



"All May Na Man Have in Talle": The Parabiblical Imaginary in Medieval English Literature

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The Parabiblical Imaginary in Late Medieval English Literature

Abstract

This is a study of four fourteenth-century narrative poems written in a parabiblical mode. The poems—*Cursor Mundi* (c. 1300), *Cleanness*, *Patience* and *Pearl* (all c. 1380s)—are substantially and thematically concerned with retelling, in English, portions of the Vulgate Bible. “Substantially,” I say, because each poem engages extensively and complexly with the plots of Scripture it stakes out, and “thematically” because each consciously foregrounds the activity of re-telling from prior biblical scripts, from *pretexts*, as it were, in the double sense that the Bible furnishes both authoritative exemplars and ulterior interests.

After situating these texts in their (diachronic and synchronic) historical conditions, the thesis considers biblical and theological curiosities that drive these texts’ shared interest in “biblical disidentity,” then turns to a linked series of poem-specific studies. *Cursor Mundi* revisits the Bible as a place it has never before been and recuperates something it has never possessed—namely, a Bible larger than itself and constituted by a diversity of texts and traditions exceeding the Bible’s usual canonical bounds. *Cursor Mundi*’s thematic vastness provides an imaginative warrant for the subsequent texts, each of which applies the principle of imagining the Bible “in para” in order to conduct a specific visionary experiment. *Cleanness* finds in the Bible powers of beatific vision outstripping traditional limits upon that doctrine; *Patience* grows frustrated with the Bible’s unavailability to human need and imagines expressive alternatives to strict biblicity; and *Pearl* recalibrates the canons of human reason, establishing a habitus of non-Truth vis-à-vis a Scripture whose teeming it cannot contain. Taken together, our experimental texts help constitute a new mode of imaginative literature.

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For Timnah

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Introducing the Parabiblical

This is a study of four long fourteenth-century narrative poems written in what I describe as a parabiblical mode. The four poems—*Cursor Mundi* (c. 1300), plus the works of the so-called Pearl-poet, *Cleanness*, *Patience*, and *Pearl* (all c. 1380s)—are all substantially and thematically concerned with retelling, in English, portions of the Vulgate Bible. “Substantially,” I say, because each of our poems engages extensively and complexly with the plots of Scripture it stakes out, and “thematically” because each poem consciously foregrounds the activity of retelling from prior biblical scripts, from *pretexts*, as it were, in the double sense that the Bible furnishes both authoritative exemplars and ulterior interests. Considered from different perspectives, the dynamics between these elements, Scripture’s authority and its ulteriority, or *furtherness*, begin to change. Taken together, our experimental texts help constitute a new mode of imaginative literature.

This study aims to show that new mode working in and through some of the best known non-Chaucerian texts of the fourteenth century, and thereby to sketch, preliminarily, some features of a broader cultural imaginary that these texts reflect and partly comprise. Although a complex of issues most exigent in the late fourteenth century drives the fullest expression of the parabiblical imaginary, elements of it are intermittently discernible well into the Anglo-Saxon period. Indeed the very category of “English literature” seems shaped at its traditional beginning by factors of parabiblical concern. Let me begin, as such, with Bede.

English literature, Bede tells us, begins suddenly.¹ In his well-known tale, the seventh-century Northumbrian monk Cædmon, as yet a shy, unlettered lay brother of the monastery of

¹ “Biblical material enjoyed popularity in the vernacular from the time of the earliest English poetry”: thus James Morey, with apt Anglo-Saxon understatement, on the congenital biblicity of English poetry. James H. Morey, *Book and Verse: A Guide to Middle English Biblical Literature* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 2. Hereafter, Morey, “*Book*

Streonæshalch, slips out of a feast as the harp, with its duty to sing, comes his way. Returning to the stables under his care, he sleeps and dreams of a visitor who asks him to sing the *principium creaturarum*. With nowhere left to go, Cædmon hems, haws, obeys, and surprises himself with song. *Statim . . . coepit cantare in laudem Dei conditoris*, Bede relates, *versus quos numquam audierat*: immediately he began to sing in praise of God the Creator verses he had never heard.

A hymn of great beauty emerges whole—

Nu sculon herigean heofonrices Weard
 Meotodes meahte on his modgeþanc
 weorc Wuldor-Fæder swa he wundra gehwæs
 ece Drihten or onstealde
 He ærest sceop ielda bearnum
 heofon to hrofe halig Scyppend
 ða middangeard moncynnes Weard
 ece Drihten æfter teode
 firum foldan Frea ælmihtig

—emerges *statim*, that is, both spontaneously and absolutely.² Cædmon sings

uncharacteristically straight away, his song inspired, not derived. *Statim* gives these facts force.

and Verse.” That Cædmon’s *Hymn* inaugurates English literature is an anachronistic (and often polemical) claim, one that confers originary status on what is merely the earliest extant artifact. Strictly speaking, we can really only call it “the first documented oral poem in Old English” (Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe, “Orality and the Developing Text of Cædmon’s *Hymn*” [*Speculum* 62 (1), 1987], 1). Bruce Holsinger observes that reading the *Hymn* as “a mythic point of origin for English poetry [is] . . . a quaint assessment in any case,” and frames the Cædmon story “as a kind of founding parable” for the way scholarship of the later middle ages “continues to sacrifice so much of its historical acuity” by privileging “literary invention” at the cost of recognizing continuities with Anglo-Saxon literary and liturgical cultures (“The Parable of Cædmon’s *Hymn*: Liturgical Invention and Literary Tradition,” [*JEGP* 106 (2), 2007], 151-152). Bede’s *statim* performs a similar elision, treating the *Hymn* as spontaneous utterance at the cost of overlooking its range of intertexts, both in Scripture and in the Anglo-Saxon oral tradition.

² I quote here a standardized modern rendering Anglo-Saxon of Bede’s Latin prose for what Cædmon originally spoke—that is to say, the topmost layer of several macaronic sediments. *Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. and trans. Bertram Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 414-16 (Latin edition). Apart from the Anglo-Saxon *Hymn*, for which I cite the Norton Anthology (Stephen Greenblatt, et al., eds., [New York: Norton, 2006, 8th ed., Vol. A], 25-26), English translations of Bede’s Latin are my own. Given my broad point about Cædmon’s traditionality—the suggestion that our *tradition* of the English

Formed on a night of general merriment, Cædmon's song is uninfluenced by the night's harpers, some of whom he did not hear; it is also immediate, untouched by other texts, not many of which he knows. Revealed, the *Hymn* arrives with the full, sudden life and autonomy of revelation. It is an exercise no less than an exaltation of creation *ex nihilo*.

Bede's Latin stresses the point of this suddenness by reproducing the *Hymn*'s supernal source as aporetic paraphrase. "This is the sense, but not the form itself, of the words that Cædmon sang sleeping," he reports; as the traditional translation, the Anglo-Saxon here only gestures at a hidden original (see n. 2 above). The *Hymn*, like the visitor evoking it, just emerges from the shadows of the fire-lighted barn; Bede does not try to follow it back, neither clarifying Cædmon's verse nor pursuing it to clear sources. This occlusion—either Bede's decision not to report the *Hymn* precisely, or his inability to do so from the data at hand—allows Cædmon the discretion of his making, leaving a good deal of Scripture concealed within the *Hymn*. Indeed "a cultural retrieval of great depth underlies the *Hymn*'s surface simplicities."³ The poem condenses the Hexameron of Genesis 1-2, glorifies God after the fashion of the Psalter, knows both the Jewish 'Alenu prayer and the Lord's Prayer, perhaps even shows faint Trinitarian

literary tradition typically begins with Cædmon—I cite the classroom classic Norton Anthology, rather than the *Hymn*'s essential specialist treatment, which is Daniel Paul O'Donnell's *Cædmon's Hymn: a multimedia study, archive and edition* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, in association with SEENET and the Medieval Academy, 2005).

³ Geoffrey Shepherd, "Scriptural Poetry," in *Poets and Prophets: Essays on Medieval Studies*, T.A. Shippey and John Pickles, eds. (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1990), 19.

traces.⁴ All these scriptural presences are suppressed where *statim* conflates immediate with unmediated. For the poet and his hagio-biographer alike, these omissions fashion the *Hymn* not from biblical sources, but pre-biblical ones: the *Hymn* in this perspective is itself a movement of the Spirit.

This traditional model of prophecy—God’s word vocalized, *nolens volens*, through His chosen instrument—authenticates the Cædmon miracle, but with the matter of prophetic consciousness the story begins thinking more experimentally. The *Hymn* does mark a divine gift, but Bede gives us no warrant to believe that the *Hymn*’s words are the received content of an unbidden audition, the one-way declaration of a speaking God. Instead of recording them with reverential precision, he paraphrases, and leaves it unspecified whether the words Cædmon voices are dictated or inspired in some more general way.⁵ Yet because of the story’s starkly vatic claim, neither can we conclude that Cædmon—Cædmon himself, as it were—works *post facto* upon a mass of biblical material conned and concealed beneath the “surface simplicities” of an untutored persona. This tension implicitly compounds the notion of prophecy *statim* with a

⁴ Shepherd, *ibid.*, mentions the *Hymn*’s assimilation of the *’Alenu* prayer; for the other biblical and doctrinal affiliations canvassed here, see Lawrence Besserman, *Biblical Paradigms in Middle English Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 7-9. Besserman canvases the possibility that the *Hymn*’s biblical register was intensified by the diction of Bede’s Latin paraphrase being “read back into Old English recensions of the originally less biblical (i.e., more secular-heroic) Cædmonian *Hymn*” (8). My own interest in approaching later medieval texts by way of the *Hymn* only requires treating it in its extant form.

⁵ Discussing the divine inspiration behind the Bible itself, William J. Abraham explores this distinction in a modern-day context. Against modern Evangelical ideas of inspiration as direct divine speaking, Abraham argues that “when we speak of the divine inspiration of the Bible it is legitimate to talk in terms of degrees of inspiration; to insist on the full, indeed heightened, use of native ability in the creation of style, content, vocabulary, etc.; to note that there is no guarantee of inerrancy, since agents, even when inspired by God, can make mistakes; and finally to infer that inspiration will result, first, in some kind of unity within the biblical literature and secondly in the committal to writing of a reliable and trustworthy account of God’s revelatory and saving acts for mankind.” William J. Abraham, *The Divine Inspiration of Holy Scripture*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1981), 42.

measure of human work. By disclosing what amounts to a biblical repertoire in Cædmon's memory, Bede's story frames the *Hymn* as a flashpoint between divine provision and human response. This dynamism complicates our reception of the hymnal moment.

Cædmon's verse is numinous inside his dream, and ambiguously poised there. On one hand, Cædmon with his *Hymn* becomes an inexhaustible transformer of Scripture, rendering in English verse whatever anyone expounds to him *divinis litteris*. Yet on the other hand Cædmon's divine discourse stops with him; as the free gift of divine grace, his singing is neither ascribable nor teachable to any man, and though it has spurred many to try, the work of Cædmon's *Hymn* will not be carried on.⁶ Bede's portrait of Cædmon thus effaces both the *after* it implies and the *before* on which it depends: it is an origin story without subsequence, and an inspiration story without precedence; it forecloses the very tradition it inaugurates, and suppresses, with *statim*, the degree of the *Hymn*'s scriptural inheritance. In terms of discursive domains, the *Hymn* oscillates between Scripture and its unlimited surround.

The Cædmon complex—that is, the *Hymn* plus its narrative framing—shows Scripture itself to behave strangely, too. Wherever it comes from, Cædmon's spontaneity takes biblical form. Yet it does so in a curious way, for it is “sudden” in the sense of being a vivid reflection of something unseen, the epiphanic shimmer of an otherwise invisible body. The very miracle in

⁶ Of course, the tradition of Anglo-Saxon biblical poetry did continue, as attested by poems such as *Gensis*, *Exodus*, *Daniel*, *Judith*, *Christ I and II*, and *The Fates of the Apostles* all attest; Bede's point about Cædmon is rhetorical, and specific to the mythos around this particular *rusticus*. For Trevor Ross, the *Hymn*'s literary singularity signals its place in a different kind of tradition. “Bede may have been motivated by affection for Anglo-Saxon verse, since Cædmon's hymn imparts religious doctrine in the heroic diction of a bardic past, yet the uniqueness of Cædmon's spontaneous verse-making renders any ideal of poetic lineage irrelevant. . . . Cædmon's defining tradition, his true source of value, is not an indigenous poetic culture but a religious community, an ecclesiastically unified England whose history Bede is writing and within which Cædmon's story is but one more example of God's universal harmony.” Trevor Ross, *The Making of the English Literary Canon from the Middle Ages to the Late Eighteenth Century* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill and Queen's UP, 1998), 29.

this story is the bilocation of Scripture into two mirrored places, the suppressed scriptural trace of Cædmon's dream finding novel expression in his speech. It bears remarking that Bede frames things this way; Scripture's mirrored relation to itself would be lost without the context of Bede's narration. We must feel the nestedness of Cædmon's *Hymn* in order to appreciate how it springs from the dark. We must recognize how, of what we might call the conditions of the *Hymn*'s sacredness, its setting-apart, Bede engineers a specific illusion of presence. For while he layers the *Hymn*'s seclusion in Cædmon's dream—there it is inimitable, untranslatable, detectable only in rough paraphrase—it nevertheless emerges a recognizable scriptural reflex, a reconfiguration of knowledges scripturally derived. The verse enables us to see the Bible, despite the kinds of absence Bede ascribes to it, by its sudden projection into an extrabiblical likeness.

Thus while the *Hymn* is about separation—about *middangeard*'s coalescence out of chaos and enclosure under heaven's *hrofe*, and about God's own act of instantiating time—it is also about separation's erasure, about divinity's permeation of the phenomenal world. If it taps an ebullience in Scripture, a readiness to overspill boundaries into new terrain, this excess underscores in crossing it the line between Scripture and its discursive others. Even if “the limits of the Canon . . . were blurred” for most medieval men such that, especially in the early middle ages, “the treatment of Scripture shows uncertainty as to the authority of . . . apocryphal writings,”⁷ the Cædmon complex thematizes such confusion, rather than replicating it, by embedding Cædmon's speech act in a visibly concentric discursive structure. This structure allows the *Hymn* to claim a holy guarantee, yet at the same time to take shape diegetically, that is, on a level of discourse contained within the story Bede tells. The main event of the story

⁷ Geoffrey Shepherd, “English Versions of the Scriptures before Wyclif,” in G.W.H. Lampe, ed., *The Cambridge History of the Bible: From the Fathers to the Reformation* (Vol. 2) (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1969), 364. Hereafter, Shepherd, “English Versions.”

remains the irruption of charismatic speech, of course; but on the view of it I am proposing, that event is rhetorically controlled by Bede's extradiegetic narration. Its pneumatology becomes in turn a kind of irony, with the *Hymn*'s biblical intertext bracketed as indirect speech; indeed Scripture is doubly reported here, first by Cædmon, then by Bede reporting Cædmon. The result of this nesting, and of the overlapping modes of ambivalence I have described to this point, is that Cædmon's *Hymn* proves, *in situ*, to be essentially quasi-biblical in nature—not just “more or less” biblical, but distinctively so, *precisely quasi-biblical*, constituted by imperfect similarity to Scripture, and thrust by its Bedan context into a heterological relationship to the sacred material it inherits.

Just as Scripture makes use of the *Hymn*, so does it supply the authoritative other in the poem's act of *allegoria* (literally, “other speaking”). By ventriloquizing the Bible, Cædmon claims some of its tincture for his *Hymn*. And yet, because Bede's narrative takes pains to ensconce its scriptural element, it foregrounds a dynamic that might not otherwise obtain: in its schema, *biblical discourses are simultaneously sacrosanct and fungible*, at once sealed away from vernacular articulation, yet annexable, too, for revision and reshaping. These qualities inform the *Hymn* chiastically. Because he can draw on it to suffuse his prayer, the Bible gives Cædmon an ontological guarantee and enters his speech on a continuum of authoritative truth. Sacrosanctity, though, brooks no direct handling. Cædmon is not a prophet in the strictest sense; he cannot claim, as Ezekiel does for example, that “I saw the visions of God.”⁸ Rather, Cædmon is asked to sing, and by dint of its staged act of poesis, his response to this challenge opens an alternative, *ad hoc habitus* in which scriptural imagining can play out. Thus if Cædmon is any kind of prophet, he is one who both adds to the store of revealed truth and underscores the

⁸ Ezk. 1:1. *vidi visiones Dei*

boundary proscribing his own participation in that domain. Both revealed and liturgical, that is to say, both divinely vouchsafed and yet elaborated in human hands under institutional conditions, Cædmon's *Hymn* manifests the features of hybridity that will mark the later-medieval tradition of parabiblicity: at once scripturally grounded and distinctly non-scriptural, the *Hymn* thematizes itself as both essential in the Bible and superadded to it.

Situating the parabiblical

I have dwelt at some length on Bede in order to indicate that the parabiblical imaginary, as a dimension of medieval biblical culture more generally, is not a phenomenon of trajectorism: while they flower most fully in the late fourteenth century, the textual behaviors I shall describe as comprising the parabiblical imaginary are strongly rooted in the Bible itself, and can find expression, as Bede helps us to see, at any time. A given writer's "parabiblicity" may be fostered by particularities of culture, institution and disposition, but Scripture's capacity to entertain such engagement remains ever present, flickering in and out of view not as part of any *zeitgeist*, but as a resource availing itself to the discursive aims and practices of any number of writers and *milieux*. Bede's Cædmon complex is thus a rich text unto itself, and a heuristic paradigm for this study's thinking going forward.

When the reformist pope Innocent III convoked the Fourth Council of the Lateran in the spring of 1213, he could not have foreseen the effect its canons, issued some two and a half years later, would have on the course of English literature. Widely considered "the most pastoral of all the general church councils of the Middle Ages," Lateran IV sought to reform the clergy and enrich lay spirituality.⁹ In tandem with the Council's provision, in Canon 11, that each

⁹ Leonard E. Boyle, "The Fourth Lateran Council and Manuals of Popular Theology," in Thomas Heffernan, ed., *The Popular Literature of Medieval England*, pp. 30-43; p. 30.

metropolitan church maintain a theologian capable of teaching “scripture to priests and others and especially to instruct them in matters which are recognized as pertaining to the cure of souls,” Canon 21 of Lateran IV—widely known today by its first words, *Omnis utriusque sexus*—is a landmark text in the history of interiority.¹⁰ Requiring annual auricular confession of sins for adults of both sexes, Canon 21 reads,

The priest shall be discerning and prudent, so that like a skilled doctor he may pour wine and oil over the wounds of the injured one. Let him carefully inquire about the circumstances of both the sinner and the sin, so that he may prudently discern what sort of advice he ought to give and what remedy to apply, using various means to heal the sick person. Let him take the utmost care, however, not to betray the sinner at all by word or sign or in any other way. If the priest needs wise advice, let him seek it cautiously without any mention of the person concerned.¹¹

The canon underscores the sanctity between parishioner and confessor, and insists on individual privacy even as it encourages priests to probe thoughtfully into the nature of each transgression and to take counsel, as necessary, in achieving its remission; this circuit of atonement is balmed, tenderly and biblically, in the image of wine and oil borrowed from Luke, the physician evangelist, and his parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10:25-37). The canon’s prescription for

¹⁰ Norman P. Tanner, S.J., ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* (2 vols.), Washington, D.C.: Georgetown UP, 1990, Vol. 1, p. 243.

¹¹ With the portion just quoted excerpted, Canon 21 reads as follows: “All the faithful of either sex, after they have reached the age of discernment, should individually confess all their sins in a faithful manner to their own priest at least once a year, and let them take care to do what they can to perform the penance imposed on them. Let them reverently receive the sacrament of the eucharist at least at Easter unless they think, for a good reason and on the advice of their own priest, that they should abstain from receiving it for a time. Otherwise they shall be barred from entering a church during their lifetime and they shall be denied a Christian burial at death. Let this salutary decree be frequently published in churches, so that nobody may find the pretence of an excuse in the blindness of ignorance. If any persons wish, for good reasons, to confess their sins to another priest let them first ask and obtain the permission of their own priest; for otherwise the other priest will not have the power to absolve or to bind them. . . . For if anyone presumes to reveal a sin disclosed to him in confession, we decree that he is not only to be deposed from his priestly office but also to be confined to a strict monastery to do perpetual penance.” (Ibid., p. 245).

the *cura animarum* acutely recognizes the complexity of the state of souls and points the way, should either priest or confessor need any “more prudent counsel,” to the wide array of pastoral materials—manuals of confession; scriptural and theological *summae*; prayer expositions; sermons, homilies and exempla; compendia of vices and virtues; lives of Christ; and, crucially for our purposes, verse and prose biblical paraphrases on a nuanced gradient of sophistication—that followed in the wake of Lateran IV in Latin and a host of European vernaculars.¹² Within a few generations of Lateran IV, poetry as a pastoral subdomain had developed richly upon the pre-conciliar traditions of biblical verse paraphrase in both Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman; as Marcia Colish puts it, the mass of religious poetry produced in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries “attests to the view that . . . poets believed poetry was capable of communicating moral truths and moving the hearer toward God.”¹³

In the past twenty years, scholarly discussion of such *pastoralia* has often taken its cues from Nicholas Watson, who classes a subset of this material as “vernacular theology,” a catchall category “which in principle could include any kind of writing, sermon, or play that communicates theological information to an audience,” but which Watson narrows in practice and deploys in order to focus

attention on the specifically intellectual content of vernacular religious texts that are often treated with condescension (especially in relation to Latin texts), encouraging reflection on the kinds of religious information available to vernacular readers without obliging us to insist on the simplicity or crudity of that information: that is, the term is an attempt to

¹² Here I augment Boyle’s list of *pastoralia*, p. 31. Drawing on Morton Bloomfield’s directory of such works (Bloomfield *et al.*, eds., *Incipits of Latin Works on the Virtues and Vices, 1100-1500 A.D.: Including a Section on the Incipits of Works on the Pater Noster*, Cambridge: Medieval Academy of America, 1979), Andrew Reeves presents the astonishing figure that by the end of the middle ages, over 10,000 *pastoralia* had been produced (*Religious Education in Thirteenth-Century England: The Creeds and Articles of Faith*, Leiden: Brill, 2015, p. 58).

¹³ Marcia Colish, *The Mirror of Language: A Study in the Medieval Theory of Knowledge* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 161.

distance scholarship from its habitual adherence to a clerical, Latinate perspective in its dealings with these texts.

In brief, Watson emphasizes “the more intellectually challenging texts” among the *pastoralia* that follow in the wake of Lateran IV, and calls for medieval texts to be reclaimed with due rigor from the approaches of old-style philology and numinous devotion.¹⁴

The focus of my own study thus proves to be a subset of a subset, insofar as I aim to describe a particular kind of “intellectually challenging” behavior evinced in the poems I treat. I have used my chosen term for such texts—parabiblical—a few times already, and here I should clarify that I borrow and adapt the term from another scholar, James Simpson, who uses it to designate rereadings of the Bible produced in the late middle ages as “parabiblical writings (parallel to yet different from the biblical text), where the interpreter’s own spiritual needs, or those of his audience, permitted rearrangement of and addition to the scriptural text.” Such

¹⁴ Nicholas Watson, “Censorship and Cultural Change in Late-Medieval England: Vernacular Theology, the Oxford Translation Debate and Arundel’s Constitutions of 1409,” *Speculum* 70 (4), 1995, pp. 822-864 (hereafter, Watson, “Censorship”). “My use of the term [vernacular theology],” Watson explains, in preference to any of the range of alternatives—‘popular,’ ‘didactic,’ ‘devotional,’ ‘pastoral,’ ‘mystical,’ or ‘affective’ writing, for example—has several interrelated aims. First, it makes possible the comparative discussion of various kinds of vernacular writing that tend to be studied in isolation or in groupings that are sometimes artificial. Second, the word “theology” focuses our attention on the specifically intellectual content of vernacular religious texts that are often treated with condescension (especially in relation to Latin texts), encouraging reflection on the kinds of religious information available to vernacular readers without obliging us to insist on the simplicity or crudity of that information: that is, the term is an attempt to distance scholarship from its habitual adherence to a clerical, Latinate perspective in its dealings with these texts. Third, the term is intended to focus attention on the cultural-linguistic environment in which religious writing happens and to act as a counterweight to the aura of otherworldliness that often surrounds terms like “devotional,” or indeed “spirituality” itself. In principle, the term “vernacular theology” covers a very wide range of texts, from the catechetical to the speculative, and from the most scrupulously orthodox Passion meditation to the most outspoken Lollard polemic. In practice, of course, I have had to narrow things down a good bit by making a number of what I hope will not seem arbitrary exclusions. These include Lollard texts, . . . works that were intended for public performance, not private reading—that is, plays and sermons; . . . most narrative texts, especially saints’ lives; . . . and large numbers of brief, anonymous didactic texts. . . . In general, my emphasis is . . . on the more intellectually challenging texts” (pp. 832-824, n. 4).

writing Simpson sees as exemplary of pre-Reformation biblical culture in which “biblical narrative . . . [can be] entirely broken up [and] subordinated . . . to the larger coherence of an institutional programme of teaching,” and his specimen texts of such writing include *Piers Plowman*, Julian of Norwich’s *Showings* and *Pearl* . . . in which the Bible is received and remade in an accretive, dialogic way.”¹⁵ These observations fit my own idea of parabiblicity, but I will go on to specify more closely the kinds of textual behavior I draw under this heading. In order to do so, though, I need for now to focus on the historical arc that makes complicating the term possible—and necessary.

That both the *Cursor*-poet and the *Pearl*-poet write in the broad pastoral tradition coming out of Lateran IV is clear, but their intellectual environments differ in ways inflecting their poems. Probably taking shape in the late thirteenth century, *Cursor Mundi* comes just a few generations after the council itself, and shows important affiliations with texts of an earlier period. The poem retells the history of the world from creation to doomsday, and its comprehensive treatment of Scripture aligns it with such works of the high middle ages as Honorius Augustodunensis’s *Elucidarium* (c. 1100), a theological encyclopedia of sorts; Peter Comestor’s *Historia Scholastica* (c. 1150), a biblical digest that was a standard medieval school text; the *Ormulum* (c. 1180), a biblical paraphrase we will consider briefly in contrast to *Cursor Mundi*; and the *Northern Homily Cycle* (c. 1300), a collection of homiletic biblical paraphrases and exempla nearly contemporary with *Cursor Mundi*. All these works show a zeal to impart a fullness of knowledge that comports with the lay-educative aims codified by Lateran IV, and even those texts that predate the council—which is to say, most of those I just listed—manifest the council’s urgency to elevate the minimum of theological (and salvific) knowledge required of

¹⁵ James Simpson, *Reform and Cultural Revolution* (*The Oxford English Literary History*, Volume 2: 1350-1547) (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004), 461-462. Hereafter, Simpson, “*Reform*.”

the laity. In England, the currents of lay education unleashed by Lateran IV come to a head in the Constitutions of Lambeth issued by the Archbishop of Canterbury, John Pecham, in 1281. Epitomizing the thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century impetus for increasing lay religious fluency, Pecham's ninth canon requires parish priests to expound on a quarterly basis, in English, the basic tenets of the Christian faith, which it distills to a simple syllabus: the articles of faith; the ten commandments; the two evangelical precepts; the seven works of mercy; the seven deadly sins; the seven principal virtues; and the seven sacraments.¹⁶ Written and assembled just as Pecham's Syllabus began exerting its influence in English parishes, *Cursor Mundi* represents the literary high water mark of this trend of knowledge dissemination.

By the middle of the fourteenth century, the programmatic learning envisioned by Pecham had met with much success. His Syllabus became the model for another such religious primer—*The Layfolks' Catechism*, a 1357 work by John Gaytryge, commissioned by William Thoresby, Archbishop of York—and as the *œuvre* of the *Pearl*-poet bears out remarkably, vernacular literature from mid-century forward showed a marked increase in ambit, ambition and sophistication. Where encyclopedic texts like *Cursor Mundi* had dramatically thrown open the domain of Scripture to lay exploration far beyond their accustomed homiletic familiarities, and catechetical texts inspired by the Pechamite Syllabus had instilled fundamental bodies of doctrine, readers' curiosity deepened apace with their knowledge, and texts ministering to their more complicated desires become ever more self-questioning. "Vernacular texts themselves," Watson states, "[showed] an increasingly overt sense that what they were doing in presenting an

¹⁶ My précis of Pecham's Syllabus relies on E. A. Jones, "Literature of Religious Instruction," in Peter Brown, ed., *A Companion to Medieval English Literature and Culture c. 1350-1500*, Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007, 406-410.

ever wider array of theological concerns to an ever larger and less clearly defined group of readers needed justifying.”¹⁷

We will see that the quality of parabolicity is a particular expression of imaginative texts’ need to justify their work and to theorize their bases. This self-consciousness reflects a fourteenth-century historical arc traced by Watson, whereby “Pecham’s *minimum* necessary for the laity to know if they are to be saved has [by the early fifteenth century] been redefined as the *maximum* they may read, hear or even discuss.”¹⁸ These provisions brought unprecedented pressures of censorship to bear on religious writing of many kinds, generally licensing only the simpler, more pragmatic kinds of texts designated by Pecham’s Syllabus.¹⁹ In one respect, this historical arc maps onto the interval separating *Cursor Mundi* from the *Pearl*-poems. For if the earlier poet shows an inclusiveness analogous to the growing body of knowledge for which lay Christians are responsible post-Lateran IV, the latter often “bares the device” of his imaginative

¹⁷ Watson, “Censorship,” p. 838.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 828. This sea-change in Middle English literary culture culminated ecclesiastical legislation sponsored by Thomas Arundel, Archbishop of Canterbury, in the Constitutions of Clarendon (1409), provisions chiefly aimed at rooting out Lollardy, the wide-ranging English heresy associated with John Wycliffe (c. 1320-1384), and especially with the English-language Bible translation project often credited to his name, but which in effect constrained theological writing in English much more broadly. Article 7 of the Constitutions, for example, states in no uncertain terms that “it is a dangerous thing, as witnesseth blessed St. Jerome, to translate the text of the holy Scripture out of the tongue into another; for in the translation the same sense is not always easily kept, as the same St. Jerome confesseth, that although he were inspired, yet oftentimes in this he erred: *we therefore decree and ordain, that no man, hereafter, by his own authority translate any text of the Scripture into English or any other tongue . . . by way of a book, libel, or treatise; and that no man read any such book, libel or treatise, now lately set forth in the time of John Wickliff, or since, or hereafter to be set forth, in part or in whole, privily or apertly, upon pain of greater excommunication, until the said translation be allowed by the ordinary of the place, or, if the case so require, by the council provincial. He that shall do contrary to this, shall likewise be punished as a favourer of error and heresy*” (cited by Watson, pp. 828-829, in the translation of John Foxe’s *Acts and Monuments*, 3:245; my emphasis).

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 826.

visions, in Brechtian terms, as though he were liable to such institutional strictures on English-language theological writing as come fully to obtain, likely beyond his own death, in the early fifteenth century.²⁰

In another respect, however, this neat parallel between arcs fails us—for what are we to make of the fact that, as practitioners of a self-consciously *derived* mode of poetry, both poets are given to baring the device? Historically speaking, both the *Cursor*-poet and the *Pearl*-poet work at a curious remove from fifteenth-century pressure on the English Bible. We might grant that the *Pearl*-poet, writing in the last quarter of the fourteenth century, potentially felt some of the coming institutional strictures that limited biblical expression at the turn of the fifteenth century, but the same cannot be said for the *Cursor*-poet: he wrote nearly a hundred years earlier, and produced a text that shows remarkable latitude in its augmentation of the category of the biblical. Common to both poets, however, is a fondness for highlighting their innovations upon the Bible as it is traditionally and canonically construed, such that creative variance from Scripture, per se, constitutes the very texture of their work: *Cursor Mundi* is omnivorous in enlarging the body of Scripture with thematically heterogeneous discourses of many kinds, whereas each of the *Pearl*-poet's works is governed by potentially strident galvanizing claims—that Scripture can approximate beatific vision; that Scripture must sometimes be set aside for the sake of forging new sacred speech; that Scripture for human beings is wildly misbehaved and overthrows all our attempts to draw near to it or know it. Each poet, in his turn, foregrounds the elements of provisionality and fictionality that render such innovation possible, but these rhetorical conditions savor differently in 1300 versus, say, 1390: what for the *Pearl*-poet may be

²⁰ See Vincent Gillespie and Kantik Ghosh, eds. *After Arundel: Religious Writing in Fifteenth-Century England* (Medieval Church Studies 21), Turnhout: Belgium, 2011, for a range of nuanced responses to Watson's argument in "Censorship" and to the "fetishized . . . watershed date" of 1409 (xi).

a self-protective, disposable carapace of human facture, a willingness to unhand any of his claims in the face of censorious authority, can for the *Cursor*-poet only be an energizing, voluntarily chosen parameter of difficulty. *The Cursor-poet* does not conduct the *Pearl*-poet's kind of acutely provocative experiments, but in his appetitive annexations to the Bible, he does avail himself of every traditional experiment upon the Bible—apocryphal, legendary, mythic, devotional—that he knows. We might even say that *Cursor Mundi*'s enlargements of the Bible—moderate, pastoral and traditional as they may be—may well be an early step toward the more restricted environment of the fifteenth century.

Characterizing the parabiblical

Bede shows Cædmon visibly sluicing old wine into a new skin—a reversal of the image in Christ's parable, of course, but one that points up an implicit commitment to biblical resources' durability in new forms.²¹ This commitment epitomizes why, although they develop in a different biblical culture, our fourteenth-century texts could well take Cædmon's *Hymn* and make it their manifesto. Indeed the exigencies of late medieval religious life, especially as they bear on the Bible, explain *a fortiori* the Cædmonian tendency to imagine the Bible in what I shall call *quasi* form. Typically a term of imprecision, *quasi* here marks the distinct advantage, to a poet laying hands on the sacred text of Scripture, of adopting a rhetoric of provisionality for framing Scripture *quam si—as if* it were susceptible to imaginative enlargements or restatements restricted by tradition, decorum or prevailing orthodoxies.

²¹ Mark 2.22: *Et nemo mittit vinum novum in utres veteres: alioquin dirumpet vinum utres, et vinum effundetur, et utres peribunt: sed vinum novum in utres novos mitti debet.* [“And no man putteth new wine into old bottles: otherwise the wine will burst the bottles, and both the wine will be spilled, and the bottles will be lost. But new wine must be put into new bottles.”]

So much depends upon this subjunctive mood. For it allows our poets space to collaborate on a question that is, from a late-medieval standpoint, literally impossibly large. *How, these texts ask, can we know more about the Bible than the Bible knows about itself?* Conducted piecemeal on behalf of a culture that could not have assembled it whole, this inquiry is aimed two ways—prescriptively, as *How can we deepen our knowledge of biblical narrative beyond what it readily yields?*, and descriptively, as *How is it that we do know more about biblical narrative than we find in the Bible itself?* In some respects fourteenth-century England had clear and ready answers to these questions: they were not impossibly large, they were easy. Lateran IV had equipped English people, clerical and lay alike, eventually, with texts and tools for teaching and learning the rudiments of faith; and as to the second question, medieval Christians were frankly accustomed to a world of texts, images and discourses that supplemented the biblical center from which they radiated—apocryphal legends, for instance, or techniques of reading that deepened one’s sense for Scripture’s more latent meanings. In fact, as James Morey reminds us, “the Bible in the Middle Ages . . . consisted for the laity not of a set of texts within a canon but of those stories which, partly because of their liturgical significance and partly because of their picturesque and memorable qualities, formed a provisional ‘Bible’ in the popular imagination.”²² These basic answers never fail to obtain, but they do not fully exhaust the central, searching parabiblical inquiry—again, *how can we know more about the Bible than the Bible knows about itself?*

This question frames the space of the parabiblical imaginary. The question itself is adapted from a short essay by Paul Strohm, in which he argues that “texts . . . carry forms or pre- or nondiscursive knowledge within their bounds,” and that “certain textual duplicities,

²² James H. Morey, “Peter Comestor, Biblical Paraphrase, and the Medieval Popular Bible,” (*Speculum* 68[1], 1993), 6-35.

withholdings, omissions, and (especially) repressions can only be identified from a vantage point *outside* the textual system.”²³ Through six entwined readings of a Eucharistic joke by Chaucer’s Pardoner, Strohm shows how “the investigator who refuses the move to an external ground accepts a tacit limitation. Analysis conducted on the text’s own ground limits itself to what may be described as knowledgeable reiteration or ‘respectful redoubling’ of a text’s assumptions. But texts are inherently evasive, and the investigator who wishes to learn more from a text than it cares to avow must sometimes treat its assumptions with a certain strategic *disrespect*.”²⁴ Strohm’s strategies for disclosing the guarded secrets of textual systems are astute and fruitful, but I borrow his terms more for their framing than for anything specific that they yield. To be sure, despite his unmatched status among fourteenth-century authors, Chaucer is not at issue here; but in treating him as a personality riven with all the complexity, self-occlusion, duplicity and repression we commonly grant as features of human personhood, Strohm’s terms articulate many of the ways in which the parabiblical imaginary implicitly understands the Bible itself. Especially—but not only—when we come to *Pearl*, we will find texts treating the Bible with frank recognition of its vicissitudes of personality, such that Strohm’s brilliant invitation to Chaucer to lie upon the analyst’s couch provides a model not for our readings of these poems, but for these poems’ readings of Scripture as an analysand in its own right.

Our purpose in this study is not so much to practice Strohmian disrespectful reading, but to observe it in action. Parabiblical texts comprise a group not so much for their own susceptibility to disrespectful reading of this kind, as for how they wield such reading as they

²³ Paul Strohm, “What Can We Know about Chaucer That He Didn’t Know about Himself?” in *Theory and the Premodern Text* (Medieval Cultures 26, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 165-81. Both quotations are cited to p. 165, with the italicized emphases in the original.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

reenvision biblical narratives. Indeed, the formation of “external ground” from which to look back upon the domain of the Bible—critically, inventively, *disrespectfully* in Strohm’s sense—is the enabling theme of these poems. Instead of simply starting with questions rooted outside the discursive field of Scripture, these poems demonstrate Scripture’s autogenous self-questioning; external ground, sprung from internal, is a thematic development for these poems. *It is what they are about.* Like the story of Cædmon’s miracle, these poems envision a Bible both self-alienating and self-regarding, and on the basis of this tension, they form a shared hypothesis, namely, that the Bible is not identical with itself—or, more accurately, that the Bible can be shown to relate to itself disidentically. Scripture is richest for them, most compelling and generative, for its demonstrable lack of selfsameness, and it is this quality—*demonstrable disidentity*—that permits a family resemblance among experiments based in ecclesiastically sponsored programs of lay education, on the one hand, and more heterodox investigations of scriptural arcana on the other. Not only do its potential meanings foliate with each fresh encounter with Scripture, but the power accorded in the middle ages to the Bible itself consists, in various measures for various observers, in the capacity of the sacred text to project itself into different discursive domains.

As a modest term of art, “disidentity” will require some circulation to accrue its meaning. Because each poem we treat inflects it differently, the idea will become more fully rounded when we read these poems together. A natural question as we set out concerns the logically default state from which disidentity departs: what would it mean for Scripture *to be* identical with itself? Numerous models of truth tended to corroborate Scripture’s unity, after all. As the verbal expression of a supremely simplex God, the Bible was indissoluble in meaning (e.g., the *quadriga* of fourfold reading) and self-reference (e.g., inter-testamental typologies), its seeming

structural multiplicities always resolved into the unity of its inspiring Spirit. Monastic conceptions of Scripture had long emphasized the synecdochic relation of its parts to the whole: “What page or what utterance of the divinely inspired books of the Old and New Testaments is not a most unerring rule for human life?” asks Benedict in his *Regula* (c. 530)—an enduring image not of disidentity, but of the radical identity inherent in every page of the holy book.

The fifteenth-century canonist Nicholas of Cusa (1401-64) provides us a counter figure. His treatise *De Docta Ignorantia* (1440) argues that the human mind approaches truth asymptotically, and never arrives. “The precise truth,” says Cusa in a chapter heading, “is incomprehensible.”

For the intellect is to truth as [an inscribed] polygon is to [the inscribing] circle. The more angles the inscribed polygon has the more similar it is to the circle. However, even if the number of its angles is increased ad infinitum, the polygon never becomes equal [to the circle] unless it is resolved into identity with the circle. Hence, regarding truth, it is evident that we do not know anything other than the following: viz., that we know truth not to be precisely comprehensible as it is.²⁵

Cusa’s circle is his geometric limiting case, and by analogy the biblical horizon on which texts rewriting the Bible verge; by the primary thrust of this analogy, a proto-Cartesian skepticism suggests that retelling Scripture any way but copying it word-for-word—producing anything shy of “resolution into identity” with it—leaves Scripture incognito, yielding only a sense of its excessive, unmatchable meaning. This is a crucial feature of the parabiblical imaginary, and the four poems at the core of this study do operate, in part, on the assumption of their own discursive shortcoming vis-à-vis their sacred source.

But of course medieval literature is replete with texts that retell, recast, enlarge and embroider biblical narratives of all kinds. This is a fact of cultural life throughout the middle ages, one not at all lost on the intensely self-conscious mode of literature at issue here. In this

²⁵ Nicholas of Cusa, *De Docta Ignorantia* I.3, trans. as *Nicholas of Cusa On Learned Ignorance*, by Jasper Hopkins, Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 1981, p. 52.

regard, Cusa's Socratic *ignorantia* faces the solid resistance of actual practice: readers and writers believe in the heuristic value of scriptural approximations. In fact, insofar as texts err from the circle of biblical truth, rather than tracing it with transcriptionist fidelity, they remind medieval readers of the line's intrinsic fuzziness and of indeterminacies within it. If we imagine reversing the outlines of Cusa's diagram, such that the angular human inscription of Cusa's polygon now surrounds the perfect sphere of biblical truth, we see that such provisional recontouring draws into view the fact—and often some of the details—of Scripture's own intrinsically unresolved identity. Bruce Holsinger, for instance, finds that our original parabiblical artifact, Cædmon's *Hymn*, helps the brothers of Streonæshalch to explain the existence of an English-language liturgy there. In a more self-reflexive way, Bede's story also provides a mythic etiology for discursive spaces just beyond “the limits of the Canon” and the traditional *termini patrum*.²⁶

Cædmon's story helps us lay out still more principles for thinking about English literature's parabiblical strain. For Cædmon, *Scripture both potentiates and ratifies a vatic claim*; it is the *Hymn*'s clear, if suppressed, starting point, as well as the proof of its provenance. Not only does the Abbess Hild test Cædmon's gift with a new bit of sacred history to render, then celebrate his success by ordering him tutored in the full *seriem sacrae historiae*, but she and her assembly of wise men surely approve Cædmon's verses for their biblical decorousness. She and her scholars, impaneled for their expertise in sacred doctrine, may well apply the traditional discourse of *discretio spirituum* in order to assess the nature of Cædmon's speech, asking among

²⁶ Holsinger, *op. cit.*, pp. 156-57. “And for the brothers of Whitby, what really needed explaining, it seems to me—what most needed justifying—was the presence of vernacular poetry in active daily use within the walls of their monastery. . . . Bede's enduringly famous account of Cædmon may be comprehensible less as the story of a man than as the work of a liturgical culture seeking to explain its unique character to a chronicler who promised to perpetuate its institutional memory.”

other things (the formulation is much more recent) “whedir ye visions acordis with diuyme scripture or discordis.”²⁷ Considered this way, in its external aspect, as it were, Scripture potentiating then ratifying Cædmon’s vatic claim describes a juridical dynamic, the process whereby the *Hymn* is inspired, vetted and historiographically enshrined.

But there is a subtler form of this dynamic, one inscribed in and by the ambition of Cædmon’s pronouncement. In Bede’s story this version thematizes the first in permuted form, and in so doing it identifies a crucial behavior of the parabiblical imaginary. The *Hymn* shows Scripture speaking to itself in a closed circuit; it is the extrascriptural manifest of Scripture’s self-utterance, a bespeaking on Cædmon’s part that attests to, without disclosing, the biblicity of his audition. *It represents Scripture’s self-reflection*—and where Hild and her men duly test Cædmon’s speech against a biblical framework, their intervention mimics the poet’s own dialogic method of staging Scripture murmuring to itself, deep calling unto deep.²⁸ Hild’s juridical process, a consensus decision as to the verses’ quality and origin, finds its formal reciprocal in the *Hymn*’s orchestration of intrascriptural dialogue. *Each is a method for testing and experiencing Scripture’s self-relation.*

For his part, this is because Cædmon is a distinctly ruminative poet, composing *quasi mundum animal ruminando*, like a clean animal chewing its cud (see Lv. 11.3 and Dt. 14.6). His

²⁷ This formulation is Alfonso of Jaén’s, who composed his *Epistola Solitarii ad Reges* (c.1375-76) as part of the documentation for Bridget of Sweden’s canonization. Alfonso’s letter is one of the key treatises on *discretio spirituum*, or the “distinguishing of spirits” sent by God from those sent by the devil, is rooted in the writing of St. Paul, whose list of spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians includes *discretio spirituum* among other gifts pertaining to verbal acts—prophecy, speaking in tongues, the interpretation of speeches (see 1 Cor. 12.4-10). Sources in the early church from Athanasius’s *Life of St. Anthony* (c. 360) and Augustine’s *De Genesi ad Litteram* (early 390s) elaborate and articulate the doctrine, and by the late middle ages texts such as Jean de Gerson’s *De Distinctione Verarum Visionum de Falsis* (c. 1401) and *De Probatione Spirituum* (c. 1415) had enumerated standard criteria for testing spirits’ probity.

²⁸ Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Murmuring Deep: Reflections on the Biblical Unconscious*, Schocken Books: New York, 2009.

verses are the yield of slow, recursive meditation upon what he commits to memory *divinis litteris*—a process traditionally likened on biblical grounds to the digestion of ruminant animals, which regurgitate and re-masticate their ingesta in multiple phases. As a praxis of reading, or of cogitating something read, *ruminatio* was by Bede’s time a nuanced tradition, and one that would continue to avail throughout the middle ages. It is so important for the parabiblical imaginary, in fact, that it will require separate discussion below. For now, though, let us continue inductively with the *Hymn*, the very time of which establishes its ruminative method: *Now*—statim—let *us praise* animates a present-tense rememorative churning, the verse calling on biblical memory to map the cosmogony it mimics, and entwining the works and names of God, in variation, as a concentrated theurgical refrain. It is an ambitious project to be sure, staking several audacious claims—first, the claim to insert itself at the veiled inception of created history; second, the claim that human praise can instantiate the holiness of its address; and last, the *sine qua non* of the prior two, the claim that Bible reading, or biblical knowledge, can be itself a visionary power.

Moreover, Cædmon ruminates not upon the raw text of the Bible, which we never see him access, but upon biblical narratives as they have been prepared for him by doctrinal and exegetical instruction. Omnivorous at first of material so contextualized, Caedmon retains his predilection for Scripture explained—for *quicquid sacrae scripturae per interpretes disceret*, a phrase that teeters between the new poet’s zeal (“*whatever* he could learn through interpreters”) and the mature poet’s sustained discipleship (“whatever he could learn *through interpreters*”). Over a career versifying the whole of sacred history, from Creation and *tota Genesis historia* to Christ’s ascension and the *apostolorum doctrina*, Cædmon remains beholden to his clerical informants. Thus if his receptiveness to them once marked the probity of his gift (*caelestem ei a Domino concessam esse gratiam*, Hild and her men agree), its abiding shows the largeness of his

ambition. *For it allows a kerygmatic framing of Scripture*, a restatement of biblical story to unfold received understandings into the very texture of his diegesis. Cædmon does not merely relate biblical narratives, or even relate them embellished *in modulationem carminis*; rather, he conveys them ventilated by pertinent authoritative readings, and he offers them, as such, amalgamated as both text and interpretation.

Dom Jean Leclercq gives this way of engaging Scripture a classic description. “Reading and meditation are sometimes described by the very expressive word *ruminatio*,” he says, to practice which is to

meditate [and] attach oneself closely to the sentence being recited and weigh all its words in order to sound the depths of their full meaning. It means assimilating the contents of a text by means of a kind of mastication which releases its full flavor. It means, as St. Augustine, St. Gregory, John of Fécamp and others say in an untranslatable expression, to taste it with the *palatum cordis* or *in ore cordis*.²⁹

These images—roughly the palate of the heart, or the mouth of the heart—suggest a private, experiential encounter with the words of Scripture of which Cædmon with his nested dream proves once again exemplary, for from the results of parabiblical poets’ work we can discern some of the imaginative procedures that develop in this liminal position. Poets vivify biblical scripts by playing them over in their mind’s eye; they squint in order to see latencies of all kinds; they close their eyes and feel Scripture’s particular touch upon themselves and their time. They collate scriptural texts, puzzle over patterns, supplement, wrench. Their craftsmanship manifests intimate familiarity with Scripture: habitually chewing over certain biblical particulars, the ruminative reader finds himself nourished heart, mind, and soul by the method he brings to bear.

²⁹ Jean Leclercq, O. S. B., *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God* (trans. Catherine Misrahi, New York: Fordham UP, 1982), 73 [*L’Amour des lettres et le désir de Dieu: Initiation aux auteurs monastiques du Moyen-Age*, Paris: Cerf, 1957]. Hereafter, Leclercq, “*Love of Learning*.”

His reading becomes part of him; by a process every bit as incorporative as that of eating, the reader continually reappoints his personal interiority. Reflection in turn yields fluency, and a mind thus trained develops a reflexive biblicity of thought and expression. Leclercq deems this work a “sanctification of the imagination,” a redemptive hallowing of imaginative powers often held, in other streams of Christian tradition, to be deeply suspect. The sanctifying agent is memory, for where that is enriched with biblical material ruminatively conned, expression tends to show distinctly biblical character and discipline, and as such it mimics the Bible’s own suggestive economy. “The memory, fashioned wholly by the Bible and nurtured entirely by biblical words and the images they evoke, [issues] spontaneously in a biblical vocabulary,” Leclercq writes. “[Scriptural] reminiscences are not quotations, elements of phrases borrowed from another. They are the words the words of the person using them; they belong to him. Perhaps he is not even conscious of owing them to a source. Moreover, this biblical vocabulary . . . hints at much more than it says.”³⁰

In small space Leclercq describes a deep paradox. For his monks as for my poets, the bible was at once intimately familiar and inexorably strange. However fully such thinkers inhabited their biblical worlds, “biblical words did not become trite,” Leclercq writes. “People never got used to them.” For the medieval ruminant, sustained work with the Bible suspends, and even reverses, the psychology of habituation. He gains familiarity, but in a very real way it is familiarity with estrangement, that is, with the Bible’s paradoxical power of abeyant disclosure: scripture reserves as it reveals, it hints “at much more than it says.” *Ruminatio* means assimilating passages whose circumference of meaning cannot be taken; it entails the gradual internal burgeoning of depth and dimension. By Leclercq’s terms, the value of *ruminatio*’s

³⁰ Ibid., p. 75.

provender emerges more fully after ingestion: Isaiah's coal glows more in his stomach than it did in the seraphic hand.

Leclercq's well-known account of *ruminatio* finds a parallel in a mode of "confessional exegesis" described by another scholar. Contrasting it with "scientific exegesis"—textual criticism, study of historical contexts, deployments within theological argument—Gilbert Dahan describes "confessional exegesis" as a more personal, holistic mode of reading in which Scripture addresses, and is responded to by, the entire self.

Confessional exegesis implicates the reader totally and naturally: in a confessional context, to read the Bible is not to read a story, nor even a book of history; it is to become implicated in a dialogue between the text and oneself, a text that calls to one and to which one calls in turn, a text that demands existential engagement (which one either follows or does not).³¹

Parabiblical texts comprise records of such a mode of reading, allow us provisional spaces of confessional exegesis in which Scripture, poet and reader—whose role quite often is to read *both* texts before him—are existentially, imaginatively engaged in triplex dynamics.

Contrasting the Parabiblical: Thought, Word and Deed in *The Ormulum*

Such gustatory models of reading present a complex, inexhaustibly dimensioned idea of Scripture that may seem to overwhelm the pastoral mandates of Lateran IV with which we began. Is Scripture really so complicated for late-medieval lay readers? What competing models of Scripture could furnish a simpler story? Well, if this were a simpler story, our senses of pretext as both "authoritative exemplar" and "ulterior interest" would be antithetical. Biblical

³¹ "L'exégèse confessante implique totalement et par nature le lecteur: dans un contexte confessant, lire la Bible n'est pas lire un roman ni même un livre d'histoire; c'est s'impliquer dans un dialogue entre le texte et soi, texte qui interpelle et que l'on interpelle, texte qui demande un engagement existentiel (que l'on suit ou non)." Gilbert Dahan, *Lire la Bible au Moyen Age: Essais d'Herméneutique Médiévale* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, S. A., 2009), 46. Hereafter, Dahan, "Lire." Translation is my own.

exemplarity would simply fill the space, leaving no further margin, nothing ulterior, for pursuing the excesses of narrative, and brooking no attempt to develop its latencies. *Scripture would be strictly isomorphic with itself*. It would foreclose innovative forms of its own re-expression, and biblically inflected Middle English literature would thus consist, now as then, of only its simpler kinds—conservative paraphrases, devotional hymns, “saints legends and pious fictions,”³² any and all texts, really, in which the composing intelligence implicitly inscribed is that of a human mind ultimately wondering at Scripture and handing it along, intact if ornamented, in a non-appropriative mode.³³ Such texts would hew faithfully to the Vulgate, comprising a legacy of the tenth-century abbot Ælfric at his most conservative: “heo [sc. the Bible] is swa geendeburd swa swa God sylf hi gedihte ðam writere Moyse, ne durren na mare awritan on Englisc þonne þæt Læden hæfð.”³⁴ Precluded moving beyond “what the Latin has” by their belief in Scripture’s direct divine provenance, texts could not stage the *metamorphosis* of the Bible, its own imaginative renovation, only its *catalysis* of discourses predicated on *traditional* treatment—the careful handing on intact—of their biblical origins.

³² These are Geoffrey Shepherd’s examples of textual categories that “were much less controversial” as “uneasiness [increased] among [fourteenth-century] orthodox in offering Scripture to the laity.” Geoffrey Shepherd, “English Versions,” 382.

³³ I have in mind here Carolyn Walker Bynum’s formulation of wonder as “non-appropriative” cognition, as the looking astonishment of *admiratio*. High and late medieval devotional traditions contrasted “the wonder-ful . . . not with the known, the knowable, or the usual,” Bynum writes, “but with the imitable. The phrase *non imitandum sed admirandum* . . . had been used since the early Church to express the distance between heroes and martyrs, on the one hand, and the ordinary faithful, on the other.” The notion of imitability is crucial to the difference between parabiblical texts’ audacious *elaborations* of Scripture from more traditional postures of its *reception*. (We shall have occasion to return to these points of Bynum in our treatment of *Patience*.) Caroline Walker Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity* (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2001), 51.

³⁴ “The Bible is arranged as God Himself composed it for Moses the scribe, such that we dare not write any more in English than the Latin has.” Ælfric of Eynsham, “Preface to Genesis,” in S.J. Crawford, ed., *The Old English Version of the Heptateuch, Ælfric’s Treatise on the Old and New Testament and his Preface to Genesis*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1922), 79.

Indeed, if this were a simpler story, the twelfth-century Augustinian canon Orrm (not often thought the foremost medieval poet) would epitomize the ambitions of biblically minded making. He dedicates his *Orrmulum*—an attempt, likely in the compendious *speculum* tradition, to encompass the missal year’s Gospel readings—to Walter, his “broþherr / Afterr þe flæsshes kinde” and “i Cristenndom.” In doing so he evinces ideas about biblical writing that our texts subvert as they pursue brasher aims; even as a small sample, the present excerpt of Orrm’s dedication registers relatively conservative commitments that our texts oppose just in being.

Icc hafe wennd inntill Ennglissh, Goddspelles hallzhe lare, Afterr þat little witt þat me Min Drihhtin hefeþþ lenedd.	<i>holy lore</i>
Þu þohhtesst tatt itt mihhte wel Till mikell frame turnenn, 3iff Ennglissh folc, for lufe off Crist, Itt wolde 3erne lernenn,	<i>much good</i>
7 follzhenn itt, 7 fillenn itt Wiþþ þohht, wiþþ word, wiþþ dede. ³⁵	<i>follow</i>

Consider Orrm’s general schematic for availing an English Scripture. He works, as Ælfric of Eynsham (c. 955-c. 1010) did, at the behest of a superior, and in doing so he entrains Scripture in a program of lay education, his broad aim “to let English folk win salvation.”³⁶ The task, for Orrm, requires but a simple machinery of turnabout, something roughly like a loom. Applying “þat little witt þat me / Min Drihhtin hefeþþ lenedd,” Orrm takes up the skein of Scripture, loops it through the heddle of Walter’s commission, and produces a sparsely woven biblical matrix which the English laity, drawn in their homely way by yearning and love of Christ, will fill—either *fill in* and *fulfill*, for Orrm makes no distinction—“Wiþþ þohht, wiþþ word, wiþþ dede.”

³⁵ Rev. Robert Holt, M. A., ed., *The Ormulum with the Notes and Glossary of Dr. R. M. White*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1878, ll. 13-22.

³⁶ David Lawton, “Englishing the Bible, 1066-1549,” in David Wallace, ed., *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999), 464. Hereafter Lawton, “Englishing,” and Wallace.

Walter, we know, has foreseen the work turning “till mikell frame,” foreseen it fructifying profitably, but Orm’s faint metaphors of clothwork brings an interesting additional sense to Walter’s word frame. In brief, the great good of Orm’s work Englishing includes a certain enclosure of the biblical *textus*, a framework boundary within which lay audiences embroider Scripture, as it were, without elaborating its dimensions. Scripture in Orm’s view verges on pious praxis, not its own discursive enlargement: *changes of kind and mode* mark every movement beyond the edge of scriptural text. Orm understands biblically based poetry from an *essentially* didactic standpoint. For him, it is homiletic in form—it is pedagogy, rather than experience; it organizes institutional directives and provides basic salvational instruction; by “wending into English” it delivers a Bible held to speak unequivocally, if complexly, in its own terms; and it understands *filling in* the framework of scriptural good to entwine inextricably with *fulfilling* predetermined scriptural mandates.

Having said all this, it may be otiose to ask whether there is any getting lost in Orm’s Scripture—whether any of the *viatores anglici* constructed by Orm’s text has any latitude, within Scripture, for bewilderment or astonishment. In one important regard, the answer is clearly no. Liturgically ordered and densely signposted, tireless in pointing out wherever “this betokens that,” Orm’s Scripture has a neat perimeter and lucid legibility. Of the excerpt we have seen, Katharine Breen has observed that Orm’s language “signals that the English people are to ‘follzhenn’ the *Orrmulum* in the same way that the canons ‘follzhenn’ their rule-book. . . . Just as the goal of each monk or canon is to embody his rule so that the text can be derived from his actions, so the readers and listeners are asked to fill or fulfill the English text of the

Orrmulum, making it substantial through their obedience.”³⁷ The strictness of this demand enlivens the dead metaphor within our notion of following orders: to obey the Gospel, for Orm, is literally to pursue it in a linear way, to walk in its track, and to do so in such a regular way that text and praxis are perfectly mutually revealing. Orm’s text encodes stark *directions* for its own use, and expects of its audience the same fidelious *procession* it carries out, and manifests, for Walter: “Icc hafe . . . *forpedd* te þin wille” (ll. 11-12). With such an authoritative guide, readers have little room to err within the Bible or expatiate upon it. Orm is a strict educator indeed.

Yet such strictness is ironic for Orm, hardly suited to what David Lawton terms his “awesome garrulity.”³⁸ Taking account of Orm’s wildly abundant verbal economy—one so suffused with the Gospel, in Orm’s own view, that every word “participat[es] in the sacredness of Scripture” and “even Orm’s spelling system is divinely sanctioned”—Lawton offers a different sense of what we might call the evangelical physics of the *Orrmulum*. Like Breen, Lawton sees Orm’s text aspiring to transparency as it mediates between Scripture and human action; but instead of crisscrossing Scripture with the monological lines of praxis described by Breen, Lawton posits a rather more dynamic relationality at work in Orm’s text. “Orm’s Gospel functions as microcosm,” Lawton writes, such that “there is an identity between salvation history and the mystical body of Christ. Orm’s . . . work is centered upon that body in an unusually centrifugal way, concentrating on the Gospel text and excluding apocryphal matter. His structure is theocentric: the Gospel of the Mass stands for both the Gospel and the Mass in expressing real presence.”³⁹ Lawton’s formulation is arresting, all the more so for being

³⁷ Katharine Breen, *Imagining an English Reading Public, 1150-1400* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010), 112.

³⁸ Lawton, “Englishing,” 464.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 466.

accurate: *centered upon* the body of Christ in an unusually *centrifugal* way? This paradoxical physics captures an almost Trinitarian circulation of presence within Orm's text, wherein the missal, Scripture, sacred history and Christ are all coextensive; only by presuming these identities can Orm center his text centrifugally, or move among these categories—what we might call the *persons* of his text, recalling if we did not just that term's Trinitarian pertinence, but also its original sense of reverberant re-sounding—and yet maintain the claim, apropos of a book bulked with his own deixis, “þatt all iss haliz lare” (l. 318). Lawton's schema complements Breen's in revealing that what Orm offers to organize and direct to the level of praxis is, at one and the same time, nothing less than *a site of real presence*. Garrulous Orm, we realize, seeks to speak the overwhelming truth.

Taken together, Lawton and Breen draw into relief the conflict in the *Ormmulum's* deployment of Scripture. On one hand the poem is confident that within its own discursive compass it has comprehended Scripture and instantiated it veridically and salvifically; it sees itself, from a certain angle anyway, as an effective phenomenon, or reflex, of the Gospel itself. Yet because of the reflexive nature of its project—its aim to make the Gospel substantial in human terms, that is, to en flesh Scripture in human lives and to English it as the matrix of human living—the poem is fraught with various forms of biblical excess threaten its confidence. Scripture is disproportionate to Orm's “little witt,” which results in its unwieldiness in his hands and the poem's obvious imbalance between quotation and commentary; and more importantly, because the poem thematizes the continuity of truth, text and praxis, it blurs the distinction between meaning and enactment that Orm, at his more bossily didactic,⁴⁰ would have in place.

⁴⁰ “Orm may be the bossiest writer in Middle English literature.” Thus Meg Worley, “Using the Ormmulum to Redefine Vernacularity,” in Fiona Somerset and Nicholas Watson, eds., *The Vulgar Tongue: Medieval and Postmedieval Vernacularity* (University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 2003), 21.

Thus within one text we find two kinds inscribed, one seeking to produce a neatly *regular* following, and another, no less present but inherently less exigent, seeking to imitate (rather than to conduct) the Bible by asserting its own participation in the boundless economy of divinity itself. The *Orrmulum* is thus both a referential order restrained and guaranteed by the canonical Bible to which it strictly points, *and* an incipiently speculative, simulational order that yearns—as it thinks the English laity should yearn—to become an integral part of the scriptural frame. No sooner does the poem circumscribe the Gospel than it finds itself participant in the Gospel’s overspill of metonymic plenitudes.

This discovery amounts, for Orm, to a temptation to power, one that Orm’s piety tries mostly successfully to resist. As I said when we began with Orm, his natural tendency is to treat Scripture with deferential tact: he works non-appropriatively, trying to hand Scripture along without wrenching it into any design of his own. Only as he preaches does he find Scripture offering a mutual accommodation. Only perforce does he risk its teeming. Only by backing into it, as it were, does he find Scripture stooping from its transcendence: “L’Ecriture sainte est la transcription dans le langage des hommes d’un message divin,” says Gilbert Dahan.

Holy Scripture transcribes a divine message in the language of men. Divinely uttered, it exceeds all possibilities of human expression but, destined for man, it cannot but place itself within his reach. Because divine, it is not located within time, or, rather, it declares itself perpetually, addressing each generation of men, who will find in it answers to questions of their own time.⁴¹

However congenial it may be to a range of sensibilities medieval and modern, Dahan’s notion of an eternally fecund, perpetually responsive Scripture contravenes Orm’s declared interests, his pragmatic plan to parcel the Gospel neatly and adequately glossed with all “Þatt tatt þe

⁴¹ Dahan, *Lire*, 393-94. “Parole divine, elle exceed toutes les possibilités de l’expression humaine mais, destinée à l’homme, elle ne peut que se mettre à sa portée. Parce que divine, elle ne se situe pas dans le temps, ou, plutôt, elle s’énonce perpétuellement, s’adressant à chaque generation d’hommes, qui y trouveront la réponse, aux questions de leur temps”

Goddspell meneþþ, / Þatt mann birrþ spellen to te follc / Off þezze sawle need” (a sequence tough to modernize; roughly, everything that the Gospel intends to be spelled out for people regarding their souls’ needs).

As we move away from Orm, let us distill the two keys of his practice. First, Orm issues stern marching orders: Scripture consists in teachable doctrinal meanings, and Orm’s job is molding minds to scriptural discipline. Doing so depends on the categorical separateness of Scripture and homily; Orm’s teaching *acts upon* the Bible but preserves its priority in every sense. Commentary dwarfs quotation because his mode is deictic, rather than heuristic. He tells, rather than shows; he unpacks biblical narrative, rather than unfolding it. His poetics is that of a Scripture already discovered, respectfully handled, and maintained as a closed system. Yet alongside all this, Orm also wants to stand aside and let Scripture speak; indeed his volubility bespeaks his hope that fulsome explanation “Maz3 hellpenn þa þatt redenn it / To sen 7 tunnerrstandenn / All þess (sc. the Gospel) te better” (D. ll. 47-49). Speak, Orm, that Scripture may speak—a paradoxical form of ancillary service, one in which materially perfecting his own artifact, lading it “maniz word / Þe rime swa to fillenn” (ll. 43-44), allows Orm to clarify the Gospel itself. Completing the Gospel ethically and epistemologically (with thought, word and deed) finds its aesthetic complement in shaping a verse form to mediate the sacred source. Yet Orm’s formal labor aspires to nothing so much as transparency, his text a self-effacing looking glass polished to draw the Gospel into view. “Þurhsekenn ille an ferss,” Orm counsels, “þurhlokenn offte” (D. ll. 67-68). Rich advice, these exhortations to look *through* Orm’s verses; they enjoin the reader into recursively cycling between the *Ormmulum* and the Bible it means to parse. *Search and re-search my verse, keep looking it though, for it luminesces with Scripture*, Orm’s text says. *Read me in order to read Scripture*—a call stranger than it may

at first sound in that it credits the *Orrmulum* with manifesting Scripture more fully than Scripture manifests itself. Why? Because the poem presents Scripture enmeshed in correct doctrinal understandings, concomitant knowledges derived from (but not explicit in) Scripture itself. Situating Scripture thus, Orm comes to the brink, but only to the brink, of quite a large claim: *Scripture is more fully itself for the overlay of my own text.*

He does not make the claim for himself, however, and that makes all the difference. For in his reluctance to conflate the orders of his text—to insinuate his didactic energies fully inside the Bible they treat, or to inhabit the paradox implied by his own text, that of vatic revisionism—Orm remains an exemplar of the “simpler story” of biblically based art with which we began. I have sketched Orm’s treatment of Scripture in some detail, however, in order to begin providing a sense, in this case a mostly philological one, of where the parabiblical imaginary comes from. In a promissory way, with details that will gather meaning as a backdrop for our later texts, I have sought to throw into sharp focus the bracingly experimental energies of our later texts.

These questions circle back to the idea I set out as we began with Orm, the idea of the Bible’s latent iterability. By contrast to more conservative thinkers like Ælfric and Orm for whom Scripture brooks no adjustment of its narrative or doctrinal contours, the three thinkers we study here invest in—indeed produce—a multifaceted concept of a Bible *interestingly not limited* by the strictures of canon, doctrine or tradition. I stress the phrase, *interestingly not limited*, partly because left unmarked it would be a rather *uninteresting* initial predication to make of our key texts; more importantly, though, the phrase distinctly describes Scripture’s engagement by parabiblical thinking. Recall that interest, *inter-esse*, means inclusion in the sense of drawing in or making room, the concern of one being coming into the midst of another; interest, at its core,

is a notion of commingling.⁴² In this particular sense the *Orrmulum* takes no interest in Scripture, insofar as it does not try to enter into Scripture's discursive field, but rather leaves in plain view the seams and sutures of its self-annexation, exposing its own superaddedness and ontological difference. It is essentially ancillary. The poem surely does *approach* the Bible, in the sense of drawing near it so as to explain its features up close, but it does not *approximate* the Bible, in the sense of simulating it, because its new knowledge is of a secondary order of thought—homily, not Bible, a distinction the poem itself builds in. An ironic fissure separates the *Orrmulum* from its host text: Orrm teaches *about* the Bible precisely because he is not *inside* it. He *does not iterate* the Bible by producing the new versions of it that would result from his discursive entry—literally his interest—therein.

Many texts, of course, expand upon the Bible's often spare narrative data, but that alone does not qualify them as parabiblical. That term I reserve for texts—and indeed artifacts in other modes beyond my purview here—essentially marked by a doubled gesture, the construction first of a sense that the Bible has extended a tincture of itself into alien pages, and second, of a concomitant set of terms or concepts that check the truth claim, or relinquish the truth value altogether, of that opening gambit. Alone, no mere embellishment of biblical narrative—a supplied detail, a novel allegorical reading, an inserted scene—is sufficient to produce the entwinings of invention and skepticism, truth and falsehood, propelling the movements of the parabiblical imagination.

This kind of dynamism is what I mean by the modest term of art *iterability*. To iterate the Bible is to produce a version of it, one with a complex acknowledgment of its own status *as version*. “That was a way of putting it—not very satisfactory,” says Eliot in the “East Coker” section of *Four Quartets*. Such a spirit of experimental provisionality, a willingness to try and

⁴² See *OED*, “interest” and especially the older form, “interest.”

try again to witness the Bible exceeding all efforts to enunciate it, characterizes the discourses we encounter. Of course in the late middle ages, no poem *could* be satisfactory in re-expressing Scripture, for Scripture always had the broad capacity to anticipate its own new meanings—to be always already in possession, and aware, of the truths it concealed, and thus to outstrip every effort, and all efforts combined, to map its own depths.⁴³ All the ways of putting it already inhered in the Bible if they were true, and the more traditional forms of reading—say, chewing over the fullness of meaning in a given passage, verse or word, or configuring the biblical text with the pertinent essentials of exegetical tradition (the *Glossa*)—prove but an *arrière garde*, needful but reticent, for the more exploratory imaginations at work in our texts. For while our texts do make use of standard interpretive apparatus, their shared salient feature, the trait that joins them most closely as members of the parabiblical imaginary, is their unwillingness to exchange the *experience* of biblical narrative for the doctrinal truth extracted by any tool or preserved in any tradition. These texts refuse Orm’s logic of betokening, with its motivating desire to facilitate biblical use. Instead, with a counter desire to stage Scripture as immersive and challenging, these texts insist upon a strange mode of biblical heurism, one that places readers inside biblical worlds where narratives are lived, rather than contemplated, but where the immediacy of encountering Scripture is set off by acts of puncturing the mimetic *mise-en-scène*.

⁴³ In our period this anticipatory power on the part of the Bible needs neither the ancient tradition of monastic holism (Benedict) nor the coming Reformation doctrine of *sola scriptura* to explain it. Even the fourteenth century’s chief defender of the literal level, Nicholas of Lyra, affirmed that although the Bible’s meanings were not infinite, their bounds were effectively those of all truth: “The volume of Sacred Scripture—which, though it is divided into many individual books, still these are taken together into one volume which is called the Bible—‘containeth all’ [Wisdom 1.7], because when one considers this science [sc., theology or, for Lyra, the Bible itself] in a certain sense one considers all science.” James George Kiecker, *The Hermeneutical Principles and Exegetical Methods of Nicholas of Lyra, O.F.M. (ca. 1270-1349)* (Access via Proquest Digital Dissertations, Paper AAI7824341, 1978), 42.

Disrupting the biblical provenance of a rendered scene both allows for parabiblicity's essential doubled gesture. There, the action alternates between taking Scripture in hand to deploy it to new effect, and performing the willingness to unhand the sacred text at the first *Noli me tangere*—at the notional possibility, that is, of encountering the resistance of any more authoritative discourse. Again, none of our texts comes close to open heterodoxy, but even as they handle Scripture relatively safely, our texts are all wary in this way.

Biblicizing the parabiblical

This is that disciple who giveth testimony of these things, and hath written these things; and we know that his testimony is true. But there are also many other things which Jesus did; which, if they were written every one, the world itself, I think, would not be able to contain the books that should be written.

— John 21.24-25⁴⁴

For I [sc., Jesus] testify to every one that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book: If any man shall add to these things, God shall add unto him the plagues written in this book. And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from these things that are written in this book.

— Revelation 22.18-19⁴⁵

Holy Scripture . . . somehow grows with its readers.

— Gregory the Great, *Moralia on Job* XX.I.1⁴⁶

⁴⁴ *Sunt autem et alia multa quae fecit Iesus quae si scribantur per singula nec ipsum arbitror mundum capere eos qui scribendi sunt libros*

⁴⁵ *Contestor ego omni audienti verba prophetiae libri huius si quis adposuerit ad haec adponet Deus super illum plagas scriptas in libro isto et si quis deminuerit de verbis libri prophetiae huius auferet Deus partem eius de ligno vitae et de civitate sancta et de his quae scripta sunt in libro isto*

⁴⁶ Gregory expresses this idea twice. His seventh homily on Ezechiel reads the prophet's vision of the four living creatures ascending from the earth as a figure for Scripture's ability to anticipate our rising understanding: "*Divina eloquia cum legente crescunt; nam tanto illa quisque altius intelligit, quanto in eis altius intendit*" (PL 76, Col. 0843D; my italics). My epigraph, however, cites Gregory's *Moralia on Job*. This is the better known of the two quotations, and I

We begin our next section with two pieces of testimony and an inconvenient truth. By bringing them together I seek to epitomize a complex of attitudes inscribed already in the Bible, not to posit any direct influence. I offer these epigraphs because together they sketch key dynamics of this study's core cultural artifacts. We begin with John the Evangelist, whose Gospel defines a boundary of what, by the fourteenth century, had long been canonized biblical space. Jesus did many other things that I have not reported, John says; my testimony ends here, but like the creative Logos itself, the story I tell extends beyond these bounds.⁴⁷ The Bible is emphatically *not* coterminous with the story it tells. This final gesture is a crackling paradox.

prefer it because its *aliquo modo* encodes Gregory's abiding astonishment at Scripture's plasticity. Its context is a paean to Scripture's virtues. "Quamvis omnem scientiam atque doctrinam Scriptura sacra sine aliqua comparatione transcendat, ut taceam quod vera praedicat, quod ad coelestem patriam vocat; quod a terrenis desideriis ad superna amplectenda cor legentis immutat; quod dictis obscurioribus exercet fortes, et parvulis humili sermone blanditur, quod nec sic clausa est ut pavesci debeat, nec sic patet ut vilescat, quod usu fastidium tollit, et tanto amplius diligitur quanto amplius meditatur; quod legentis animum humilibus verbis adjuvat, sublimibus sensibus levat, *quod aliquo modo cum legentibus crescit*, quod a rudibus lectoribus quasi recognoscitur, et tamen doctis semper nova reperitur; ut ergo de rerum pondere taceam, scientias tamen omnes atque doctrinas ipso etiam locutionis suae more transcendit, quia uno eodemque sermone dum narrat textum, prodit mysterium, et sic scit praeterita dicere, ut eo ipso noverit futura praedicare, et non immutato dicendi ordine, eisdem ipsis sermonibus novit et anteacta describere, et agenda nuntiare" (PL 76, Cols. 0135B-D; my emphasis).

⁴⁷ The bible, we recall, abounds in such liminal zones; its human authors need not share John's theology of the Logos in order to share his sense of biblical narrative's excessiveness.

Literally dissonant, it closes not just John's Gospel, but the Gospels as a collection,⁴⁸ saying two things at once, namely, that John's book completes the primary narrative knowledge vouchsafed by God, and, simultaneously, that that body of truth, the very dimension of divine action in history, has a wider remit which refractions like John's make visible only in part. Alongside his Synoptic counterparts, John *authenticates* the story of Christ's Incarnation, but does not fully *articulate* it; he is quite explicit on this point. Thus the biblical canon is not the full measure of narrative truth: John may circumscribe biblical space, but with an implied view of narrative terrain stretching far away, his perimeter rouses the curiosity it would avert, and indicates the latencies it would conceal. Leaving unsaid "many other things which Jesus did," John potentiates *as further narrative* a history at once boundless (*multa*), documentarily alternative (*alia*), and divine (*quae fecit Iesus*).

Internal hints that biblical meanings might continue tend to license a range of extrabiblical discursive practices; indeed "extracanonical" traditions, ranging from Hebrew Bible pseudepigrapha to alternative gospels and apocalypses, have coexisted with "canonical" texts

⁴⁸ Hugh of St. Victor can help us understand how firmly *conclusory* the end of John's Gospel was felt to be in at least one high medieval exegetical context. "Just as the entire body of the Old Testament writings can, broadly speaking, be called the Law, while the five books of Moses are called the Law in a special sense, so too, generally speaking, the entire New Testament can be called the Gospel, even though those four books—namely, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—in which the deeds and words of the Savior are fully set forth, deserve to be called the Gospel in a special sense" (my emphasis). [*Sicut omnis scriptura Veteris Testamenti lex appellari potest, specialiter tamen libri Moysi quinque lex dicuntur; ita generaliter totum Novum Testamentum Evangelium dici potest, sed tamen specialiter ista quatuor volumina, Matthaei scilicet Marci, Lucae atque Joannis, in quibus facta et dicta Salvatoris plane explicantur, nuncupari meruerunt* (PL 176).] With an essentially monastic perspective, Hugh understands the Bible synecdochically, as a diptych of Law and Gospel in which the whole of the Old and New Testaments come, respectively, under those broad categories. His model thus underscores the power of John's conclusion to culminate Christian Scriptures, implicitly arranging the Evangelist's last word as an analog to that of Revelation. More importantly, Hugh explicitly frames the Gospels' narrative accounts—the "deeds and words of the Savior"—as the adequate core of the Gospel in his larger sense. Narrative, for Hugh, is the primary mode of all revealed knowledge.

since long before these categories were fully and finally distinguished.⁴⁹ I could not possibly canvas here the historical array of biblically allied discourses. Instead, I wish to suggest that the last words of John's Gospel provide an experiential clue to what is essential and distinct about the Middle English parabiblical imaginary, that in these words we experience the inchoate sensation of parabiblicity.

That sensation begins in vertigo. It begins, for John 21:25, with the verse's oscillation at a limit point, its dynamic attitude of looking both outward, from the conclusory edge of John's Gospel, and inward, back over the narrative history that has come before it. John was eyewitness, of course, to many of the "things which Christ did," and his Gospel records seven miraculous signs plus the Passion. Yet in closing the book John wields his eyewitness testimony most powerfully by obverting it, that is, by attesting to its negative space, to what remains over the horizon from his account. "Turn it and turn it again, for everything is in it," the rabbis say of the Torah; but as his own gaze turns at the close of his book, John hints that quite a lot of "everything"—at least in the narrative terms of *gestae Dei*—might lie beyond the scriptural margin. He marks the threshold between the biblical and the extrabiblical, and in so doing establishes *with scriptural authority* some basic conditions of the Middle English parabiblical. These include, first, an abiding biblical priority, a centeredness upon the Bible no matter how boldly any poem may speculate or range; next, an insatiable curiosity about the meanings of that scriptural center; and third—a feature that follows as both a "yet" and a "so"—a resistless eccentricity, a confidence that some tincture of the Bible, some dram of its ontological guarantee and salvific efficacy, will carry out into textual futures streaming, like John's line of sight, from the scriptural littoral. At this point, says John, my account is sufficient, if incomplete. To

⁴⁹ The unique authority of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John was established by the late second century, while the present canon of the Bible was, for the purposes of this study, determined in the early fifth century by the Council of Carthage (419).

sharpen the point, I would suggest that John's narrative theology is sufficient *and* incomplete, in fact sufficient *because* it is incomplete: his thought gains in salvific and imaginative potency for its final note of rhetorical inadequacy. For just as John once "believed" upon finding the risen Christ's discarded winding cloths (*ille discipulus . . . vidit et credidit* [Jn. 20:7-8]), he affirms in closing the generative paradox of plenitude's supplementation—where once linen wrappings bespoke the divine body they no longer held, now a narrative boundary signals nothing so much as what lies over the horizon it occludes.

Sunt autem et alia multa quae fecit Iesus. John's *autem* encodes the parabiblical dilemma. Grammatically available as both a copulative ("and," "moreover") and an adversative ("but") conjunction, John's *autem* suggests that he may be of two minds regarding the unreported history of Christ's deeds, imbuing that history with two irreconcilable values. On one hand John is drawn along by what he describes, his effort to conclude giving way to paratactic effusion ("*And* there are many other things which Jesus did"), while on the other hand his *autem* forcibly disjoins the Gospel from its unspoken residue ("*But* there are many other things"). In the first sense John's Gospel leaves off at the threshold of its own discursive afterlife, availing for the Bible an additive domain shaped by boundless wonder: what more did Jesus do, where else might His work be recorded? What are Scripture's *ands*, its potentials for growth? Real energy accrues to such questions, not least because their endlessness suits the infinite generativity of the Word they concern. In this regard, we could say that John points to a discursive space of exuberance, a zone of overspill for the Bible's superabundance of story and meaning, and one which our texts, as some of the uncontainable books John mentions, ambitiously inhabit. Calling that space the parabile, we could then authenticate it by remembering that faith is purest outside the realm of the positively attested. *Beati qui non*

viderunt et crediderunt (Jn. 20:29): Christ's textually excessive career is meaningful precisely because it eludes empirical construal. Such a schematic would highlight the Bible's susceptibility to continuation, and propose that any or all of the discourses comprising John's scriptural surround might permeate, permute or enlarge that privileged center.

This model would have limited purchase to describe the fourteenth century's more ambitious texts, however, insofar as it may sanction a range of subjectivist hermeneutics that only partly obtain in the parabiblical imaginary. John is no figurehead for a subjectivist Bible, and taken in its adversative sense his *autem* turns pretender discourses away at the gate, insistent that firsthand testimony (here a byword for canonical Scripture) be kept apart from the numinous, undifferentiated realm of speculation: "But there are many other things which Jesus did, which, if they were written every one, the world itself, I think, would not be able to contain the books that should be written." Here the grammar implies a stark scriptural margin, one that deepens the gulf between Scripture and commentary and mitigates, in advance, the risk of their commingling: whatever other books might remain to be written, they are to be bracketed, marked as different in kind, from their sacred wellspring. Failure to observe that separation, John warns, may well bring the *revelatory* senses of apocalypse together with the word's more popular *eschatological* ones.

It's little wonder, given this apocalyptic ending, that Chaucer's Prioress conflates John the Evangelist with John the Divine. "The grete evaungelist, Seint John, / In Pathmost wroot," she avers, and while later scholars have sought to distinguish the two Johns, most premodern

traditions assumed their identity.⁵⁰ Without wishing to adopt the Prioress's totalizing turn of mind (her "Amor vincit omnia"), I'd like now to draw our second Johannine epigraph into view and develop the intrabiblical tension that gives rise to the parabiblical imaginary. To the ambivalent twilight of the Gospel's final moment, Revelation adds certain thunder. "If any man shall add to these things," it warns, "God shall add unto him the plagues written in this book. And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from these things that are written in this book." These verses are the last and fiercest of the Bible's internal Praetorian guard, as it were, a chain of passages that pointedly contest attempts to adopt, adapt, expand or reconfigure the features of the Bible as they are found *in situ*. I count both our scriptural epigraphs among this guard, and trace them to Deuteronomy 4.2 ("You shall add nothing to what I order you and shall take nothing away"), itself plainly audible in Revelation's final warning. Taken together, the endings of John and Revelation offer the very basic reminder that the Bible stands poised to purge itself of exogenous discourses. What those discourses *are*, of course, is a limitless question, the repeated reframing of which we will only consider with respect to particular, text- and context-specific cases.

Working our way into those text-centered studies means entering the experiential welter that gathers between our Johannine warnings. John admits the incompleteness of his account,

⁵⁰ Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho* (c. 160s) is the earliest extant text to identify John the Apostle with John the Divine. "A man among us named John, one of Christ's apostles, received a revelation and foretold that the followers of Christ would dwell in Jerusalem for a thousand years, and that afterwards the universal and, in short, everlasting resurrection and judgment would take place," Justin says. His statement probably assumes the triple identification of Apostle, Evangelist and Divine, a view widely rejected since the higher criticism but prevalent across our texts. "The apostel John" is both the visionary agency and a prominent catchword where *Pearl's* setting shifts to the celestial Jerusalem, for instance. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* (ed. Michael Slusser, trans. Thomas B. Falls, Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 127.

vis-à-vis the fuller volume of Christ's earthly life, and acknowledges an asymptotic approach to a plenary Gospel. He suggests that he could have related more of Christ's life, that other writers might already say more (as they do in the Synoptic Gospels), and that, as if by a kind of Grail logic, more of the story could still come to light. An especially dense instance of the Bible at odds with itself—the fertile condition for the parabiblical imaginary—John's final words are an admonishment entwined with an invitation, an oscillating truth claim smacking of Beckett: "There is no more. There is more." This dynamism finally affirms only the *pleroma* of Christ's life, its uncapturable, inexhaustible fullness and its completeness only unto itself. The Book of Revelation counters, by contrast, with its own textual adequacy, if not an exact accommodation between vision and record, then an inviolable textual equilibrium to be sure. Trespassers beware, Revelation warns: the very category of biblicity builds in a fundamental intractability, an insistence upon self-sameness sufficient to trouble any attempt to draw Scripture into dialectical relation. The book—and with it, the Bible—ends projecting condign punishments for the Bible's slightest alteration. God will visit its plagues on anyone who adds to its prophecy, and anyone making excisions will incur utter annihilation.

Written into a syntax of draconian reciprocity (*si quis adposuerit . . . adponet Deus; si quis deminuerit . . . auferet Deus*), these verses wrench the Gospel's tact into a ghastly curse. They aim to preempt a range of threats to the Bible's text, from the error of a negligent scribe to the willful misappropriation of a heretic. But with their palpably reflexive form—their verbs setting readerly action and lordly response in parallel, and their severe *auferet*, God's own verb of erasure, a common idiom for what anyone might "take away" from his reading—the verses enact, in *experiential* terms, a second paradox. Bible reading is a dialectical endeavor, they show; but apply anything to the text (say, the hinted overspill of the Gospel of John) or take

anything from it (say, an analogical reading of some apocalyptic detail), and it's your soul that you imperil. Henri de Lubac has shown how common and conventional it was, throughout the long middle ages, to take the end of Revelation as a warning against subjectivist reading. A catchword for that tradition was adjustment, whether one adjusted Scripture to one's own fallible mind, or conformed, more wisely and humbly, to Scripture's sense. "O prudent reader, always beware of a superstitious understanding, so that you do not adjust the Scriptures to your own sense; join your sense to the Scriptures."⁵¹ These happen to be the words of an eleventh-century

⁵¹ This exhortation is from the miscellany *De Varia Psalmorum atque Cantuum Modulatione* of the Benedictine reformer and music theorist Berno of Reichenau; de Lubac quotes it to show, against an earlier opinion, how thoroughly traditional and unexceptional it is. Against Ceslas Spicq's view that Berno's wariness of rampant allegory qualifies his text as "the unique work of criticism, properly speaking, of the Middle Ages" (*Esquisse d'une Histoire de l'Exégèse Latine au Moyen Âge*, Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrain, 1944; 22), de Lubac evinces Berno's traditionalism within a network of other, greater authorities. (Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*, trans. E. M. Macierowski, vol. 3, Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009; 99). Writing in the mid-eleventh century, Berno is also useful to us because he synthesizes a common pair of high medieval understandings of Revelation's colophon. Codicologically speaking, Berno understands John's vehemence about exact transmission to extend to the entirety of Scripture, a treatment of "last words" analogous to Hugh's comments on the end of John. "We should therefore hold firmly to the order of Holy Scripture, and observe its tenor in all things, mindful that a certain wise man warns, 'O prudent reader, always beware of a superstitious understanding, so that you do not adjust the Scriptures to your own sense; join your sense to the Scriptures.' Therefore it is to be resolved that we should unchangeably preserve, hold, and *keep the sacred words of the Gospel, the oracles of the patriarchs and the prophets, the writings of the apostles*, with complete faith and fitting devotion, as they are found in the authentic books—neither adding nor deleting nor changing anything, if we should wish to evade the threat which the Holy Spirit seems to extend at the end of the Apocalypse" (my emphasis). Berno's formulaic jussives—*servemus, tenamus, custodiamus*—also suggest, in their semantic excess, that proper treatment of Scripture includes carrying its decrees out into life. Adding and diminishing, for Berno, means the full range of ways in which Bible and life are dynamically engaged, a usefully supple understanding for the waves of lay practical education coming out of Lateran IV. [*Debemus igitur sacrae Scripturae seriem firmiter tenere ac ejus tenorem in omnibus inviolabiliter observare, attendentes quod quidam sapiens admonet dicens: Prudens lector, semper cave superstitiosam intelligentiam, ut non tuo sensui attemperes Scripturas, Scripturis sensum tuum adjungas. Igitur constituendum est ut sacra Evangelii verba, patriarcharum ac prophetarum oracula, apostolorum scripta, fide integra, devotione congrua, ut in authenticis libris reperiuntur, incommutabiliter servemus, teneamus, custodiamus, nec aliquid addentes, nec dementes, nec mutantes, si velimus illam*

abbot, but they are long-traditioned ones, and all the more urgent in a fourteenth century that saw unprecedented pressure on questions, and practices, of Scriptural lability. Shaped by changes in biblical, theological and religious domains, the parabiblical imaginary develops as the reflex of a culture that ultimately cannot agree, or perhaps even decide, what its Bible must be.

Late-medieval parabiblical texts offer the truth of reading that so astonished Gregory the Great, the fact felt in our third epigraph that *Scripture somehow grows with its readers*. Gregory's "somehow," *aliquo modo*, registers his version of the Cædmonian secret, which is the apposite relationship between scriptural reading and divine information: not only is the Bible itself divinely vouchsafed, but individual acts of reading it can deliver insights sanctified by their provenance. The surprise, or suddenness, of Scripture's excrescence is a sustained capacity always to meet the understanding at its every arrival. By aligning its implicit scriptural intertexts with its divine evocation—indeed, by coding reading as prophecy under the auspice of sudden expression—the *Hymn* dramatizes Scripture's own givenness to recursive proclamation. Cædmon's gift, in other words, both draws upon and mimics the Bible's inherent iterability.

Disidentity is intransitive, as it were, a feature inherent in the Bible itself, rather a relational or comparative term. Where "nonidentity" could indicate vacuity or characterlessness, a blankness shiftily filled, biblical disidentity is a function of the *overabundance* of meaning medieval readers found in Scripture. It forms a tradition of perceived semantic saturation as old as the Bible itself. Medieval readers of all persuasions took the Bible's inexhaustibility on faith, and thought about it in myriad ways. They found nonidentity built into the structure of their experience of the Bible itself.

comminationem evadere quam Spiritus sanctus juxta finem Apocalypsis videtur intentare (PL 142, 1146C-D).]

The chapters ahead

Our first chapter treats *Cursor Mundi*, a poem with an ambitious scope bespeaking the parabiblical imaginary's conceptual charter, for above all this is a literature of largeness. The poem is interested in etiologies, and one of its main origin stories tracks the journey of Seth, Adam and Eve's third son, to retrieve the oil of mercy from the Eden of his parents' banishment; his journey serves, as Ernest Mardon has shown, as an organizing leitmotif for the length of the poem.⁵² Directed Eden-ward by the dying Adam, Seth's response resonates with *Cursor Mundi*'s distinctive rumination on Scripture's disidentity. "Yai, sir, wist i wyderward / That tat vncuth contré ware, / Thou wat that I was neuer thare" (1246-48). I argue that *Cursor Mundi*, like Seth, seeks paradoxically to revisit a place it has never before been, to recuperate something it never possessed—namely, a Bible larger than itself, a Bible constituted, that is, by a diversity of texts and traditions far exceeding its usual canonical bounds. Quietly interweaving Scripture with texts of other kinds (e.g., biblical paraphrase, saints' lives and legends, patristic commentary), *Cursor Mundi* assumes the Bible's imbrication among other discourses, and suggests that reflection through other texts allows the Bible to emerge more fully itself. As does Seth, this biblically based poem shows its point of origin to be more expansive, fecund and ravishing than we had even suspected. It ventilates the Bible, weaving lengthy, variegated proof for its belief that Scripture avails new texture, dimension and vividness for being conceived as a diffused, distributed system, as the Bible *plus* its constellation of ancillary texts. *Cursor Mundi* establishes a model of scriptural elasticity on which all our subsequent texts implicitly depend.

Chapters Two and Three treat a pair of poems, *Cleanness* and *Patience*, that disagree about the quality of such elasticity, and stage between them a far-reaching debate over literary

⁵² Ernest G. Mardon, *The Narrative Unity of the Cursor Mundi*, Glasgow: William MacLellan, 1970. Hereafter, Mardon, "Narrative Unity."

texts' capacity for availing religious, and particularly visionary, experience. *Cleanness* frames a very brash experiment, but it begins conservatively. It is homiletic in form, its *thema* a well-known beatitude, Matthew 5:8 ("Blessed are the clean of heart: for they shall see God"). But by twisting the logic of that text, *Cleanness* ventures a large, complex claim. First it inverts the beatitude, suggesting that anyone seeing God—say through the window of a vividly imagined, probing poem—needs must undergo a simultaneous cleansing of heart. Aware though that no depiction of God approaches true *facie ad faciem* seeing, the poem develops its logic and implies, quietly but pervasively, that its reader's gradual moral refinement equates to low-grade visionary experience, and that the poem's own textual mediation correlates with the reader's partial preparedness. *Cleanness* insinuates its own ability to extend the tradition of Scripture per se, for if, like Scripture, it can bring the workings of God to life in the mind's eye, and in so doing prepare the soul to see and be seen by God seated in judgment, then the poem can boast, if only provisionally, that it has become—*transubstantiated into*, is its strident suggestion—a kind of Scripture unto itself. This ambition means that *Cleanness* is an outlier among our texts, for against the thrust of my argument that the parabiblical imaginary develops in a culture broadly, if tacitly, convinced that Scripture's lack of stable identity is an expression of its power, *Cleanness* insists on scriptural self-sameness, on understanding Scripture's central work to be the repeated, replicable training of a reader's eschatological imagination. In the final analysis, the Bible for *Cleanness* is not identical to itself, but that's because its ultimate *raison d'être*—rehearsing and rehearsing for the presence of God, an exercise of both memory (texts) and prolepsis (prophecy)—renders it essentially imitable by other texts. "As a report about Revelation," wrote Abraham Joshua Heschel, "the Bible itself is a midrash."⁵³ *Cleanness* sees beatific vision in just

⁵³ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1955), 185.

such a way: by its experimental terms, the Bible is but the first order of a hierarchy of texts all convergent upon *visio Dei*.

Like its hero, *Patience* is a pessimist. The poem retells the story of Jonah, the reluctant prophet for whom “the Lord prepared a great fish” (Jon. 2:1). With *Pearl*, *Cleanness* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Patience* survives in just one manuscript, BL MS Cotton Nero A.x. While the four poems almost certainly share an author, in the context of the parabiblical imaginary, it is the relationship between *Patience* and *Cleanness* that proves the tensest sibling rivalry. The poems’ basic trajectories—centripetal versus centrifugal, each with its paradox—say a good deal about their quarrel: *Cleanness* explores filth in order to “aprochen to [God’s] presens” (8), whereas *Patience* features a divinely ordained prophet who will “aproche hit no nerre” (85). It may seem merely convenient, the poems’ shared use of this word; indeed it mostly is. But by looking at both poems in terms of how each “approaches” God, I want to tease out a thread that’s most distinct for running between the two texts, a thread that either text, considered alone, might well conceal. Both poems retell sustained portions of the Bible, but they wonder in so doing about distinctly literary texts’ power to *approximate* divinity, to draw near the godhead and to emulate His sacred texts. This wonder fuels the poems’ quiet, pervasive inquiry into the conditions of their shared experiment. Working together, the one brimming with confidence and the other commensurately skeptical, *Cleanness* and *Patience* test the capacity of literature (a discursive order they help define against the Bible) to kindle visionary experience at the same time that it eschews, perforce and to manifold advantage, any claim to divinely inspired status. Their inquiry’s questions coalesce as they flicker between the two texts. How can distinctly post-biblical discourse offer to redispense biblical narrative? What comes, that is, of retelling? Can a poem highlighting its intertextual *reception* of the Bible hope to excavate,

ventilate or extend biblical truth? What is the relationship between the divine inspiration that produced Scripture, and the imaginative inspiration that Scripture avails in turn? What can a poem teach its reader about *visio* or prophecy, powers of such *immediacy* as they are, by thematizing them ironically—wryly and at some remove—as *Cleanness* and *Patience* both do?

I have suggested that *Cleanness* aspires to *quasi*-scriptural status. By rewiring the circuitry of vision and beatitude, the poem hopes to backfill its penitential effects with biblical causes; or to put this another way, the poem asks whether the mirror that reflects a page of Scripture doesn't itself *become* an image of Scripture. Taking its timbre from its Jonah, the prophet who petulantly evades “Godde's glam” (63) that he cry down Nineveh, *Patience* disputes these suggestions and turns *Cleanness*'s project on its head. The prophet who resists doing God's work begets a text that is no surer, itself, about what it can do to render the Bible. Met with *Cleanness*'s soaring ambition, *Patience* restores difficulty to the parabiblical imaginary. Against *Cleanness*'s systemically extensive model of Scripture—a model where even indirect recensions manifest Scripture's presence by sharing in its beatific aim—*Patience* takes a more deferential posture, thematizing the Bible not as it unfolds and instantiates itself across other texts, but as it consists in inassimilable largeness and diversity. Where *Cleanness* believes in a kind of lossless scriptural metabolism, in new skins for old wine, *Patience* foregrounds the unwieldiness of the Bible's circuitous self-relation; in its view, disidentity manifests not in Scripture's ubiquity across texts, but in the flux and unknowability of the holy canon itself.

Patience and *Cleanness* are similarly *about* the experience of reading the Bible—but they are so in obverse ways. They are contrary developments of the basic parabiblical impulse, each thematically foregrounding distances between its scriptural source and the events of its own retelling, and seeking to disclose the latent truths of Scripture precisely in and by way of that

interval of space. *Cleanness* seeks to disclose Scripture's replicability as a *techne* for fostering beatific experience; the poem's sense of disidentity is outward, such that the Bible enters, effectively present, into other texts that share its beatific conductivity. *Patience*, by contrast, attends to inward, endogenous forms of biblical disidentity, and thus puts a curious twist on *Cleanness*'s reflexive vision: where *Cleanness*'s reader feels himself proleptically participant in the "kyndom of heven" (161), his conscience admonished and cleansed by the sacred-historical pageant he witnesses, *Patience* ironically offers its reader a God's-eye perspective—we all wag our fingers at Jonah's foolishness—only to press home the reader's felt identification with Jonah's helplessness in the face of an unknowable God and an unavailing Bible. In its moments of despair, which is to say most of the time, *Patience* simply does not believe, not scripturally anyhow. Just as its prophet cannot see that any good will come of his calling, so its framework for retelling Scripture is shot through with existential doubt. *Patience* and *Cleanness* part ways from their shared sense that Scripture is fundamentally *not* self-identical. Where *Cleanness* curates the Bible as an open, extendible system of homologous structures, each and all conducting the soul toward the "Creatores cort" (191) and beatific vision, *Patience* reframes biblical disidentity as a matter of fracture: to its mind, so many difficulties beset the reading experience—arbitrariness, flux, opacity, distance—that even the Bible itself can be inaccessible to human need. Without directly disputing *Cleanness*'s eschatological reflexivity—or, for that matter, denying the traditions of scriptural elasticity flowing through *Cursor Mundi* into *Cleanness*'s speculations—*Patience* becomes so compellingly frustrated with the Bible, and so persuasive in suggesting alternatives to biblicity, that it meaningfully alters the picture of what biblically based poems can do in the fourteenth century.

In Chapter Four, *Pearl* emerges as a term of synthesis for the foregoing debate, borrowing in broad outline the key features of both its sibling texts. Where both *Cleanness* and *Patience* are framed narratives in which the experience of biblical worlds applies outwardly to the workaday world of late medieval England, *Pearl* draws its protagonist—and with him its reader—directly into divine space. Like *Cleanness*, *Pearl* shows a confidence of vision sufficient to transport its narrator straight to the very door of heaven, here figured as the New Jerusalem of the Book of Revelation; but no less like *Patience*, the poem is baffled by what its unmediated encounter with God’s economy turns out to be.

Toward the end of *Pearl* is where we arrive, finally and almost fully, in the New Jerusalem; but guided by the poem, we arrive with an ironic self-skepticism dramatized upon the threshold of sacrosanct space. As the poem draws to a close, its hero has been ecstatically tracking the edge of the heavenly Jerusalem, impatient to join his lost pearl across the river of life; rashly, he decides to swim for it, but no sooner has he plunged into the river than he is yanked from his dreaming: “[R]yzt as I sparred vnto þe bonc, / Þat brathþe out of my drem me brayde. / Þen wakned I in þat erber wlonk” (1169-71). These lines dramatize the risk, and the purchase, of entry into scriptural space. They bereave the dreamer a second time, but even in his moment of compounded loss we sense a dawning consolation; we see that a visionary glimpse can renew the mundane world *and* illuminate the Bible, paradoxically, from a speculated within.

Our study concludes with a coda, a rumination of its own upon the *Pearl*-poet’s distinct use of the conjunction “if,” a word that flags in his practice powers of the imagination that allow him to pitch his biblical explorations in a subjunctive, often contrary-to-fact mode, and thereby to inhabit disparate spaces simultaneously. “If,” in this respect, is the paradigmatic parabiblical word. For each of the poems in MS Cotton Nero A.x, we shall see an “*if*-moment” potentiating

dramatic and intellectual actions partaking of the morpheme's frenetic lexical shuttling as J. Hillis Miller describes it.

“Para” is a double antithetical prefix signifying at once proximity and distance, similarity and difference, interiority and exteriority, something inside a domestic economy and at the same time outside it, something simultaneously this side of a boundary line, threshold or margin, and also beyond it, equivalent in status and also secondary or subsidiary, submissive, as of guest to host, slave to master. A thing in “para,” moreover, is not only simultaneously on both sides of the boundary line between inside and out. It is also the boundary itself, the screen which is a permeable membrane connecting inside and outside. It confuses them with one another, allowing the outside in, making the inside out, dividing them and joining them. It also forms an ambiguous transition between one and the other. Though a given word in “para” may seem to choose univocally one of these possibilities, the other meanings are always there as a shimmering in the word which makes it refuse to stay still in a sentence.⁵⁴

The dynamism of Miller's sense of “para” empowers our heuristic for reading texts that thematize their own interiority-and-exteriority to the Bible, and self-consciously explore terrain on both sides of the boundary demarcating the Bible's domestic economy. Our poems may accommodate the Bible to potentially new audiences, but they also highlight complexities of meaning within the sacred text. The poems guide the development of familiarity with Scripture, and in learning to think with the Bible, readers also learn to think against it and around it in myriad other ways—to receive Scripture in all its contrariety and to consider its discursive genealogies; to speculate upon its basis and to develop their own biblical idioms; and to calibrate the truth value of discourses ranged around the Bible as the central, if often unfamiliar, text of medieval Christian cultures.

⁵⁴ J. Hillis Miller, “The Critic as Host,” in *Deconstruction & Criticism*, (New York: Continuum, 1979), 219.

Chapter One Thematizing the Parabiblical: *Cursor Mundi*

“Kyng Alured, þat founded þe vnyuersite of Oxenford, translatede þe beste laws into Englysch tonge and a gret del of þe Sauter . . . into Englysch, and made Wyrefryth, byschop of Wyrceetre, translate Seint Gregore hys bokes Dialoges out of Latyn ynto Saxon. Also Cedmon of Whyteby was inspired of þe Holy Gost and made wonder poesydes an Englysch nyȝ of al þe storyes of holy wryt.” Writing in the 1380s, the prolific translator and translation theorist John Trevisa inscribes his English rendering of Ranulph Higden’s Latin *Polychronicon* (c. 1320s-1350s) in a long tradition of English-language translation.⁵⁵ A compendious, largely biblical world history from Genesis through the reign of Edward II (d. 1327) and beyond, the *Polychronicon* in translation allows Trevisa “a means of transmitting information to English readers and of fashioning a vernacular capable of conveying knowledge about the world.”⁵⁶ The sanctions for translation Trevisa cites—the programmatic institutional mandates of crown, university, church and catholic tradition embodied in Alfred, and such sudden, unmediated bursts of inspiration as motivate Cædmon—return us to themes we saw shaping the parabiblical imaginary in the introduction to this study.

Moreover, Trevisa’s misplaced faith, some seven hundred years after the “fact,” that Cædmon produced “an Englysch” an omnibus of biblical narratives indicates the ongoing dream in medieval English literature of a full *Scriptura Anglice*. Despite Bede’s claim that Cædmon

⁵⁵ These are the words of the lord in Trevisa’s *Dialogus Inter Dominum et Clericum*, the dialogic defense of translation with which Trevisa prefaces his version of Higden’s *Polychronicon*. Ronald Waldron, “Trevisa’s Original Prefaces on Translation: A Critical Edition,” in Edward Donald Kennedy et al., eds., *Medieval English Studies Presented to George Kane* (Wolfboro, NH: D. S. Brewer, 1988), 292.

⁵⁶ Emily Steiner, “Compendious Genres: Higden, Trevisa, and the Medieval Encyclopedia,” *Exemplaria* 27 (2015), 75-76. Hereafter, Steiner, “Compendious.”

took diverse biblical stories and *multa carmina faciebat*, no such legacy of texts exists beyond the *Hymn*, and we have no warrant to believe that Trevisa knew any wider Cædmonian corpus than we do. As we pass, then, from earlier expressions of the parabiblical impulse and from our more abstract introductory discussion of this mode of making, we realize that we continue in spaces of absence marked out by Cædmon's shadow. Here, Trevisa cites Cædmon's notional biblical *œuvre* for its paradoxically wonderful imitability: crediting Cædmon with "wonder poesyes . . . ny3 of al þe storyes of holy wryt," Trevisa Englishes the *Polychronicon* partly on the claim that such biblical history already exists in the language thanks to Cædmon, and that an English *Polychronicon* will merely supplement and update such material. The truth, though, is that Trevisa's English history helps backfill a Cædmonian tradition that does not materially exist; like the *Hymn* itself, Cædmon's *carmina biblica* generate tradition from a place of effacement. It remains for other texts to bring into English "þe storyes of holy wryt."

Just over halfway between the *Ormulum* (c. 1180), at which we have glanced, and Trevisa's work on Higden, an anonymous northern cleric began just such a text: *Cursor Mundi* (c. 1300), an encyclopedic world history, grew to nearly 30,000 lines in its longest form, and undertakes to present the history of the world from Creation to Doomsday. Throughout the poem we get a fulsome metanarrative drawn chiefly from the Vulgate. From the Hexameron of Creation through the lives of the patriarchs of the Hebrew Bible; from the infancy of Christ through the story of His passion; from the acts of the apostles through the culmination of history in the apocalypse of St. John, *Cursor Mundi* is replete with canonical Scripture.

But the poem is not coterminous with the Vulgate's narrative universe, a point that is important in both formal and conceptual ways. Formally speaking, in and among the narratives he knows from the Vulgate, the *Cursor*-poet draws a good many other sources into play, crafting

an *omnium gatherum* of extrabiblical sources in small and large ways. From the *Historia Scholastica* (c. 1170), for instance, the *Cursor*-poet can imagine the inside of Noah's ark and the exilic lives of Adam and Eve; but more importantly, in the same text he finds sanction for taking an encyclopedic ambit and for emphasizing the Scripture's narrative appeal. "Readers liked the *Historia*"—just as *Cursor Mundi* hopes to be liked—"because it is indeed a book for stories."⁵⁷ Similarly, the *Cursor*-poet draws on Herman de Valenciennes's *Histoire de la Bible* and *Li Romanz de Dieu et de sa Mère* (both c.1190) for Old Testament material, especially, but also as models for dedicating *Cursor Mundi* to the Virgin Mary.⁵⁸ Numerous other sources help the *Cursor*-poet organize his chronicle into an essentially Augustinian schema of the seven ages of the world.⁵⁹ In brief the poem, like the universe it narrates, is one of uncontainable materials, events and interactions.⁶⁰

More important for considering *Cursor Mundi* as a parabiblical artifact, however, is the conceptual version of this excessiveness. Emily Steiner has argued that large compendia give medieval writers a place for considering theoretical questions of genre. It is the task of this

⁵⁷ James H. Morey, *Book and Verse: A Guide to Middle English Biblical Literature* (entry on *Cursor Mundi*), Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 6-35.

⁵⁸ Lois Borland, "Herman's Bible and the *Cursor Mundi*," *Studies in Philology* 30 (1933), 427-44.

⁵⁹ Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* XXII:30. *Ipse etiam numerous aetatum, ueluti dierum, si secundum eos articulos temporis computetur, qui scripturis uidentur expressi, iste sabbatismus eidentius apparebit, quoniam septimus inuenitur* (Augustinus, *De Civitate Dei* [Corpus Christianorum Series Latina XLVIII], Turnhout: Brepols, 1955, 865). ["This Sabbath shall appear still more clearly if we count the ages as days, in accordance with the periods of time defined in Scripture, for that period will be found to be the seventh" (Saint Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods, D. D., New York: Random House, 1950, 867.)]

⁶⁰ John J. Thompson offers a broad, useful and tidy account of *Cursor Mundi*'s sources in the section "Sources and Compiling Methods" of his study *The Cursor Mundi: Poem, Texts and Contexts* (Medium Ævum Monographs New Series XIX), Oxford: The Society for the Study of Medieval Languages and Literature, 1998, 100-177. Hereafter, Thompson, "*Poem*."

chapter to specify how this particular compendious text theorizes its own burden of encyclopedic largeness.⁶¹ To set out by putting a complicated idea in its simplest form, *Cursor Mundi* is parabiblical because it at once mirrors the Bible and—itself overflowing with apocryphal, exegetical, midrashic and devotional discourses—reflects back more than the Bible actually contains. The poem positions itself as not only “biblical,” but as knowing more about the Bible than the Bible knows about itself. It is the Bible-plus, so to speak, and as such, *Cursor Mundi* indicates the Bible’s own self-disidentity. In this respect the poem lodges a fairly lofty claim, and here is its conceptually excessive dimension: the poem offers itself as a medium in which Scripture’s latent, uncontained truths can burgeon and become manifest. And yet at the same time, the poem deferentially distances itself from any transparent claim to such truth by repeatedly calling attention to itself as mere mediation—provisional, supplemental, dispensable and perhaps ultimately fictive. We can even take this a step further. Because *Cursor Mundi* performs Scripture’s disidentical relation to itself, it is also self-disidentical by its very act of biblical mimesis. Biblical disidentity now exists in a hall of mirrors, with *Cursor Mundi* locating and dramatizing the Bible’s capacities for self-excess, even as the poem thematizes the foregoing set of complex interrelations. *In imitatio Scripturae*, the poem’s own disidentity involves negotiating not *its* truth claims about the Bible, but the truth claims that the surface of a creatively warped reflective glass allow the Bible, at least provisionally, to make about itself.

As a *poioumenon* of a certain kind—a metatextual, self-narrating “product” that is about the process of its own creation—*Cursor Mundi* does much more with its scriptural source, and as

⁶¹ “Compendiousness is both a characteristic of a medieval genre—the compendium—and the means through which medieval writers experimented with genre,” Steiner suggests, allowing such writers as “Higden and Trevisa to negotiate between big prose genres—universal history and natural encyclopedias, for example—and between genre, translation, and style.” Steiner, “Compendious,” 75 & 86.

an imaginative text in its own right, than scholars commonly recognize.⁶² It is true, of course, that *Cursor Mundi* participates in the waves of *pastoralia* and religious-instructive material coming through and from Lateran IV: just three or so generations removed from the council itself, *Cursor Mundi* is clearly shaped by its directives for the *cura animarum*. It is a robust biblical paraphrase in a culture lacking its own vernacular Bible translation, and as such helps comprise “a whole vernacular literature that offers itself to ‘lewed folk’ as a kind of imaginative substitute for the English Bible they are denied.”⁶³ The poem offers moral counsel, seeking to “make . . . readers reform their lives,”⁶⁴ and to do so on the basis of a Scripture “expanded . . . sufficiently to make its meaning clear to most intelligences.”⁶⁵ And as an encyclopedic history it “aspires to amass for the non-specialist (vernacular) reader a compendium of everything worth knowing,”⁶⁶ and although its reception history “suggests that it was not viewed solely as a theological work but as a one-volume library of useful knowledge,” nevertheless the poem in its original form “insists that only the story of salvation that it tells is worth hearing.”⁶⁷

⁶² Derived from ancient Greek, “poioumenon” is Alastair Fowler’s term for a metafictional text thematizing the process of creation—often its own creation—and “calculated to offer opportunities to explore the boundaries of fiction and reality—the limits of narrative truth.” Alastair Fowler, *A History of English Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1987), 372.

⁶³ David Lawton, *Faith, Text and History: The Bible in English* (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1990), 58. Hereafter, Lawton, “*Faith*.”

⁶⁴ Piero Boitani, *English Medieval Narrative in the 13th & 14th Centuries*, trans. Joan Krakover Hall (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1982), 5.

⁶⁵ J. A. W. Bennett and Douglas Gray, *The Oxford History of English Literature: Middle English Literature 1100-1400* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986), 35.

⁶⁶ Thomas Hahn, “Early Middle English,” in Wallace, 87.

⁶⁷ Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, et al., eds., *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280-1520* (University Park, PA: Penn State UP, 1999), 267-268.

All of these observations are true of *Cursor Mundi*, but none of them sufficiently credits the poem for the more ambitious forms of experience and education it structures for its readers. In the end, *Cursor Mundi* invites readers into the circuit of disidentity that it configures between itself and a Scripture marked precisely by shape-shifting display. Rather than aiming merely to impart knowledge or to catechize us on the lineaments of salvation history, *Cursor Mundi* seeks to train readers to engage with Scripture in ways which, it persuades us, are endogenous to Scripture's own universe of stories. It asks us, indeed, to become "paraselves," to inhabit versions of Christian selfhood conditioned by and responsive to the expressions of disidentity that distinguish and enrich Scripture. This explains the poem's ultimate devotion to Mary, the figure *par excellence* for the kinds of renovative inexhaustibility *Cursor Mundi* explores in biblical terms.

Qua-sa will of hy[r] fa[y]rnes spell,	<i>Whoso . . . fairness</i>
Find he sal inogh to tel;	<i>shall</i>
Of hir godenes and hir treuthede,	
Men may fynd euermar to rede. ⁶⁸ (85-88)	

Reading and "spelling," the kerygmatic proclamation of Mary's fairness, are the ingress and egress of readers' experience with Scripture, and here stand for all human praxis to the extent that we are invited to orient ourselves to Scripture as the supreme apprehensible source of "godenes" and "treuthede." *Cursor Mundi* offers itself in this endeavor as a mediating heuristic for thinking parabiblically—and for thinking, therefore, properly biblically.

Thematizing the provisionality of its disclosures rests, for *Cursor Mundi*, on thematizing the largeness of the biblical world. With its sacred history so deep and so replete with multiplex signification, the Bible resists the settlement of its meanings for *Cursor Mundi* even as it engenders the poem's narrative universe. We can only ever experience Scripture in parts, the

⁶⁸ Richard Morris, ed., *Cursor Mundi (The Cursor on the world): A Northumbrian Poem of the XIVth Century* (7 vols.) (London: Early English Text Society, 1874-1892), ll. 85-88.

poem tells us, our knowledge incomplete and contingent, human despite deriving from the absolute truth and authority of the Bible itself. *Cursor Mundi* bespeaks these limitations for the whole of the parabiblical imaginary: poetic texts that remake Scripture do so because they find it always partially concealed, not fully available to any single reader (or reading). As a subset of such renovative poetic texts, those of a pronounced *parabiblical* flavor delight in drawing attention to this truth condition.

Al þis werld, or þis bok blin,
Wit cristes help I sal ouer-rin,
And tell sum gestes principale;
For all may na man haue in talle. (121-124)

Of the broad theological principle of God's immeasurable scope, *Cursor Mundi* also makes a practical parameter. "All may na man haue in talle," we are reminded: there is no encompassing this story, no single account of its details. Scripture reveals itself palimpsestically, in gradual passes, leaving no single encounter an adequate rendering of the terrain. The title of my larger work is meant to signal this fact, for the parabiblical imaginary depends for its vitality on the powerful given of disidentity.

As we stand before *Cursor Mundi*, we face a version of this same challenge: there is no neat way through or around its bulk. Because we cannot proceed with all due slowness through a poem of such length, depth and diversity, our study of *Cursor Mundi* must be a selective tour, attending to the "gestes principale" of its parabiblical project. Four connected areas of inquiry will allow us, I hope, to describe in a fulsome way the strategy behind *Cursor Mundi*'s encyclopedic compilation. We begin with the poem's exhortation to be circumspect. Invoking Jesus's words about discerning prophecy by its fruits, *Cursor Mundi* reminds us to read cautiously even as the reminder flags the poem's own errancy from its scriptural track. This double gesture indicates the poem's parabiblical ambition: by aligning extrabiblical errancy with

prophecy as a mode of discourse—not a predictive mode, but an exhortational one—*Cursor Mundi* signals its aim to develop the truth of Scripture, strictly construed, by collocating it with pertinent but noncanonical narratives and doctrines. From here, as a second stage in our treatment of the poem, we follow one of its major forays into such work, tracking Adam’s son Seth as he reverses the course of his parents’ expulsion from Eden. Here, the poem unfurls an itinerary that is extrabiblical both geographically and philosophically: the story goes places the Bible does not go, and asks questions the Bible does not ask. For our purposes, these innovations show *Cursor Mundi*’s narrative-theological methodology in action. Seth’s recourse to Eden enacts the poem’s faith that provisional elements of truth remain to be gathered outside Scripture’s formal remit. His quest exemplifies, too, the poem’s way of intentionally probing the body of Scripture and its textual relations, and this is the third of our objects of study. With a wide and surprising semantic range, the idea of “intention” helps *Cursor Mundi* calibrate the truth-value of its discoveries, even as it supplies the very means of their making. It is on the basis of intention itself—what he can “schew wit myn entent”—that the *Cursor*-poet aims, simultaneously, to disclose truth where it has been hidden, and to couch such disclosures in cautious, canny terms of human limitation. Finally, our last section on *Cursor Mundi* forms a case study of this complex epistemological gesture in motion. Here, we attend to an electric moment in Christ’s earthly ministry when the words of His own mouth somehow become truer still, so to speak, for the corroboration of events taking place off the scriptural page. This story—that of Peter’s denial of Christ and the *gallus redivivus* witnessed by the traitor Judas Iscariot—forms a crystalline expression of parabiblical imagining as *Cursor Mundi* conceives it.

The spur to scilwisness

Although it is vast, voluble and baggy by most standards, *Cursor Mundi* achieves uncharacteristic economy with its first allusion to the Bible. The *Cursor*-poet opens his work by contrasting it with popular reading tastes;⁶⁹ against the “rimes” (or in many of the *Cursor* manuscripts, “iestes”⁷⁰) so many readers yearn to hear, the poet urges the virtues of his own biblically based text. His ethics of reading assumes an affinity between readers and the texts they favor.

To rede and here Ilkon is prest,	<i>each one</i>
þe thynges þat þam likes best.	
þe wisman wil o wisdom here,	
þe foul hym draghus to foly nere,	<i>draws</i>
þe wrang to here right is lath,	
And pride wit buxumnes is wrath;	<i>humility</i>
O chastite has lichur leth	<i>lecher; loath</i>

⁶⁹ Thirteenth-century English tastes for romance, *chansons de geste* and other continental forms are described in detail by Elizabeth Salter, *English and International*, New York: Cambridge UP, 1988.

⁷⁰ Of the four MSS edited in parallel by Richard Morris, two (BM MS Cotton Vespasian A.iii [herein “MS C”], and Bodleian MS Fairfax 14 [“MS F”]) use “rimes,” and two (Göttingen University Library MS Theol. 107 [“MS G”] and Trinity College Cambridge MS R.3.8 [“MS T”]) “iestes.” Persuaded by John Thompson’s example (and those of the “many other modern scholars” whom he follows), I refer in this study unless otherwise noted to the text of MS C, the ‘relatively early date and relative completeness’ of which argue convincingly, if not unassailably, for its primacy (Thompson, *Poem*, 20). In deciding between the so-called “northern” and “southern” versions of *Cursor Mundi*, I began my work on the poem by following the judgments of Derek Pearsall (in his review of *The Southern Version of Cursor Mundi*, *RES* 31 [1980], 334-36) and Thompson, whose analysis suggests that “the case for the so-called ‘Southern version’ has been overstated” by its Ottawa editors (Thompson, *Poem*, 17). As my work has progressed, however, I have come to share, not merely defer to, these scholars’ central objection that (as Pearsall puts it) “it becomes evident that . . . the ‘southern version’, unless further evidence is forthcoming in the subsequent volumes, is not a version at all, nor even an example of ‘recomposition’ but a straightforward piece of dialectical ‘translation’.” In my judgment the Ottawa team’s subsequent volumes did not provide sufficient “further evidence” for distinguishing any “southern version.” Finally, of the earliest “northern” manuscripts (E, C and G), MS C is richest with interpolated texts (*Index of Middle English Verse* entries 3976 and 1885; 1786 and 3208; 1029, 780, 1775; and 788 and 959) and thus best shows the cultural vitality and fluidity enjoyed by this text in its earliest forms.

On charite ai werrais wrath.
Bot be the fruit may scilwis se,
O quat vertu is ilka tre. (25-34)

wages war
the discerning

Invoking Matthew 7.16, the last couplet here has a range of implications for the *Cursor*-poet's ambitious project, the first of which pertains to the quietness of the allusion's presence.⁷¹ In a poem that will soon assert its plan to "schew wit myn entent, / Bre[fl]i of aipere testament" (119-20), it is not surprising that the narrative should borrow from and adapt scriptural sources; but at this early juncture in the prologue, here in the direct discourse of the poem's narratorial frame, the unflagged use of gospel text exemplifies the *Cursor*-poet's fluency in his biblical idiom, the sheer saturation of his thought with biblical images and ideas. Like Bernard of Clairvaux a century and more before him and William Langland nearly a century later, the *Cursor*-poet seems indeed to "speak Bible" as his own discursive possession.

There is little doubt, it is true, that *Cursor Mundi*'s readers have always been familiar with this Matthean verse. Not only was it part of the Sermon on the Mount, a key text for liturgy, exegesis and polemic since the earliest church fathers, but by the time of the poem's composition, the exhortation to "know them by their fruits" had long enjoyed currency in English in a variety of proverbial forms.⁷² Thus the poet's ongoing explanation—"Of alkyn fruit

⁷¹ "Attendite a falsis prophetis, qui veniunt ad vos in vestimentis ovium, intrinsecus autem sunt lupi rapaces: a *fructibus eorum cognoscetis eos*. Numquid colligunt de spinas uvas, aut de tribulis ficus? Sic omnis arbor bona fructus bonos facit: mala autem arbor malos fructus facit. Non potest arbor bona malos fructus facere: neque arbor mala bonos fructus facere. Omnis arbor, quæ non facit fructum bonum, excidetur, et in ignem mittetur. Igitur *ex fructibus eorum cognoscetis eos*" (Mt. 7:15-20, my emphasis). ["Beware of false prophets, who come to you in the clothing of sheep, but inwardly they are ravaging wolves. *By their fruits you shall know them*. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit, and the evil tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can an evil tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit, shall be cut down, and shall be cast into the fire. Wherefore *by their fruits you shall know them*."]

⁷² Whiting's list of variations includes, among others, the witnesses of Wulfstan's *Larspel* (c.1023: "Seldan cymþ god wæstm of yfelum sæde"); the West Saxon Gospels' (c. 1000) version

þat man schal fynd / He fettes fro þe rote his kind. / O gode pertre coms god peres, / Wers tre, vers fruit it beres” (35-38, corresponding in sense to Mt. 7:17-18)—seems more than just good measure. Instead, it serves to disambiguate Scripture from proverb, to clarify in its very terms that the poet is thinking specifically of verses in the gospel, not the proverbial tradition that follows upon them. In this respect the allusion to Matthew 7 suggests a key movement of *Cursor Mundi*’s parabiblical method—namely, a dynamic relationship of kernel to bloom between biblical text and poetic divagation. If the poet’s unmarked use of Christ’s phrasing might open out onto the multiform proverbial career enjoyed by “knowing them by their fruits,” his care in returning the phrase to its scriptural origin represents the orthotic energy of his poem, that pervasive pressure by which parabiblical elaborations remain oriented by and around biblical text. A reader momentarily uncertain about the provenance of lines 33-34, be it Matthew’s gospel or any of a range of proverbs, finds the ambiguity closed off by the *Cursor*-poet’s continuance with Christ’s own sermon: moving temporally through lines 33-38, we are guided by a principle of the parabiblical imaginary per se. For the passage avails an itinerary away from a discrete biblical locus (Matthew 7), along lines suggested by the passage’s familiar idiomatic derivations (what we might term broadly the intervening cultural life that has accrued to the passage), yet returning to the stores of scriptural energy which both anchor and motivate such flights.

of Mt. 7.16 (“Swa ælc god treow byrþ gode wæstmas, and ælc yfel treow byrþ yfele wæstmas”) and Mt. 12.33 (“Witlodlice be þam wæstme byþ þæt treow oncnawen”); and the South English Legendary’s (c. 1300) attributed quotation (“For ore loverd seide, i-wis: ‘bi the fruyt man may i-seo hwat-manere treo it is”). B. J. and H. W. Whiting, *Proverbs, Sentences and Proverbial Phrases from English Writings Mainly before 1500* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1968). In the next century, Lydgate’s *Troy Book* (c. 1420) offers a variation on the metaphor whereby the circuitry between origin and product is more cyclical; if somehow fruit (despite its virtuous source) has become corrupted, “The rotys vertu thus can the frute renewe” (I.iii.98). It will become clear that such salutary regenerativeness inheres in the *Cursor*-poet’s ideas about Christ’s analogy.

Returning closely to the text of Scripture is crucial for the *Cursor*-poet given his pastoral aim of disseminating knowledge of the Bible per se and elevating its cultural status among lay readers. But in their subtlety and generativity, his changes to biblical text are often more interesting than his orthotic recuperations of it. So fluent is he in his biblical idiom that it is easy to miss the change this couplet makes to its gospel source. This change avails Matthew 7's second main implication about the poet's project, and introduces key concepts for this study of his poem. Into the system of analogy he borrows from Christ's Sermon on the Mount (roughly, fruit : tree :: prophecy : prophet :: text : reader), the *Cursor*-poet inserts the important qualification of discernment, of being "scilwis." Where Christ's teaching about false prophets assumes a rhetoric of stable knowability—epitomized tautologically by "arbor bona fructus bonos facit"—the *Cursor*-poet acknowledges hermeneutic difficulty and reserves cognition to those "scilwis" enough to attain it.⁷³ If it is true, as Ernest Mardon puts it, that the *Cursor*-poet "shows great skill in concealing the didactic purpose of his work,"⁷⁴ it bears noting that in this initial treatment of scriptural material, the poet takes pains not to conceal, but to foreground, the difficulty of those elements of his project to do with the powers of spiritual discernment associated with Christ's warning. And if it is true, as James Morey suggests, that in *Cursor*

⁷³ The significance, and indeed the vexatiousness, of this insertion into Christ's statement is thrown into relief by MS G's change of "scilwis" to "ilk man." Among Morris's editions, MS F's reading, "by þe frute men may see" (33), comes closest to rendering the neutrality of Christ's language in the Vulgate, yet even here, MS evidence may suggest some uneasiness in the copyist: in F lines 33-34 precede lines 31-32, the only such disordering of lines in the MS, and a moment which agitates the current of the poem's discourse on the legibility of prophecy. MS T's reading, "bi the fruyte may men ofte se" (33; my emphasis), goes some way toward limiting the frequency of human recognition of false prophecy, yet stops short of reserving it only to the "scilwis." (Edited as Appendix III in Morris, v. 5, three MSS besides Morris's four principal ones also preserve *Cursor Mundi*'s prologue. Two, MS Bodleian Laud 416 and MS Bedford concur with MS T: they read, respectively, "And by the frute may men oft se" [33], and "Bot by þe froyt men may afte see" [33]. The last, MS Herald's College Arundel 57, does not contain this portion of the prologue, picking up as it does from line 153.)

⁷⁴ Ernest G. Mardon, *Narrative Unity*, 58.

Mundi “doctrinal messages are [secondary] to explaining the mechanics of the narrative on a literal level,” that same mechanical literal level comes to life with hermeneutic difficulties, doctrinal and otherwise, that this “scilwis” initially flags.⁷⁵

Widely known as it has always been to *Cursor Mundi* readers, Christ’s encouragement to “know them by their fruits” does surprisingly complex work at the outset of the poem. It serves first in the program of orthotic, steadily pressured return to the Bible that subtends so much late medieval parabiblical writing. It does so by both gratifying and conscripting readers who recognize its presence: to understand the import of Christ’s words placed here is necessarily to share some of the *Cursor*-poet’s knowledge of the Bible, and perhaps to feel oneself already persuaded away from the secular *romans* that *Cursor Mundi* aims to displace as prized reading material. The poem’s ensuing catalog of the properties of the human soul sharpens this challenge to discernment, clarifying that to be “scilwis” is first and foremost to be discerning.

Made by God in his own Trinitarian image, the soul has three chief powers: “minning” (“perception” in Morris’s necessarily reductive gloss), “vnderstand[ing]” and “schilwisnes o will, / þe god to tak and leue þe ill” (561-568). Christ’s words cast any reader who has ears to hear—and nearly all do, as the poem well knows—into a position of readerly parabiblicism, not inside biblical text per se, but immediately outside its bounds in liminal terrain that affords Janus-faced views onto both Scripture and the expansive, still expanding imaginative realms just over its horizons. Christ’s words sound a fraught warning about *Cursor Mundi*’s own potential for false prophecy, for perverting the sacred history that the poem unfolds. By speaking Bible, the poem cannot avoid announcing itself as “not-Bible,” as both contingent and derivative in the root sense of those terms. Fewer than forty lines in, the *Cursor*-poet courts for his own work the same hermeneutic suspicion by which he dismisses *romans*. If those texts are ethically objectionable,

⁷⁵ James H. Morey, *Book and Verse*, 101.

just so many “sanges sere of selcuth rime” (23), so too might the *Cursor-poet* participate in a dangerous kind of textual multiplication, relating to the Bible proper at a remove analogous to that which separates *romans* from his own poem.⁷⁶ That is, even as his poem stakes out discursive terrain adjacent to the center of biblical truth, that claim equivocally announces, *ipso facto*, the poem’s superadded character, its accretion to the Bible, rather than any essential identity with it. The poem is thus useful to us because it has an overt concern with both the status of Scripture among other kinds of narrative and the relationship of the canonical Bible to a wide array of extrabiblical material—apocrypha, legends, exegetics—surrounding it. Though it is not always consistent about marking what derives from canonical Scripture versus what does not, in its concern to restore biblical metanarrative to the center of literary culture, *Cursor Mundi* makes generative assumptions how diversely sourced, and widely distributed, the system of biblical story proves to be.

To be sure, *Cursor Mundi* offers itself as the apprehensible expression of not just one, but two infinite stores of divine plenitude. We shall attend further on to *Cursor Mundi*’s formative rhetoric of Marian maternity, but as we prepare to move our attention to an importantly spatial

⁷⁶ With a cross-reference to MS G’s substitution of “diuerse,” *MED* quotes this line of *Cursor Mundi* under “selcouth,” def. 3 (“diverse, various”). This sense of the line (roughly, “diverse songs of various formal patterns”) is by no means necessary. Surely the more frequent uses of “selcouth” as “marvelous” or “strange” (cf. *MED* def. 1 and 2) fit the poet’s tonal distinction between his work and the more worldly, courtly texts—those “Storis als o ferekin thinges / O princes, prelates and o kynges” (21-22)—with which his prologue stages competition. In this sense the line would point to the preciousness of rival verse forms, their “selcuth rime.” But if *MED* is correct, this instance of “selcuth” (a key term throughout *Cursor Mundi*) as “diverse” helps draw attention to the language of textual multiplication that pervades this prologue. Here “selcuth” is coupled almost redundantly with “sanges sere,” and placed alongside “maneres sere” (2), “aunters sere” (12), “ferekin [i.e., serekin] thinges,” and other tonal indications that numerousness per se concerns the *Cursor-poet* as he imagines his poem’s rivals. Hence this valence of “selcuth” encodes part of his objection to *romans*: not only do they corrupt the human need to hear narratives with worldly salaciousness, but they also proliferate wildly. They are “diverse” in ways colored by that term’s original sense of divergence from good, (cf. *OED* “divers,” def. 2), perniciously multiple in many respects, and chiefly in the ethical alterity they promote.

exploration in Seth's return to Eden, we should notice the poet's declared aim to "sette mi merc" (131) upon the mystery of the Trinity. Invoking both Marian and Trinitarian stores of energy is a coordinated gesture for *Cursor Mundi*, I suggest, and from these dedications a logical fathomlessness follows that we can begin situating in Trinitarian terms.

þis werc sal i fund
Apon a selcuth stedfast grund,
þat is, þe haly *trinite*,
þat all has wroght wit his beute;
At him self first i sette mi merc,
And sithen to tell his hand werc. (127-132)

The poet's chosen description encodes his unshakable interest in divine secrecy—in the "selcuth" ground of the Trinity, literally in something that is little known, or was once known, but has now receded into obscurity (cf. *OED*, "selcouth," a., from Old English "seldan," seldom, + "cūþ," known). Such semantically encoded divination allows the *Cursor*-poet to imply his own visionary status, his ability to see extraordinarily deeply into divine mystery and to manifest his vision in words unusually dense with signification. This gesture, let us recall, partakes in (and effectively redoubles) the larger animating claim of the parabiblical imaginary, namely, that texts acculturated by deep traditions of biblical learning and expansion can attain provisional knowledge exceeding anything contained by Scripture in se ipso.

It is a heady claim indeed, but one that I can spell out more clearly, I hope, with the help of another, more modern Trinitarian thinker. With its interest in "selcuth" arcana, *Cursor Mundi* pushes to the hilt parabiblical poetry's claim to expand the horizons of what is biblically thinkable. The German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer allows us to locate such soaring ambition in the poet's early gesture of leveling of his "mark" upon the Trinity. Philosophy has always sought, says Gadamer, "to make the process through which we come to know the truth an object of our knowledge and to know this knowledge of the truth in its own right." For

Gadamer, the “extreme formulation” of such self-reflexiveness is to be found in Hegelian dialectics, where

this task and this claim . . . are only fulfilled when philosophy comprehends and gathers up into itself the totality of truth as it has been unfolded in its historical development. Consequently Hegelian philosophy also claimed above all to have comprehended the truth of the Christian message in conceptual form. *This included even the deepest mystery of Christian doctrine, the mystery of the Trinity. I personally believe that this doctrine has constantly stimulated the course of thought in the West as a challenge and invitation to try and think that which continually transcends the limits of human understanding.*⁷⁷

Gadamer states philosophically the more intuitive understanding of truth in history subtending *Cursor Mundi*'s discourse of scilwisness. Without tracking too far into Gadamer's discussion of Hegel, I do wish to adduce the “geometry of truth” implicit in his statement as a way of talking about *Cursor Mundi*'s commitment to history in its narrative guise. For Hegel, as Gadamer reads him, the truth of history is “conceptual” in outline, taken together and gathered up into a notionally tidy if teeming form; on this model, historical truth is comprehended and totalized, a folding up of history “as it has been unfolded in its historical development.” By contrast, for Gadamer, the restless incomprehensibility of the Trinity demands a contrasting shape, an endless linear projection that distinctly resists totalizing and inspires human thought to iterative approximations. On this model, as for *Cursor Mundi*, truth is measured incrementally and in process, and history as its domain provides the narrative material for building provisionally and asymptotically toward its comprehension. Invoking the Trinity signals the poem's linear, narrative pursuit of history not *to* conceptual truths, but *toward* them in their perpetual outdistancing.

This idea of truth has, of course, a pronounced temporal dimension. Subjected as it is to apocalyptic time, history's incomprehensible scope finds, for *Cursor Mundi*, its aptly vast record

⁷⁷ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, ed. Robert Bernasconi, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986), 5 (my emphasis).

in the Bible. Just as, with respect to Scripture, “all may na man haue in talle,” so for the scope of history itself does *Cursor Mundi* predicate an essential unknowability. The world’s sixth and final age of grace, the poem tells us,

bigan at cristes come,	<i>coming</i>
And lastes to þe dai o dome.	
<i>Quen for to be þat wat naman,</i>	<i>knows no man</i>
He sal all end þat all began,	
For quen he first þis werld wroght,	
Ai for to stand he mad it noght.	<i>Forever</i>
<i>þe term es sett at end it in,</i>	
<i>Bot mai it neuer vte ouer rine.</i> (21849-21856, my emphasis)	

These ideas are keynotes for the *Cursor*-poet: no man can comprehend the vastness of the narrative he strives to convey, such that the very idea of “overrunning” its boundaries takes on a binary importance. The poet titles his work elsewhere with emphatic decisiveness, averring that “Cursur of the world men aght it call / For almost it ouer-rennes all” (267-268), whereas the true boundary of history, proscribing all trespass, is Christ’s own to set: “þe term es sett at end it in, / Bot mai it neuer vte ouer rine.” The poem’s frenetic exploration is thus a race against time in which motion, overrunning, is figured inversely against a *ne plus ultra* terminus, one that cannot be overrun.

Cursor Mundi’s reminder to be “scilwis,” then, marks a complex dare to its reader, one that represents in miniature the poem’s large, paradoxical statement: “I am the Bible-plus; I am not the Bible at all.” Rousing our awareness of the stakes of our reading choices, this moment in *Cursor Mundi*—again, the poem’s first citation of any biblical source—asks us to consider the ethical selves we wish to become through reading. “Be the fruit may scilwis se, / O quat vertu is ilka tre.” The logic is reciprocal, of course: if good readers choose good books, so too is the self shaped by the texts to which it attends. So far, so good—but subtler work is being done here, too. By rooting this proverbial language in its source in Matthew 7, *Cursor Mundi* offers a

certain gambit, or a readerly precondition which, if detected, helps the poem to open up and reveal its most ambitious parabiblical work. The call to scilwiness marks the need for all *Cursor Mundi*'s readers to realize their progress along lines that hew differently—some quite close, others wildly extravagant—to the narrative through-line of scriptural history. Setting out alongside the poem from the center point of the Bible itself, we are called upon to discern the value of our divagations therefrom, and to bear back the lessons of our wandering to enrich the urtext from which we err.

Seth and the effusive truth of the “vncuth contré”

A point of origin, a wide wandering, return: the schema is embedded in *Cursor Mundi*'s deepest narrative level. We transition now to the poem's own great courser, Seth, whose peregrinations literalize the poem's commitment to truth's narrative eventuations. At the end of Adam's life, a recursive motion begins that sets the pattern for the poem's own explorations. As death draws near, Adam calls upon his son, Seth, to return to the Garden of Eden with two questions for the angel there guarding its sanctity: when precisely will Adam die, and whether or not he will receive the healing oil of mercy God promised when He expelled Adam from the Garden (“þe oile o merci most þou bide, / I hight at send it sum tide” [955-56]). Seth's quest for the oil forms a thread of continuity in *Cursor Mundi*, one that will be “interwoven throughout some 14,000” of the poem's lines.⁷⁸ This narrative and its key images will surface at critical

⁷⁸ Esther Casier Quinn, *The Quest of Seth for the Oil of Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 2. Hereafter, Quinn, “*Quest*.” Quinn usefully surveys the development of the Seth story, first extant in a first-century CE Jewish text, the Greek-language *Apocalypse of Moses*; a version of this text known as the *Vita Adae et Evae* marks the story's entry into Latin. *The Gospel of Nicodemus*, in its final form by the mid-fourth century and a widely-recognized inspiration for medieval thinkers, is the first distinctly Christian telling of the Seth story; in it Seth narrates his quest for the patriarchs at the time of Christ's Harrowing of Hell, and announces that Christ Himself will bring the promised oil of mercy. Twelfth-century texts in

junctures in sacred history—in Eden, on Noah’s ark (explained retrospectively, 21663-21668); during Israel’s wandering in the desert (6301-6368, 6881-6912); in the lives of David (7973-8330) and Solomon (8447-8508, 8757-8882); on the occasion of the first Christian martyrdom, itself curiously before Christ’s birth (8889-8978)—and culminate in the building of the True Cross itself (16543-16604).

Like Cædmon’s story, this one contains a deep archaeology, a past here manifest in traces of Adam’s curse.

Adam had pastd nine hundret yere, Nai selcut þof he wex vn-ferre. For-wroght wit his hak and spad Of him-self he wex al sad. He lened him þan a-pon his hak, Wit seth his sun þus gat he spak:— “Sun,” he said, “þou most now ga To paradis þat i com fra Til cherubin þat [es] þe yateward.” (1237-1245)	<i>Undone</i> <i>porter</i>
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Adam’s “hak and spad,” with the weariness they bring, show a long life of fallen exile.

Alongside mention of the cherub standing sentry, Adam’s posture evinces the presentness of the past—indeed its more-than-presentness, for not only does Adam’s pain daily grow harder, but its symbolic accoutrements, his “hak and spad,” plus Eden’s enclosure, are jarringly still to hand some nine hundred years on. The effect is one of existential simultaneity, a temporal shimmer restoring Adam, instantaneously *and* across toilsome centuries, to his first state.

Latin and an array of European vernaculars developed the Seth story’s mythic, etiological dimensions, and in the thirteenth century, the so-called *Legende*—extant in numerous Latin manuscripts and a variety of vernacular translations and adaptations—assembled the myth’s high-level narrative features largely as we will find them in *Cursor Mundi*. In the next century Jacob de Voragine’s wildly successful hagiographic compilation, the *Legenda Aurea* (c. 1260), presents the Seth story in two parts, the first in Passion Week, with Seth proclaiming during the Harrowing that the archangel Michael withheld from him the oil of mercy until the passing of five thousand years, and the second on the Feast of the Invention of the Holy Cross, with Seth receiving from Michael a branch of the Tree that tempted Eve, and planting it, upon his return from Eden, over the grave of his father found already dead.

Seth has a different sense of Eden, of course, and accepts his father's commission with the natural proviso of a second-generation exile. "Yai, sir, wist i wyderward / þat tat vncuth contré ware, / þou wat þat i was neuer þare" (1246-1248). This humility concerning Eden is no less than that of the fourteenth-century traveler Sir John Mandeville, who owns, despite wide conversancy with the rest of the world, that "of paradys ne can I not speken *propurly* for I was not *pere*."⁷⁹ But where Mandeville cannot travel to paradise even in mind—"it is fer bezonde [and] þat forthinketh me . . . I [am] not worthi" (202)—Seth's journey is duty-bound. Moreover, the prospect stirs his curiosity even if his initial impulse is to demur. "Yea, sir, *if only I knew* where that unknown country lay": inciting Adam to direct his step, Seth shifts talk of Eden into a grammatical subjunctive apt for its imagined status in the empirically unknown. He is firm, in turn, about his need for an indicative map, reminding Adam as he accepts the errand, "You know I was never there." The moment is touching in its way, with Seth deferring to his father's clearer memory of his own childhood, and to Adam's intimacy with a place Seth may never even find.

Two kinds of orientation to paradise are on display here, with Adam's traumatic nostalgia finding inexact answer in Seth's filial sense of the patria he has never known. This is a crucial juncture in *Cursor Mundi*, not only because it marks the poem's first extended deployment (aside from some traditional angelology) of extrabiblical material, but also because, as we venture upon the poem's patchwork world of stories, Adam and Seth represent ways of knowing a sacred space that prove especially telling within the context of *Cursor Mundi*'s narrative of narratives. The onset of the Seth story serves to entwine the poem's formal choices with its thematic concerns. The paradigmatic scriptural figure, Adam, finds redress in Seth, the son whose very name associates him with *tertium-quid* alterity (*vocavitque nomen ejus Seth, dicens: Posuit mihi*

⁷⁹ *Mandeville's Travels, Translated from the French by Jean d'Outremeuse, Edited from MS Cotton Titus c.XVI in the British Museum*, ed. P. Hamelius, London: EETS o.s. 153 (2 vols.), 1919, vol. 1, p. 202.

Deus semen aliud pro Abel, quem occidit Cain [Gen. 4:25]), and whose apocryphal career circles back to enlarge upon his father's canonical domain. Seth stands in relation to Adam, that is, just as *Cursor Mundi*, that reluctantly diverse book of "maters redde on raw" (221), stands in relation to its biblical center: deprived an origin of traditional coherence, he retraces the paths of initial dispersal not in order to "regain the blissful seat," a Miltonic feat beyond his strength, but to supplement its historical absence with provisionally-derived secondary forms. Seth's quest thus has an effusive effect on the coherence of Scripture: by pursuing narrative implications beyond the canonical page, Seth conducts an experiment in testing the behavior of biblical truths outside their traditional encasement. Like so much biblically derived literature, *Cursor Mundi*'s story of Seth asks what can happen—what new and yet necessary knowledge can emerge—when we destabilize truth in its received forms.

This question is carried out within the diegesis of the Seth story. Adam knows Eden from inside; his relationship to it has been one of identity, and by contrast to Seth, who will never quite find his way into the Garden, Adam never quite leaves it. Identity—the default condition potentiating disidentity—is indeed key to Adam's Edenic relation. It is not that he was created inside the Garden; we know specifically that he was not ("vtewit paradis [was he] wrought" [588]), and in this sense it is not his native, constitutive soil. But for the *Cursor*-poet the Fall of mankind abrogated not the sacredness of one tree, but a global principle of identity, of formal coherence and integrity, inherent in Eden's very soil. Of the domain "quilk man clepes paradis" (606), the poet tells us that God

gaf it him, als in heritage,
to yeild þerfor na mar knaulage,
Bot for to hald it wel vnbroken
þe forbot þat was be-tuix þam spoken; *prohibition*
Bot for-þi þat he held it nocht
He did us all in bale be broght. (609-614, my emphasis)

The slippage of “it” in the first highlighted line—the change of grammatical referent from Eden itself to the agreed-upon “forbot”—suggests equivalency between dual cares.⁸⁰ Edenic homeostasis was the content of the commandment, keeping which meant holding Eden “als in heritage,” a patrimony where husbandry entails enjoying the fruits of the land, but *limiting* the yield of knowledge. Lapsarian knowledge breaks up and parcels out the central plot God Himself ordained as a site of pre-Fall accommodation between the knowable and the known; when Adam disturbs that balance, he seems for the *Cursor*-poet to fracture Eden itself. With the Garden and commandment alike no longer “wel unbroken,” the logic of “arbor bona fructus bonos facit” does not apply.

Seth’s quest to palliate this rupture proves a layered example of parabiblical disidentity: with one foot fixed in the Bible, the Seth story ranges widely in extracanonical space; but it is also *about* the overflow of knowledge from off the biblical page. The narrative enacts the very enlargement it discovers. Superfluous “knaulage” streams from the wound rent in the Tree by *Cursor Mundi*’s Eve. Of course, it streams from *every* version of the Tree; it is, after all, the *lignum scientiae boni et mali*. But it is clear that *Cursor Mundi* takes special interest in the epistemological dimensions of the Fall. Indeed, the poem’s breadth and texture position the activity of rewriting as a concomitant of the fallen world; without the Fall and its proliferation of

⁸⁰ This slippage may require just a bit of spelling out. These lines’ first complete unit of thought seems to be that God entrusted Adam with Eden not to farm it for more knowledge, but simply to hold its perfection intact (609-11). Line 612, however, requires construing “it” with the succeeding lines, not the prior ones, such that “it” now pronominalizes “þe forbot” of 613; on this reading, Adam receives Eden not in order to yield more knowledge, “but for to hold”—so that he can hold? in exchange for holding?—God’s prohibition unbroken. The lines are difficult indeed, but to construe them at all means momentarily to conjoin Eden, Adam’s patrimony, and the commandment, his interdict, under the pronominal guise of “it.” The ideational physics of this conflation enact an instance of disidentity.

knowledge, *Cursor Mundi* could not rewrite or add to the store of scriptural narratives,⁸¹ but neither would it need to assemble the program of religious education comprised by its narrative sequence.⁸² These truths condition the poem's thematic doublings-back. Adam's penitential plea and Seth's journey in that cause—both immediate effects of the Fall—parallel the poem's own march through biblical story: in all cases, recourse through logically-, diegetically- or historically-prior elements of narrative represents the journey offered in and by the poem to edifying first principles.

Thus the scene is resonant when Seth, as we recall, explains that he has only a vague intuition where Eden is, and that Adam should know this better than anyone. Adam's fatherly instructions form an *ars poetica* for *Cursor Mundi*'s own imaginative travels.

Toward þe est end of þis dale

⁸¹ By adding to God's words in the Bible—an understatement in its case—*Cursor Mundi* may knowingly take part in a transgression associated, in the middle ages, with Eve's temptation by the serpent. For in her initial resistance to the serpent's seduction, Eve adds a clause to God's prohibition against eating from the Tree. Where God had warned Adam, "of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat" (Gen. 2.17), Eve reports in turn, "of the fruit of the tree . . . God hath commanded us that we should not eat; *and that we should not touch it*, lest perhaps we die" (Gen. 3.3, my emphasis). Known to later, Christian scholars primarily through the Victorine school, the eleventh-century French rabbi Rashi correlated this addition with Proverbs 30.6: "She added to the command," he comments, "therefore, she came to diminish it. That is what is stated, 'Do not add to His words.'" *Rashi 'al ha-Torah (the Torah with Rashi's commentary translated, annotated, and elucidated)*, Yisrael Isser Zvi Herczeg et al., eds., (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1994), 31.

⁸² That the Fall occasioned the need for religious education was a commonplace of fourteenth-century pastoral reforms. Taystek, translating Archbishop Thoresby's Instruction, explains that human beings need "to know god al-myghten" in order to live and serve him,

And so come to that bliss that thai were made to.
 This maner of knawying had our forme-fadyr
 In *the* state of innocency that thai were made in,
 And so shuld we have had, if *thai* had not synned,
 Noght so mikell als hali saules has now in heven,
 Bot mikel mare than man has now in erthe. (15-20)

The Layfolks' Catechism: Or, the English and Latin Versions of Archbishop Thoresby's Instruction for the People, Thomas Frederick Simmons and Henry Edward Nolloth, eds., (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1901), 2.

Find a grene gate þou sale;
 In þat way sal þou find forsoth
 þi moders and mine our bather slogh,
 Foluand thoru þat gresse gren,
 þat euer has siþen ben gren,
 þat we com wendand als vn-wis
 Quen we war put o paradis
 vn-to þis wreched world slade,
 þar i first me self was made;
 Thoru þe gretnes of our sin
 Moght na gres groue siþen þar-in;
 þe falau slogh sal be þi gate
 O paradis right to þe yate. (1251-1264)

A moralized landscape of innocence and experience, “green to the very door”: the itinerary could be another great biblicist’s—Blake’s or Wordsworth’s. But Seth will walk backward in time, not forward, his journey a familial pilgrimage across the wilds of Adam’s birth (“þis wreched world slade / þar i first me self was made” [1259-1260]), and in through the wicket of the Garden’s outer “grene.” That the barren path of expulsion might lead to sanctity is rather a fond hope, of course, and the verse here knows as much. Its irreciprocal images of green plot a diminution of life; its ironies chime (“vn-wis” / “paradis”); and an aural near-miss foretells Seth’s futility when, in an unusually dense lexical gesture, the typical asseveration “forsoth” holds itself in abeyance from “slogh.” This abeyance, in turn, avails a near-rhyme structured by the proof of Edenic verity against the curious meandering of Seth’s enjoined sleuth. To put this another way, Seth intends to track his way into the Garden of Eden, but the pertinent verses hint in advance that he will only come near. Adam’s map sets the poem on its near-miss course with sacrality.

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These features inscribe in *Cursor Mundi* two of the chief imaginative habits of the parabiblical imaginary—first, a *vestigial* forensics whereby parabiblical artifacts test the perimeter of the impress of biblical narratives, and second, an *asymptotic* approach to an

internally configured idea of the status of biblicity. Parabiblicity consists, that is, in each poem clearing a hurdle of its own setting; the *Cursor*-poet's well-known linguistic advice, "Giue we ilkan þare langage" (247), applies conceptually, too, to the business of reimagining and re-expressing Scripture. *Cursor Mundi*'s own project entails taking the compass of a world perpetually enlarged by discursive offshoots—roads not taken by canonical tellings, meanings deepened and constellated by exegetical traditions, visions that spring from off the biblical page. Scripture is not identical to itself, in this view, because the interpellations of apocryphal narratives and other ancillary discourses induce it into a kind of Heraclitean flux. The endeavor of taking comprehensive stock of salvation history, conceiving it as a coherent totality, is akin in this view to mapping in real time the infinitesimal spread of the ocean floor from the Mid-Atlantic Ridge.

Seth's quest is the poem's own bustling curiosity in such a task put into dramatic action; the energy for the expansion of the world he explores is simply Christ. His presence is the truth discovered typologically at the end of Seth's quest; it is also the living, biologically crescent center of the poem's design. In the first sense, the poem is logocentric, comprising a domain of sometimes speculative wandering, oriented around the central point of the Bible but amplified by heterogeneous narrative material. This logocentricity is essentially spatial in nature, availing a *peribiblical* surround of ulterior discourses wedging into the scriptural circumference and opening up space for *parabiblical* disidentity to manifest in various ways. The salvific truth of the oil of mercy emerges intertextually, for instance, as disparate elements of the Seth story at its largest—its biblical kernel, plus other strains legendary and exegetical—are typologically joined.

A second sense underwrites and explains the first. In addition to being logocentric, the poem is also Logocentric: replete with Christ, *λόγος*, Second Person of the Holy Trinity. In a

very real way, the poem positions itself as Christ’s discursive double, taking its form—just as Christ does—through a vital connection with the Virgin Mary in her maternal, material aspect. Seth’s quest enacts the Incarnationist model of making, laid out in *Cursor Mundi*’s self-reflexive prologue, whereby Mary effectively becomes mother to the poem itself by shaping discursive space that includes, in its very elaboration, the praise of her Son.

<p>Suilk in herth es fundun nan, For scho es modur and maidan; Moder and maiden neuer þe lesse, For-þi of hir tok <i>cris</i>t his fiesse. Qua truly loues þis lemman, þis es þe loue bes neuer gan; For in þis loue scho failes neuer, And in þat toþer scho lastes ever. <i>Off suilk an suld ye [mater] take,</i>⁸³ <i>Crafty þat can rimes make;</i> <i>Of hir to mak bath rim and sang,</i> <i>And luue hir suette sun amang.</i> (78-88, my emphasis)</p>	<p><i>The like on earth</i></p> <p><i>flesh</i> <i>He who . . . lover</i></p> <p><i>such a one</i></p>
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All poets, *Cursor Mundi* insists, should set their sights on the Virgin; in her paradoxical motherhood are the abiding complexity, breadth, and truth that substantive poetry requires. Alongside, and in some ways prior to, Christ’s own traditional dual nature, Mary avails her own generatively disidentical self-relation. “Mother and maiden nevertheless”: just as *Pearl* will wield the concessive “nevertheless” in reckoning with the seeming inconsistencies of God’s economy, so *Cursor Mundi* is energized by the logical friction of incompatible truths, by the perpetual logical oscillation between motherhood and maidenhood. If the poem’s logocentricity plots a peribiblical surround, its energy for exploring that vastness is divinely, Logocentrically, begotten: the poem is large because it is coextensive with—layered upon, a version of, “sibling” to—Christ Himself. It is an expression of Christ’s own plenitude, and as such a domain of infinite possibility in which parabiblical disidentities can play out and be explored. *Cursor*

⁸³ Editorially supplied in MS C, “mater” is attested in each of the other MSS edited by Morris.

Mundi's deployment of the Seth myth emphasizes both the richness of the story as a heuristic for theological exploration and the provisionality of the resultant disclosures.

Seth's errand culminates with an instruction: look, but do not touch.

"Ga to þe zatte . . . and lote þi hed inwar, þi self wit-outte, And tent to thinges at þi might þat sal be sceud vn-to þi sight." (1305-1308)	<i>gate . . . bow</i> <i>attend . . . as you can</i> <i>shown</i>
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Gentle with Seth's incapacity, the angel "mikelik" (1304) encourages him to make of the vision what he can. "Tent to thinges at þi might": the full piquancy of this phrasing will emerge further on, but already it is clear that Seth is ill-equipped for a vision which amounts, after all, to nothing less than the fullness of time. Over three iterative looks inside the Garden, Seth sees traditional features of the Edenic landscape—a central fountain feeding "four gret stremmes" (1316)—plus a tree that undergoes transformation each time he looks again: first it is barren ("dri for adam sin" [1328]), then "a neddur hit [has] umbilaid" (1336), then it shoots skyward and plunges its roots down to hell, "quare vnder he sagh his broþer abell" (1348). In the tree's "croppe" (1342) at this stage, and at the center of Seth's experience, is the newborn Christ—"goddes sun wit-outen wene" (1356), the angel explains, whose infantile cries harbinger the bitterness of His redemptive work.

þi fader sin now wepes he þat he sal clens sum time sal be, Quen þe plentez sal cum o time; þis is þe oile þat was hight him. (1356-1360)	<i>promised</i>
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This assurance is most of what Seth has come for; no wonder, then, that he turns to take his leave. But he does so empty-handed at first—not because the angel has denied Adam's request, but because its fulfillment takes unanticipated form. Seth can look, but not touch, because there is nothing yet palpable; the oil is a token in promise of Christ's healing work in the Incarnation.

Its promised reality lies far in the future.

Seth learns, indeed, that the oil of mercy has been a *figural prophecy*, in Erich Auerbach's influential conception, "something real and historical which announces something else [in salvation history] that is also real and historical."⁸⁴ "Real and historical" are the essential descriptors, for Auerbach, of phenomena coordinated in a relationship of figural typology: since figuration is in its highest sense a feature of God's own writing of history, concrete events in time can adumbrate subsequent events in time, even as human authors can achieve such foreshadowing effects only by way of verbal constructions.⁸⁵ These dynamics are especially interesting in the case of the oil pledge insofar as it lacks, as a promissory speech act, the tangible referent Seth had anticipated. God's promise was in fact "real and historical," but instead of seeing its fulfillment in Adam's anointing, we learn that the oil of mercy is in fact a promise of a promise: where God assured Adam he would receive the oil, in the event fulfillment is delayed into the day of Christ's redeeming act.

That the Seth story, a noncanonical legend, with its central article, the oil, can align figurally with the central truth of Christ is in one sense outrageous, entailing nothing less than a circuit of guarantee between an imagined—that is, extrabiblical—artifact and the truth of the

⁸⁴ Erich Auerbach, "Figura," in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature: Six Essays* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 29. Hereafter, Auerbach, "Figura."

⁸⁵ Auerbach is the subtlest modern theorist of figural typology, but the technique itself is a basic theological tool. As David Lawton explains, "given that the early Christian Church had taken over the whole Jewish Scripture, called it the Old Testament and given it a radically different meaning, it is no great surprise that the early Christians played down the literal meaning. The new kind of Christian meaning began with St Paul, who preached that the letter—the literal sense—kills; and its first major resource . . . is what we now know as typology. Typology is the central link from the Old Testament to the New Testament. It is built into the Pauline and other Epistles (Christ as new Adam), into Christ's teaching itself (as in the parable reference to Himself as Bridegroom), and it is thoroughly developed in the commentary of the Church which abounds in types of Christ: Abel because he dies, Noah because he saves humanity, Jonah because Christ himself mentions him and the three days Jonah spends in the whale are equivalent to the three days Christ spends harrowing hell, and so on." Lawton, *Faith*, 19-20.

Word itself. Of course, *Cursor Mundi* is under no obligation to conform to Auerbach's conception of figuration, but his terms allow us a tidy grasp of the poem's ambitious dynamics. Promised oil, Seth receives the further assurance of Christ's cleansing: God fulfills His promise by exploding the magnitude of the redemptive act. Soteriologically this makes perfect sense; but the structure of this plan has an interesting implication for the relationship between Scripture and parascripture. Here, the plenitude of Christ's truth—a central fact standing in apposition to the central space of the Garden of Eden—backfills the ontology of the promised oil. Where figural typology normally depends upon type and antitype, or fulfillment, both being grounded on the bedrock of Scripture—the near sacrifice of Isaac, say, *pre-figuring* the Crucifixion—here Christ's historical, redemptive act circles back, diegetically, to encompass and fulfill the promissory energy of a biblically extrinsic phenomenon. In short, the typology of the oil provides a broad sanction for the truth and salvific purchase of not just traditional paratexts like the legend of Seth, but of *Cursor Mundi* itself. It is as though the facts of Scripture draw the fictions of the imagination into nearness, as though all roads lead to Rome. “Al that is writen,” says Chaucer paraphrasing 2 Timothy 3.16, “is writen for oure doctrine.” *Cursor Mundi*'s use of the Seth legend places a good deal of emphasis on this sense of inclusivity.

Indeed, a kind of *discordia concors* is Seth's final Edenic gift. Three seeds “þat I toke o þat appel tre,” says the angel, are to be Seth's parting gift; they come with instructions for Adam's burial.

do þam vnder his tong rote,
 þai sal til mani man be bote;
 þai sal be cedre, ciprese, and pine,
 O þam sal man haue medicen. (1375-1378)

root
salvation

The image—three different trees from a single stock, no two of the four mutually germane⁸⁶—is part of *Cursor Mundi*'s pervasive Trinitarian motif: as the poet goes on to explain, the cedar with its matchless height betokens God the Father; the cypress the Son for its “suetē saur”; and the pine the Holy Ghost for its “mani kirkels” of fruit (1379-1386). This simple allegory links the triple flowering of the apple seeds with Seth's expansion of the Eden story: in both cases, an unsuspected abundance comes of singularity. No less than the apple seeds, the protected space of the Garden *and the ostensibly settled narrative of the Garden* yield over time far more than they seemed to contain.

Seminal abundance allows the poem to reinscribe the parallel between the moral improvement it seeks to impart and the nature of the Bible on whose basis this must occur: the Bible, like the soul to which it is addressed—*and like the individual narratives it contains*—has an evergreen capacity for surprising transformation. The seeds, with their surprise in store, return us to the dim groping by which Seth seeks Eden: “Yai, sir, wist i wyderward / þat tat vncuth contré ware, / þou wat þat i was neuer þare.” For Seth, Eden is neither a vivid image nor an articulated idea. Rather it is “vncuth”: unknown, unfrequented, marvelously strange, far off his experiential map. He does not know it; merely to seek it enlarges the world. If Seth's journey centripetally re-coils the Adamic diaspora, its center for him is an unprecedented blank, an unforeseen origin that issues, like an apple seed germinating a cypress tree, in great surprise, the force of which is nothing less than the shock of the divine real. Just as Seth's first glimpse of Eden astounds him—“Al was he gloppend for þat light” (1288)—so *Cursor Mundi*'s prologue replicates the Seth narrative by situating the poem itself as a jolt of moral recognition.

⁸⁶ Quinn, *Quest*, notes that “the mention of the apple in the [thirteenth-century anonymous] *Legende* [which *Cursor Mundi* inherits] is extraneous, even awkward . . . since it is related that from the seeds come cedar, cypress and pine sprouts! At this point too many traditions may have been unskillfully combined” (128). Quinn's remark reminds us that intertextual teeming is itself a kind of superabundance in the Seth story.

And to þoo speke i alþer-mast
 þat won in vnuarc es to wast
 þair liif in trofel and truandis,
 To be ware wit þat self and wis,
 Sumquat vnto þat thing to tent,
 þat al þar mode might wit amend. (251-256)

*most of all
 in misconduct . . . waste
 trifling . . . idleness*

Somewhat

The address here is simple—leave off sinning, and repent—and surprisingly personal for this poem of swift narratives, urging as it does a regimen of introspection and self-care: Be wisely wary with the self entrusted to you; pay heed to its health and correction.⁸⁷ Standing outside the poem’s diegesis, the exhortation helps gird the *mise en abyme* thematic doubling of the Seth story: in both cases, the urgent need is that of return. Where Seth means vicariously to lead Adam back to the touch-point of his making, Fall and redemption, the poem itself means to return its reader from mundane trifling, “thyng þat may not auail / þat es bot fantum o þis world” (90-91), to the edifying solidity of biblical history. It calls, in short, for a kind of *μετάνοια*, that holistic change of heart glossed, by its keenest modern expositor, as “a word of whose fullness, in its initial position, the New Testament itself can be the only adequate translation, for, in that initial position, it is the key-note of its whole strain.”⁸⁸

It is this act of animadversion, of salvific turning-toward, that most distinguishes *Cursor Mundi*’s particular use of the Seth mythology. As an inherited apocryphal narrative, the Seth story was rather fully built by the time it came into the *Cursor*-poet’s hands (see n. 10 above). But the poet sees in Seth an avatar for his interests. To the etiological explanations already at work around Seth (the origin of the True Cross, the typological linkage of Fall and Redemption),

⁸⁷ Although these lines place a “self” requiring care, rather than a “soul” doing so, in apposition to the “liif” spent frivolously, the bifurcation of the human entity seen here smacks of a long tradition of body-soul debate poems. For an example nearly contemporary with *Cursor Mundi*, see the late thirteenth-century “Desputisoun Bitven þe Bodi & þe Soule” in the Auchinleck MS (NLS Adv. MS 19.2.1).

⁸⁸ Treadwell, *The Great Meaning of Metanoia: An Underdeveloped Chapter in the Life and Teaching of Christ*, New York: Thomas Whitaker, 1896, p. viii.

Cursor Mundi adds a mythic history for parabiblicity itself. Tracking Seth beyond the edge of the biblical page allows the myth, in most any of its versions, to achieve a range of theological aims: signaling Adam's position *sub tempore gratiae*, mollifying his curse via the New Testament, indicating the prevenience of Christ's mercy. But in the context of *Cursor Mundi*, replete as the poem is with legend, embellishment, and apocryphal expansion, Seth's opening disclaimer—"þou wat þat i was neuer þare"—reminds readers that this text traffics in a retroactive expansionism upon sources of which the poem's meditation on Seth himself is a particularly vivid, rounded example.

Seth's footsteps, reversing Adam's, thus map the broader poem's structure of recognition. For *Cursor Mundi* is above all a poem of re-course, of seeking the spiritual remedy of the truth in its neglected—unread, unselected—stores. Like its first adventurer Seth, the poem circles back to hallowed ground aiming to rehabilitate the connection of humankind to God's divine bequest. "The end of all our exploring / [Is] to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time": two versions of this Eliotic recognition operate in *Cursor Mundi*. First, for Seth, Eden marks a paradoxical return to a place he has never been. Rooted there by his familial past, Seth experiences Eden as a novelty that is also a patrimony. As he peers into the Garden, Seth stands parabiblically not so much because he invades its fence (though that applies too), but because the scene is an accommodation, a time for learning to look and to attend, granted by the angel as a kind of holy condescension. Framing an incomprehensibly vast tableau of salvation history, the scene courts Seth's contemplation *and thematizes that process* for its reader's contemplation. *Cursor Mundi* does not simply present this scene, it presents it inset, attended to by a character whose behavior both models and mimics that of the reader looking over Seth's shoulder and doubling his gaze into the uncouth space of Eden.

Parabiblical probing

Both within and by means of the Seth story, *Cursor Mundi* shows intense consciousness of its own annexations to Scripture—so much so, in fact, that it makes them the matter of its dramatic action. The poem is about the wobble of its own orbit around its biblical center: it thematizes its enlargement of scriptural narrative worlds, seizing on such ancient apocrypha as the Seth story as both the means for inducing biblical narratives to foliate and the traditional grounds for doing so. Such intertextual foliation is one of *Cursor Mundi*'s hallmark techniques.⁸⁹ The poem evinces scriptural disidentities that often come of its curiosity about potential geographic ulteriorities—secrets hidden in biblical landscapes, apocryphal stories edging the purlieus of properly biblical scenes, features of meaning drawn into relief by exegetical traditions. The Bible is not identical to itself, in *Cursor Mundi*'s estimation, because so much of its topography overruns the perimeter of canonicity. Literally re-fulgent, such phenomena of the Bible reflect back upon and illuminate it from a projected remove. Seth's quest exemplifies and enacts this dynamism, as we have seen.

We turn now, however, to another exploratory tool wielded by the poem. Here, rather than tracking narrative threads through and beyond the canonical enclosure of Scripture, the poet envisions his biblical heuristic as a kind of cleaving force, a "cracking open" of the smooth surface integrities of Scripture in order to reveal what may be hidden within. We will observe the poem's application of this technique chiefly in the scene of Christ's baptism by His cousin and forerunner, John the Baptist. But before we do so, it makes sense to pause and take stock of *Cursor Mundi*'s place among some of the currents of biblical scholarship of late medieval

⁸⁹ "Material from the Apocryphal Gospels were [*sic*] combined with the Christian myths and legends to enrich and unify the history of salvation. The 'Cursor' poet [*sic*] is the first writer in English to attempt to bring together most of the important items from these various sources" (Mardon, *Narrative Unity*, 78).

England. Some of this intellectual environment we considered in the introduction to this study, but we can nuance our account of *Cursor Mundi*'s parabiblical behaviors by remaining in touch with its broader biblical milieu. How do *Cursor Mundi*'s imaginative expansions of Scripture relate to the biblico-cultural traditions surrounding it?

The poem's tendency to ponder the Bible by blending canonical truths with provisional fictions opens up questions about the status—the cultural, theological, and ontological status—of parabiblical literature in fourteenth-century Britain. Taking his cue from Wycliffe's *De Apostasia*, “a work strident in its distrust of ‘glossing,’ fables, ‘ymaginacio,’ Hildegard of Bingen’s prophecies and other such ‘perversions’ of scriptural meaning,” Kantik Ghosh begins his study of Wycliffism by stating with due forcefulness the preeminent hermeneutic aim of Wycliffe and his followers: “the Bible had to be reclaimed from the discourse of glossing.”⁹⁰ In many ways we can easily imagine how Ghosh's Wycliffe might have assessed *Cursor Mundi*,

⁹⁰ Kantik Ghosh, *The Wycliffite Heresy: Authority and the Interpretation of Texts*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002, 73 and 1. On the etymology of the noun form of “glose,” the Middle English ancestor of “gloss,” *OED* sketches a semantic development in the word analogous to what concerns Wycliffe and others about the practice of biblical glossing. From Latin (“glossa”) through Old French (“glose”), “gloze” comes into Middle English already transformed from its root sense: originally “a word needing explanation” (shaded by ties to Greek notions of foreignness and foreign languages), “glossa” came later to mean the explanation itself. In a 2006 article on the contemporary vitality of Robertsonian “exegetical criticism”—itself dependent upon, and indeed its own mode of, interpretative glossing—Alan T. Gaylord points to a dynamic in the semantic range of “gloss” more familiar to scholars of Middle English religious literature: “The handiest discussion of the exegetical practice of (Chaucer’s) Friar is by Jill Mann in her 1990 Sir Israel Gollancz Memorial Lecture to The British Academy. At the beginning of her review of the medieval meanings of gloss/glosyng, she quotes from the *MED*, glose, v., def. 1: ‘A gloss or explanatory comment on a text or word; a series or collection of glosses; 2. Specious or sophistical interpretation; deceitful commentary; falsification, deceit.’ The pejoration of the first term into the second,” Gaylord writes, “is a natural development with many words.” (“Reflections on D. W. Robertson, Jr., and ‘Exegetical Criticism,’” *Chaucer Review* 40:3 [2006], 313.) Mann’s two-part *MED* citation shows how many late medieval thinkers understand the evolution of “glossa” from an interpretative difficulty to an interpretative explanation: especially where the Bible is concerned, explanatory supplementation poses the danger of sophistry and deceit. Clarifying a text threatens to occlude its rich ambiguousness.

especially if by glossing we mean not just the application of supplementary discourses to explain points of textual, conceptual or doctrinal ambiguity, but also the collocation of biblical sources with, and their imaginative expansion by, material of various kinds (narrative, exegetical, devotional, natural historical) and provenances (*inter alia*, Christian and Jewish oral and apocryphal traditions, and earlier literary treatments in a range of languages).⁹¹ So various is the poem's nonbiblical material that it thwarts scholarly attempts even to say precisely how the poem itself handles the Bible. David Daniell's study of English biblical translation asserts that although *Cursor Mundi* is "the most biblically influenced Middle English work" to roughly 1350, it [like *Pearl* and its companion poems] is "not, sadly, part of the story of the English Bible. . . . Sometimes very close [to its biblical sources] . . . and sometimes wholly occupied with other things" in Daniell's view, *Cursor Mundi* intermittently uses the Bible as "the basis for a great deal of elaboration"; when the Bible *is* a presence, the poem "attache[s itself] to the central Bible stories as the traditions [have] grown about them."⁹² For Daniell, *Cursor Mundi*'s method of narrative enmeshment—its presentation of stories ventilated and entwined with their own cultural afterlives—disqualifies the poem as credible translation. Similarly, James Simpson sets *Cursor Mundi* apart from traditions of English biblical translation: "for all its inclusion of biblical narrative," the poem "can hardly be described as a biblical translation." Rather, Simpson

⁹¹ For thorough introductory treatment of *Cursor Mundi*'s heterogeneous non-biblical sources, see H. C. W. Haensch, "Inquiry into the Sources of the 'Cursor Mundi'" (pp. 1-56 in Morris, v.7); for analysis and point-by-point source identification, see the introduction and footnotes *passim* in Sarah M. Horrall, et al., eds., *The Southern Version of Cursor Mundi*, Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press (4 vols.), 1978-90; and for the most thoroughgoing discussion of *Cursor Mundi* in relation to its most important literary sources, see Thompson, *Poem*, *passim* and especially pp. 100-77.

⁹² David Daniell, *The Bible in English* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2003), 64-65.

writes, “it produce[s] and rearrange[s] narrative ultimately drawn from the Bible simply as sourceless and unquestionable history.”⁹³

Taken together, these comments begin to suggest the radical alterity of *Cursor Mundi*'s project in treating the Bible, its distance from the projects of biblical translation that so electrify theorists both in and of the latter half of the fourteenth century. Simpson suggests that the poem conceives of its scriptural basis holistically, as uninvolved in the negotiations of meaning, and of how meaning is to be decided, at stake in late medieval and early modern debates over translation of the Bible into the vernacular. Such debates are marked for well over a century (roughly 1376-1533), Simpson shows, by consistent battle lines—“the ‘orthodox’ argu[ing] that scriptural meaning is the product of human convention, and is dependent on the decision-making power of human institutions for its formulation, and “their fundamentalist opponents argu[ing] instead that human decisions must derive from Scripture and Scripture alone.”⁹⁴ In many respects, *Cursor Mundi* exemplifies what Simpson designates a pre-Reformation tradition of biblical paraphrase and accretion.⁹⁵ However, its nimble handling of Scripture allows it to sidestep questions about whether and how scriptural meaning is to be socially determined, and perhaps to resist institutional demands: by representing scriptural narrative, and representing it enmeshed with material exogenous to it, *Cursor Mundi* seeks not to determine scriptural meaning, in any sense of fixing it, but to throw open the realm of meaning by what we might term a principle of resonant dilation.

⁹³ Simpson, *Reform*, p. 464.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 467.

⁹⁵ “This textual culture frankly accepted interpretative and textual accretion by biblical readers: rereadings of the Bible produced parabiblical rewritings (parallel to yet different from the biblical text), where the interpreter’s own spiritual needs, or those of his audience, permitted rearrangement of and addition to the scriptural text.” *Ibid.*, p. 461.

the compressed, Trinitarian signification of this moment represents not just a departure from Gospel sources, but also the kind of scriptural dilation from which the *Cursor*-poet builds so much of his poem. Recall Gadamer on the Trinity, a doctrine that he claims challenges us “to try and think that which continually transcends the limits of human understanding”: for *Cursor Mundi*, this incomprehensibility issues in plenitude in mystery. Just as the voice of the Father cleaves the “þe liftes seuen” (12871) and proclaims the divine recognition, so too does a fullness of theological meaning manifest itself in and through the narrative seam between Testaments Old and New. Here, that narrative seam is almost imperceptibly fine, marked adverbially “her-wit” to suggest that the transition between Testaments—already temporally displaced from the obvious textual division between those books—is perfectly coextensive with John’s gesture, his “office,” of baptizing Christ. Despite the sharp, end-stopped division within the couplet marking testamental transition, the scene as rendered dramatically by the *Cursor*-poet avails no precise moment of change. What fissure there is becomes immediately pressed apart, dilated to allow for the outspeaking of divine truths that would remain otherwise concealed by the smoothness of the narrative surface.

Such a strategy of disclosure remains itself latent—exemplified, but not described—in the *Cursor*-poet’s handling of Christ’s baptism. Yet because that handling is coded to recall the poet’s more explicit theorizing of his own practice in his prologue, the passage serves well to

eum dicens, ego a te debeo baptizari et tu venis ad me. Respondens autem Iesus dixit ei, sine modo sic enim decet nos implere omnem iustitiam, tunc dimisit eum. Baptizatus autem confestim ascendit de aqua, et ecce aperti sunt ei caeli et vidit Spiritum Dei descendentem sicut columbam venientem super se, et ecce vox de caelis dicens, hic est Filius meus dilectus in quo mihi conplacui. [“Then cometh Jesus from Galilee to the Jordan, unto John, to be baptized by him. But John stayed him, saying: I ought to be baptized by thee, and comest thou to me? And Jesus answering, said to him: Suffer it to be so now. For so it becometh us to fulfill all justice. Then he suffered him. And Jesus being baptized, forthwith came out of the water: and lo, the heavens were opened to him: and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove, and coming upon him. And behold a voice from heaven, saying: This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”]

characterize many of his ideas about parabiblical writing per se. Let us turn now to the most pertinent moment of his prologue. In telling the history of the world from creation till doomsday, the poet writes, he will present an extensive, episodic narrative not unlike the tales of romance “iestes” with which his work contrasts; his aim, we learn, is

Sumkins iestes for to scaw,	<i>Some kinds of . . . show</i>
þat done were in þe hald[e] law,	<i>old</i>
Bituix þe ald law and þe new,	<i>Between</i>
How crist brith began to brew,	<i>birth</i>
I sal yow schew wit myn entent,	
Bre[fl]i of aiþere testament. (115-120)	

Deeds done under the old law and the new one easily make sense as material the poet will recount: however loosely it must be done, his work will knit together both Old and New Testament narratives. But the liminal moment to which the poet draws attention—that time “betuix þe ald law and þe newe”—makes far less sense in the terms the *Cursor*-poet provides. Connected as it is here with Christ’s birth, this interval seems perhaps to designate the period of time between, say, the Annunciation and the official start of his ministry, that time when “in his louing” for the newly-slain John the Baptist, Christ “fra Nazareth to capharnaum, / Fra neptalim to zabulon, / Went . . . prechand o þe fai” (13245-13248).⁹⁸ These lines might also plausibly cast Christ’s baptism as “brith” by way of traditional associations between baptism and re-birth; in such a reading, Christ’s baptism alone would constitute the interval between testaments. Yet as we have seen, the *Cursor*-poet’s depiction of the testamental transition affords little such interstitial space. The moment “betuix” seems to last, if it has duration at all, only as long as it takes for John “quakand vp his hand [to] lift” and baptize “vr lauerd crist” (12865-866); even the

⁹⁸ Traditions in both east and west concur in linking the transition from old law to new law to the moment of Christ’s baptism. Thus it is appropriate to assert that the *Cursor*-poet aligns “law” and “testament,” on biblical and exegetical grounds, as markers of one and the same shift between temporal and theological epochs.

couplet containing the shift between testaments in its interlinear pause arrives after the actual fact.

To explain how the *Cursor*-poet reconciles this seeming contradiction—how, that is, he can disclose truths, or even narratives, from a moment of such fineness of jointure—goes a long way toward characterizing his understanding of parabiblical discourse, and toward situating *Cursor Mundi* in its most illuminating intellectual contexts. Two keywords in this passage of the prologue flag the *Cursor*-poet’s way of inciting growth in his poem beyond what his scriptural source texts strictly warrant. “Brew” in his usage is not without connotations of fermentation and effervescence: Christ’s birth sets in motion slow processes of maturation and expansion, developments of the quality of narrative material akin to chemical reaction and steady increases of sheer narrative volume. It is the conceptual space articulated by such effervescence—and marked by dynamics of evaporation (narrative threads trailing off), condensation (their reemergence) and convection (cyclical appearances of narrative continuities)—that the *Cursor*-poet measures, tends and apportions.

Such metaphors of brewery are less fanciful, or clearer in meaning, when considered alongside the poet’s promissory boast about the deictic power of his “entent.” This gesture initially appears boastful insofar as it seems to suggest a lossless adequation between the poet’s narrative art and the realm of scriptural truth he promises to “schew.” Indeed, the promise available places the enormous scope of salvation history wholly under the purview of the poet’s own artistic volition. It is he who will choose, frame and explain the “iestes” of his story, a fact at least doubly problematic—first, in that the poet’s invocation of *res gestae* aligns his scriptural vision, if not with the romance “iestes” of prologues G and T, then with the language of

chronicle histories usually secular in nature;⁹⁹ and second, in that this passage signals a desire to cull, organize and even *foretell* episodes from the metanarrative of salvation history which is still ongoing—still, that is, a-brew.

Crucially for *Cursor Mundi*, though, the semantic range of the “entent” reaches beyond such confidence of in the will. *OED* explains that Middle English had two related forms of the word: entent/intent (cognate with OF *entent*, meaning “intention” or “application,” ultimately from the Latin *intentus*, “a stretching out”), and entente/intente (cognate with OF *entente*, meaning “intention, thought, desire, purpose, etc.,” and ultimately from the same Latin root as *entent*) (*OED*, intent, n.). With both words, the image is one of the mind or will extended or applied to some purpose; it is in this respect that the *Cursor*-poet seems to boast of what he can compass “wit [his] entent.” But because the Middle English word is deeply polyvalent, a spectrum of meanings colors it here. The poet may be saying a number of different things: that he’ll pay diligent attention to his biblical sources (*MED*, entente, def. 6); that he’ll teach, or show what he has been taught, about the Bible (*MED*, entente, def. 8); or perhaps merely that he

⁹⁹ On the distinction between *res gestae* as worldly, political historiography and the genre of “universal history” in which *Cursor Mundi* is more appropriately classified, see e.g., Peter Classen, “*Res Gestae*, Universal History and Apocalypse: Visions of Past and Future,” in R. L. Benson and G. Constable with C. D. Lanham, eds., *Renaissance and Renewal in the Twelfth Century* (Medieval Academy Reprints for Teaching), Toronto: Toronto UP, 1991, pp. 387-417. As he turns his attention from the first to the second generic categories of historical writing named in his essay’s title, Classen stipulates that “virtually all the works [he has] discussed [as *res gestae*] take their point of departure from the experience of political actions in the authors’ own time. The great world chronicles, on the other hand, [are] based far more on literary tradition” (398). Making a second distinction quite useful for thinking about *Cursor Mundi*, which he does not mention, Classen later distinguishes such “great world chronicles” from apocalyptic historiography, the most exemplary writer of which, Otto of Freising (d. 1158), did more than any other historian of the twelfth century to “imbue the stuff of world history with theology” (403). Classen’s distinctions imply that by the early fourteenth century, a writer like the *Cursor*-poet would have enjoyed far more latitude in working within and across these generic categories; but the poet’s juxtaposition of “sumkins iestes” with the sacred narratives in (and between) both biblical testaments nevertheless signals his own sense that his work boldly commingles romance, chronicle and scriptural histories.

wishes himself able to represent biblical narrative (*MED*, *entencioun*, def. 2a). All of these senses sort with his generally reverential treatment of biblical history.

Three further nuances of *entent* help spell out what the *Cursor*-poet forecasts. Insofar as these are somewhat in tension with each other, their implied presences add complexity his claim. In the first instance, *entent* continues the series of potentially limited promises above—I shall duly attend to the Bible, I shall strive to teach what I can about it, and I hope for success in the task—by comprising notions of opinion or embodied perspective (cf. *MED*, *entencioun*, def. 4a). Taken as such, the poet’s vow to “schew wit myn entent, / Bre[fl]I of aipere testament” amounts to deferential qualification: “I will show what I can, what *seem to me* to be the highlights of biblical history.” Yet poet’s claim can also turn diametrically around the same word, for *entent* equivocally bespeaks notions of the “significance or import . . . of a situation or doctrine” (cf. *MED*, *entencioun*, def. 4b). The lexeme around intention thus oscillates between meanings that are directly opposed—here, between opinion and not just objective significance, but objective *doctrinal* significance in the full theological sense of that phrase. On either side of this oscillation lies a shared component of meaning that binds these opposed senses together—namely, a sense of the inwardness of signification, either that *held inwardly* as opinion or perspectival knowledge, or that of innermost, truest knowability, the *essential character* of a thing known.

Such shades of inwardness inform our final sense of *entent*, the one in which the word retains its fullest Latinate flavor, and which best connects all the foregoing. Beneath medieval Latin *intentio*, itself a consummately vexed term for medieval poets and theologians,¹⁰⁰ run

¹⁰⁰ One example must suffice here to suggest some of the ways in which “entent” and related notions fascinated late medieval thinkers. Chaucer’s Miller’s Tale famously ruminates on the idea of “prying into privities,” be they God’s or a spouse’s. In his Prologue, the Miller asserts in his own voice that “An housbounde shal nat ben inquisityf / Of Goddes pryvetee, nor of his wyf”

etymological roots that link the noun *intentio* to *tempto*, a verb which commonly describes feeling or handling in an exploratory manner (cf. *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, *tempto*, def. 1). A common compound phrase, *temptare venas*, refers to feeling for someone's pulse (def. 1b), and in more figurative uses *tempto* extends to testing, investigating, examining (defs. 2-4) and making experimental use of something (def. 5).¹⁰¹

By staging his work as an exploratory *intention* into Scripture, the *Cursor*-poet follows Doubting Thomas in probing into divine *corpus*. Skepticism is not at issue. For all his doubt, Thomas is first among the apostles to confess Christ's divinity after His resurrection (*Respondet Thomas, et dixit ei: Dominus meus et Deus meus* [Jn. 20:28]), and the *Cursor*-poet shares this desire to see for himself. Moreover, he evinces his desire, and that of fourteenth-century parabiblical literature more generally, to make art from varying kinds of encounter—liturgical, exegetical and speculative in nature, to name but a few kinds—with Scripture, and further to

(l.3163-64). Not ten lines later, Chaucer apologizes for such ribaldry. Recalling Reason's defense of bawdy terms in *Roman de la Rose* (see *Roman*, 6943-7185), Chaucer entreats, 'For Goddes love, demeth nat that I seye / *Of yvel entente*, but for I moot reherce / Hir tales alle, be they better or worse, / Or elles falsen som of my mateere' (3172-75, my emphasis): 'Judge not that I mean to speak evilly,' he says—but also, 'Judge not that I myself pry into the evils in this tale; I simply report them.' Such separation between inward truths and outward narrations aligns Chaucer with the *Cursor*-poet, even if the latter has far more interest in plumbing, if not 'Goddes pryvetee,' then the interior, often hidden truths of His revelation.

¹⁰¹ A dynamic complex of these senses survives to us in English in Shakespeare, whose jealous King Leontes fitfully exclaims, "Affection, thy intention stabs the center!" (*The Winter's Tale*, 1.2.37, in Stephen Greenblatt *et al.*, eds., *The Norton Shakespeare* [New York: Norton, 1997]). Shaded as it is, in his moment of suspicious agony, by an excessively vivid sense of in-stabbing, and of painful probing, Leontes's feeling for the word *intention* aptly, if violently, captures the most generative sense in which the *Cursor*-poet understands his own artistic *entente*. Lines 36-37 are a famous crux for Shakespearean editors. In the First Folio, copy 38, for instance, the lines are punctuated thus: "Can thy Dam, may't be / Affection? Thy Intention stabs the Center." Such punctuation forecloses the possibility that Leontes addresses himself directly to a personified Affection, but on the modern stage the lines are often performed as an agonized apostrophe. As such they best bear out the sense that Leontes feels himself brutally gored by affection for the wife he mistakenly suspects of adultery (see Stephen Orgel, "The Poetics of Incomprehensibility," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 42 [4], 1991).

make art from what we might call “the encounter with the encounter”: by presenting himself in his search after what meanings might inhere in the narratives of “aīpere testament,” the *Cursor*-poet both conducts and enjoins the experimental, hermeneutic work of intentional probing.

Parabiblical accesses

Cursor Mundi's original invocation of Matthew 7 registers the poem's complex attitude toward the work it does. It is both a vaunt—“so ‘scilwis’ am I that I dare to organize all of history”—and an invitation to resistance, reminding the reader presently and intertextually of the need for discernment. This entwinement activates the key logic of the poet's analogy: keen readers make “right readings” just as prophets prophesy truly or falsely, and right readings, like true prophecy, can come from off the scriptural page. At the poem's most ambitious, such disclosures of truth savor in the reading experience as moments of real crescendo. The parabiblical imaginary is not without its emotional appeals, after all, and in this final section of our examination of the poem, I wish briefly to highlight an especially engaging episode within the poem: its treatment of Judas's betrayal of Christ, a well-known biblical story to which *Cursor Mundi* adds color from apocryphal sources as well as at the level of narrative style.

This story, of course, is widely known—featured famously by Giotto in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua (c.1305), for instance, and present in countless written sources: as Morey's study of middle English biblical literature points out, “those gospel chapters which cover the Passion of Christ, notably Matthew 27, are cited more often than any other chapters in any other biblical book.”¹⁰² This familiarity subtends the chief parabiblical effects inscribed in *Cursor Mundi*'s retelling of the events of the Passion, and allows us a moment to address a basic

¹⁰² Morey, *Book and Verse*, p. 263.

question raised by the parabiblical imaginary. How, given the pastoral mission of so much of this literature, can a given text be considered to exhibit behaviors “in para” (to use J. Hillis Miller’s phrase) when we cannot ever be sure of the biblical fluency of its audience? How can a text be “parabiblical” when recognition of its first-level “biblical” qualities cannot always be taken for granted? In the case of *Cursor Mundi*, for example, Sarah Horrall has said that such “vernacular biblical paraphrases” often provided the “way in which knowledge of scripture and scriptural exegesis made its way from cell to the world”: for much of the laity, such texts provided a first encounter with the Bible per se.¹⁰³ How, then, to be para-, when biblicity is not assured?

There are multiple approaches to these questions. A simple one begins in tradition, the familiarity with Scripture diffused through the parabiblical imaginary as such. Judas’s betrayal may be so central to the story of Christ’s passion as to be familiar for nearly any adult novice in medieval Europe. A better ready answer may stem from a given text’s evident sophistication: as I hope to have shown already, a good many features of *Cursor Mundi* as a treatment of Scripture prevent its being classed as a simple biblical primer. Scholars working on the poem on other fronts concur. In a study of the poem’s circulation, for instance, Guy Trudel identifies its placement in four manuscripts alongside the Middle English *Book of Penance*; here, he affirms that while “I do not wish to rule out a lay readership for the *Book [of Penance]* . . . I would like to assert a definite clerical readership for it, which may indicate that the *Cursor Mundi* and other texts which traveled with the *Book of Penance* were not meant, as the *Cursor* proclaims,

¹⁰³ Sarah M. Horrall, “For the Commun at Understand: *Cursor Mundi* and its Background,” in *De cella in seculum: Religious and Secular Life in Late Medieval England*, ed. Michael G. Sargent, (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1989), 97.

exclusively ‘for the commun at understand.’”¹⁰⁴ Trudel could well point to *Cursor Mundi*’s treatment of Judas’s betrayal for narrative evidence of his conviction. Clerical readers would be best equipped to participate in the betrayal story’s welter of irreconcilable implications; they would most acutely feel the strange combination of emotional responses that comes of being imaginatively present for Christ’s final days at a historical moment *prior* to Judas’s setting the passion irretrievably into motion; and clerical readers would be most tantalized by the nearly four hundred suspenseful lines that pass between Christ identifying Judas as his betrayer and receiving from him the kiss of betrayal in the garden. *Cursor Mundi* cannot but be intended, at least in part, for readers who know their Bible relatively well, for so many of its best effects—as here in the Judas story—depend upon a reader knowing original biblical narratives and oscillating constantly between a remembered biblical text and the re-presented parabiblical one. Such oscillation energizes the orthotic pressure, and the imaginative divagation, that shape so much parabiblical discourse around its biblical origin.

More interesting for our purposes, though, are techniques evident in such texts as *Cursor Mundi* for structuring para- experiences, so to speak, within the diegesis of the narrative. The poem’s treatment of the Passion narrative, especially as it handles Judas, shows a number of such moments. When Judas informs Christ’s captors where and how to find Him, for instance, the narrative voice pauses to reflect in tones of woeful malediction: “Ha! quat þis traitur iudas was / vnkind bath and felun,” the poem snarls (15469-15470); and again, with parallel derision,

Ha! þou Iudas, traitur, thef,
 felunest in lede!
 O þi mikel wickednes
 mai al þis werld nu rede. (15479-15482)

Reflecting on Judas’s sleight allows *Cursor Mundi* a moment to call attention to itself as text:

¹⁰⁴ Guy Trudel, “The Middle English *Book of Penance* and the Readers of *Cursor Mundi*” (*Medium Aevum* 74, 2005), 26.

using one of its signature (and self-referential; see pp. 7 and 37 above) phrases for its audience, *Cursor Mundi* traps the felon in his act and directs attention to his preservation in a kind of double exposure. “A cinematic image of nostalgia is a double exposure, or a superimposition of two images,” writes Svetlana Boym, her words apt for the way *Cursor Mundi* situates Scripture as the *nostos*, or home, for which the parabiblical imaginary may long.¹⁰⁵ Judas rendered legible for “al þis werld [to] rede” casts even Scripture itself as a kind of paratext, the secondary record of events occurring in time. (Imagining Scripture in such a system of nested, concentric discursive domains will be a crucial too of our next text, *Cleanness*.)

Another technique of *Cursor Mundi*’s Passion sequence is familiar to us, too, from modern televisual practice. As it juggles the various plots convergent on Christ’s arrest, the poem occasionally organizes its narratives in stop-start simultaneities. No less than a twentieth-century western, this poem—with its own vast frontiers to canvas—must sometimes redirect attention to goings-on “meanwhile, back at the ranch.” Having drawn down its curses upon Judas in his wretchedness, the poem changes tack:

Leue we nu of iudas here
to sai and his tresun.
To spek o iesu þar he was
herberd in þat tun. (15491-15494)

By turning from one narrative thread to another, these lines help the poem’s Passion sequence achieve layeredness and suspense, and indicate faintly the kinds of simultaneity and action over the horizon we explored in treating Seth. These lines and the technique they evince are important to mention chiefly because they offer a recognizable version of the two more complicated, and less familiar, forms of simultaneity I want now to draw into focus in *Cursor Mundi*’s Judas narrative. We might class one as philosophical, the other as narratological in its

¹⁰⁵ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), xiv.

import. Both are crucial to *Cursor Mundi*'s rendering of Judas's role in Christ's Passion narrative, to which we now turn.

In the poem's account of the Passion, Christ vows to indicate his betrayer at the last supper by feeding him a bit of milksop bread. Even as the events of the Passion occur, in Christ's words, *ut adimplerentur scripturae prophetarum*—"that the scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled" (Mt. 26:56)—the apostles receive this information not as the inexorable course of prophetic truth, but as an outrageous irruption occasioning chagrin. "Quen þai herd þat he suld dei / . . . Qua suld do þis suike, ilkan / Of oþer has mistrun [mistrust]" (15347, 15353-15354). Nevertheless, Christ affirms what he has foretold, and soon the promised signal comes to pass.

"He þat I to wete the bred, þat ilk is he, þat baald;" Iudas opend then his muth Ar he þat to was cald, Son it was þat morsel bun, He dight it as he wald, And Iudas suelid it onan, þat siþen his maister sald. (15377-15384)	<i>for whom I dip same . . . bold (or brazen) one Before he was called to do so prepared arranged (or predetermined) swallowed . . . at once later . . . sold</i>
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This tableau engages the reader in one of the Passion's most indissoluble mysteries. What is Judas's agency in betraying his master? If the betrayal is necessary in the scheme of Christian eschatology, how are we to understand Judas's performance of this unavoidably damning deed? *Cursor Mundi* often downplays these questions with traditional pejorations of Judas. We learn immediately, for instance, that

Vte of vr lauerd hand hali þe morsel laght Iudas, Wit þat ilk morsel he laght, crep in him sathanas. (15385-15388)	<i>lord's took crept</i>
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—and this flat characterization goes some way toward placing the blame squarely on the bedeviled disciple. But these lines point to a mystery, too, in which *Cursor Mundi* cannot help being interested. Following the Gospel of John in depicting this scene (see Jn. 13:26-27), the poem eschews the models of Matthew and Mark, in which the betrayer is he “who dippeth his hand with me in the dish” (Mk. 14:20), and that of Luke, where the betrayer’s “hand is with me on the table” (Lk. 22:21).¹⁰⁶ *Cursor Mundi* eschews these quiet mentions of Judas’s hand in action, instead specifying that out of Christ’s own “hand hali”—the inverted syntax drives home the propinquity of good and evil—“crep in him sathanas.” Even Milton’s statement, “Evil be thou my good,” remains in its diametric inversion below the level of the theological paradox seen here. How can evil creep in from Christ’s own hand? Equally strange is Judas’s alacrity to take the fated bread from his lord. He opens his mouth for it without being asked to do so: for a fleeting moment, it appears that he may open his mouth to ask that Christ bestow the morsel upon him.

I want to suggest that *Cursor Mundi* deploys this scene to think, in part, about a crux of philosophical simultaneity. Earlier Peter Abelard (d. 1142) had framed in theoretical, ethical terms some of the narrative features of *Cursor Mundi*’s Judas story. Without venturing that *Cursor Mundi* knows Abelard’s work, I do wish to explore how the poem thinks, in narrative, about some of the same ideas around Judas. The famous intentionalist thinker of the high middle ages, Abelard helps us connect the sense of “entent” as a verb of probing with the volitional sense more common for us now; specifically, he furnishes an authoritative touchstone for showing the poem’s *intentional probing* draws out the complex *volitional intentionality* inscribed

¹⁰⁶ In many ways the choice of model is typical for *Cursor Mundi*, which tends to favor John in diverse respects. Mark Hazard has shown the pervasive influence of John on *Cursor Mundi*’s visionary project. *The Literal Sense and the Gospel of John in Late-Medieval Commentary and Literature* (Routledge: New York, 2002).

in Judas's act of betrayal. Abelard's thought gives us a way of understanding the strangeness of Christ's "hand hali" and of Judas's eagerness to receive damnation. "It is indeed obvious that works which it is or is not at all fitting to do may be performed as much by good as by bad men who are separated by their intention alone. In fact," Abelard says,

as (Augustine) has observed, in the same deed in which we see God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ we see also Judas the betrayer. The giving up of the Son was certainly done by the Father; and it was done by the Son and it was done by that betrayer, since both the Father delivered up the Son and the Son delivered up himself, as the Apostle observed, and Judas delivered up the Master. So the betrayer did what God did, but surely he did not do it well? For although what was done was good, it certainly was not well done nor should it have benefited him. For God thinks not of what is done but in what mind it may be done, and the merit or glory of the doer lies in the intention, not in the deed.¹⁰⁷

Abelard's discussion bifurcates the single action of the betrayal onto two distinct intentional planes: as both Father and Son, God assents to the betrayal as the essential act of Christ's work of redemption, whereas Judas's intentions, whatever they may include, burlesque the divine act of submission in damnable guise. Deed and intention are not inherently isomorphic, but *Cursor Mundi* chiastically compacts the bread of betrayal with strange intentions: Judas the betrayer now seems potentially collusive with Christ, and the Savior Himself seems to take some motivating role in His own betrayal. It isn't that the poem embeds any particular theory about

¹⁰⁷ *Constat quippe opera quae fieri conuenit aut minime aequae a bonis sicut a malis hominibus geri, quod intentio sola separat. In eodem quippe facto, ut [Augustinus] meminit, in quo uidemus Deum Patrem et Dominum Iesum Christum, uidemus et Iudam proditorem. Facta quippe est a Deo Patre traditio Filii, facta est et a Filio, facta est et a proditore illo, cum et Pater Filium tradidit et Filius se ipsum, ut meminit Apostolus, et Iudas magistrum. Fecit ergo proditor quod et Deus, sed numquid ille bene fecit? Nam et si bonum, non utique bene uel quod ei prodesse debuerit. Non enim quae fiunt, sed quo animo fiant pensat Deus, nec in opere sed in intentione meritum operantis uel laus consistit (Peter Abelard, *Scito teipsum*, ed. Rainer M. Ilgner, [Turnhout: Brepols, 2001], ll. 461-73; my emphasis). I use D. E. Luscombe's English translation of this passage (*Peter Abelard's Ethics*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971; 29). Abelard's discussion of these acts of *traditio* closely resembles Augustine's treatment of the topic in his seventh homily on 1 John, in which love as the motivating factor provides the crucial distinction between Judas's betrayal and the acts of the Father and Son (*PL* 25: 2132-2133).*

these matters in the scene, but rather that it configures its verse to open up questions about such issues of agency and secrecy.¹⁰⁸

The philosophical simultaneity of Judas's betrayal also has a narratological reflex, one expression of which already familiar to us in its form. Where the surface narrative as the poet finds it in narrative or pictorial sources may be clear, by attending to possibilities of detail and framing-structures of theological explication, the poet can explore the episode, even in the spare jointure of its biblical construction, for latent elements of meaning. The *Cursor*-poet's rendering of Judas's betrayal relies on this possibility by collocating divine and mercenary intentions in his depiction of the narrative event, inscribing potential contraries even into the visual details of the scene. It is a striking instance of an imaginative text suggesting, within its own derivative and provisional parameters, that it can disclose questions—if not answers—not directly addressed by Scripture itself.

A more dramatic effect of narratological simultaneity comes just after Judas has betrayed his lord. From the garden where He is arrested at Judas's signal, Jesus is taken to Caiaphas, the high priest of the Sanhedrin. His disciple Peter follows in the shadows—

Petre he folud him on ferr,
for durst he noght in sight,
For wonder gladly wald he wite
o þe ending if he might. (15883-15886)

—and the atmosphere darkens further when he arrives at Caiaphas's gate, gains furtive entry, and huddles with others gathered there for warmth and news.

¹⁰⁸ *Cursor Mundi*'s treatment of Judas may dovetail with Britt Mize's recent argument that thirteenth-century texts such as the *South English Ministry and Passion* (c. 1275-1280) and the *Southern Passion* (c. 1290) found Judas useful for teaching the sacrament of penance, and reconceptualized him as a penitential figure in whom the remorse shown in Matthew partially overcame demonized role he is given in John. Britt Mize, "Working with the Enemy: The Harmonizing Tradition and the New Utility of Judas Iscariot in Thirteenth-Century England" (*Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures* 36 [2010]).

A fir was kindeld on þe place
 þe night it was ful caald,
 Mani drou a-bote þat fire
 For tiþans þat war tald. (15909-15912) *tidings*

Meanwhile Judas has made his own way from the garden, rushing home to tell his mother what he has achieved with Christ's arrest. He finds her boiling a plucked rooster over an open fire—an image coded, I think, to recall the fire where we've just left Peter—from which she turns to scold his sinfulness.

“þou,” sco said, “nu sal be scent,
 i wat þai mon him sla,
 To ded þou sal him se be don,
 Bot he sal rise þar fra.” (15979-15982) *ruined
 think . . . may . . . slay
 You will see him put to death*

Confident in his turn about what he has done, Judas plays contrapuntally on her idea of Christ's rising.

“Rise,” said he, “dame nai, god dote,
 bes it noght moder sua,
 Ne sal he neuer vp-rise eft,
 Truli i þe hight,
 Ar sal þis cok vp-rise
 was skald yisternight!” (15983-15988) *certainly
 it be not . . . so
 again
 I promise you
 Ere
 scalded*

It is at this moment that our parallel narrative threads converge. While Judas and his mother have argued, Peter has been accosted by members of Caiaphas's crowd, and repeatedly denied his lord for fear for his own skin. Exclaiming a third time, “I knau him noght, for-soth,” Peter fulfills Christ's earlier warning—“Ar þe cock him crau to-night, / thris þou sal me nite [deny]” (15571-15572)—and we watch as the weight of his denial creeps in on him like night.

Be þis was þe time o night
 past midnight and mare.
 þan bigan þe cok to crau,
 þe time was cummen þar,
 Petre þan him bi-thoght,
 þe word him said was are,
 And went him forth vte of þat curt,

Wepand full selli sare. (15943-15950)

Signaling midnight and the drawing down of an awful darkness, the verses here register Peter's self-begotten sorrow and leave him to crawl off, weeping and dazed, to sleep beneath a rock.

Elsewhere—in senses both geographic and atmospheric in quality—Judas's smug sureness that Christ will never again rise falls flat, as the cock upon the flame miraculously regathers its plumage and flies off free and triumphant.

Vnnethe had he said þe word, þe cok lepe vp and flight Federd fayrer þan be-forn And cru throu grace o dright. (15989-15998)	<i>Scarcely</i> <i>Feathered</i> <i>the lord's grace</i>
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This is, to be sure, the very cock Peter hears sealing his failure to remain steadfast to his lord.¹⁰⁹

The theological upshot of this tale is surely foreseen by readers: they are fortified in their knowledge, but not enlarged in it, by this “testimony of the dumb creature.”¹¹⁰ But this miracle story nevertheless feels, in the reading experience, like the imaginative disclosure of truth, in part because it represents a conjoining of simultaneous narrative threads—one that exists

¹⁰⁹ In the Ottawa edition of *The Southern Version of Cursor Mundi*, Henry J. Stauffenberg notes that no source can be specified for this portion of the Judas story, but he indicates a number of versions of it that the *Cursor*-poet might have in mind when asserting that “it is written o sir Iudas.” Among these are the *Acta Petri* (c. 175) and the *Acta Pilati* (c. 350), the latter an especially influential literary consolidation of legends about the end of Christ's life, widely known in medieval England as the *Gospel of Nicodemus*. Stauffenberg also lists the scriptural bases for this story—Mt. 26.34, 74-75; Mk. 14.30, 68, 72; Lk. 22.34, 60-61; and Jn. 14.38 and 18.27—and usefully characterizes the “testificatory role of the cock lying at the heart of the tale” (p. 149, n. to 15961-98). Ilona Nagy offers the most comprehensive treatment of this story's diverse development across Near Eastern and European literatures. “The Roasted Cock Crows: Apocryphal Writings (*Acts of Peter*, *The Ethiopic Book of the Cock*, Coptic Fragments, *The Gospel of Nicodemus*) and Folklore Texts” (*Electronic Journal of Folklore* 36 ([2007])).

¹¹⁰ The phrase is that of Leopold Kretzenbacher, “Zeugnis der stummen Kreatur: Zur Ikonographie eines Mirakels der Nikolaus von Tolentino-Legende,” in Edith Ennen and Günter Wiegmann (Hrsg.s), eds., *Festschrift für Matthias Zender, Studien zu Volkskultur, Sprache und Landesgeschichte* I, Bonn: Ludwig Röhrscheid, 1972, pp. 435-446. Qtd. in Nagy, n. 53 *supra*, p. 19.

in the poem's biblical original, another that does not. What is true in the canonically sacrosanct story of Peter's denial abides in apocryphal narratives flanking it.¹¹¹ Just as the image of Christ feeding Judas bread calls very opposed energies to a still, the crowing cock sings diverse of matters simultaneously: Peter's denial and Christ's enduring love, Judas's crime and imminent damnation, the end of Christ's earthly ministry and the beginning of His ascension. A feeling of totality suffuses the scene, the alpha and the omega of one small narrative conjoin. Revealing the simultaneity of different strata, different registers, different "gestes" or "occurrences" of truth, *Cursor Mundi* reminds us of the density of truth to be found by probing biblical and biblically-derived narratives and arranging them alongside one another. The cock story may well be one of the untold stores of truth about Christ alluded to in John 21:25: "But there are also many other things which Jesus did; which, if they were written every one, the world itself, I think, would not be able to contain the books that should be written." With its wide ambit and omnivorous appetite for texts about his savior, the *Cursor*-poet is certain he can fill a great many of the endless books wondered at by John.

Transitioning parabiblicities: from principle to application

Even as it clearly does not invent the kinds of exegesis-by-apocrypha that it deploys, *Cursor Mundi* has been foundational for our study of the parabiblical imaginary in laying the groundwork for poets open to seeing the Bible in its various modes of disidentity. In this perspective, *Cursor Mundi* situates biblical ulteriority as a *spatial* dimension: Seth's story tracks through a region of peri-biblical adjacency that connects to the canonically-defined space of Eden without offering him access to it; Judas's story allows central truths of salvation history to

¹¹¹ Paull Franklin Baum's monograph "The Medieval Legend of Judas Iscariot" clarifies the basis of the Judas story on the Œdipus myth, and surveys its wide circulation in various forms across European languages (*PMLA* 31, 1916, pp. 481-632).

resound in apocryphal, mythic space. *Cursor Mundi* points up the hermeneutic purchase of extrabiblical wandering, but by asking questions about *where else* the Bible might go, the poem points the way to questions of *how else* the Bible might go. The hand-off here, in the root sense of tradition, is between a poem availing a principle of ulteriority figured as expanse, and inheritor poems (here, those of the *Pearl*-poet) that focus on scriptural unknowns in a different way. *Cursor Mundi*'s unknowns are narrative gaps and possibilities just over the horizon, which the poem shows energetic pursues; for the *Pearl*-poet, by contrast, unknowns are more often intrabiblical possibilities within Scripture. An experimenter more than an explorer, the *Pearl*-poet takes up the license with which *Cursor Mundi* treats Scripture and applies it to a series of discrete, if interrelated, rhetorical inquiries to do with Scripture's inherent visionary powers.

We transition now to *Cleanness*, the first of our three texts by the oft-called *Pearl*-poet. In many ways this is a natural transition: in their vastness of scope, variety of narrative materials and shared commitment to Scripture's vatic potencies, *Cursor Mundi* and *Cleanness* are a good deal alike. But where our discussion of *Cursor Mundi* has sometimes been paradigmatic in nature, attending to how thematizing the parabiblical furnishes imaginative techniques that might extend to other poems, the *Pearl*-poet compiles three very different, very distinct parabiblical experiments. *Cleanness*, as I have suggested, is the first term in the tripartite conversation comprising the poet's parabiblical *œuvre*, and we shall observe the poem in dialogue with its companion text *Patience*. (*Pearl* we shall treat not alone, but in tandem with a more holistic consideration of its poet's powers of imagination.) Between them, *Cleanness* and *Patience* contest the claims of Bible-reading to visionary experience, and articulate very different senses of the spiritual equipment Scripture offers its reader.

Chapter Two *Cleanness and the Mediation of Unclean Hands*

In all three of his biblically derived poems (*Pearl*, *Cleanness* and *Patience*, in the order of their only extant manuscript, BL MS Cotton Nero A.x) the *Pearl*-poet renders well known biblical narratives with a high degree of fidelity to their original contours and details.¹¹² As one of the poems' most influential editors puts it, "it is abundantly clear that the poet had the Vulgate text before him" as he wrote.¹¹³ Yet the *Pearl*-poet is not the last artist of whom it could be observed, after Eliot's famous dictum, that "mature poets steal."¹¹⁴ In his progress through those parts of the Bible he evidently finds most interesting—Genesis, the Minor Prophets and Revelation—the poet shows relentless energy in renovating the texts he selects to equip fresh philosophical thinking. Consider just the fact that in writing *Patience* he chooses Jonah, not Job, as his figure for exploring that virtue: here indeed is a mind unafraid to reorient tradition or to transgress, in his own imaginative way, the *termini patrum*.

Still, *Cleanness* in particular has seen its perceived imaginative weaknesses well documented among scholars. Ruth E. Hamilton cites a number of studies to sum up the tradition of disapproval for the poem. "It has been seen as a heavy-handed homily," she writes,

¹¹² Hereafter I shall refer to the poet text-specifically: as the "*Cleanness*-poet" for the current discussion, the "*Patience*-poet" next, and the "*Pearl*-poet" not just for my discussion of that poem, but also to designate him with reference to his full body of work.

¹¹³ Sir Israel Gollancz, ed. *Patience* (London: Oxford UP, 1924), 8.

¹¹⁴ T. S. Eliot, "Philip Massinger," in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (New York: Knopf, 1920), 114. "One of the surest of tests [of poetic merit] is the way in which a poet borrows. Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different. The good poet welds his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different from that from which it was torn; the bad poet throws it into something which has no cohesion. A good poet will usually borrow from authors remote in time, or alien in language, or diverse in interest."

full of negative exempla that stress the dire consequences of living an unclean life, unrelieved by good examples or the promise of a reward for a pure life. *Cleanness* has also been called loosely structured at best, with only its broad theme linking the disparate sections of the poem. More recently . . . critics have recognized that certain images recur throughout the poem and help connect the different sections, feasts being one of those images and vessels being another. . . . Nonetheless, *Cleanness* is still considered, for the most part, a weak effort by a good poet, a hodgepodge of biblical narratives and sermons with little structure or unity (Menner xxxi-xxxviii; Gollancz x, xv, xxx; Kelly 232-33; Foley 324-25; Andrew 24).¹¹⁵

In an understandable critical move, Hamilton turns from such summary critiques of *Cleanness* to the work of reclaiming its value as a piece of literature, for her, a reassessment best conducted in terms of Gérard Genette's theories of time and order in narrative, which allow the poem's principles of structure and meaning to shine through. Like Hamilton and other readers of *Cleanness*, I have my own aim to adjust its widespread (if increasingly nuanced) relegation as the least appreciated—least understood and least liked—of the poet's *corpus*. But rather than contesting the kinds of negative judgment Hamilton cites among scholars, I accept these unwieldy facts about the poem and incorporate a good many of them into an account of the poem's distinct parabiblical experimentation. The poem's broad outlines might make this case strange: *Cleanness* as a poem *is* repetitive in its heavy-handed, unrelieved admonishment of sin; it *is* loose in structure, a "hodgepodge" of narratives and other kinds of scriptural text crowded under its *thema*; and it *is* monotonous in turning all of its discourses to the same tropological end.¹¹⁶ With its plodding insistence on a certain narrative homology—the tendency of its stories

¹¹⁵ Ruth E. Hamilton, "Repeating Narrative and Anachrony in *Cleanness*," (*Style* 20 [2], 1986), 182. Hamilton's references have been useful to my own study: Robert J. Menner, ed., *Purity: A Middle English Poem*, *Yale Studies in English* 61, New Haven: Yale UP, 1920 (hereafter, Menner, "*Purity*"); Gollancz (see n. 113 above); T. D. Kelly and John T. Irwin, "The Meaning of *Cleanness*: Parable as Effective Sign," *Medieval Studies* 35, 1973 (hereafter, Kelly and Irwin, "Meaning"); Michael M. Foley, "A Bibliography of *Purity (Cleanness)*, 1864-1972," *Chaucer Review* 8, 1973-74; and Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, eds., *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, London: Edward Arnold, 1978.

to conduce to a common end or moral shaping—the poem is an odd fit for our model of parabiblical behavior within texts. Yet in offering itself as a readerly ritual of purification, the poem turns out to evince behaviors assimilable to our parabiblical model, and to initiate an abiding conversation among all three of the *Pearl*-poet’s texts about how best to enter into a reading relationship with Scripture and its discursive expressions “in para.”

“Thrynne wyses,” two parables and a beatitude

Cleanness is almost wholly a *cento biblico*. Taking the virtue of “clannesse” as its theme, the poem’s conceptual interests include cleanness of conscience, scrupulous moral and social praxis, sexual purity and religious rectitude, all of which are pursued through stories dramatizing the virtue’s absence among human beings, and the consequent incursion of God into history in order to redress the forms of uncleanness He sees there. Near its end, the poet rounds off his discourse with a neat division of all we have seen.

Thus upon thrynne wyses I haf yow thro schewed	<i>three ways</i>
That unclannes tocleves in corage dere	<i>sticks; heart; noble</i>
Of that wynnelych Lorde that wonyes in heven,	<i>gracious; dwells</i>
Entyses Hym to be tene, telled up His wrake. ¹¹⁷ (1805-1808)	<i>angry; aroused . . . anger</i>

¹¹⁶ Ryan McDermott has recently treated tropological interpretation as “the key to any successful literal, allegorical, or anagogical reading because it circulates the hermeneutical endeavor out into reader’s life, where the reader’s actions can render him or her a fit interpreter. . . . Tropological invention,” McDermott writes, can “take the form of literary invention, a responsive re-creation of the biblical material in surprisingly original yet recognizable renderings.” While McDermott focuses almost exclusively on *Patience*, among the *Pearl*-poet’s corpus, his discussion of tropology is suggestive for *Cleanness*, a poem with tropological reading equally—but quite differently—at its conceptual center. Ryan McDermott, *Tropologies: Ethics and Invention in England, c. 1350-1600* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame UP, 2016), 3 and 11.

¹¹⁷ All quotations of the *Pearl*-poet are cited to J. J. Anderson, ed., *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, Cleanness, Patience* (London: J. M. Dent, 1996).

The neatness of this division likely surprises many readers: *Cleanness* is a rather long poem, and by its end these “three ways” may seem to have been circuitous.¹¹⁸ Nevertheless, the poet’s division usefully stands, and it is clear in any case that the poem plots its basic structures with biblical shapes. Its “thrynne wyse,” or main narrative plans, are the stories of the antediluvian world and its end in Noah’s flood (Genesis 3-6); the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18-19); and the fall of Babylon, and with it its prince, Belshazzar, descendant of Nebuchadnezzar, into the hands of the Medes (Daniel 5).¹¹⁹ Among these main narratives, as connective and reflective material, are smaller, more freely curated narrative elements. These include semibiblical traditions, such as that of Satan’s belligerence and fall (mainly rooted in three verses of Isaiah 14), and allusions to secular literature, the most famous being to “Clopyngnel” (i.e., Jean de Meun) and his *Roman de la Rose*.

At the outset of the poem, two other biblical *loci* help the poem set up the kinds of thinking it will do. These are the “two parables and a beatitude” noted in the title of this subsection, and while their importance to the poem requires addressing each of them separately in its turn, we should note them now in the overall architecture of this sprawling poem. Though the sense of their multiplicity will become a bit more complicated when examined more closely, *Cleanness*’s keynote parables are borrowed from Christ—the Parable of the Wedding Banquet He tells in Matthew 22, and that of the Great Supper told in Luke 14. These the *Cleanness*-poet conflates into a parable of his own, relayed early on in order to set out his poem’s frequently

¹¹⁸ At 1,812 long alliterative lines, *Cleanness* is half again as long as *Pearl* (1,212 lines) and over three times as long as *Patience* (531 lines). The poet’s best known poem, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, is longest of all at 2,531 lines, but as Arthurian romance it is largely non-scriptural in nature and not germane to this study.

¹¹⁹ In their edition of the works of the *Pearl*-poet, Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron provide a useful outline of *Cleanness*’s structural elements. *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, eds. (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1996), 25.

parabolic mode of thinking, and to drive home his project's eschatological stakes by underscoring how finely divided the domains he treats can be—how his biblically-derived text cleaves so closely to Scripture as nearly to inhabit it, and how immediately the poem's dramatized ethical praxes give onto the ultimate state of souls.

The urgency of these issues finds acute expression in the beatitude from which *Cleanness* initiates its explorations; in the poem's own phrasing, this is "The hathel clene of his hert hapenes ful fayre, / For he schal loke on oure Lorde with a loue chere" (27-28). The sixth of the eight kinds of blessedness vouchsafed by Christ in his Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5), this promise in its contingency comprises the central logic of *Cleanness*. In short form now, as we conclude taking stock of the poem's principle parts, this blessing evidently intrigues the *Cleanness*-poet for its notional reversibility: "Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God" becomes for *Cleanness* an invitation to explore the idea of purity through its reverse, namely, the possibility that those who do somehow see God—say in the pages of Scripture or in the borrowed portrayals of a biblically-derived poem—undergo a degree of purification that harbingers blessedness even as it prepares for it. Another such logic of reversibility guides the poem's choice to mine Scripture for its very darkest moments of God's wrath in action. Sins for which characters within the Bible can be "amerc'd / Of heav'n" tend also to elicit God's stark immanence.¹²⁰ These flashes of His face incite readers to moral introspection, but more than this, such moments are also rehearsals of, and for, the eternal beatific vision Christ contingently offers. The implicit claim here that *Cleanness*, like Scripture, can do the preparatory work of purification is the poem's marker of parabolicity: radically self-same in the panoply of negative

¹²⁰ "Amerc'd / Of Heav'n" is Milton's phrase, who uses it with reference to the legions of angels who fall with Satan (*Paradise Lost* I:609-610). John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Gordon Teskey (New York: Norton, 2005).

exempla it curates, the poem suggests that it has codified the Bible's own essential power, and can convey it to readers intact despite its own second-order status as text.

The beatitude and its reversal

We shall explore these points in terms of *Cleanness's* linked narratives, but for now I'd like to continue developing the conceptual background against which they play out. *Cleanness* deploys the sixth beatitude as a scriptural memory, one that inscribes in the poem from its start a sense that all texts, the Bible included, comprise a record at some remove from the events they relate.

Me mynes on one amonge other, *as Mathew recordes*,
That thus of clanness uncloses a ful cler speche:
“The hathel clene of his hert hapenes ful fayre,
For he schal loke on oure Lorde with a loue chere.” (25-28, my emphasis)

Though their subject is a face-to-face encounter with God, these lines nest such immediacy in gradations of removal, in the narrator's somewhat arbitrary memory of the evangelist Matthew's record of a divine event that happened in time. *Cleanness* stands in a series of records, or of records of records. The difference here is not between Bible and poem, but between an event of divine action and the Bible: Christ's words have been consigned to written preservation, and the poem will go on to take this datum, registered here by the by, in opposite directions. *Cleanness's* self-understanding implies for the Bible a doubled status, and by extension a doubled status for itself, too. To the extent that Scripture is a direct impression of revelation—a discursive Veronica cloth, so to speak—the poem can only ever hope to be Scripture's earthly adjacent; but if Scripture itself is revelation's earthly adjacent, then the poem can claim for itself a startling degree of effective veridicality, an ability to speak the truth with near-scriptural authenticity. On the first model, poems like *Cleanness* can only ever be interpretations of the undifferentiated

world of truth that Scripture contains: such texts offer *rehearsals for* beatific vision. On the second model, however, *Cleanness* stands in relation to the Bible as the Bible itself stands in relation to God: textual truth is guaranteed, if diminished, by the more incomprehensible body of truth standing behind it. Imaginative poems, like their inspired originals, can claim to offer *rehearsals of* beatific vision at least to some degree. Abraham Joshua Heschel says that “as a report about revelation, the bible itself is *a midrash*.”¹²¹ Preserving the ambiguity of this statement, *Cleanness* positions itself to occupy both these alternatives at once.

Cleanness's interest in the sixth beatitude manifests its ambiguous sense that heaven and earth relate in terms of both consequence and continuity; it situates human life with both a durable, morally contingent teleology and a frangible delicacy to divine incursion. The time signatures of God's involvement with man bespeak these qualities. They are both geological (as when, post-Flood, He correlates the vastness of both world and time to pledge Himself irenically, “Whyl of the lenth of the londe lastes the terme” [568]) and frenetic (as when the Medes, agents of His vengeance, swarm Babylon “in on a res, on rowtes ful grete” [1782]). Yet concurrent with these paces of approximation are principles of division, for *Cleanness*'s very project is to expound the traditional soteriological split between the sheep and the goats.¹²² Simplistically divisive as this is—the man clean of heart will see God, the unclean will “forfete hys blysse, /

¹²¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983, p. 185.

¹²² Mt. 25:32-34. *Et congregabuntur ante eum omnes gentes et separabit eos ab invicem, sicut pastor segregat oves ab hedis: et statuet oves quidem a dextris suis hedos autem a sinistris. Tunc dicet rex his qui a dextris eius erunt: venite benedicti Patris mei, possidete paratum vobis regnum a constitutione mundi.* [“And all nations shall be gathered together before him, and he shall separate them one from another, as the shepherd separateth the sheep from the goats: And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on his left. Then shall the king say to them that shall be on his right hand: Come, ye blessed of my Father, possess you the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”]

That he the Soverayn ne se” (177-78)—*Cleanness* builds into its central logic a felt assurance that reading itself may prepare us for beatitude on either of the foregoing models. If seeing God is the reward of the blessed, then the sustained experience made possible by the poem of seeing Him both privately and at His work (we shall see examples of both) may indicate my own blessedness.¹²³ Reading, I feel myself either nascently participating in beatitude or at the very least privileged with God’s own exhortation to prepare. The *Cleanness*-poet’s parable, in this sense, means the Bible embedded already in a hermeneutic apparatus designed to cull out a number of the Bible’s most essential catastrophic, or morally “overturning,” events.

Biblical narrative wielded in this way affords a sense of surety that is doubly paradoxical in nature: ever mindful of the remove at which “the Soverayn . . . syttes so hyghe” (552), and of the “fele fautes” (177) that imperil the path of arrival “to se that semly in sete” (1055), the poem nevertheless promotes real intimacy with the God of beatific vision. Neither distance nor difficulty militates against *Cleanness*’s vision. Though God is distant and the journey difficult, *Cleanness* understands the portraiture of the Bible to constitute, narratologically, a mode of free indirect discursive access to Him.

Proving as much, the poet no sooner recalls the beatitude, with its reversible logic, than he inverts it yet another way, for “Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God” also entails “He shall never see God who shows any uncleanness.”

¹²³ In one place, at least, Augustine anticipated *Cleanness*’s dynamic understanding of Christ’s conditional beatitude. If beatific vision is reserved to the *mundicors*, Augustine imagines besting a pagan interlocutor, with his visible god, by glorying in what “our God” does for us even as he eludes the bodily eye: *Si ipsi deos suos vident oculis; habemus et nos alios oculos, unde videamus Deum nostrum. Ipsi oculi mundandi sunt a Deo nostro, ut videamus Deum nostrum: Beati enim mundo corde, quia ipsi Deum videbunt.* [“If they see their gods with their eyes, we have other eyes with which we may see our God. These eyes must be cleaned by our God, so that we may see our God: Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God.”] The more even incidental sights of God train our vision, the more we allow Him to perfect that vision. Purity begets vision, but vision begets purity. Augustine, *Tractatus in Evangelium Johannis CXXIV*, PL 35, cols. 1379-1976 (*Tractatus XX*, col. 1562).

As so says, to that syght seche schal he never
 That any unclannesse hatz on, auwhere abowte;
 For He that flemus ych fylthe fer fro His hert
 May not byde that burre that hit His body neghe. (29-32)

That these are logical relations is patent, but the poet's notion of his gloss is more interesting: he restates Christ's words not as if Christ *were* saying something other than He does, but with "as so says," the phrase implying the semantic simultaneity of the contrapositive gloss, implying that it courses along within the very current of Christ's message. Like *Cleanness* as a whole, the gloss is not an instructive adjustment of the Bible, but a vital isotope of the original.

Parable and its earthly elisions

Cleanness begins by insisting upon the Bible's primacy and richness as a resource for thought. Biblical stories furnish not just the poet's own equipment for exploring the *thema* of cleanness, but that of any such endeavor.

Clannesse whoso kyndly cowthe comende, And rekken up alle the resouns that ho by right askes, Fayre formes myght he fynde in forthering his speche, And in the contraré kark and combraunce huge. (1-4)	<i>knew how to account for . . . arguments trouble . . . difficulty</i>
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Commending cleanness is a matter of decorum. Whoever commends her properly, accounting for all that is rightly hers in terms "fair" in being both lovely and justly accorded, does so by finding "fayre forms"—not *with which* to further his speech about cleanness, but "*in furthering* his speche," in the very act of speaking itself. Seek, and ye shall find; speak cleanness, and do so cleanly.¹²⁴ The immediate adequation between thought and expression is a form of the poem's

¹²⁴ In this sense these lines enact syntactically the *inventio* they describe: against no background and necessarily without context, the word "Clannesse," opens the poem an abstract principle abstractly announced. Momentarily the word lacks even a clear grammatical role: eventually the direct object of "comende," the word shimmers for a moment, especially aurally, as a potential grammatical subject ("Cleanness who so kindly can commend" herself to our attention, perhaps, or commend others by whom she is diligently served). Syntactically absolute and semantically

confidence that “uche power pas[ses] out of” God (1654)—that outside of God’s own positive powers nothing exists, and that any creativity seeking to imitate reality (versus “meontic” creativity seeking to depict what has not been seen or experienced in reality) cannot but be good. On this Augustinian model of good and evil, evil consists in the privation of good, that is, being itself. The adequation between thinking cleanness and speaking it explains why *Cleanness* turns directly to biblical narratives for exploring its central virtue: as the discursive provision of God, the Bible is already the gratuitous expression of His “atlyng” or intention, such that even negative exempla of uncleanness still body forth the positive good of God.

The poet exemplifies the self-illuminating path of such disclosure in his opening considerations. In mind of Christ’s promise that “the hathel clene of his hert . . . schal loke on oure Lorde with a loue chere,” the poet inveighs against uncleanness by way of what seems an original analogy. God “flemus uch fylthe fer fro his hert,” he avers (31),

Forthy hyy not to heven in hateres totorne, Ne in the harlates hod and handes unwaschen. For what urthly hathel that hyy honour haldes Wolde lyke if a ladde com lytherly attyred,	<i>hasten; torn clothing beggar’s hood earthly lord badly</i>
When he were sette solempnely in a sete ryche, Abof dukes on dece, with dayntys served? Then the harlot with haste helded to the table, With rent cokres at the kne, and his clutte trasches,	<i>dais went torn pants; old shoes</i>
And his tabarde totorne, and his totes oute, Other ani on of alle thyse, he schulde be halden utter[.] (33-42)	<i>toes thrown out</i>

Specifying this to be an “urthly” scene, the poet articulates his analogy between feudal indecorum and sinfulness before God; but no sooner does the hypothetical situation seize his

indeterminate as the poem begins, “clannesse” thus achieves syntactic articulation only as the poet “furthers his speech,” as he moves from his desire to bespeak cleanness over the path of expression unfurled by that desire. Similarly, line 4’s refusal of semantic specificity—does “the contraré” mean dispraising cleanness or commending turpitude?—enacts the general impossibility to which the line refers.

imagination than its subjunctive mood—“what earthly lord would like it if someone behaved this way?”—yields to indicative elaboration: “the harlot with haste helded to the table,” etc. Or at least the passage *seems* to continue in the indicative, but this turns out not to be the case when half-line 42b changes line 39’s “Then,” initially a marker of temporal sequence, into a coordinate in an “if-then” construction. In the brief interval while the one sense has yet to yield to the second, the poet has seemed distracted, tempted away from his own subjunctive structure by the indicative vibrancy of detail he imagines for it. Only when he prescribes a consequence for roguish behavior (“he schulde be halden utter,” a phrase of dark, Learean menace) does his verse right itself by supplying the delayed apodasis of a sentence whose protactic beginning appeared to be indicative narration. Recommending exile for the interloper, the poet also chastens himself not to be carried away—exiled—from the grammar, and the ideational space, of subjunctive supposition.

Such modal elision shows the porousness between the poem and the Bible. Where the Bible is the instrument of human thinking, it is natural, *Cleanness* suggests, that the two intertwine. As the poem pursues the idea of the ill-clad harlot, its human descriptions quickly slip into biblical paradigms. This dynamism emerges most clearly when, after fifteen lines narrating a tale of a trespassing slob and his just humiliation, *Cleanness* “gives away” the fact that it has been thinking all along in biblical terms. After relishing the condign punishments due to him whose “schrowde feble” disgraces his “urthly hathel,” *Cleanness* applies the force of what to this point has been abstract hypothesis. As on earth, so in heaven—only much more so. “And if unwelcum he were to a worthlych prynce, / Yet hym is the hyghe kyng harder in heven; / As Mathew meles in his masse” (49-51).

Although he begins in the poet’s hands as a hypothetical figure for appearing impudently

before God, it turns out that the harlot is *Christ's own* figure, the central “antihero” in His Parable of the Wedding Banquet (Mt. 22:1-14), which *Cleanness* now spends another hundred or so lines retelling—that is, re-retelling—as expressly biblical quotation, finally in fully biblical form. Here, as Christ relates, a rich man prepares a banquet to celebrate the wedding of his beloved son, sending word to friends that a great feast has been prepared, and that they should “[Come] cof to my corte, er hit colde worthe” (60). His invitation is variously declined: two guests are precluded by business, another has just been married himself. Incensed at these refusals, the lord sends his men into the streets to gather up all and sundry.

Thenne gos forth, my gomes, the grete streetes,
 And forsettes on uche a syde the ceté aboute
 The wayferande frekes, on fote and on hors,
 Bothe burnes and burdes, the better and the wers,

Lathes hem alle luflyly to lenge at my fest,
 And brynges hem blythly to borghe as barounes thay were,
 So that my palays plat ful be pyght al aboute;
 These other wreches iwysse worthy nocht wern. (77-84)

Opening his home to a rather mixed social crowd, the lord specifies that all should be treated “as barounes thay were,” in order that his palace teem with guests; when these still do not fill the hall, the lord, still fulminating over his initial snub, orders his men to gather more in distinctly Lucan—not Matthean—terms (“And the Lord said to the servant: Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled”).¹²⁵

Laytes yet ferre,	<i>Search further</i>
Ferre out in the felde, and feches mo gestes;	
Waytes gorstes and greues, if ani gomes lygges;	<i>scrublands</i>
What kyn folk so ther fare, feches hem hider.	

Yet a more motley crew is brought in—be they bold, timid, hale, lame or one-eyed, the lord

¹²⁵ Lk. 14:23. *Et ait dominus servo exi in vias et sepes et conpelle intrare ut impleatur domus mea.*

wants them all—and seated by social degree as manifested by their dress. Now satisfied with his numbers, the lord proceeds through the hall to survey his guests. Spotting one man “not for a halyday honestly arrayed” (134), the lord loses all temper. ““Say me, frende’ quoth the freke, with a felle chere / ‘Hou wan thou into this won in wedes so fowle?”

The abytt that thou has upon, no halyday hit menskes;	<i>honors</i>
Thou, burne, for no brydale art busked in wedes.	
How was thou hardy this hous for thyn unhap to neghe	<i>brazen; misfortune</i>
In on so ratted a robe and rent at the sydes?	
Thow art a gome ungoderly in that gown febele;	<i>vile</i>
Thou praysed me and my place ful pover ful nede,	
That was so prest to aproche my presens hereinne.	
Hopes thou I be a harlot thi erigaut to prayse? (141-148)	<i>garment</i>

The man in the unclean garment is aghast at these words, and simply, pitifully hangs his head: “the urthe he biholdes” in a gesture that returns us to the play of earthly and spiritual narrative domains in which this complex parable episode is engaged.¹²⁶ However much it may arouse the reader’s sympathy to bear witness to this upbraiding, the man is—by the terms of the parable—condignly condemned. “Stik hym . . . / Depe in my dounghoun ther doel ever dwelles,” the lord orders, “Greving and gretynge and gryspynge harde / Of tethe tenfully togeder, to teche hym be quoynt” (157-160).

In addition to relishing just how vividly the *Cleanness*-poet manages to present his parable, I recount it at some length in order to underscore the element of human pathos enjoined upon the reader by the tension between the lord’s onetime open call—“Bothe burnes and burdes, the better and the wers, / Lathes hem alle luflyly to lenge at my fest”—and the endless punishment that ensues for him. The poem’s parabolic utterance results in two kinds of

¹²⁶ Lynn Staley presents a diachronic study of the development of this figure in her essay “The Man in Foul Clothes in Late Fourteenth-Century Conversation About Sin,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 24 (2002).

confusion. First, human sympathy and a sense for divine justice commingle in our emotional experience: we likely identify *with* the man thrown into the stocks, but we also identify him as a figure for filth at the level of the parable. Experientially, these contrary forms of identification scramble the counters of our reception of this story—the literal with the parabolic, and in turn the sharp binary between cleanness and uncleanness is eroded.

Second, a kind of dreamy tumbling of the locus of meaning ensues: just as Alice falls down the rabbit hole, and Langland's Will drowns into a land of "ferly," *Cleanness* opens with a deliberative human and contemporary consciousness that slowly dissolves into a biblical setting. Or, better, into two settings already communicant, for it is evident that thinking about both Matthew 5 and Matthew 22 is what guides the *Cleanness*-poet to his initial "fayre formes." Nesting its biblical references, the poem formally replicates its concern to elide boundaries between itself and canonical Scripture; in doing so it mimics the elision of distinct texts *within Scripture*. "The kingdom of heaven is likened to a king, who made a marriage for his son," Christ says in Matthew 22—but the parable *Cleanness* "quotes" from here blends the Matthean account with a similar but markedly different one from Luke (14.16-24). Already triplicate, the poem's parable gains a *fourth* layer when its source version, said to come from "Mathew . . . in his masse," reveals its hybrid, Mattheo-Lucan provenance. (The four layers, or iterations of the parable, are Christ's Matthean parable as it detectably guides the poet's memory starting out; the poet's earthly banquet analogy; the Matthean version as the poet explicitly now returns to it; and the Lucan variation, quietly inflecting the poet's scriptural memory.) Such textual conflation even enjoys the Bible's own sanction: as layered, partially overlapping versions of a single utterance of Christ's, the accounts in Matthew and Luke exemplify the inexact parallels of

wording, order and presentation that characterize what we know as the Synoptic Gospels.¹²⁷ Two Gospels layering their perspectives of one and the same parabolic speech act allow *Cleanness* to remind us subtly that the Bible itself is structured homologically, with multiple authoritative voices. Writ large, as we will see in the next section, it is just such repetition that *Cleanness* sees and inscribes in the series of biblical narratives it relates: each re-sounding each the imperative to become clean, these stories furnish a synoptic view of the equation between cleanness and blessedness. Readers of *Cleanness* come to share in the poem's own multifaceted view of *assembled* evidence, and with each iteration feel themselves drawn closer to a primordial truth. The layering of Matthew and Luke shows the poem's belief in the interpretive purchase of textual adjacency: as in the logic of parable itself, where comparative shuttling between disparate systems of reference placed side by side allows latent meanings to emerge, *Cleanness* begins by pondering Matthew 5 in light of Matthew 22 (and implicitly Luke 14). Drawing these texts into mutual illumination, the poem exemplifies its juxtapositive method and confesses its faith that the Bible arrays its disparate parts into self-explicating order. Two points follow from here: first, such orderliness in Scripture allows *Cleanness* to conjoin its own recensionist biblical stories to the sacred text that serves as its original, and second, here begins *Cleanness's* quarrel with its sibling poem *Patience*. Where the former text conceives of Scripture as an

¹²⁷ The specialized term “synoptic” did not exist until 1774, when it was used by the German scholar Johan Jakob Griesbach’s *Synopsis Evangeliorvm Matthaei, Marc et Lvcae*. Concerned with only the first three canonical Gospels—those which we have known ever since as the Synoptic Gospels—Griesbach used the term to distinguish his work from the tradition of four-part Gospel “harmonies” that began in the later second century with Tatian’s *Diatesseron*. In this line, and in the wider tradition of Gospel commentaries, the *Cleanness*-poet would have had numerous models for conflating the two parables. Charlotte Morse lists those of Ambrose, Honorius Augustodunensis, and Victor of Capua (*The Pattern of Judgment in the Queste and Cleanness*, [Columbia & London: University of Missouri Press, 1978], 27-28; hereafter Morse, “*Pattern*”), and T. D. Kelly and John T. Irwin point out that “the additional conflation of the Matthean and Lucan versions by the poet of *Cleanness* simply continues the fusing tendency begun by the gospel writer [i.e., Matthew]” (Kelly and Irwin, “Meaning,” 255).

epistemological thoroughfare spanning all the way from God Himself to biblically inspired imaginative literature, *Patience* will insist on the frustrating effects of Scripture's internal rivenness and occlusion. We shall have more to say about this quarrel when we turn our attention properly to *Patience*, but for now we transition from the poem's play with matters of "canonicity" to its concrete treatment of three of Scripture's own most familiar stories.

Darkness and interiority in *Cleanness's* "thrynne wyse"

Citing O. F. Emerson, A. C. Spearing has suggested that the *Pearl*-poet "might have been 'directly acquainted with . . . Hebrew commentaries on the Bible.'"¹²⁸ Without venturing the claim that the poet, writing *Cleanness*, is intimately familiar with Talmudic debate, it is worth noting, that the Talmud traditionally thinks of canonicity in terms of cleanliness—but not always in intuitive ways. "All holy scriptures defile the hands," claims the Mishnah Yadayim 3:5, a paradoxical statement in and of itself, but one that is especially so in light of *Cleanness's* revulsion at "hondes unwaschen" (34).¹²⁹ Just as the Hebrew word for holiness, *qadosh*, literally signifies separation in a broad sense encompassing sacrosanctity as well as the casting out of things defiled, so too does the *Cleanness*-poet achieve his tropological aim by suggesting surprising propinquities between cleanness and filth. Indeed, the beatific vision at the poem's theological center is approachable, in poetry, via either of these radically opposed means. As

¹²⁸ A. C. Spearing, *Readings in Medieval Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987), 258 n. 13, citing O. F. Emerson, "A Note on the M. E. *Cleanness*" (*Modern Language Review* 10, 1915), 373-375. Substantiating this possibility, Spearing points out that *Cleanness's* "division of animals into clean and unclean . . . —*clene* and *horwed* (334-335)—derives, like so much in the poem, from the Jewish conception of purity, transmitted through the Old Testament" (185). Hereafter Spearing, "*Readings*."

¹²⁹ Qtd. in Timothy H. Lim, "The Defilement of the Hands as a Principle Determining the Holiness of Scriptures" (*The Journal of Theological Studies* ns 61 [2], 2010), 501-515. Hereafter, Lim, "Defilement."

Émile Durkheim puts this idea, “the pure and the impure and not two separate genera but two varieties of the same genus that includes all sacred things.”¹³⁰ In *Cleanness*, such a principle of conflation guides the poet’s deployment of his chosen narratives in alternative ways: aiming to condition cleanness of heart in his readers, the poet either emphasizes and augments the features of human defilement that he finds in the Bible, or he attends to God where he finds Him in moments of His own intense privacy. Both narrative methods conduce to the vanishing point of beatific vision, and both play upon the kind of reversible logic we now know to be congenial to him: either the filth portrayed in *Cleanness* renders its readers hands clean, or the genuine—canonical?—holiness of its narratives leaves its readers’ hands defiled, at least by the standard set by the Mishnah. A kindred kind of evocative logic governs his treatment of scriptural narrative. He is equally interested—identically interested—in cleanliness and filth, precisely because they are reciprocals. “The notion that holy scriptures, like sources of impurity, impart uncleanness to those who are literally ineligible to touch them” governs *Cleanness*’s experiments with blurring these categories.¹³¹ We turn now to examining key narrative moments that perform this kind of thinking.

As in *Cursor Mundi*, in *Cleanness* the human generations succeeding Adam pose an interesting opportunity for the work of parabiblical imagining. The poem’s first movement canvasses the rebellion of Lucifer and his “hurl[ing] into helle-hole (223), the fall of Adam and Eve, and the grand culmination of the first age of the world in Noah’s flood. Midway through these primordial events, the earliest, most physically beautiful generations of men “wonyed in the world withouten any maysters” (252). Living under natural law alone—“Ther was no law to

¹³⁰ Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001), 306. Hereafter, Durkheim, “*Elementary Forms*.”

¹³¹ Lim, “Defilement,” 506.

hem layd bot loke to kynde, / And kepe to hit and alle hit cors clanly fulfyllen” (263-264)—these men soon “controevéd agayn kynde contraré werkes” (266), and the women soon fall prey to the lechery of devils.

So ferly fowled her flesch that the fende loked How the deghter of the douthe wern derelych fayre, And fallen in felawschyp with hem on folken wyse, And engendered on hem jeauntes with her japes ille. (269-272)	<i>thoroughly daughters of men in human fashion giants; vile tricks</i>
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Because I am more interested in God’s reaction to this historical moment than in the human praxes eliciting it, I shall respectfully bracket the rich body of scholarship on *Cleanness*’s treatment of same-sex erotic love.¹³² Fiends have seized the opportunity to “fall in fellowship” with women “on folken wyse”, and for the medieval poet these phenomena—homosexual desire, the miscegenation of the human and the supernatural—are abominations of formal distinction, and as such they give him a chance to draw together the counters of his vision, clean and unclean, in the very mind of God.¹³³ Genesis sets some quiet precedent for the divine rumination

¹³² Elizabeth B. Keiser’s *Courtly Desire and Medieval Homophobia: The Legitimation of Sexual Pleasure in Cleanness and Its Contexts* examines *Cleanness*’s evident homophobia in light of three major sources of medieval fear and anxiety around same-sex erotic love—Alain de Lille, Thomas Aquinas and Jean de Meun. One of the best studies of *Cleanness* and homosexual eroticism, Keiser’s book ultimately redeems the poem from its evident homophobia by suggesting that its valorization of sexual pleasure begins “dismantling the most significant traditional theological argument against same-sex love” (Elizabeth B. Keiser, *Courtly Desire and Medieval Homophobia: The Legitimation of Sexual Pleasure in Cleanness and Its Contexts* [New Haven: Yale UP, 1997], 223.) Allen J. Frantzen has also written about *Cleanness*’s intense interest in sodomy in a broad sense of the term (“diverse [sex] acts with a common denominator: all thwarted conception” [p. 451]), suggesting that the *Cleanness*-poet far exceeds all other medieval writers in his compulsive interest in male homosexuality. “The poet, one might say, has queered this poem himself” (Allen J. Frantzen, “The Disclosure of Sodomy in *Cleanness*,” [PMLA 111 (3), 1996], 452).

¹³³ Following the anthropologist and cultural theorist Mary Douglas, Spearing has argued that in this poem, “divine purity . . . is based on orderly classification” (Spearing, *Readings*, 185). Spearing generously credits Douglas’s study, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, for guiding his thinking about *Cleanness*. “I have certainly gained more help from [Douglas] in understanding the way the Gawain-poet thinks, and especially in

that attends this moment in history, but *Cleanness* exploits an opportunity to figure God as He is touched by human sin to the depth of His heart. In the Bible giants, or Nephilim (“the fallen ones”), rather than fiends couple with the daughters of men, and God shows the concern that *Cleanness* will amplify in its turn:

God seeing that the wickedness of men was great on the earth, and that all the thought of their heart was bent upon evil at all times, it repented him that he had made man on the earth. And being touched inwardly with sorrow of heart, He said: I will destroy man, whom I have created, from the face of the earth, from man even to beasts, from the creeping thing even to the fowls of the air, for it repenteth me that I have made them.¹³⁴

The poet shows acute interest in the repeated cordial imagery here: men’s hearts “bent upon evil at all times” touch God Himself “inwardly with sorrow of heart,” a doubling effect that unleashes the poet’s imagination of just what this inward touching can avail. For in his mind, God’s decision to destroy the earth comes of a “temptande tene,” an anger sufficiently sharp to stab its way into God’s very being (recall the senses of Latin *tempto* we explored in *Cursor Mundi*), and sufficiently capacious as to wound Him in diverse ways—with injury, reproach, insult, shame, anxiety and even, strange to say in this context, the very pains of hell (see MED, “tene,” n. 2, for this semantic range).

When He knew vche contré corruppte in hitselven, And vch freke forloyned fro the ryght wayes, Felle temptande tene towched His hert; As wywe wo hym withinne, werp to Hymselven:	<i>gone astray</i>
“Me forthynkes ful much that euer I mon made, Bot I schal delyuer and do away that doten on this molde, And fleme out of the folde al that flesch weres,	<i>regret earth</i>

understanding [*Cleanness*], than from any literary criticism and scholarship I have so far encountered” (p. 185).

¹³⁴ Gen. 6:5-7. *Videns autem Deus quod multa malitia hominum esset in terra, et cuncta cogitatio cordis intenta esset ad malum omni tempore, paenituit eum quod hominem fecisset in terra. Et tactus dolore cordis intrinsecus, delebo inquit hominem quem creavi a facie terrae ab homine usque ad animantia, a reptili usque ad volucres caeli, paenitet enim me fecisse eos.*

Fro the burne to the best, fro bryddes to fysches;

man; beast

Al schal doun and be ded and dryven out of erthe
That ever I sette saule inne, and sore hit me rwes
That ever I made hem myself; bot if I may hereafter,
I schal wayte to be war her wrenches to kepe.” (281-292)

carefully observe

These lines do a good deal to press home the pain of the scriptural original. Registering “*uche contré corrupte in hitselven*,” the first quatrain here intensifies this marker of self-reference: *God Himself* begins to “werp to Hymselfen” “as wywe wo hym withinne”—as a man sorrowing inside himself, a phrase indecorously interested in the interior of God’s privacy. Further on, the relatively mild self-accusation of “I will destroy man, whom I have created” finds like intensification: “*sore hit me rwes / That ever I made hem myself*” shows God in an astonishingly intimate moment of soliloquy. Finally, God’s expression of regret in the Middle English shows an audacious philosophical sharpening of its original. Like the Vulgate phrasing *paenitet enim me*, “Me forthynkes” drives home the image of God’s regret oppressing Him as punishment from without; but there is more than simply this in the English, for as an Anglo-Saxon derivation, “for + ðyncan” brings to bear an etymology of impersonal destruction from without.¹³⁵ Quietly, God’s expression of sorrow suggests that He, like Belshazzar besieged by Darius, is threatened with external destruction, a force originating outside Himself that proves quite the theological conundrum in *Cleanness*’s cosmos. God concludes his soliloquy resolving, in a remarkably human way, to be more careful to observe his opponents’ maneuvers: “if I may hereafter, / I schal wayte to be war her wrenches to kepe.” Expressed by the deity, these lines suggest a surprisingly equal footing for the cosmic struggle in and around the issue of clean moral praxis.

These intensifications upon the Vulgate he had before him show the *Cleanness*-poet’s

¹³⁵ See J. R. Clark Hall, *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* (Toronto: Toronto UP, 1960) for the Anglo-Saxon semantics of “for-” as a privative prefix “denot[ing] loss or destruction” (124) and “ðyncan” as an impersonal verb with dative meaning “to appear, seem” (368).

interest in collocating the dire pains of uncleanness with the very source of goodness and being itself, and in revealing in parabiblical terms the mental and emotional life of God only hinted at in his biblical sources. Our next episodes show God first planning to destroy the cities of the plain, Sodom and Gomorrah, and then violently doing so. These scenes depict some of the same divine interiority and humanness we saw in the moment of God's primordial regret, but they also layer in some of the poem's thinking about its own status as a biblical derivation.

We pick up with God doing just what He vowed to do in our last scene, mindfully striving "to be war her wrenches to kepe." He visits the patriarch Abraham and his wife Sarah at their home (an episode we shall revisit near the end of this study), and as He takes leave, He invites Abraham to walk with Him a bit. Just as it does in Genesis, the walk shows God in an especially confessional mood, and the *Cleanness*-poet takes pains to heighten the sense of intimacy with which He shares His mind with Abraham. "How might I hyde myn hert fro Habraham the trwe," God asks,

That I ne dyscovered to his corse my counsayl so dere,
Sythen he is chosen to be chef chyldryn fader,

That so folk schal falle fro to flete alle the worlde,
And uche blod in that burne blessed schal worthe?
Me bos telle to that tolk the tene of my wyllle,
And alle myn atlyng to Abraham unhaspe bilyve.

The grete soun of Sodamas synkkes in myn eres,
And the gult of Gomorre gares me to wrath.
I schal lyght into that led and loke myselven
If thay haf don as the dyne dryves on lofte. (682-692)

The lines correspond in sense to Gen. 18:17-21, but as before, the poet's evident interest is in the degree to which God freely reveals Himself in humanlike ways.¹³⁶ The speech in Genesis itself

¹³⁶ Gen. 18:17-21. *Dixitque Dominus num celare potero Abraham, quae gesturus sum cum futurus sit in gentem magnam ac robustissimam et benedicendae sint in illo omnes nationes terrae scio enim quod praecepturus sit filiis suis et domui suae post se ut custodiant viam*

curiously dwells upon Abraham's own historic sanctity, his own desert to be privy to God's plan. As the "chosen . . . chef chyldryn fader," Abraham merits the disclosure; but here, God is urgent and effusive in sharing His thoughts, coordinating the value of "myn hert" with "Habraham the trwe," and resolving quickly "alle myn atlyng [endeavoring, advance planning and preparation] to Abraham [to] unhaspe bilyve"—that is, quickly to unlock His heart, as to a trusted confidant. All of this, God says, "Me bos telle to that tolk": "I had better" tell him, as though the dynamic of power were such that God were subject to Abraham's censure for keeping secrets.

Such an inversion of power is complicated when we recall that God's plan, after all, is to lay waste to Sodom and Gomorrah, cities whose iniquity God has taken on strangely bodily form to go and observe for Himself. Though Abraham bravely (and famously) haggles with his Lord on behalf of the cities, their destruction is certain, a fact the poem dramatizes beyond anything portrayed in Scripture.¹³⁷ The cities are overwhelmed by a great storm of wind, water, fire and sulfur, but for our purposes, the salient portion of the scene shows hell helping heaven to achieve their ruin.

Domini et faciant iustitiam et iudicium ut adducat Dominus propter Abraham omnia quae locutus est ad eum dixit, itaque Dominus clamor Sodomorum et Gomorrae multiplicatus est et peccatum earum adgravatum est nimis descendam et videbo utrum clamorem qui venit ad me opere compleverint an non est ita ut sciam.

¹³⁷ Compared to *Cleanness's* nearly thirty lines of cinematic violence, Scripture is especially laconic on the destruction of the cities, rendering it in just four verses (Gen. 29:24-25, 27-28): *Igitur Dominus pluit super Sodomam et Gomorram sulphur et ignem a Domino de caelo. Et subvertit civitates has, et omnem circa regionem universos, habitatores urbium et cuncta terrae virentia. . . . Abraham autem consurgens mane ubi steterat prius cum Domino. Intuitus est Sodomam et Gomorram et universam terram regionis illius: viditque ascendentem favillam de terra quasi fornacis fumum* ["And the Lord rained upon Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven. And he destroyed these cities, and all the country about, all the inhabitants of the cities, and all things that spring from the earth. . . . And Abraham got up early in the morning and in the place where he had stood before with the Lord. He looked towards Sodom and Gomorrah, and the whole land of that country: and he saw the ashes rise up from the earth as the smoke of a furnace."]

For when that the helle herde the houndes of heven,
He was ferlyly fayn, unfolded bylyve;
The grete barres of the abyme he barst up at ones,
That alle the regioun torof in riftes ful grete,

And cloven alle in lyttel cloutes the clyffes aywhere,
As lauce leves of the boke that lepes in twynne.
The brethe of the brynston bi that hit blende were,
Al tho citees and her sydes sunkken to helle.

Rydelles wern tho grete rowtes of renkkes withinne,
When thay wern war of the wrake that no wywe achaped;
Such a yomerly yarm of yellyng ther rysed,
Therof clatered the cloudes, that Kryst myght haf rawthe. (961-972)

These lines bring heaven and hell to personified life, and into collaboration. *Cleanness* offers a vantage onto secret work performed on the plain, and suggests—in line with its own confidence of vision—that even the depths of hell participate in God’s providential action. Clean and unclean are once again drawn into startling propinquity, and drawn under the consolidating rubric of the poem’s program of historic cleansing, of all things collaborating, in time, to conduce to a view of God in His secrecy. Just a few scenes earlier in God’s colloquy with Abraham, we saw Him “unhaspe bilyve” all His “atlyng” for Abraham: here, that language of divine spaces thrown open to reveal themselves to humankind brought into a verse structure bookended by images of overwhelming openness. Hell greedily “unfold[s] bylyve; / The grete barres of the abyme he barst up at ones” in order to swallow up the cities of the plain, while the citizenry cries out dolorously for the reciprocal opening of heaven: “yomerly yarm of yellyng ther rysed, / Therof clatered the cloudes, that Kryst myght haf rawthe.”

These opposing ruptures find their touch-point in the middle quatrain here. The poet renders the violent demolition of the cities in eerily self-referential terms. Like the leaves of the Cumaean Sibyl in *Aeneid* Book VI, the fabric of Sodom and Gomorrah is rent and scattered to the winds, “cloven alle in lyttel cloutes the clyffes aywhere, / As lauce leves of the boke that lepes in

twynne.” Not surprisingly, this passage has drawn a good deal of attention among scholars of the poem. In my view, one of the merits of Spearing’s excellent essay on *Cleanness*, which we have quoted already, is how it marshals the insights of other scholars—Mary Douglas, now Julia Kristeva—to illuminate the poem’s ruminations. Quoting Kristeva, Spearing suggests that in connection with “the ultimate destructive act . . . imagined as the tearing apart of a book, . . . Kristeva points to the way in which defilement is a threat to the possibility of symbolism itself.”

The danger of filth represents for the subject the risk to which the very symbolic order is permanently exposed, to the extent that it is the device of discriminations, of differences. . . . One might ask. . . if all writing is not a second level rite, at the level of language, that is, which causes one to be reminded, through the linguistic signs themselves, of the demarcations that precondition them.¹³⁸

Kristeva’s suggestion might lead us to conclude that *Cleanness* thinks with horror of this image of the scattered book—and surely this operates on one level of the poem at this stage. But *Cleanness* is also, itself, a scattered book of a certain kind, such that the image of “lauce leves of the boke . . . lep[iyng] in twynne” may—despite its literal destruction of Scripture—also figure the poem’s conceptual thinking about Scripture as a potentially open system in which a procession of readings, recensions and interpretations can take their place.

A final bit of narrative will help us round out our survey of the poem’s admixtures of cleanliness and uncleanness, and of how these partake in the poem’s thinking about scriptural homology. At the climax of the poem’s third movement, itself based on the fifth chapter of the Book of Daniel, King Baltazar of Babylon convenes a banquet for a thousand of his grandees, serving them richly in vessels despoiled by his forces from the Temple of Solomon; the drunkenness of the scene, and the desecration of the vessels, is for the poem the very height of

¹³⁸ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia UP, 1982), 69 and 74-75. Qtd. in Spearing, *Readings*, 186.

reprehensible impurity. Baltazar's banquet is arrested in its revelry when suddenly "ther a ferly bifel that fele folk seyen":

Fryst knew hit the kyng & alle the cort after:
In the palays pryncipale, upon the playn wowe,
In contrary of the candelstik, that clerest hit schyned,

Ther apered a paume, with poyntel in fyngres,
That was grysly and gret, and grymly he wrytes;
Non other forme bot a fust faylande þe wryste
Pared on the purget, purtrayed lettres. (1529-1536)

The king is horrified at this ferly prospect, and after his wise men fail to interpret the writing on the wall, calls for Daniel—renowned since the days of the king's father, Nebuchadnezzar, for his interpretive acumen—to parse through the writing. Declining all the honors offered him for an accurate reading, Daniel agrees to read, but only after reminding Baltazar of the "bobounce, . . . blasfamye" and impious idolatry of desecrating the looted temple vessels (1712).

Bifore thy borde has thou broght beverage in thede, *vessels*
That blythely were fyrst blest with bischopes hondes, *zealously*
Lovande theron lese goddes that lyf haden never, *praising*
Made of stokkes and stones that neuer styry moght. *stir*

And for that frothande fylthe, the Fader of heven *festering*
Has sende into this sale thise syghtes uncowthe, *hall*
The fyste with the fyngeres that flayed thi hert,
That rasped renyschly the wowe with the rogh penne. (1717-1724) *harshly*

Baltazar remains silent, and Daniel turns to unlock the meaning of the mysterious writing; for the king and his court, the news is not good.

Thise ar the wordes here wryten, withoute werk more,
By uch fygure, as I fynde, as oure Fader lykes:
Mane, Techal, Phares: merked in thrynne,
That thretes the of thyn unthryfte upon thre wyse. (1725-1728)

Recalling *Cleanness's* own "thrynne wyses" of exploring its theme through scriptural history, Daniel expounds each of the "runisch saues" (1545): "Mane" signifies that God has assessed

Baltazar's kingdom and brought it to a full reckoning; "Techal," that the king's reign has been found lacking in "faith dedes" (1735); and "Phares" that the Babylonian kingdom shall be divided up among the conquering Medes. Yet these dire messages inspire in Baltazar the strangest of reactions: instead of disbelief or rage, Baltazar has Daniel clothed in royal purple, and calls for his elevation to the third highest rank in the realm. The poem registers this change with fanfare far exceeding its biblical source, and soon the drunken "Baltazar to his bedd with blysse was caryed" (1765). Despite the interval of joy at court added to the biblical account, the story ends just as it does in Daniel 5: *eadem nocte interfectus est Balthasar rex Chaldeus et Darius Medus successit in regnum annos natus sexaginta duo.*¹³⁹

Comparing the poem's account of Daniel's prophetic reading against its source in Scripture, the question arises: what accounts, in *Cleanness*, for Baltazar's joyous elevation of Daniel and his blissful last night? Wholly added to what the poet receives from Scripture, these features of Baltazar's imagined biography sort strangely with Daniel's reading of the "ferly hand" and with the sure imminent truth of the prophecy. How can Baltazar be imagined to carouse till the dawn in the face of Daniel's ominous reading?

We can begin answering these questions by turning again to Durkheim, whose rumination "on the ambiguity of the notion of the sacred" includes the observation that

religious forces are of two kinds. Some are benevolent, guardians of the physical and moral order. . . . On the other hand, there are negative and impure powers that produce disorder, cause death and illness, and instigate sacrilege. . . . [A]ll religious life gravitates around two opposite poles, which share the opposition between pure and impure, holy and sacrilegious, divine and diabolical. But even as these two aspects of religious life oppose each other, they are closely related. . . . There is a certain horror in religious respect, particularly when it is very intense; and the fear inspired by malignant powers is not without a certain reverential quality.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁹ Dan. 5:30-31. "The same night Baltasar the Chaldean king was slain. And Darius the Mede succeeded to the kingdom, being threescore and two years old."

¹⁴⁰ Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, 304-305.

The king's apparent bliss at Daniel's decipherment may be but the reciprocal of the "dasande drede [that] dusched to his hert" (1538) upon first seeing the writing hand. The poem concludes with a vivid display of the collapse between categories that are seemingly, and perhaps even radically, distinct and opposed. In fact our reading of *Cleanness* throughout this chapter has attended to various manifestations of this collapse—the mundane and the parabolic, "the helle" and "the houndes of heven," divine transcendence and immanence, Bible and not-Bible. To this set of binary pairs, I would like to bring one more. Wedged between the second and third of *Cleanness's* "thrynne wyses" comes a sustained look at Christ's own relation to the concepts of discreteness and commingling that revolve inside the notion of the holy. The passage offers *Cleanness's* most pristine image of its titular virtue.

So clene was His hondelyng uche ordure hit schonied,
 And the gropyng so goud of God & Man bothe,
 That for fetys of His fyngeres fonded He neuer
 Nauther to cout ne to kerue with knyf ne wyth egge.

Forthy brek He þe bred blades wythouten,
 For hit ferde freloker in fete in His fayre honde,
 Displayed more pryuyly when He hit part schulde,
 Thenne alle the toles of Tolowse moght tyght hit to kerue. (1101-1108)

The healing power of Christ's hands is associated with His miraculously sharp breaking of bread: recalling that *qadosh* (holiness) means separation, the image of Christ's hands stands apart from the narrative portions of the poem, and powerfully communicates His ability to impose order upon chaos. But even this image of pure wholeness—and pure separation—is tinged with *Cleanness's* monomaniacal concern with mixture. The doctrinal truth that Christ is wholly God and wholly man is the poem's only tenable instance of pure order; where the human world is concerned, cleanness can only ever be contaminated with a measure of filth. Thus when Daniel restores for Baltazar the symbolic order of letters, even as the content of the message

communicates horror, the experience for the king is one of relief, even of ecstatic religious respect, in Durkheim's terms. Baltazar's "blysse" is a fully realized expression of *Cleanness's* design upon its readers. We emerge from the poem in a cleaner state for having endured its murky ritual. Like Baltazar, we experience an access of truth through a rather painful medium.

Eucharistic use and hondel

We are now in a position to circle back with more fulsome understanding to the poem's invocation of the conceptual apparatus of the Eucharist as it sets out telling the ghastly tales we have sampled. From the start the *Cleanness*-poet pitches his experimental text in Eucharistic terms. Like a priest performing the mystery of the altar, the poet has in hand material that communicates with ultimacy; yet unlike that priest, the poet finds his material—Scripture—already consecrated. His responsibility to his work is thus more and less urgent than that of a celebrant of the mass: the poet has no role whatever in conferring sacrality upon the Bible, but for that reason he might hazard greater presumption in undertaking to deploy it.¹⁴¹ Either way, the poet is concerned from the outset that his work with the Bible, like the sacrificial work of a priest at mass, necessarily pledges and attests to his purity and taskworthiness. He avers it for himself: priests internally worthy of the miracle they perform receive of the grace they confer,

¹⁴¹ On the Eucharist's late medieval duality between objective efficacy and priestly privilege, see Aquinas, *ST IIIa* q.82 a.1. "Such is the dignity of this sacrament that it is performed only as in the person of Christ. Now whoever performs any act in another's stead, must do so by the power bestowed by such a one. But as the power of receiving this sacrament is conceded by Christ to the baptized person, so likewise the power of consecrating this sacrament on Christ's behalf is bestowed upon the priest at his ordination: for thereby he is put upon a level with them to whom the Lord said: 'Do this for a commemoration of Me.' Therefore, it must be said that it belongs to priests to accomplish this sacrament." Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. the Fathers of the Dominican Province (London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne, Ltd., 1920).

while other so-called “prestes” secure only punishment.¹⁴² As Charlotte Morse puts it, “the wrath of God tolerates no irony, no failed analogies, no hypocrisies; these priests, like all unworthy communicants, eat damnation.”¹⁴³ As *Cleanness* opens, the poet knows the Word he seeks to deploy to be God’s own, and that the contagion of hypocrisy can be infinitesimal. He is duly daunted.

For wonder wroth is the wyy that wroght alle thinges
Wyth the freke that in fylthe folwes hym after—
As renkes of relygioun that reden and syngen,
And aprochen to hys presens and prestes arn called;

Thay teen unto his temmple and temen to Hymselfen,
Reken with reverence thay rychen His auter,
Thay hondel ther his aune body and usen hit bothe.
If thay in clannes be clos thay cleche gret mede;

Bot if thay conterfete crafte and cortaysye wont,
As be honest utwyth and inwith alle fylthes,
Then ar thay synful hemsself and sulpen altogeder

¹⁴² The *Cleanness*-poet is hardly unique in his concern about priestly integrity. Despite a fairly stable orthodox tradition, the moral status of baptismal clergy was an anxious issue for the church into the sixteenth century, when in 1547 the Council of Trent formally affirmed the doctrine of objective sacramental efficacy (the conferral of grace *ex opere operato*, by the ‘work already done’ in the host’s consecration). In the late fourteenth century, the *Cleanness*-poet was not alone in his anxiety; his contemporary, the Lollard John Purvey, was characteristically explicit about his doubt. Purvey grants that Augustine had already vindicated sacramental efficacy *ex opere operato* in his victory over the Donatists, but he decries the kind of priestly vice these lines of *Cleanness* have in mind. ‘Though euele prestis moun make the sacramentis verrili, and mynistre tho helfulli to deuout men, netheles cristene men owen not to resceyue sacramentis neithir deuyn seruise of opin symonientis, lechouris, or siche viciouse men, not in dispising the sacramentis othir in supposinge that suche men moun not make the sacramentis verrili, but for abhominacioun of siche opin synnis, and that siche viciouse men ben ashamid and do helpful penaunce.’ Hypocrisy, as the *Cleanness*-poet specifically imagines it, proves for its latency an even greater menace *ex opere operantis* than the ‘open’ sins Purvey lists. John Purvey, *Remonstrance Against Romish Corruptions in the Church, Addressed to the People and Parliament of England in 1395*, 18 *Ric. II*, ed. J. Forshall, London 1851, 120-34 (art. xxxv).

¹⁴³ Morse, *Pattern*, 140.

Bothe God and His gere, and hym to greme cachen.¹⁴⁴ (5-16)

These early lines almost savor of satire, impugning clerical turpitude from a heavy-handed reformist standpoint, but with their earnest seriousness and absolute—indeed Godlike—refusal of ironic fissure, this Eucharistic allusion provides *Cleanness* with both its poetics and its metaphysics. Most important for both of them is the strict demand for ontological selfsameness, felt first here as the pressure of a predicate. In the poet's hallmark way, *Cleanness* begins by remembering God periphrastically.¹⁴⁵ That irascible “wyy that wroght alle thinges,” He is the sole source of *all* substance, let alone that which equips such transactions as, say, the sacrifice of the mass or parabiblical imagining. Poetry in this regard is itself a type of communion, and the

¹⁴⁴ Uneasy with the lines' doctrinal implications, some editors emend ll. 15-16. Menner, for example, expunges the idea that priestly uncleanness defiles both God and his gear, adjusting the lines so that the priests themselves are ‘sulped’ by the God whom they ‘lothe’ (‘Then ar they sinful hemsself and sulped altogeder; / Lothe God and His gere, and hym to greme cachen’). Charles Moorman follows Menner in his recently revised edition (*The Works of the Gawain-Poet* [Hattiesburg, MS: University of Southern MS, 2009]), and Morse too endorses Menner's emendations. Without them, she claims, “the lines mean that God can be defiled and they imply that the sacrament celebrated by an unclean priest is inefficacious. . . . I do not see any other signs of unorthodoxy in the poem” (Morse, *Pattern*, 139-40, n. 11). Morse is probably right that *Cleanness* shows little if any internal unorthodoxy. But the poem constitutes itself biblically because it believes in the tangibility—the putative *vulnerability*—of God and His things; it proceeds biblically because it fears the potential errancy of any other procedure. Thus unorthodoxy is *Cleanness*'s defining shadow, helping contour the poem's form from just beyond the beatific light that irradiates its space. *Cleanness* may show no signs of unorthodoxy, but its very membrane marks the threshold of God's conceivable “sulping.”

¹⁴⁵ Among modern editors, Robert Menner first drew attention to “the poet's habit of paraphrasing [God] by means of a relative clause, either with the pronoun ‘he that’ . . . or with some such common word for ‘man’ as wyy [or] tolke.” This “stylistic trick of the *Gawain*-poet,” Menner wrote, is so peculiar that [it is] rightly called . . . distinctive. . . . In the entire body of alliterative poetry no such expressions can be found outside of the *Gawain*-poet, with the exception of two phrases which are plainly imitated from him” (Menner, *Purity*, xvi). John W. Clark later tempered this last statement, showing that Menner not only understood too narrowly the *Pearl*-poet's range of such periphrastic epithets, but also missed in other texts instances of those paraphrases he did recognize, most notably in *Wynnere and Wastoure* (1350s?), which certainly predates all works of the *Pearl*-poet. John W. Clark, ‘Paraphrases for “God” in the Poems Attributed to the “Gawain-Poet”’ (*Modern Language Notes* 65 [1950]).

analogy for the *Cleanness*-poet is a very real one: the parabiblical imaginary, even in discursive spaces fully and overtly fictional, requires meaningful handling of God's own body, an activity that dangerously inverts God's own behavior as "the gropande God, the grounde of alle dedes / Rypande of uche a ring the reynes and hert" (591-592). Poets no less than priests must live up to their calling.

Yet *Cleanness*'s biblical sanction is fraught by contingency, indemonstrability and unwieldiness. In a notional context where the model of authenticity is Eucharistic transubstantiation, the poem's chief embarrassment is parabiblicity itself. Nothing transubstantiates a poem. No amount of borrowed Bible confers canonicity. *Cleanness* begins, then, in a daredevil's attitude: it seeks not to imply its own consecratedness, but to expose to view its own persistent Aristotelian accidents, its own apparent failure against the standard of the Real Presence. Conspicuously selective, speculative and revisionist, the poem values risky variousness, but it knows that hybridity may equate to hypocrisy.

The invocation of God's "aune body" levels all these charges in a stroke. A poem dedicated to the value of selfsameness stands awkwardly beside texts from which it borrows, especially when intertextual borrowing means ontological dependence. Analogy with the Eucharist calls into question not just the poem's grounds for being, but those of the very parabiblical mode it represents. Why should the virtue of cleanness utter a poem and not, say, the lectionary? Why the lectionary rather than Scripture itself? Should not all forms of thinking the Bible aspire to the condition of biblicity?

Cleanness begins, then, on the brink of self-abjuration; the poet could acquiesce to these Eucharistic pressures and simply copy out the Vulgate he has before him. After all, sounding the Bible in the sense of taking its depths might best be performed by incantation, by sounding it

aloud, instantiating it theurgically rather than reproducing it—leading it out again from recondite concealment—in the literary imagination. Here is how the *Cleanness*-poet manages to sound the Bible in both senses, to conjure it theurgically while subjecting it to exploratory measuring and ventilation. The words *hoc est corpus meum* key the miracle of the mass, but *are themselves the miracle* where parabiblical poesis is concerned. Or at least words like them are the miracle; for although these particular words of Christ’s never appear in *Cleanness*, their presentation of deictic proof—“This is my body”—exemplifies the mode of biblical access in which *Cleanness* takes most interest. The words impart the Eucharist’s sacramental efficacy, linking the actions performed by the celebrant to those of Christ’s own priesthood; they do so because they are Christ’s own instructions for feasting in His memory.¹⁴⁶ The words are thus doubly deictic, the apotheosis of biblical proof, in that they both *refer to* and *are* God’s own affirmed being: they effect transubstantiation, but even more immediately, they reveal the sacred truth embodied in Scripture. Even to trace their very graphemes would be to instantiate a biblical world; for *Cleanness*, to speak revelation is itself revelation.

The poem’s scriptural arrogations are redeemed, and finally guaranteed, only by its willing self-effacement within the semiotic system it maps. Flagged in the Eucharistic vignette by the well-known Augustinian binary of “use” (*uti*) and “enjoyment” (*frui*), this tendency of thought crucially divides decorous treatment of holiness—in host or Bible—from any gesture that would desecrate or instrumentalize it. Augustine’s terms facilitate the distinction. For him, “to enjoy something is to cling to it with love for its own sake,” whereas “to use something . . . is to employ it in obtaining that which you love, provided that it is worthy of love. . . . The things

¹⁴⁶ See Mt. 26.26, Mk. 14.22 and Lk. 22.19.

which are to be enjoyed are the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, a single Trinity.”¹⁴⁷

Cleanness begins by picturing priests who “reken with reverence . . . rychen [God’s] auter,” who

“*hondel* ther his aune body and *usen* it bothe” (my emphasis). The value of these activities is

¹⁴⁷“Some things are to be enjoyed,” Augustine writes, “others to be used, and there are others which are to be enjoyed and used. Those things which are to be enjoyed make us blessed. Those things which are to be used help and . . . sustain us as we move toward blessedness in order that we may gain and cling to those things which make us blessed. . . . To enjoy something is to cling to it with love for its own sake. To use something, however, is to employ it in obtaining that which you love, provided that it is worthy of love. For an illicit use should be called rather a waste or an abuse. Suppose we were wanderers who could not live in blessedness except at home . . . We would need vehicles . . . to help us reach our homeland, which is to be enjoyed. But if the amenities of the journey and the motion of the vehicles itself delighted us, and we were led to enjoy those things which we should use, we should not wish to end our journey quickly, and, entangled in a perverse sweetness, we should be alienated from our country, whose sweetness would make us blessed. Thus in this mortal life, wandering from God, if we wish to return to our native country where we can be blessed we should use this world and not enjoy it, so that the invisible things of God being understood by the things that are made may be seen, that is, so that by means of corporal and temporal things we may comprehend the eternal and spiritual. The things which are to be enjoyed are the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, a single Trinity, a certain supreme thing common to all who enjoy it, if, indeed, it is a thing and not rather the cause of all things, or both a thing and a cause” (Saint Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 1:3-5, trans. D. W. Robertson, Jr., [Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1997]). [*Res ergo aliae sunt, quibus fruendum est, aliae quibus utendum, aliae quae fruuntur et utuntur. Illae quibus fruendum est, nos beatos faciunt. Istis quibus utendum est, tendentes ad beatitudinem adiuuamur et quasi adminiculamur, ut ad illas, quae nos beatos faciunt, peruenire atque his inhaerere possimus. Nos uero, qui fruimur et utimur inter utrasque constituti, si eis, quibus utendum est, frui uoluerimus, impeditur cursus noster et aliquando etiam deflectitur, ut ab his rebus, quibus fruendum est, obtinendis uel retardemur uel etiam reuocemur inferiorum amore praepediti. Frui enim est amore inhaerere alicui rei propter se ipsam. Vti autem, quod in usum uenerit, ad id, quod amas obtinendum referre, si tamen amandum est. Nam usus inlicitus abusus potius uel abusus nominandus est. Quomodo ergo, si essemus peregrini, qui beate uiuere nisi in patria non possemus, eaque peregrinatione utique miseri et miseriam finire cupientes in patriam redire uellemus, opus esset uel terrestribus uel marinis uehiculis, quibus utendum esset, ut ad patriam, qua fruendum erat, peruenire ualeremus; quod si amoenitates itineris et ipsa gestatio uehiculorum nos delectaret, conuersi ad fruendum his, quibus uti debuimus, nollemus cito uiam finire et peruersa suauitate implicati alienaremur a patria, cuius suauitas faceret beatos, sic in huius mortalitatis uita peregrinantes a domino, si redire in patriam uolumus, ubi beati esse possimus, utendum est hoc mundo, non fruendum, ut invisibilia dei per ea, quae facta sunt, intellecta conspiciantur, hoc est, ut de corporalibus temporalibusque rebus aeterna et spiritualia capiamus. Res igitur, quibus fruendum est, pater et filius et spiritus sanctus eademque trinitas, una quaedam summa res communisque omnibus fruentibus ea, si tamen res et non rerum omnium causa, si tamen et causa* (Augustinus, *De doctrina Christiana* I:iii-v, ed. Joseph Martin, [Turnhout: Brepols, 1962]). Hereafter Augustine, “DCD.”

attitudinally contingent: “If [priests] in clannes be clos” it is one thing, but “if they conterfete crafte” it is another. This duplicity mimics that of the term use itself. Still vital in the late middle ages, the Augustinian idea of earthly life as exile from God reserves use for the mundane “vehicles” we use to return to blessedness; *abuse* results whenever we forget that ‘we should use this world and not enjoy it.’ In *Cleanness*’s poetics of participation, desire—like painterly sightlines and divine biblicity—streams away and achieves its end only in God.¹⁴⁸ Yet in late fourteenth-century England, use was also a customary expression for partaking of the sacrament, especially for the ingestion of the host.¹⁴⁹ It is primarily in this sense that *Cleanness* deploys the term here. But in seeking to rectify understanding of the sacrament, a properly Augustinian project, *Cleanness* relies on a doubled, almost contranymic sense of the term “use” as both a feature of the *contemptus mundi* proper to Christian belief and, contrarily, a name for Christ’s Real Presence.

These details nuance the parallel between *Cleanness*’s poesis and Eucharistic praxis. To be sure, the poem is most importantly like the sacrament in that it, too, oscillates between the two senses of use. On one hand a mere poem, a trifle exempt from censure—that is, seriousness—for the very fact of its verse form, *Cleanness* is *useful* to its reader insofar as it transmits, or

¹⁴⁸ I borrow the notion of a “poetics of participation” from Eugene Vance’s nuanced article “*Pearl*: Love and the Poetics of Participation” in Piero Boitani and Anna Torti, eds., *Poetics: Theory and Practice in Medieval English Literature*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1991. Vance explains the Platonic and Pseudo-Dionysian backgrounds of *Pearl*’s curiosity about how earthly diversity can participate in God, or the One, as the *Idipsum*.

¹⁴⁹ See *OED*, ‘use’ (v.), especially definitions I.1.a. (*trans.* To celebrate, keep, or observe [a rite, custom, etc.]; to pursue or follow as a custom or usage); II.7.a. (To make use of [some immaterial thing] as a means or instrument; to employ for a certain end or purpose); and II.11.b. (To partake of [the sacrament]; to take or receive [the Eucharist]), with the pertinent illustrative quotations.

retransmits, the sacred truths it finds in the Bible.¹⁵⁰ It is to be used, semiotically, as a goad to remember heaven; from there it must be discarded lest it cloy as “perverse sweetness.” On the other hand *Cleanness* takes itself seriously as a *techne* of revelation: like the ceremony surrounding the consecration of the host, the poem makes visible a process of God-making. If use denotes deferral of the patrimonial pleasure of restoration to God, *Cleanness* hastens communion by working as a kind of *camera lucida*, reflecting and tracing on paper images of God’s incursion into time. The poem, in this regard, adumbrates the enjoyment of Augustinian soteriology. Its intimacy with the persons of the Trinity—especially the Lord God of Genesis, and secondarily with Christ—collapses the Augustinian bifurcation of use/earthly deferment, and enjoyment/divine presence. For Augustine even those entities properly “enjoyed and used” involve enjoying God within the otherwise transitory, an attitude that essentially remains eschatological hope: “when you enjoy a man in God . . . you take joy in Him who will make you blessed.”¹⁵¹ But *Cleanness* likens itself to the miracle of the mass because it, too, hazards sublunary *enjoyment* of the Godhead; like those of the liturgy per se, this poem’s aesthetic pleasures are indissoluble from its thematized participation in eternity. Or, rather, the other way round—for *Cleanness* thematizes eternity’s participation in time. The poem is a researched record of the object of all enjoyment becoming a provisional subject in the world of use; as a

¹⁵⁰ As Margaret Deanesly observes, verse biblical translations were widely out of bounds for “serious” discourses of various kinds; no one debating matters legal, academic, theological or heresiological could ever appeal to such texts. “No verse translations, or bible stories, or ‘moralisations,’ or homilies on the gospels, could be appealed to by teachers [Purvey, etc.] in support of their doctrine, as in the case of a prose translation: and therefore no verse translation was ever condemned as heretical” (Margaret Deanesly, *The Lollard Bible and Other Medieval Biblical Versions* [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1920], 146; qtd. in Morey, *Book and Verse*, p. 11)

¹⁵¹ Augustine, *DCD* I:33.

literary artifact the poem is another instance of that becoming. In *Cleanness* God speaks, regrets, and recriminates. He reveals His mind. He shows His eternity to be relatable.

Cleanness's narrative theology activates a series of nuances in that word “relatable.” The poem portrays God’s entry into genuine *relationship* with the world of created time: instead of transcendence, God is characterized by dynamic presence and absence, and as we have repeatedly seen, by the surprising emotionality of His interactions with humankind. So, too, the poem’s very existence shows its belief that wide *circulation*—saying, not ineffability; sharing, not esotericism—serves best to manifest the truth of these events. Against scholastic traditions, for instance, that set the *veritas rerum* beyond human reach, *Cleanness* thinks seriously about the *human* economy of sacred meanings.¹⁵² Meanings, for *Cleanness*, emerge from long human use of biblical story; truth’s coin gains weight for travelling hand to hand.

“Hondel” in *Cleanness's* prologue announces a watershed: a clean hand conducts God’s procession into the world; a polluted one molests Him. “Reken with reverence [priests] rychen His auter,” the poet says, “Thay hondel ther his aune body and usen hit bothe.” These lines mark the entry of Eucharistic thought into the poem, yet they curiously conceal the moment of consecration. Evidently it occurs in the line break, allowing the lines to proceed from the preparation of the altar directly to the handling of God’s body, a phrase properly reserved for the transubstantiated host. Without anyone in *Cleanness* intoning “Hoc est corpus meum,” there is no isolable *moment* of consecration, and the sacrament’s mystery remains guarded within the elision; or contrarily, if “use” in its celebratory sense marks the host’s consecration, and not its

¹⁵² Aquinas’s commentary on Aristotle’s *De caelo et mundo* contains a classic formulation of this strain of high medieval scholasticism. ‘Studium philosophiae non est ad hoc quod sciatur quid homines senserint,’ Aquinas writes, ‘sed qualiter se habeat veritas rerum.’ [“The study of philosophy is undertaken not to know what men feel, but to know what is the truth of things.”] *Sancti Thomae Aquinatis Opera omnia iussu impensaue Leonis XIII P. M. edita, t. 3: In libros Aristotelis De caelo et mundo expositio* (Rome: Ex Typographia Polyglotta S. C. de Propaganda Fide, 1886). I. 1.22. n.8.

eating, then in the depiction of these lines the priests “hondel” God’s body before it exists. Either way, *Cleanness* seems to efface the sacrament even as the sacrament avails the initial terms of the poem’s self-revelation: like the handling and use involved in the Eucharist, *Cleanness*’s treatment of “God and His gere” risks everything.

This omission may indicate diffidence in the face of Eucharistic controversy—on this matter the 1380s were no quiet time—but the poem’s care in reflecting itself through the Eucharist suggests something more. These lines displace the moment of consecration for a reason beyond quietude, a reason that careful attention to them will bring out. Readers of *Cleanness* need not venture this scrutiny alone: no less a figure than Thomas Aquinas shares the poem’s interest in the temporal displacement of the emergence of Real Presence. “The substance of the bread or wine remains,” Aquinas says, “until the last instant of the consecration; but in the last instant of the consecration there is already present there the substance of the body or blood of Christ.”¹⁵³ Mark the moment of consecration as finely as you like; according to Aquinas you will always find Christ *already* present on the “unconcluded side” of that marker. Aquinas is staving off the idea of transubstantiation as an empirical *process* that might, in theory, be halted halfway and leave the host half bread, half Christ in its substance. He insists, with scholastic precision, upon a notion quite like that which, as imaginative speculation, drives *Cleanness*, namely, that wherever human creative praxis would lay hands upon “God’s gere,” it will find God always already there, guiding creativity and already having made the “stuff” of human thought, having already availed it, that is, to our handling.

Granted, the *Cleanness*-poet almost certainly *did not* have Aquinas in mind when he arranged his lines on the Eucharist; even more certainly, he did not share Aquinas’s

¹⁵³ *ST IIIa q.75 a.3. Substantia panis vel vini manet usque ad ultimum instans consecrationis. In ultimo autem instanti consecrationis iam est ibi substantia vel corporis vel sanguinis Christi.*

determination to preserve the sacrament's numinousness. Aquinas's description of Eucharistic metaphysics is not a source of *Cleanness's* thinking about Real Presence, but an apt emblem of it. For *Cleanness* conceives of a God who extends Himself to Creation—and through creation—by way of replicable, homologous structures: communicable theophanies, scriptural recursiveness, intersecting cosmological orders, divine deputations. Such are the narrative phenomena of *Cleanness's* deep structural insistence that parabiblical art, modeled as it is on biblical revelation, must strive to embody the ontological unity to which it is unshakably oriented. As at the mass altar, where Christ enters the host unseen no matter how alertly Aquinas observes, so too is God ineluctably *present to* and *present in* literary texts that thematize biblical exploration as *Cleanness* does. He is the motion and lodestar, the precondition and the vanishing point, of all parabiblical art. His prevenient immanence, so aptly pictured by Aquinas's Eucharist, provides the space and terrain of all handling. His freely chosen willingness to be present in the host, a *commemoration* of Christ's Last Supper, explains how He avails Himself in parabiblical texts that *commemorate* their biblical originals. *Cleanness* repeatedly attests to God's desire to enter into the world as a true narrative actant; those stories betoken His more general willingness to extend a qualified biblicity to works of human art. Each and every day sees countless instances of the miracle of the mass, and on the model of that abundance, *Cleanness* envisions a Bible arbitrarily designed by God not merely to inspire human thought, but to recreate itself there limitless times.

Handling is *Cleanness's* honest word for suddenly finding itself an instance of parabiblical recreation: like a priest at mass, the poem has holiness in hand an instant before it is ready, and in this regard its "handiness" is all thumbs. Fumblingly, the poem sets out speaking, confident only that "Clannesse who-so kyndly cowthe comende / . . . Fayre formes myght he

fynde in forthering his speche,” that by the spontaneity Freud calls *einfall*, or free association, it will grope its way to suitable expression (1-3). In this regard as in others, *Cleanness* seeks to emulate the habits of God, who in His intimacy with human hearts proves “the gropande God, the grounde of alle dedes” (591). The hand that laid earth’s foundations and, seeking after it, the hand that clutches and sifts what it can: this ironic shimmer of the alliterative terms “gropande” and “grounde” shows but the doggedness of the poem’s journey-work after God’s pattern. The poet is also apprentice to far more earthly authorities. Groping, handling and like terms are important in late medieval religious praxis; they provide a language for rumination and speculation, for searching one’s conscience and confessing one’s sins.¹⁵⁴ These valences bespeak an exploratory aspiration like that of *Cursor Mundi*, but they also register *Cleanness*’s unique confidence that it *can handle* the condition of biblicity, that like a confessor the poem brings an authorized discourse to the task of adjudicating truths and consequences. In this connection “hondel” finally provides a delayed chiming. For by *not* fulfilling the Augustinian binary invoked by the poem’s intricate work with “use”—in not availing the satisfactions gathered up by Augustine in *frui*—the notion of handling may seem to disappoint expectations *Cleanness* very carefully sets up. Recall, though, that Augustine’s *frui* survives to us not as “fruit,” a prize harvested at labor’s end, but as “fruition,” the particular pleasure of possession.¹⁵⁵ *Cleanness* begins its experiment writing the Bible into new discursive spaces optimistic that it has all that it needs—tools, material and energy—ready in hand.

¹⁵⁴ See, for example, Robert Mannyng of Brunne’s devotional manual *Handlyng Synne* (Cambridge: Chadwick-Healey, 1992), c. 1303-1338.

¹⁵⁵ *OED*, “fruition” (n.).

Chapter Three “I am an Ebru . . . Thou art God”: *Patience* and Divine Care

Taking no less impetus than its predecessor from the beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount, *Patience* follows *Cleanness* in BL MS Cotton Nero A.x, and immediately announces its intention, not far from that of *Cleanness*, to revolve a given virtue cited in Christ’s speech—here the “poynt” of patient suffering—as it can shape his audience’s ongoing moral praxis. Like *Cleanness*, *Patience* is almost wholly biblically comprised, conveying material directly from Scripture and doing so with a degree of fidelity unmatched by any of our other texts: it limits itself almost entirely to the story of the reluctant Old Testament prophet Jonah, and renders it in English verse cleaving carefully in sense to its Latin Vulgate original.¹⁵⁶ As in Scripture, the story is simple: a certain man Jonah (whose name means “dove” or “the grieving one,” Haimo of Auxerre reminds us, and whose father is Ammitai, or “truth”) is called by God to go to Nineveh (the cosmos or “beauty”) and preach against the city’s rampant sin.¹⁵⁷ Thinking to evade the peril of this role, Jonah books passage to Tarshish instead, endangering all aboard his ship when God stirs up a storm. Jonah is jettisoned and swallowed up by a whale, spends three days praying deep in its guts; finally delivered, Jonah is just where God wants him, and resigns himself to cry down the sinful city. He is effective, too effective, for when the Ninevites sincerely repent, God spares them; but instead of rejoicing in their salvation, Jonah seethes to see

¹⁵⁶ Earlier modern assessments of *Patience*’s work with its sources tended to homogenize *Patience* with them, especially the biblical Book of Jonah; Sir Israel Gollancz, for instance, subtitled his edition “An Alliterative Version of *Jonah* by the Poet of *Pearl*” (London: Oxford UP, 1913). Dorothy Everett began the trend in modern scholarship of evaluating more carefully *Patience*’s nuanced relationships with its sources. “The Alliterative Revival,” in Patricia Kean, ed., *Essays on Middle English Literature*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955, esp. pp. 68-74.

¹⁵⁷ Haimo of Auxerre’s (d. 875) *Ennarratio in Jonam Prophetam* has been widely used by modern scholars, in explicating *Patience*. While I do not make thorough use of Haimo’s text, I find its occasional detail to bear usefully on my reading of the poem. *Commentary on the Book of Jonah*, trans. Deborah Everhart, (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1993), 6-7. Hereafter Haimo, “*Commentary*.”

his prophetic threats obviated, and goes east of the city to sulk. There he falls asleep in a makeshift hovel, awaking the next morning to find it transfigured into a “lefsel of lof” (448), a cool green bower raised by God in His grace. Jonah is joyous and spends the day in its shelter, but he wakes again to find it withered. Its destruction is Exhibit A in God’s final lesson for the disconsolate Jonah:

Is this ryghtwys, thou renk, all thy ronk noyse,
So wrothe for a wodbynde to wax so sone? . . . *woodbine*

Bythenk the, mon, if the forthynk sore, *you are sorely displeased*
If I wolde help my hondewerk, haf thou no wonder. (490-491, 495-496)

Even in its schematic form, the stakes of the story are evident; indeed, for the *Patience*-poet, the story’s simplicity suits its homely concerns—the stormy nature of the human heart; the power of prayer and other forms of expressive making; the love of God for His own creation; and above all, the intimate encounter between man and God to which these things give way.

Patience’s profound simplicity has affected how readers receive it. With its practical application to Christian living and vivid presentation of material derived directly from the Bible, the poem is often classed in modest terms: as homily, exemplum, strict biblical translation, an inset poetic retelling that allows these genres to jostle within a first-person narrative frame.¹⁵⁸ These descriptions are perfectly apt; but I’d like to complicate their taxonomic neatness, without complicating this humble and honest poem, by looking at *Patience* in light of its subtler elements of creative remaking. It is the claim of this chapter that *Patience* supplies the second term in a two-part exchange with its parabiblical companion piece *Cleanness*, and that both poems—as our foregoing consideration of *Cleanness* has begun to make clear—evince far more speculative

¹⁵⁸ For examples of such classifications see, respectively, Lawton, “Englishing the Bible,” 479; J. A. Burrow, *Medieval Writers and their Work* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008), 121-124; Simpson, *Reform*, 489; and Lynn Staley Johnson, *The Voice of the Gawain-Poet* (: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), 3.

ambition, as engagements of Scripture, than they are often critically accorded. To be sure, both poems partake of the generic kinds I have mentioned, but because they are also attuned to possibilities opened up by Scripture's traces of disidentity, they also transcend them in conducting other kinds of work. Specifically, *Patience* turns *Cleanness*'s brash experiment with Scripture's beatific optics on its head, thematizing Scripture's internal rivenness so as not merely to occlude the homologous translucency envisioned by *Cleanness*, but to reassess Scripture altogether, within the bounds of provisionality, as a tool of spiritual living. Where *Cleanness* shows confidence in the capacity of texts to manifest God *sub specie temporis*, *Patience* shows deep pessimism about Scripture's availability to human need, and a concomitant eagerness to supplement Scripture's perceived abeyances with human expression.

Both ideas of Scripture are conceivably open systems: *Cleanness* organizes Scripture and its discursive derivatives into a *quasi*-midrashic series convergent on *visio Dei*, whereas for *Patience*, Scripture's obduracy (and God's unapproachable power) informs Jonah's ignorance and despair until sheer anguish moves him to cry out and achieve something of a direct through-line to divine communion. But from this initial kinship, the two poems part ways, a severance written into both poems from the start. Scholars have noted that each poem is set in motion by a given beatitude: *Cleanness* by Christ's promise that "The hathel clene of his hert hapenes ful fayre / For he schal loke on oure Lorde with a loue chere" (27-28), and *Patience* by the assurance that "Thay ar happen also that con her hert stere, / For hores is the hevenryche" (27-28).¹⁵⁹ Each poem ventures a hope of drawing near to the presence of God, either by looking into His face in a loving gaze, or by coming into possession of His kingdom. From here, though, the poems'

¹⁵⁹ See, e.g., J. J. Anderson, *Language and Imagination in the Gawain-Poet* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2005), 127; and Sarah Stanbury, *Seeing the Gawain-Poet: Description and the Act of Perception* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 71. Hereafter, Stanbury, "Seeing."

difference is legible even as they depart their shared initial position. Where for *Cleanness* the beatitude comes as clear scriptural disclosure—“Me mynes on one among other, as Mathew recordes, / That thus of clannesse uncloses a ful cler speche” (25-26)—*Patience* piles up mediations resonant with Jonah’s own eventual anguish: “I herde on a holyday, at a hyghe masse, / How Mathew melede that his master his meyny con teche (9-10). The difference is between *Cleanness*’s model of radiant homology (a source text chosen as “one among other” for its “ful cler speche”) and *Patience*’s counter-model of a scriptural idea clotted in the interpositions of church (“hyghe masse”), authoritative report (“Mathew melede”), and apostolic succession (“his master his meyny con teche”).¹⁶⁰ It is a quiet difference, but the contrast between the two poems’ couplets encodes *Patience*’s implicit, impatient quarrel with its predecessor text *Cleanness*.

Outside of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, in which a holiday spirit prevails and ludic language is common, the *œuvre* of the *Pearl*-poet is not especially remarkable for humor or comic effects.¹⁶¹ Satire and other ethical forms of irony enter into the poet’s work, but genuine laughter is rare. Strangely it is *Patience*’s close retelling of the Book of Jonah, with its emphasis on “sufferaunce,” that proves the poet’s most ostensibly comedic text. The poem is not hilarious

¹⁶⁰ The unusually dense alliteration in these lines of *Patience*—the occlusive bilabial nasal m-sound humming five times between the two lines—mimics sensations to come: the sense of claustrophobic hemming in, the sense of murmuring one’s way toward articulate speech.

¹⁶¹ Without saying much more to substantiate the point, David Fowler does cite *Patience* as the text in which “the poet gives free rein to his inimitable sense of humor” (Fowler, *op. cit.*, 187). On the holiday atmosphere of *Gawain* and the language that attends it, see Martin Stevens, “Laughter and Game in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” *Speculum* 47(1), 1972, pp. 65-78; and for an analysis of humor’s mediation between genres in *Sir Gawain*, see Danko Kamčevski, “Orality and Humour in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” *Fabula: Zeitschrift für Erzählforschung/Journal of Folktale Studies/Revue d’Etudes sur le Conte Populaire* 54 (3-4), 2013, pp. 263-274. W. Michael Grant treats comedy in *Patience* more systematically than I can here. “Comedy, Irony and Compassion in *Patience*,” *West Virginia University Philological Papers* 20 (1973).

by any stretch; but Jonah’s reluctant prophecy is shot through with cosmic irony, and his pointless wriggling in God’s hands makes for moments, usually added by the poet to his scriptural original, that rise to a serviceable level of comedy. As we turn our attention to the body of *Patience* proper, one such moment gathers together key elements of its parabiblical experiment, and supplies a fairly good joke along the way. By way of set up, Jonah has just prayed with understandable sincerity for deliverance from the belly of the whale, and moved by this petition, God has ordered the whale to “sput [hym] spakly upon spare drye” (338). We pick up with Jonah as he drags himself ashore.

Thenne he swepe to the sonde in sluchched clothes;	<i>filthy</i>
Hit may wel be that mester were his mantyle to wasche.	<i>it was needful</i>
The bonk that he blosched to and bode hym bisyde	<i>gazed on around him</i>
Wern of the regiounes ryght that he renayed hade.	<i>renounced</i>

Thenne a wynde of Goddes worde efte the wyye bruxles:	<i>scolds</i>
“Nylt thou never to Nunive bi no kynnes wayes?”	
“Yisse, Lorde,” quoth the lede, “lene me thy grace	
For to go at thi gre; me gaynes non other.” (341-348)	<i>at your bidding . . . profits</i>

The passage understates its notice that *perhaps* Jonah’s clothes need washing after his ordeal; as readers, we should say they do, given his emergence from “glaymande glette [slimy filth] . . . that stank as the devel” (269, 274). But this bit of wryness merely subjoins the primary punch line, which is God’s to deliver. It has been, let us recall the story, a rough three days: seeking to evade God’s call by fleeing for Tarshish, Jonah called down shipwreck on the vessel and a rather unusual divine punishment on himself: *preparavit Dominus pisces grandem ut degluttiret Ionam* (Jon. 2:1). After three days in darkness spent patiently “grateful for punishment” (the words are Melville’s), Jonah now washes ashore to God’s gently mocking welcome. “Nylt thou never to Nunive bi no kynnes wayes?” God asks mirthfully. Jonah can hardly reply. *Les jeux sont faits*: Jonah lays down his fight, and twitches on his (filthy) vatic mantle.

That Jonah—despite all his pains, and after his wild cetine tour—has washed up in Nineveh provides the geographic backdrop for God’s point. As Myra Stokes powerfully puts it, “Obedience to God’s word is not a virtue in this poem: it is a fact. It has almost the status of a physical law of the universe. When Jonah rejects God’s bidding, the whole world (the elements, humankind, and animalkind) reacts against him in instinctive enforcement of it.”¹⁶² Formally, *Patience* bears out the facticity of God’s word by hewing to it closely in its biblical original; but here on the shore of Nineveh, as I have suggested, the poet adds the comic line. In the Book of Jonah, God simply renews his demand verbatim at this juncture in the story, and Jonah just as plainly obeys. The question put to Jonah in the poem, by contrast, rubs his face in his recalcitrance by inverting the tone, if not the exact words (“At all peryles . . . I aproche hit no nerre” [85]), of his onetime evasiveness. Here as elsewhere in *Patience*, God has a bit of magisterial fun with His spokesman. “Nylt thou never to Nunive bi no kynnes ways?” The question shows Jonah what real adamant looks like, and inscribes one of *Patience*’s initial philosophical premises: confronted with God, human beings fail in their capacity even to recognize the truth, much less pronounce it on their own.

God’s modest joke is a nexus of *Patience*’s thematic interests. These are in keeping with the narrative as the poet receives it from Scripture, but they indicate how he places his emphases when inducing it into a parabiblical register.¹⁶³ First, as God Himself avers in his welcome, two orders of causality govern Jonah’s career. Against the prophet’s insistence that by no means would he make Nineveh’s shores, God asserts His facility in ensuring otherwise: what for Jonah

¹⁶² Myra Stokes, “‘Suffering’ in *Patience*,” *The Chaucer Review* 18 (4), 1984, 360.

¹⁶³ Francis Cairns usefully surveys sources (both direct and indirect) and analogues of *Patience*’s version of the Jonah story. “Latin Sources and Analogues of the M. E. *Patience*,” *Studia Neophilologica* 59, 1987, pp. 7-18. Here, I am less concerned to read the poem through to its potentially diverse sources than I am to elucidate the features of its inducement of the biblical story into the parabiblical mode.

was underscored refusal—“bi no kynnes wayes” would he go where directed—becomes for God the sly reminder that He needs no “kynnes wayes,” no natural means, to do His work. And yet, for all that, God is affable and measured in this line, his power over Jonah held as lightly as can be. Compared to the message Jonah must bear to the Ninevites, and alongside the “physical law” of obedience in this narrative’s metaphysic, God genially makes some room for Jonah in his humanness. *Patience* adds the quip at Jonah’s expense, but if it is arch and authoritative it is also jocular and fatherly. Jonah will do His bidding to be sure, but God shows patience in renewing that call. These antitheses form the warp and woof of the Jonah story in the *Patience*-poet’s hands. God defines the cosmic space of the poem every inch, but He invites Jonah again and again to place himself in the right relation to that space—an effort at which the man repeatedly and parodically fails, but God keeps trying, so Jonah must. Such self-opening of the deity to interrelationship with human beings is, in its positing and its continual renewal, a facet of the story that *Patience* pursues with tenderness and warmth for all, save Jonah at times, to see.¹⁶⁴

Expressed, then, in the gently proven inexorability of His plan, God triumphs over Jonah on the shores of Nineveh just as He does everywhere else. Of course He does. He is a good sport in doing so, though, His question showing Him colloquially, with a wink. Alongside its mixture of stern and amiable pragmatic attitudes, the passage also does serious philosophical work for the poem, conducting a maneuver of the most important kind in *Patience*’s parabolicity. This is in remediating the human predicament precisely by *re-mediating* it in

¹⁶⁴ In some ways these points are similar to observations about *Patience* (and its author’s poetic world more generally) offered some fifty years ago by A. C. Spearing, but with an important difference. In this poet’s *corpus*, says Spearing, “the supernatural power with which man is confronted is partly humanized, but it retains . . . a magnificent and terrifying strength. Nevertheless it is a merciful power, and one that forgives human weakness; and it is precisely this that makes it so destructive of human dignity” (“*Patience* and the Gawain-Poet” [*Anglia* 84, 1966], 307). It is this last bit with which I disagree: while I might see Spearing’s point about Jonah’s risible puniness in God’s hands, I think the poem in its larger fullness offers the prophet a chance to augment, rather than destroy, his human dignity.

God's own terms. Human action, human speech, even human folly, are all allowed provisional jointure to Scripture under the conditions of *Patience's* experiment. Over and against the commitment of *Cleanness* to a model of continuous scriptural translucency, even where that produces narratives of mixed ethical coloration, *Patience* attends to instances of short-sightedness, on the part of human beings, and of occlusion on the part of God as He exists in Scripture.

Curiously it is the king of Nineveh, figurehead for the very sin Jonah must root out, who best understands the supple way in which God chooses freely to relate to human beings. Once he arrives a full day's journey into Nineveh, a city of three days' breadth, Jonah's prophetic maledictions continue at length and culminate in dire certainty: "The segge sesed not yet, bot sayde ever ilyche, / 'The verray vengeaunce of God schal voyde this place'" (369-370). The king is listening, and his edict upon receiving Jonah's words bespeaks the poem's faith in the efficacy of speaking and in the possible benevolence included in the unknowability of God (an issue to which we shall attend more closely with *Pearl*, were it comes to the fore).

What wote other wyte may yif the wywe lykes,
That is hende in the hyght of His gentryse?
I wot His myght is so much, thagh He be myssepayed,
That in His mylde amesyng He mercy may fynde.

*knows or may know
gracious; nobility
displeased
gentleness*

And if we leuen the layk of oure layth synnes,
And styлле steppen in the stylye he styghles hymselfen,
He wyl wende of his wodschip and His wrath leve,
And forgif uus this gult, yif we hym God leuen. (397-400)

*practice; foul
walk quietly; path
turn from; fury
believe*

The Ninevite king here proves Jonah's ironic opposite: chosen out for the sinfulness of his people, the king considers the potential malleability of God's judgments—a hope that stands in thematic contrast to the steadfastness of the condemnation Jonah "sayde ever ilyche"—and enjoins universal penance upon his people. He succeeds. All of Nineveh "leved on his lawe and

laften her synnes / Parformed alle the penaunce that the prynce radde” (405-406), and the verse used to convey the king’s edict proves prescient. “Leve” is part of “leven”: belief does somehow rhyme, that is to say, with the supple receptivity of veering aside. The tension between these expressions—Jonah’s evidently fixed mantra versus God’s supplely changeable word—is the discursive struggle conducted within *Patience* between man and God, and also maps onto the contest between *Cleanness*’s optimistic biblical homologism and *Patience*’s conviction that the Bible is a place of irreparable rivenness.

This struggle finds dramatic expression in Jonah’s wayward career. In the context of God’s providence, Jonah’s flight proves foolish, needless and doomed, eventualities which are not fully known to him, and indeed not fully perceptible for him, until he encounters them in God’s wry riposte.¹⁶⁵ As a verbal formulation and a speech act, God’s sarcasm shows the value He stamps upon Jonah’s flight, such that Jonah’s intention reemerges under the regimen of God’s truth. Such remediation has two effects that are paradigmatic for *Patience*—first, the effect of pounding out the warpage in a mirror so as to restore the human being in his true image, which *is* the image of God, and second, the effect of allowing human intention entry into the divine discourse with which it contends. Remediation is bidirectional in *Patience*: Jonah bespeaks God’s will as prophecy, but in turn and at various points in the poem, God avails Himself to human wishes via the craft of scriptural, prophetic speaking. After all of Jonah’s errancy, through all of his intractability and the period of his dark correction inside the whale—indeed, even in the face of the “wykke that in [Nineveh] dowelles / And her malys . . . so much” (69-70)—*Patience* in the end affirms the capacity of human beings not merely to announce or bespeak, but to engage meaningfully and dialogically with the store of divine truth in Scripture.

¹⁶⁵ Jay Schleusener’s discussion of *Patience*’s providential plan is useful for understanding the all-too-closed system of temporal history in the poem. “History and Action in *Patience*,” *PMLA* 86 (1971), 959-965.

If *Cleanness's* theurgical ambition is to replicate the structure of beatific vision, *Patience* answers by asking what it would be to add but a single leaf to the record of human interaction with God. That either feat is impossibly quixotic, and that both taken together might expose his way of thinking to dismissal or ridicule, does not seem to daunt the poet in his questing, but to pressurize the ambition he invests in his imaginative project.

And this is an example, writ small, of crucial cultural work performed by the parabiblical imaginary: just as Jonah will cry out *de profundis* and inscribe his own words in Scripture—and inscribe *even more* words into *Patience* as a biblically derived poem—so too does the parabiblical imaginary foster a culture of accretion to the Bible.¹⁶⁶ For if the parabiblical imaginary allows *interest* in Scripture in the root sense of that term, if it not only rouses curiosity about Scripture and susceptibility to it, but also provides us entry into biblical worlds in the Latinate sense of *inter esse*—readers' having a stake in biblical narratives, and wedging ourselves into and among their midst—then *Patience* of all our poems most consciously foregrounds the work of such clearing. In some sense God's teasing welcome instantiates *Patience's* final claim, namely, that provisional supplementations of Scripture (here, the jested for God by the poet) bring a heartening equilibrium to the spiritual difficulties that plague Jonah.¹⁶⁷ Though in Jonah's mind God may "gloumbe ful lyttel" (94) what may happen

¹⁶⁶ In this regard, *Patience's* Jonah acutely personifies the late fourteenth-century "textual and institutional culture . . . [that] accepted interpretative and textual accretion by biblical readers" described by Simpson (see Chapter One, n. 40 above).

¹⁶⁷ Opening his study of *Patience* with a quotation from Albert Camus's *Exile and the Kingdom*, James F. Rhodes cites the Jonah story as a metaphor in "the popular imagination . . . human suffering, confinement, and abandonment . . . inspiring the more theologically minded to forge an analogy with Christ who underwent his own three-day trial in the bowels of the earth." I do not follow in this vein of treating *Patience* from the perspective of modern existentialism, but Rhodes's diagnostic terms comport with my case for *Patience's* palliative engagements with the Bible. James F. Rhodes, *Poetry Does Theology* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 106-107. Hereafter, Rhodes, "Poetry."

to us as we struggle in His service, in the final analysis of the poem, nearly the opposite is true. Rather than keeping Himself aloof from our stories, God welcomes us to pen a bit of His. As a text with competing initial premises—God’s impenetrability by human desire and His ever-present availability to gratify it when it is rightly ordered—*Patience* shows how Scripture can open up to human intervention and offer us gentleness in its cradling. The poem traces, in the path of Jonah’s wide geographic and existential wandering, one possible model for human achievement of this cathexis.

Patience’s divisions

Let us consider how the need to engage God dialogically arises in *Patience*. Jonah’s prophetic career begins in a position of lack, a gap in his knowledge demarcated by the *Patience*-poet in bright line, and ironized by the fact that the poem’s Jonah, among all men, should know exactly what God plans for him given the sudden loudness of God’s commission in the poem. “Goddes glam to hym glod that hym unglad made, / With a roghlych rurd rownd in his ere”: “Rys radly,” God says, and Jonah is supposed to be off and running.¹⁶⁸ When Jonah jolts to flee from God’s directive, though, the poet chides his turn *a facie Domini* with a line of vituperation *in propria persona*. Jonah is mad, thunders the poet, to think God cannot track him beyond the bounds of Samaria; such wishful thinking is a “wenyng unwar” in Jonah’s mind, a supposition born of his doltish unawareness. Awareness is highly valued by this poem: even the imminent whale is noted for being “war of that wywe” (249) he will swallow up and torment, so certainly God can be relied upon for open eyes.

¹⁶⁸ The Vulgate opening of Jonah is rather more staid: *Et factum est verbum Domini ad Ionam . . . dicens* [“Now the word of the Lord came to Jonas . . . saying”] (Jon. 1:1).

Wise, he blushed ful brode, that burde hym by sure;	<i>sc., God saw</i>
That ofte kyd hym the carpe that kyng sayde,	<i>taught him the words</i>
Dyngne David on des that demed this speche	<i>Noble . . . dais</i>
In a psalme that he set the Sauter withinne:	<i>Psalter</i>

“O foles in folk, feles otherwhyle	<i>savor it some time</i>
And understondes umbestoude, thagh ye be stape fole,	<i>once in a while . . . raving</i>
Hope ye that He heres not that eres alle made?	<i>Think . . . ears</i>
Hit may not be that He is blynde that bigged uche yye.” (117-124)	<i>built each eye</i>

The “psalme” indicated by these lines is number 93, the pertinent part of which derides the fallen human wish for hiddenness from God’s view—

*Populum tuum, Domine, humiliaverunt; et haereditatem tuam vexaverunt.
 Viduam et advenam interfecerunt, et pupillos occiderunt.
 Et dixerunt: Non videbit Dominus, nec intelliget Deus Iacob.
 Intelligite, insipientes in populo; et stulti, aliquando sapite.
 Qui plantavit aurem non audiet? aut qui finxit oculum non considerat?
 Qui corripit gentes non arguet, qui docet hominem scientiam?
 Dominus scit cogitationes hominum, quoniam vanae sunt.¹⁶⁹*

—and plays a central role in *Patience*’s searching consideration of Jonah’s plight.¹⁷⁰ The logic of these lines is simple, for they underscore the divine ubiquity from which Jonah fruitlessly seeks shelter: as the creator of awareness itself, God brooks no hiding place. But the lines do complex work in adducing the Bible against itself, and remind us as such of the parabiblical tendency to marshal biblical discourses in contrary directions. Here, the motivating supposition—“I shal tee into Tarce and tary there a whyle, / And lightly when I am lest he letes me alone” (87-88)—is

¹⁶⁹ Thy people, O Lord, they have brought low: and they have afflicted thy inheritance. They have slain the widow and the stranger: and they have murdered the fatherless. And they have said: The Lord shall not see: neither shall the God of Jacob understand. Understand, ye senseless among the people: and, you fools, be wise at last. He that planted the ear, shall he not hear? or he that formed the eye, doth he not consider? He that chastiseth nations, shall he not rebuke: he that teacheth man knowledge? The Lord knoweth the thoughts of men, that they are vain. (Ps. 93:5-11)

¹⁷⁰ Lynn Staley has examined *Patience*’s thematic use of Psalm 93 in the context of Augustine’s exegetical discussion of the psalm. Lynn Staley Johnson, “*Patience* and the Poet’s Use of Psalm 93” (*Modern Philology* 74:1, 1976), 67-71.

marked especially by Jonah's ignorance of his own native biblical biome. We can almost hear, in his lividness, the narrator's colloquial aside: how can a man *with his own named book of the Bible* show so little of the wisdom teeming around him, *not know* this crucial psalm?

Jonah is exposed here in an important kind of self-contrariety, his hope to hide from God an *in malo* burlesque of the period of his contrition spent “wanles of wele in wombe of that fische, / And also dryvenn thurgh the depe, and in derk walteres” (262-263).¹⁷¹ This typological layeredness has, for Jonah, its more immediate exigency. By a Dantesque logic of *contrapasso*, Jonah's fit penalty in the whale springs from—literally *is*—his dearest onetime wish.¹⁷² It is this tumultuous psychical complexity, marked by inability to discern his own spiritual safety, which Jonah must lay at God's feet in their scenes of rapprochement.

But if Jonah's self-division, as a character, drives home the human stakes of *Patience's* thinking, the literary occlusion signaled in this moment is intensified against the backdrop of

¹⁷¹ Malcolm Andrew demonstrates *Patience's* dynamics of *in bono/in malo* typology in a brief but influential article (“Jonah and Christ in *Patience*,” *Modern Philology* 70, 1973, pp. 230-233). John B. Friedman takes up Andrew's suggestion that “the medieval penchant for interpreting events *in bono* and *in malo* allows ‘the poet to sustain a series of simultaneous parallels and contrasts between Jonah and Christ’” [p. 231], but argues that such readerly agility “presupposes a degree of sophistication in the audience not in keeping with the poem's purpose, style and mood” (“Figural Typology in the Middle English *Patience*,” in Bernard S. Levy and Paul Szarmach, eds., *The Alliterative Tradition in the Fourteenth Century* [Kent, OH: Kent State UP, 1981], 101).

¹⁷² Stemming from the Latin *contra* + *patior*, *contrapasso* punishments are an interesting heuristic for reading *Patience* and for thinking about the poem's self-defeating hero manqué. Famously associated with Dante's *Inferno*, the notion that sins incur an eternity suffering their own precise opposite is referred to explicitly just once in Dante, by the shade of the troubadour Bertran de Born, whose headlessness inverts his sin of turning sons against fathers and dissevering families. Bertran's shade literalizes Jonah's self-separation.

<i>Perch'io parti' così giunte persone,</i>	Because I parted persons thus united,
<i>partito porto il mio cerebro, lasso!</i>	I carry my brain parted from its
<i>dal suo principio ch'è in questo troncone.</i>	source, alas! which is in this trunk.
<i>Così s'osserva in me lo contrapasso.</i>	Thus is the retribution observed in me.

Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy* [vol. 1], trans. Charles S. Singleton, [Princeton: Princeton UP, 1970], XXVIII: 139-142.

pertinent medieval techniques of scriptural reading. Jonah is a poor rememberer, in the narrator's eyes. He fails in the exercise of memory in which a "deep impregnation with the words of Scripture" manifests in the

extremely important phenomenon of reminiscence whereby the verbal echoes so excite the memory that a mere allusion will spontaneously evoke whole quotations and, in turn, a scriptural phrase will suggest quite naturally allusions everywhere in the sacred books. Each word is like a hook, so to speak; it catches hold of one or several others which become linked together and make up the fabric of the exposé.¹⁷³

Jonah's heedlessness presses home his failure to reminisce, to reassemble the Scripture he is charged by the narrator with knowing, and *to mind* the Psalm in the sense of remembering it, *caring for it*, feeling its salvific hand at his back as he turns away from God. Moreover, in a poem that flags Jonah's mental habit of divesting God's mastery over the land from His mastery over the sea, an inability to recognize the full biblicity of his own *mise en scène* does not merely rob Jonah of his rightful meditation, it also mimics the notional un-creation of which he is guilty. Just before this tirade, as Jonah joyfully pulls out of harbor into putatively open seas, the poet had remarked—using the terms of Psalm 93 before it had been properly introduced—"He wende wel that that wyy that al the world planted / Hade no maght in that mere no man for to greve" (111-112). Cosmologically speaking, it was once for God to separate the waters from the dry land (see Gen. 1:9), but for Jonah to presume as much heaps guilt upon guilt.

A second, kindred habit of reading gets traduced here, too. A recurrent favorite of the poet's whenever he thinks of God's overarching totality (we'll see him make use of it again when we come to *Pearl*), Psalm 93 would have offered Jonah, had he remembered it, the wisdom which the narrator carefully translates in his railing. Among Jonah's mistakes at this juncture, the Psalm implies, is failing to count himself a member of the procession of biblical protagonists

¹⁷³ Leclercq, *Love of Learning*, 73-74.

before *Deus Iacob*, aligning himself thus among the impious “they” of Psalm 93. Jonah is shown to lack, moreover, the full gustatory sense for God enjoined in the psalm, to fail by the measure of *aliquando sapite*—the psalmist’s exhortation to “be wise at last,” where wisdom is pitched in a *sapiential* mode, as the capacity to taste or to savor, to “meditate [by] attach[ing him]self closely to the sentence being recited and to weigh all its words in order to sound the depths of their full meaning . . . [and] assimilate[e] the content of a text by means of a kind of mastication which releases its full flavor.”¹⁷⁴ *Patience*’s reader is afforded an especially clear vantage of this numbness on Jonah’s part, for by placing his reader within Jonah’s story and simultaneously slightly above it, the *Patience*-poet allows his reader to notice the codicological disidentity of the Bible, its unruly refusal of its component parts mutually to avail themselves or to layer in neat, homologous stacks. To *Cleanness*’s vision of Scripture as a precisely aligned series of telescopic lenses, *Patience* counterposes this image of biblical disarray. *Patience*’s Jonah imperils himself for not remembering his Psalter, and the poems’ narrative manipulations show the Book of Jonah’s sapiential deficiency for not coming in view of the Book of Psalms.

I have presented these modes of spiritual and readerly mindfulness as though the Jonah of *Patience* were liable to the Dom Leclercq’s formulations of “active reading.” This is not quite the case—but Jonah’s failures against Leclercq’s canons are but versions of a particular dissatisfaction with Scripture motivating all this poet’s work, especially that represented in and by *Patience*. Like Jonah in his inability fully to taste his scriptural setting, the galvanizing reading occasion in *Patience* is one in which someone—ostensibly the poet, but arguably a member of the audience for whom he writes—has felt himself not fully able to bore into the secret comprising the Book of Jonah. Doubling the text, interposing a thin layer of variance between Scripture and its reception into disidentity, allows the poem the redress of remediation:

¹⁷⁴ Leclercq, *The Love of Learning*, p. 73.

reading Jonah alongside a poet demonstrated to be as sharp-eyed, as keen-witted and as theologically astute as this one proves himself to be, *Patience*'s reader is offered an access of insight. Jonah *should have known his Psalter* setting out; if he had, runs the logic, he would never have set out in the direction he did. The reader shares in this fullness of this knowledge, privy to the epistemic responsibility in which Jonah fails, and to the notion—perhaps sudden for him—that the very structure of the scriptural canon builds in such occlusions as befall Jonah. This builds in the reader, in turn, a strangely bifurcated identity: here identified with the higher circles of a widening perspectival funnel centered on the Jonah of *Patience*, the reader feels *impatient* to deploy his own assimilated knowledge in order to correct Jonah's flight.¹⁷⁵ In this connection more than any other—the impatience to assert one's own sense of things, having assembled it existentially, as it were—the reader of the text cannot help but identify with its flawed antihero. Unflattering as it may be, it is out of this identification that the poet begins to build not only *Patience*'s signature religious and imaginative claim, but also the philosophical case for the variant of parabolicity which this claim represents.

Care and the shapes of *Patience*

Jonah's return to square one on the shores of Nineveh is proof of God's indulgence. He cannot see it as such, though, since as an embedded narrative actant within the tale, he cannot make reference to the morphology of his tale the way an outsider can. I adduce this term, morphology, quite literally: the tragedy Jonah perceives in his life comes of his inability accurately to view the predominant shapes of his narrative. By contrast to Jonah as a figure of

¹⁷⁵ Cf. C. David Benson, "The Impatient Reader of *Patience*," in Robert J. Blanch, Miriam Youngerman and Julian N. Wasserman, eds., *Text and Matter: New Critical Perspectives of the Pearl-Poet* (Troy, NY: Whitson, 1991).

process—a man who traverses land and sea learning lessons the hard way, for whom possibilities must follow through to their ends, whose epiphanies arrive late, and who bemoans the long duration of his life—*Patience* figures God as omnipotent immediacy. He is unreachably high up, impenetrably solid in Jonah’s perception, inescapably ubiquitous, outside of temporality. In the scene of Jonah’s deliverance, the “wynde of Goddes worde” tells the tale: indissolubly elemental form *and* divine intention, this wind reinvokes those that caused the shipwreck in the first place, winds in whose action as God’s “slyghtes” (130) there was “no tom . . . bytwene [God’s] tale and her dede” (135). These winds are but one example of an intense unity in God that proves a philosophic conundrum for *Patience*; and when they return in gentler form to comfort Jonah toward poem’s end (“The gome glyght on the grene graciouse leves, / That ever wayved a wynde so wythe and so cole” [453-454]), they whisper to Jonah a secret it takes him the whole poem to absorb: God is ever-present, but it is for Him to decide the modes of His manifestation. Jonah is quite stiff-necked indeed when it comes to his sense of how God can and ought to behave.

For God’s part, He enjoys a traditional profile of timelessness, changelessness and ubiquity when it comes to conditioning the behavior of His chosen prophet Jonah; but He reserves for Himself the choice of how to express these attributes. Occluded from God’s logic, Jonah falls back on a characteristically petulant view of God’s transcendence.

“Oure Syre syttes,” he says, “on sege so hyghe, In his glowande glorye, and gloumbes ful lyttel Thagh I be numen in Nunnive and naked dispoyled, On rode rwly torent with rybaudes mony.” (93-96)	<i>seat worries taken a cross pitifully torn to pieces by evil men aplenty</i>
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Were Jonah able to overhear himself in this moment, the way for Harold Bloom Shakespeare’s greatest characters often do, he may well wish to pluck out that image, God’s “glowande glorye,”

and consider it in his anguish.¹⁷⁶ For here Jonah nearly intuits without realizing it the redress of his alienation from the divine: gods shine out to humanity in this poem, pagan gods no less than Yahweh in His resplendence, and human beings should call back to them just the pagan sailors do in their fear of shipwreck. In the moment of their distress upon the high seas, Jonah's pagan shipmen glow their way out of certain death and despair. "Then tho very forwroght wyst no bote," the narrator tells us, "Bot uchon glewed on his god that gained hym beste" (163-164).¹⁷⁷

I do not wish to belabor a fanciful observation about morphology. Rather, I suggest that these disparate images of "glowing" between heaven and earth, and between man and God, figure *Patience's* unconscious schematic for important forms of mutual address. God is unchanging *and* processual in this poem's view, and it is His care for creation that draws Him out of the transcendent. Indeed, care is a paramount value in the poem, even—and especially—when immanent, temporal and interventionist as it can be, care confounds Jonah's assumptions about how God should act and what the divine can even mean. Where for God care means conscientious devotion to His creatures, for Jonah it means worry and dread; the prophet's ability to recognize God's care is a marker of his circuitous progress as a human being in His hands. Care bridges the poem's crucially foregrounded gaps: between Jonah and his Lord, between Scripture and parascripture, between reader and poet and between Jonah's unwavering commitment to divine unchangeability and the poem's counter-insistence, presented diegetically as well as in the very form of the poem, that disidentity is an active, positive and loving

¹⁷⁶ "Overhearing their own speeches and pondering those expressions, they change and go on to contemplate an otherness in the self, or the possibility of such otherness." Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1994), 70.

¹⁷⁷ "Glow" (< O.E. *glówan*) and "glew" (< O. E. *glíu, glíw, gleow*) may be false etymological friends, but their proximate deployment in *Patience*—*OED's* only attestation of the latter in this sense—evokes a synesthetic link between the human and the divine consonant with the poem's core thematic interests.

expression of the power of the godhead.

These forms of care need explaining.¹⁷⁸ Jonah's flight to Tarshish comes of imagining what his prophetic commission will entail; and here as so often, he is an imaginative failure. "If I bowe to his bode and bring hem this tale, / And I be nummen in Nunive," Jonah thinks, "my nyes begynes" (75-76).

He tells me those traytours arn typed schrewes;	<i>consummate</i>
I come wyth those tythynges, thay ta me bylyve,	<i>straight away</i>
Pynes me in a prysoun, put me in stokes,	
Wrythe me in a warlock, wrast out myn eyen.	<i>foot-shackle</i>

This is a mervayl message a man for to preche	
Amonge enmyes so mony and mansed fendes,	<i>accursed</i>
Bot if my gaynlych God such gref to me wolde,	
For desert of sum sake, that I slayn were. (77-84)	

This outpouring of fear—prudent caution in Jonah's mind—proves a kind of lurid blindness: as ever in our parabiblical worlds, God and His forms of expression are larger than human beings can comprehend, but Jonah foresees his torments as though they were the pinnacle of power brought to bear. That Jonah is no seer, left to his own devices, is borne out by the verse here having some fun with his "certainty": as a man just seconds removed from a sudden divine audition, Jonah is completely unreflective in resisting what he is bidden, and imagines his fate with an inexorability risible in its failure to imagine anywhere near broadly enough. The

¹⁷⁸ For the particular (yet various) sense of the term as I use it, I borrow loosely from Heidegger, who explores the semantic range of the term "concern" [*besorgen*] as a close relation of "care" [*sorge*]. Colloquially, Heidegger suggests, the term concern can mean a good many things: "having to do with something, producing something, attending to something and looking after it, making use of something, giving something up and letting it go, undertaking, accomplishing, evincing, interrogating, considering, discussing, determining." I do not find it coincidental that *Patience* takes up so many of these senses of "concern," and without wishing to pitch my study in properly Heideggerian terms, I do find useful the nexus he delineates between these valences of "concern" and "care," which for Heidegger is an ontological structural concept: "the Being of Dasein itself is to be made visible as care." Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 83-84.

inversions are comic: a “prison” he never imagined actually awaits, a “warlowe” (258) for his “warlock,” and a period of intense soul-searching in the dark will be the only wresting out of his eyes. More importantly, these quatrains are bookended by Jonah’s two chief misunderstandings: first, the clipped syntactic apposition of causality as he imagines it (“I come wyth those tythynges, thay ta me bylyve”) altogether misses the massive *change* God’s message to Nineveh aims to effect, and second, Jonah’s sense that God’s call is “a mervayl” *unless* it is meant to punish *him* bespeaks the narrowness of his frames of reference. These broad ideas—change, and marvel that *includes* the human, but is magnitudes *larger* than the human—are key components in the model of scriptural reading that *Patience* configures in its frustration with more traditional models and its competitive striving against *Cleanness*’s vatic ambition.

Change, as suppleness and adaptability, is for the poem God’s own hallmark quality, and a key expression of His care for the world. To the extent that it occurs at all, Jonah’s own transformation occurs in the belly of the whale, of course; but in order to situate the nexus *Patience* perceives between God’s openness to change and His care for His creation, I’d like to leap over Jonah’s oceanic captivity for now. We will return to the prophet’s ruminations there, but in both Scripture and in *Patience* the Jonah story offers a marvel of God’s handwork that demands first attention as living testimony to God’s care. It emerges as part of the divine response to Nineveh, as God’s special redress for Jonah’s petulance at the clement turning aside of His once-promised vengeance.

Wel knew I thi cortaysye, thy quoynt soffraunce,	<i>wise</i>
Thy bounte of debonerte and thy bene grace,	<i>kindness</i>
Thy longe abydyng wyth lur, thy late vengauce;	<i>injury</i>
And ay thy mercy is mete, be mysse neuer so huge.	<i>enough; wrong</i>

I wyst wel, when I hade worded quat-so-ever I cowthe	
To manace alle thise mody men that in this mote dowelles,	<i>insolent</i>
Wyth a prayer and a pyne thay myght her pese gete,	<i>penance</i>

And therefore I wolde haf flowen fer into Tarce. (417-424)

Jonah's displeasure here is twofold: first, his prophecy has turned to nil, and second, he claims, he knew this would happen all along. Suddenly, the prophet who fled not knowing Psalm 93 knows perfectly well the lesson of Psalm 144, and as it bears on his failure to bring about doom, he feels a fool.¹⁷⁹ He goes off east of the city, as we have said, to find a place to pout—a rough-hewn bower, as it happens, which God transfigures in order to prove for Jonah the value of care. In the morning our petulant prophet awakes under a woodbine, opening his eyes to lush green leaves overhead, "Such a lefsel of lof [as] neuer lede hade" (448). Shady and sheltering, Jonah's leaf-cell is vaulted and broad, notched on the north side to allow him just enough sun. It inspires in him extraordinary joy.

The gome glyght on the grene graciouse leves, That ever wayved a wynde so wythe and so cole. The schyre sunne hit umbeschon, thagh no schafte myght The mountaunce of a lyttel mote upon that man schyne.	<i>looked mild all around so much as a speck</i>
Thenne was the gome so glad of his gay logge, Lys loltrande therinne lokande to tounce; So blythe of his wodbynde he balteres therunder, That of no diete that day—the devel haf!—he roght.	<i>lounging capers thought</i>

¹⁷⁹ See, e.g., Ps, 144:9. *suavis Dominus universis et miserationes eius super omnia opera eius* ["The Lord is sweet to all: and his tender mercies are over all his works."] Terry Eagleton adduces J. L. Austin's theory of speech acts to discuss Jonah's frustration with his failed prophecy. "All good prophets are false prophets," Eagleton writes, "undoing their own utterances in the very act of producing them. In the terms of J. L. Austin's *How to Do Things With Words*, prophetic utterances of Jonah's sort are 'constative' (descriptive of some real or possible state of affairs) only in what one might call their surface grammar; as far as their 'deep structure' goes they actually belong to Austin's class of 'performatives,' linguistic acts which get something done. What they get done is to produce a state of affairs in which the state of affairs they describe won't be the case. Effective declarations of imminent catastrophe cancel themselves out, containing as they do a contradiction between what they say and what they do" (Terry Eagleton, "J. L. Austin and the Book of Jonah," [*New Blackfriars* 69 (815), 1988], 166).

And ever he laghed as he loked the loge alle aboute,
 And wysched hit were in his kyth ther he wony schulde, *land; might live*
 On heghe upon Effraym other Ermonnes hilles:
 “Iwysse, a worthloker won to welde I never keped.” (453-464) *own; thought*

Jonah’s woodbine is literally, for *Patience*, the structure of God’s grace: completely unlooked for by the man whom it shelters, it defines nevertheless the space of his wishing. Greenly lush in the near eastern sun, the woodbine’s leaves shimmer in the wind and surround Jonah with felt security from his past terrors—the glare of God’s call, the crush of the whale, his puniness in the order in which he operates. Protected even from overmuch sunlight—“no schafte myght / The mountaunce of a lyttel mote upon that man schyne”—Jonah enjoys a moment crafted to recall not just his entry into the maw of the whale “as mote in at a munster dor, so mukel wern his chawlez” (268), but his own recent mention of “alle thise mody men that in this mote dowelles” (422). Availing homophonic senses of “mote”—“speck” in the first two lines, “place” in the third—these lines make at the level of verse the point God will put to Jonah: dust motes, human beings and vast cities are all of similar scale from His perspective; He is free to invest any and all of them with His loving care, and to sustain each according to his judgment.

When Jonah wakes again to find his woodbine withered, his grief heaps immediately upon the ire of his failed prophecy. “A, thou maker of man, what maystery the thynkes / Thus thy freke to forfare forbi alle other?” (482-483) he asks of God, confident that he has shown himself an easy victim in God’s hands. This is true, to a point—but God’s point in turn is that He has not vanquished Jonah, but saved him alongside the rest of creation, for all of which He cares. “Is thys ryghtwys, thou renk, alle thy ronk noyse, / So wroth for a wodbynde to wax so sone? / Why art thou so waymot [irate], wywe, for so lyttel?” God asks (490-492). Jonah’s reply is characteristically bratty, brittle and profound: “Hit is not lyttel” he cries, “bot lykker to right” (493). For Jonah, this response is more self-regarding peevishness, but it resonates with the

magnanimity God has shown (if I may venture the word of God) in enclosing the leaf-cell. The woodbine *is* “lykker to right”—it *is* a matter of justice. But its justness is far larger than Jonah suspects, for the leafy structures stands, in its organic vulnerability, as a palpable touch-point between the human and the divine. Evidence of God’s care for his creation, the leaf-cell gives Jonah a place literally *to see* the divine sustenance he spends his prophetic career misunderstanding; it is the membrane of God’s own patience with him, and with the world in which he wildly reels about.

Jonah exits *Patience* in despair. “I dure to longe,” he complains, and from here, we hear no more from him. God has the last word, and closes the narrative portion of the poem vindicating the sustaining attention He pays to the world.

if I my trauayl schulde tyne of termes so longe, And type down yonder toun when hit turned were, The sor of such a swete place burde synk to my hert, So many malicious mon as mournes therinne.	<i>lose repented must</i>
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And of that soume yet arn summe, such sottes formadde, As lyttel barnes on barme that neuer bale wroght, And wymmen unwytte that wale ne couthe That on hande fro that other, for alle this hyghe worlde. (505-512)	<i>utter simpletons breast; harm will nor can</i>
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Given his silence in the face of this theodicy, we cannot know what Jonah makes of its logic.

God’s eagerness to spare Nineveh not just for its repentant men, but for its innocent women and children (and “dourbe bestes” [516]), harkens to Abraham’s bargain with God over the good men of Sodom, a scene we saw in our treatment of *Cleanness*, and a dynamic between the human and the divine that interests this poet across his *œuvre*. Yet *Patience* provides no closure at its end as to Jonah’s sense of the justice shown in divine care, the expression of God’s concern for creation as both the sustenance and the craft of his hand. For how this double sense of care informs the experience of *Patience*’s flawed hero, we must return to him in the belly of the

whale.

Just prior to his deliverance *de profundis*, Jonah prays in *Patience* in terms that match very closely the prayer he speaks in Scripture. Set curiously in the past tense, Jonah's scriptural prayer has the quality of a psalm, a historical past availing itself to future singers.¹⁸⁰

Lorde, to the haf I cleped in cares ful stronge;
Out of the hole thou me herde of hellen wombe;
I calde, and thou knew myn uncler steven.
Thou diptes me of the depe se into the dymmme hert. (305-308)

In the prayer Jonah acknowledges the fitness of his punishment, recognizes true care from mere vanity, and bargains with God for his safety.

Bot I dewoutly awowe, that verrey bes halden,
Soberly to do the sacrafyse when I schal save worthe,
And offer the for my hele a ful hol gyfte,
And halde goud that thou me hetes: haf here my trauthe. (333-336)

This vow proves effective, and God delivers the poor man as we have seen. But perhaps cued by the perfect tense of Jonah's psalm, the *Patience*-poet has done unusual work with Jonah's cetine sojourn. Where Scripture has nothing to validate Jonah's claim to have "cleped in cares ful stronge," *Patience* makes a rare addition to its source; in the poem, Jonah prays twice, and it is the first prayer that the poet adds.

Now, Prynce, of thy prophete pite thou have.
Thagh I be fol and fykel and falce of my hert,
Dewoyde now thy vengauce, thurgh vertu of rauthe;

Thagh I be gulty of gyle, as gaule of prophetes, *scum*
Thou art God, and alle gowdes ar graythely thyn owen. *truly*
Haf now mercy of thy man and his mysdedes,
And preue the lyghtly a Lorde in londe and in water. (282-288)

¹⁸⁰ Among scholars who have noted the past tense of Jonah's prayer in Scripture, Avivah Zornberg offers the most incisive reading. "Essentially Jonah's prayer is not a prayer at all. The core of prayer is wishing, asking for the fulfillment of one's needs. This is beyond Jonah's capacity. In this sense, he utters a kind of anti-prayer, knowing, derivative, emotionally plagiarist" (Avivah Zorenberg, *The Murmuring Deep: Reflections on the Biblical Unconscious*, [New York: Schocken Books, 2009], 94).

This prayer, I suggest, shows Jonah’s fullest response to the kind of care God expounds in Himself at the conclusion of the Jonah story. Over and against the scripturally based prayer he will go on to deliver, these lines are set in the urgently present tense of Jonah’s predicament; as such they validate the pastness of the second prayer, providing an occasion to which that utterance can refer. But more importantly, this prayer—invented by the *Patience*-poet—allows the prophet to present himself before God in all the humble honesty asked of him. Strangely, Jonah proceeds with a series of imperatives, commanding God, it seems to redeem him from bondage: “Devoyde now thy vengeaunce,” “Haf now mercy,” “preve the lightly a lorde”—these requests are pitched in an imperative appropriate to their petitionary nature, but also in keeping with the signature brattiness of *Patience*’s Jonah.

But in the middle of this prayer comes a moment in which Jonah acutely perceives the calibration of truth as it exists in his world. It is the answer to a call Jonah offered earlier when yielding himself as the cause of the deadly storm at sea. “Whyder in worlde that thou wylt, and what is thyn arnde?” the sailors have asked. Preparing to jettison him, they urge him to say a prayer. “Lo, thy dom is the dyght, for thy dedes ille. / Do gyf glory to thy godde, er thou glyde hens” (202-204). Jonah declares himself with uncharacteristic bravery—

“I am an Ebru,” quoth he, “of Israyl borne;
That Wyye I worchyp, iwysse, that wroght alle thynges,
Alle the worlde with the welkyn, the wynde and the sternes,
And alle that wones ther withinne, at a worde one. (205-208)

—and now first prayer in the whale comes into alignment with this same mode of humble self-presentation before God. “Lord, here am I,” biblical prophets often respond when called by God, but Jonah is usually no such creature.¹⁸¹ In the poet’s invented prayer, however, Jonah manages

¹⁸¹ See, for instance, Isaiah 6:8 and 1 Samuel 3:4.

just such right relation to the deity whom he fears. “I am an Ebru,” he once said, and now, “Thou art God[:] alle gowdes ar graythely thyn owen.” Acknowledging the deity thus, Jonah does not so much order his lord in the imperative mood as describe God’s truth as he sees it here with unusual acuity.

Patience configures an encounter between human and divine that is expressed most fully in terms superadded to the biblical script as the poet finds it. “For if the world is converted, the Lord is converted; and when the sinners change their life, He will change his sentence:” these are Haimo of Auxerre’s words for the mutual transformation of God and man in the Book of Jonah, and they are crucial for the *Patience*-poet’s reading of the book.¹⁸² God avails His prerogative of dynamically flexible speech, and where Jonah despairs over his prophecy’s failure to remain true, he ought to imitate God’s willingness to see His message renovated. Jonah finally shows sapiential knowledge of God in the prayer newly created for him by the poem, a new feeling that serves the *Patience*-poet, I suggest, as a gesture of justifying his work transmuting Scripture into disidentical form. This is *Patience*’s *ars poetica* as a parabiblical artifact. Jonah must cry out to be heard, but *Patience* imagines his cry most authentic where it is most new, most distinctly non-biblical in its casting.

From *Cleanness* and *Patience* to *Pearl*

Together *Cleanness* and *Patience* identify in Scripture energies that allow the imagination to overleap human limits. So ranging are these imaginative powers that under their influence the poems exceed not just the thinkable mundane, but even the scriptural world that is their source. Finding in the Bible scripts for leaving the script, as it were, *Cleanness* and *Patience* contravene the biblical imperatives that set them in motion as poems. *Cleanness* works

¹⁸² Haimo, *Commentary*, p. 29.

around the eschatological delay of “Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God,” dramatizing God’s punitive interventions in time in order to mobilize a reparative rhetoric of inversion: *Cleanness*’s readers, no less than its narrative actants, experience God’s ethical correction as a mode of His immanence, a presence felt in contradistinction to the poem’s eschatologically promissory dimension. *Patience*, likewise, carves out space for experimentation. But where *Cleanness* sets out empowered by its analogy with the Eucharist, *Patience* begins mired in frustration, its narrator poor, suffering and struggling to enter into the consolations of doctrine. Neither poverty nor patient suffering savors much of its present-tense blessing, says the poem in its anguish: if mine is the kingdom, “I wyl me sum other waye” (86). It is this turning away from God, a turning-away that is also a more fulsome turning-toward, that marks *Patience*’s experimentality. In its choice of narratives and in its very existence, the poem ventures the suggestion that divine discourses burgeon into availability in human gestures of supplementation. This is not so much a refusal of late-medieval emphases on Scripture’s literal level, nor a disturbance of reformist notions of *sola scriptura*, but an insistence instead on Scripture as a site, or indeed a threshold, for human makings of paradoxical character—both human and divine, contingent and necessary, obedient and obstreperous, original and renovative.

The two poems reunite, that is, precisely where they mutually depart. Convinced of the homology of God’s Word in all its forms, *Cleanness* imagines the Bible as a kind of infinite viewing lens, a tool allowing human beings to peer into ultimate things, and allowing textual accretions such as *Cleanness* itself a genuine measure of visionary clarity. *Patience*, by contrast, so impugns the transparency of the Bible that it must offer itself as an alternative space where the problems of the Bible—the inconsistencies within it, as well as our objections to it—can be worked through, and where, ideally speaking, the Bible can emerge more fully itself. In its own

implicit view, *Patience* vivifies the Bible by fitting it in, and to, the human hand. The poems are thus functional reciprocals, each placing its own emphasis on how divine and human discourses potentiate each other, but both instantiating its belief in Scripture's meaningful discursive spillover.

Such thinking requires a speculative third term. These premises—*Scripture is clear all the way to the eschaton*, or *Scripture is so unclear as to incite its own remaking*—need a space of discursive provisionality in which to develop, not so much because the ideas are theologically or ecclesiologically subversive, which they are not at least as pitched, but because they are framed so as to clash with elements of Scripture and doctrine left visibly onstage within the poems, and therefore to operate around unmovable authority. A mark of the poet's artistry is this tendency to enjoin upon readers a juggling of contradictory assertions respecting the Bible. We “wende wel,” of course, “that that wyy that al the world planted” (*Patience* 111) has equal dominion over the sea, but inasmuch as it comes of inability to see God's plan in detail and at any macroscopic level, we empathize with Jonah's errancy even as we judge it. Just the same, we know how to read aright the Augustinian vocabulary of “use” that shifts all of *Cleanness* into the subjunctive register of supposition, yet when we respond to—and emulate—the “comparisunes” of parabolic thinking (161), we do so from a place of faith ostensibly without fissure. Granting the poem a share of Christ's own power to form true fictions, we stake soteriologic hope and visionary ambition on structures of thought we must acknowledge likenings, similitudes, substitutions, the disidentities of *différance*. Such concessions are especially big news in a poem devoted to excoriating “mistrauthe” (996). They need, in fact, not just a hermeneutic of provisionality on the part of a reader, but an effort by the poet to explain their derivation, situate their role in his

poetics, and theorize their claimed powers in his parabiblical theology. The *apologia* carried out by our third term, *Pearl*, forms the subject matter of the next chapter.

Chapter Four A Tale Unresounable: *Pearl* and the Parabiblicity of Plenitude

In a very real sense, the chief *dramatis personae* of *Pearl* are two kinds of scriptural knowledge, a dialogic contest between which forms the main action of the poem.¹⁸³ One of these standpoints is that of our narrator, the so-called *Pearl*-dreamer, and as such it is emphatically *embodied* in its purview and operations. For perhaps by definition, the dreamer is among those he deems “strothe-men” (literally “marsh-men,” mentioned as such at line 115), those spiritually somnolent whose designation as such reminds readers that we are all formed *de limo terræ*, “of the slime of the earth” in the words of Genesis 2:7.¹⁸⁴ From this perspective, the Bible seems to avail the principles of a strict, and strictly just, cosmic order: equity and due proportion; moral desert and restorative justice; an ethics of earning and exchange value; firm legalism; and a zero-sum structure of heavenly reward. Set over and against these values is a female personification of wisdom, the poem’s titular pearl or *Pearl*-maiden, with an alternative sense of the Bible and Christian doctrine. For her, Scripture defines an economy of grace on the basis of very different principles: the redemption of Christ’s passion; forgiveness and generosity among His chosen; an

¹⁸³ Aiming to set the *Pearl*-dreamer on equal footing with the *Pearl*-maiden in the theological discourse they share, Jim Rhodes applies a directly Bakhtinian approach to the dialogical nature of *Pearl* (Rhodes, *Poetry*, 125-145). Reading the book of Job—which, as from *Patience*, seems strangely absent from *Pearl*’s encounter between a questing human intelligence and a starkly self-revealing deity—Robert Alter comments in terms that could apply to *Pearl*’s dialogic exchange. “If the poetry of Job . . . looms above all other biblical poetry in virtuosity and sheer expressive power, the culminating poem that God speaks out of the storm soars beyond everything that has preceded it in the book, the poet having wrought a poetic idiom even richer and more awesome than the one he gave Job. Through this pushing of poetic expression toward its own upper limits, the concluding speech helps us see the panorama of creation, as perhaps we could only do through poetry, with the eyes of God” (Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, New York: Basic Books, 2011, p. 107).

¹⁸⁴ *Formavit . . . Dominus Deus hominem de limo terrae et inspiravit in faciem eius spiraculum vitae et factus est homo in animam viventem* (Gen 2:7). [“And the Lord God formed man of the slime of the earth: and breathed into his face the breath of life, and man became a living soul.”]

ethics of courtesy, franchise and mutuality; communal membership in the *corpus mysticum* of the church; and, most important for the poem as scriptural intertext, the cosmic principle of God's arbitrary will, the divine freedom from limitation and necessity that is written into the Bible as historical record, expressed there in a poetics of plenitude, and reflected in *Pearl*'s own engagements as a parabiblical artifact.

For *Pearl*, God's freedom is paramount.¹⁸⁵ While most commonly deployed in late-medieval philosophy as "a way to explain that God could have created . . . another physical and moral universe than He factually did,"¹⁸⁶ the matter of God's radical freedom is mostly reserved in *Pearl* for Scripture's evasions of human expectation. Though it baffles the strothe-man, for instance, who sets out selfishly brooding over loss ("Pensyf, payred, I am forpayned" [246]), the poem avers that "the kyndom of God alyve / Has a property in hytself beyng" (445-46) of what we might call universal largesse: by His decree, both God and the souls who achieve the kingdom participate in a society of limitless mutual enlargement, such that even readers accustomed to the open system envisioned by *Cleanness* likely marvel at the generosity of this order. Of the kingdom, we learn,

Alle that may therinne aryve
 Of alle the reme is quen other kyng, *realm*
 And never other yet schal de pryve,
 Bot uchon fayn of otheres hafyng,
 And wolde her corounes wern worthe tho five, *crowns were five times as precious*
 If possible were her mendyng. (457-52)

¹⁸⁵ On the topic of God's radical and indelible freedom—a huge philosophical issue which I treat here only in its simplest form—I have relied much on a few classic treatments: Gordon Leff, *The Dissolution of the Medieval Outlook: An Intellectual and Spiritual Change in the Fourteenth Century*, New York: New York UP, 1976 (hereafter Leff, "*Dissolution*"); William J. Courtenay, "Necessity and Freedom in Anselm's Conception of God," *Analecta Anselmiana* 4 (2), 1975, pp. 39-64; and Marilyn McCord Adams, *William Ockham* (esp. chapters 28-30) (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987; hereafter, Adams, "Ockham.")

¹⁸⁶ Henri Veldhuis, "Ordained and Absolute Power in Scotus' *Ordinatio* I 44" (*Vivarium* 38:2 [2000], 222).

Brimming with alterity (“other . . . other . . . others”), this description disrupts some familiar earthly assumptions: that heaven is structured on the model of a singular feudal monarch; that the quest for God is “self-seeking” in some sense, either self-probing or self-regarding; and that having arrived in the kingdom, the soul can put aside its penchant for optative hoping. These disruptions conduce to a general impression that, across an epistemological abyss dividing us from it, God’s reality may well suspend some of the fundamental parameters of our own. It bears remarking that this character of the kingdom—its lack of measure and mechanism, the unpredictability of its principles—is “in hystelf being,” inherent in it, yes, but also a property of the gerund *being* under its verbal regimen, an active dynamism of the kingdom’s *doing*. A certain teeming with life, an abundance of vital excess, marks the kingdom as it awaits human presence, and where this reflects an original teeming in “God alyve,” it also infuses the Bible that is His testimony. It is the intellectual burden of *Pearl*, in and among its rich aesthetic and imaginative textures, to relate this property of the kingdom of God to embodied human understanding, and to do so with special regard to the Bible as its expression *par excellence*. With a nod to Leibnizian projects of theodicy,¹⁸⁷ we might imagine *Pearl* a “bibliodicy”

¹⁸⁷ In his search for the metaphysical root of evil, the early-modern German polymath Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1716) coined the term “theodicy” in his *Essais de théodicée sur la bonté de Dieu, la liberté de l’homme et l’origine du mal* (1710). I mention the term mostly in a general way to help color my own term, bibliodicy, formed on analogy with it. However, the link Leibniz posits between sin and human limitation may be interesting in the context of *Pearl*’s dramatic exchange between an imperfect human intelligence and the fullness of truth contained in Scripture. “Where will we find the source of evil?” Leibniz asks. “The answer is that it must be sought in the ideal nature of the creature, insofar as this nature is contained in the eternal truths that are in the understanding of God, independently of his will. *For one must consider that there is an original imperfection in the creature prior to sin, because the creature is essentially limited* (Théodicée paragraph 20, my emphasis). Qtd. in Samuel Newlands, “Leibniz on Privations, Limitations, and the Metaphysics of Evil” (*Journal of the History of Philosophy* 52 [2], 2014), 292.

designed to address Scripture's dynamic refusal, in its largeness and largesse, to conform stably to human canons of reason, right and need.¹⁸⁸

Such work happens dialogically, as exchange, but the interaction itself is tilted toward the court of heaven. *Pearl* dramatizes the philosophical volley between the dreamer and the maiden's rival understandings of Scripture and in doing so the poem also works its way into Scripture by gradually shifting their conversation into the landscape of the Book of Revelation. It is at this point, having pushed his project right into the court of God, that the poet conjoins in *Pearl* the discursive vectors set in motion by his other texts. Vatic confidence has seen its way to "that cyty of gret renoun, / Jerusalem so new and ryally dyght" (986-87); but because "so gret merwayle / No fleschly hert ne myght endeure" (1081-82), the poem essentially short-circuits at its conclusion and expels the human from the presence of the divine. Alongside the exchange between *Pearl*-dreamer and *Pearl*-maiden, *Cleanness* and *Patience* have also contested in some sense. Neither has prevailed. *Pearl* participates in their conversation by thematizing the provisionality that makes it possible and unresolvable: resisting the surety with which each stakes its contrary claim, *Pearl* frames a thought-world where, for human beings, a spirit of supposition and inquiry governs all interactions with the sacred text. *Pearl*'s version of parabolicity returns us, in a sense, to what we saw in Cædmon's *Hymn*: a reflection of Scripture without any discernibly local scriptural original. But instead of working from unspecified sources and reconstituting them in new form, *Pearl* often cites passages quite specifically, while foregrounding how conditions internal to Scripture—Scripture proper, as it were, the Gospel "as John hym wrytes" (1033)—generate thematically contingent habits of thinking that comprise the parabiblical imaginary. These, for *Pearl*, come of the fact that Scripture is so rife with

¹⁸⁸ James Simpson has remarked the painfully corrective nature of Scripture in *Pearl*. "This is . . . a poem of pain, [in which] Scripture is deployed to painful, salutary effect," and which "stresses the austere otherness of Scripture" (Simpson, *Reform*, 487).

information, often contradictory information, that unequivocal, monological truth-statements are hard to stabilize from it. Instead, the useful truth of Scripture is for *Pearl* its heterogeneity; where *Cleanness* sees no occlusive contradictions within the Bible, and where *Patience* simply cannot get past such occlusions, *Pearl* deems Scripture's substantive equivocality its most generative strength.

A simple point bears remembering as we pursue our analysis of *Pearl*: because it is a dream poem, everything we see in it, no matter how conflicted or contradictory, expresses a single mental world.¹⁸⁹ "One finds, at the origin of the theme of the dream as a manifestation of the soul in its inwardness, the Heraclitean principle: We share a world when we are awake; each sleeper is in a world of his own."¹⁹⁰ This privacy helps explain some of the strangeness of the poem: the fraught yet associative argumentation, the back-and-forth of strangely connected rhetorical adversaries, the intensities of hope and despair, and the dreamer's uncommon, likely unpublic, stubbornness in the face of biblical authority.

The lay of the (dream) land

The poem in the idiosyncrasy of its dreaming also makes somewhat strange jointure of disparate generic conventions. As the poem opens, *Pearl* has a foot in two different narrative worlds, neither of them closely identifiable with the Bible, but both present throughout the poem

¹⁸⁹ Influential treatments of *Pearl qua* dream poetry include A. C. Spearing, *Medieval Dream-Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1976), 111-129; J. Stephen Russell, *The English Dream Vision: Anatomy of a Form* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1988), 159-174; and, as part of "Dreams and Fiction," Steven F. Kruger, *Dreaming in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992), 123-149.

¹⁹⁰ Michel Foucault, "Dream, Imagination, Existence," trans. Forest Williams, in Michel Foucault and Ludwig Binswanger, *Dream and Existence*, ed. Keith Hoeller (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1993), 50. Qtd. by Elliot R. Wolfson, *A Dream Interpreted Within a Dream: Oneiropoesis and the Prism of Imagination* (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2011), 56.

and crucial to developing the dreamer's subject position with respect to it. Existential pain calls on these generic codes to shape the text into being, for the basic situation of the poem is this: a recently bereaved man mourns the loss of one who was to him "nerre then aunte or nece" (232)—a tiny daughter, we presume—and wanders into nature to a place he closely associates with her. Falling asleep there, he encounters some version of her in dream form, and while she acknowledges herself the pearl whose loss he has "playned [and] / Regretted" (242-43), she spends the remainder of the poem trying to teach him, with mixed success, to see his pain in its proper theological contexts. Not surprisingly, many of these come from the Bible, but because for the dreamer elements of the Bible are often rebarbative and illogical, his time with the maiden is a continuous re-education at her hands. *She* knows how Christ "laves hys gyftes as water of dyche, / Other gotes of golf that never charde" (607-08), but bereaved of his child, the *Pearl*-dreamer struggles even to conceive of such plenty, resisting his scriptural urtext as the maiden authoritatively bespeaks it.

On one hand, then, we discern in *Pearl* a kind of Boethian philosophical dialogue, with the maiden attempting to lead the dreamer out of his anguish toward higher understanding of his loss.¹⁹¹ One index of progress in this endeavor is the poem's proximity to the scriptural text. Early in the poem, we receive hints and echoes of a biblical substratum mediated through what, on the other hand, feels like a secular genre, the *chanson d'aventure*. On this register, traces of biblicality are so often enmeshed in traditional romance *topoi*—a delightful landscape, and

¹⁹¹ Stephen Gilman provides a useful gloss on the genre of *consolatio* as *Pearl* deploys it, contrasting older "horizontal debates" between equals, say fortune and virtue or a cook and a baker, from the "dream vertical debate"—exemplified by the *De Consolatio Philosophiae* of Boethius (c. 480-524)—in which "a dialogue [occurs] between a narrator and an allegorical personage who comes to him on the basis of admitted infallibility." *The Art of La Celestina* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1956), 159-160. Qtd. by Morton W. Bloomfield, *Piers Plowman as a Fourteenth-Century Apocalypse* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1961), 20.

enchanted reflective fountain, a chance encounter with a maiden—that the dreamer hardly recognizes them. Indeed, the sensory and emotional plenitude of *Pearl*'s landscapes immerses us in a dialectic of cognition, recognition and retrospection that will challenge the dreamer throughout the poem. By poem's end, we are squarely inside the apocalyptic landscape of the New Jerusalem, having heard a good deal of Scripture cited directly on both sides of the debate, and seeing "as John devysed" (1021) the heaven where the *Pearl*-maiden makes her home. The developmental arc between these phases is not strictly linear, however, because in *Pearl* the process of knowing is recursive, and the value of knowledge always partial, even as these relate to Scripture. Some parts of the poem seem to lead us into the mysteries of Scripture, but at other points we are rebuffed, or the dreamer refuses the knowledge proffered, such that although we attain a view of the heavenly city, in the end we have not grown much closer to the beatific vision of God. Thrust with the dreamer back to our initial condition, we realize that faith's task is to continue making sense of the enigmatic quality of knowledge *sub specie temporis*. The poem places equal emphasis on both parts of the Pauline formula, *videmus nunc per speculum in ænigmate*, simultaneously validating its limitation and pointing the way toward a gathering understanding. "We see now through a glass in a dark manner," *but we do see*. This structure reinscribes the gulf in fourteenth-century thought between revelation and knowledge, but in arriving at a lavish literalism in its treatment of the scriptural text, *Pearl* enacts a mode of fiction—of making, and making believe in the full force of that phrase—wherein even such secondary, derived experiences with divine vision as *bibliopoesis* borrow a provisional tincture of the charismatic holy. Describing how this happens will help us to understand *Pearl*'s signature mode of parabolicity.

Le surplus de sens

Cleanness, we recall, operates by homology with the Eucharist, not by a tincture of it, and when the poet thinks in *Patience* about what I have called the codicological disidentity of the Bible, the tendency of its pages not to overlay one another neatly in homologous stacks, it is Jonah, with his failure to remember his Psalter, whom he holds out for special derision and diagnosis. Lacking any redress from the very pages from which he is lifted, Jonah captures the poet's attention precisely as a reluctant prophet, a man wrestling any which way to avoid the divine *paroles* for which he is inexorably destined. Jonah's refusal to take up his vatic mantle usefully figures the Bible's own behaviors of reluctance—its difficulties of cross-reference, the competitive jostling of its discursive registers, its refusal in short to get along with itself. When he turns his mind to *Pearl*, however, the poet lights upon a protagonist with foibles diametrically opposed to those he explores in Jonah. In this new, apocalyptic world, the *Pearl*-dreamer's zeal to engage with the Word is hardly restrained; he is entangled in an overabundance of scriptural information, rather than marooned in its absence; and as such his religious education—what the *Pearl*-dreamer is bound, in the root sense of religion, by personal *wyrd* to do—involves reconciling himself to Scripture's wild heterogeneity, rather than cutting through it with the immediacy of prayer, and entertaining divine truths in their multitudes, rather than struggling to comprehend God in His transcendent unity. Unlike Jonah, the *Pearl*-dreamer is called upon not to speak, but to read. Remarking on Hamlet and Othello, A. C. Bradley could well have had Jonah and the *Pearl*-dreamer in mind: "The heroes of the two [works] are doubtless extremely unlike, so unlike that each could have dealt without much difficulty with the situation which proved fatal to the other."¹⁹²

¹⁹² A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1919), 175.

Bradley would be right, where *Pearl* is concerned, to use fatally dire terms. For if *Cleanness* begins sacramentally, invoking the conceptual apparatus of the Eucharist in order to sanctify its visionary project, and if *Patience* begins sapientially, conjuring Jonah in order to apply wisdom to the hardship of earthly penury, *Pearl* begins in lamentation, its protagonist—not yet dreaming, not yet the *Pearl*-dreamer—consumed by a grief so entire that for a time it comprises the space of the poem itself; in the “erbere” where “thurgh gresse to grounde hit for me yot” (9-10), the anguished father nearly swoons. “I dewyne,” he sighs, his expression for grief a surprising compact of poetic elements: a botanic image, damp with heard “dew,” of withering within a garden; a trope of proportion in which the human soul dwindles (see *OED*, “dwine,” v.), shrinks “down” before God in his magnitude; and, combining these, the faint trace of a biblical consolation, John 12.24-25, a touchstone text for *Pearl* whose trajectory of fall and resurrection the poem will soon cite more fully as “For uch gresse mot grow of grayness dede— / No whete were elles to wones wonne” (31-32).¹⁹³ Death is the necessary condition of life,

¹⁹³ John 12.24-25: amen amen dico vobis nisi granum frumenti cadens in terram mortuum fuerit ipsum solum manet si autem mortuum fuerit multum fructum adfert qui amat animam suam perdet eam et qui odit animam suam in hoc mundo in vitam aeternam custodit eam (“Amen, amen I say to you, unless the grain of wheat falling into the ground die, itself remaineth alone. But if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit. He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world, keepeth it unto life eternal”). *Cursor Mundi*’s vision of earth in its post-doomsday glory includes an image which *Pearl* may have in mind for the “spot of spyses” where the buried pearl “to rot is runne” (25-26). There in *Pearl*, “blomes blayke and blew and rede / . . . schynes ful schyr agayn the sunne,” unfading in their beauty for the preciousness of the seed from which they come. “So semly a sede moght fayly not, / That spryngande spyces up ne sponne / Of that precios perle wythouten spotte,” runs *Pearl*’s floral encomium. For the abiding flora on the plot interring the body of Christ, *Cursor Mundi* had already used a similar imagistic logic, marking the ever-florescence of the place in terms the *Pearl*-dreamer’s “I dewyne” seems to cite.

þe erth þat cristes cors in-bredd
 O paradise sal be a stede,
 And for it was quilum mad red,
 Wit blod o santes þar-on scede,
 It sal be fild wit mani flurs,
 Smelland suet wit sere colurs;

Pearl declares on the way into its experiment with disidentity—with configuring and seeking to understand an imaginative dimension of a precisely quasi-biblical quality.

That experiment begins in an *erbere*, as we have said, a beautiful garden or burial plot into which the father's grieving leads him time and again in elegiac recursion.¹⁹⁴ On one such visit, intoxicated by the entwining pleasures of sight and scent (“Yif hit was semly on to sene / A fayr refluayr yet fro hit flot” [45-46]), he falls asleep upon the pearl's burial mound. An immediate separation of body and spirit—

For spot my spyryt ther sprang in space;
My body on balke ther bod in sweven
My goste is gon in Godes grace
In aventure ther mervayles meven (61-64)

—and suddenly we are flying with the disembodied dreamer between crystal cliffs over forestland, a world of joys so pungent they admit no representation: no musician “moght . . . retrete” the “reken myrthe” (92) of the birdsong here, nor “nis no wyy worthé that tonge beres” (100) to tell of this world's glory. That the dream-world denies “retretement” is an explicit avowal of an intuitable fact about *Pearl*, namely that for the poem to be an adequate transcription

bat neuermar sal dime ne duine,
Bot als a paradise sal be scene. (23689-23696; my emphasis)

¹⁹⁴ Noting the special implications of the poem's seasonal setting, which she takes to mean August 15, the liturgical holiday of the Assumption of the Virgin, Elizabeth Petroff explores the importance of realistic details to *Pearl*: “The dream which follows the narrator's entrance into the *erber* can be seen to arise very naturally out of the experience of this holy day.” In particular, “words and phrases from the Song of Songs [featured in the liturgy for August 15] echo in the dreamer's mind, here Petroff cites a number of examples—and “the figure of the *Pearl*-maiden herself is probably stimulated in the narrator's mind by the image of the Virgin in Heaven.” Hence in Petroff's reading the *Pearl*-dreamer undergoes a phantasmagorical swirling of the residue of his waking life. Details from the Bible, the liturgy and tradition suffuse his sleeping mind, and suggest a strongly parabiblical version of the dreamer's Freudian work of mourning. Elizabeth Petroff, “Landscape in ‘Pearl’: The Transformation of Nature” [*The Chaucer Review* 16 (2), 1981], 182).

of its visionary experience, it must overflow with what Marie de France calls a “surplus de sens”—a linguistic excess that for Marie indicates texts’ capacity to bear, remunerate and flourish under the glossing of future interpreters, but that for *Pearl* indicates a good deal more.¹⁹⁵ Like Marie’s *Lais*, *Pearl* foresees its interpretative futures, concluding as it does with the dreamer thrust from eternity back into time, “kaste of kythes that lastes aye,” and propounding for his readers the tropological kerygma of all he has seen (1198). But *Pearl* does not so much court diachronic supplementation as amplify its own synchronic complexity: in *Pearl* even the diegetic present foliates under the touch of a reader’s attention, and the poem so problematizes the moment of encounter and cognition as to render the actions of recognition and interpretation

¹⁹⁵ Marie de France begins the prologue to her Breton *Lais* confident that texts like her own contain meanings to be unveiled by a parade of future readers (*Marie de France: Lais* [French Texts], ed. Glyn Burgess, Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1998, ll. 9-16). The translation here does not match exactly line by line, but conveys a very close sense of Marie’s Anglo-Norman (*The Lais of Marie de France*, trans. and ed. Robert Hanning and Joan Ferrante [Durham, NC: The Labyrinth Press, 1978], Prologue ll. 9-16).

Custume fu as anciëns,	The custom among the ancients—
Ceo tes[ti]monie Preciëns,	as Priscian testifies—
Es livres keque jadis feseient	was to speak quite obscurely
Assez obscurement diseient	in the books they wrote
Pur ceus ki a venir esteient	so that those who were to come after
E ki apendre les deveient,	and study them
K’i peüssent gloser la lettre	might gloss the letter
E de lur sen le surplus mettre.	And supply its significance from their own wisdom.

Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner neatly explains the density of meaning in Marie’s phrase itself, *le surplus de sens*: “The most problematic passage in the [Breton *Lais*] General Prologue describes Marie’s view of the Latin literary tradition [and] gives insight into her own art as a writer transforming oral tales into written verses that require all our skills of interpretation to unpack. Citing Priscian as her authority, she speaks of obscurities that ancient poets placed in their writings for later generations to discover (or invent) as they become more capable of ‘glossing the letter’ and revealing the ‘surplus of meaning’ contained (or inspired). Scholars have disagreed in reading these verses, assigning the ‘surplus de sen’ to the original writers or their later interpreters: Marie’s syntax involves us in the very activity she describes and thus prepares us to read tales whose stylistic economy and apparent simplicity belie their complexities. Their artful ambiguities invite countless interpretations and disagreements among readers, even in deciding whether a given ending is a happy one” (Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner, “Marie de France,” in David Kastan *et al.*, eds., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of British Literature*, Vol. 1, [Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006], 390.)

secondary, and ever supererogatory, under the welter of the landscape's sensuous plenitude. As experiential amazement sensory and intellectual by turns, the surplus of sense resides for *Pearl* in the here-and-now of the dreamer's experiential encounter—first with the dream-world itself and the maiden when he finds her there, later with the series of soteriological conundrums she poses him and with his view of the New Jerusalem. We shall turn to these explicitly theological elements of the poem further on, but for now let us continue on the plane of the senses because it will prepare us for this later work.

Sarah Stanbury has put some of what I am suggesting about *Pearl* usefully into visual terms. For the *Pearl*-poet across his *œuvre*, she writes, “description becomes a powerful narrative tool for dramatizing the limitations of human experience, an effect that is created in part by structuring descriptive passages according to the mechanics of perception. Descriptions . . . are constructed not only according to the organizing principles of the poet's imaginative eye—the poet at work in his library—but according to the ocular horizons of eyewitnesses in the narrative.”¹⁹⁶ *Pearl*'s world is one we very much enter into: we see the dream-world as the dreamer sees it, cognizing its features alongside him and sharing in his experience of its outlines coming into focus. But his cognitive challenges are not always the same as those faced by readers, and where this is the case, the poem fosters a sustained analogical likeness between the dreamer's perceptions and our own. It is a distinguishing feature of *Pearl* that its verses simulate on the level of literary form the estrangements and enchantments felt by its protagonist as theological experience. Often the dreamer renders his awareness in terms that, while plainly intelligible to him, offer us as readers a rich texture of difficulty. Consider the brief example of the dreamer's comment on the inimitable birdsong he hears: nothing human could “her reken myrthe . . . retrete,” he says, “fir quen those bryddes her wynges bete, / Thay songen wyth a

¹⁹⁶ Stanbury, *Seeing*, 2.

swete ascent” (92-93). What he seems primarily to indicate is myriad avian voices singing in polyphony; but in *Pearl*'s poetic world, where so much strain is spent getting the dreamer *to assent* in his will to the more baffling truths of God, the image allows us to construe harmony as unison, mutual consent and approval, as the birds' acquiescent reconciliation with one another as fellow creatures. The phrasing thus achieves a radical vividness that shows, among its effects, the poem's desire continually to orient readers' attention to the mysterious layeredness of its reality, to the fact that even its surfaces veil surpluses of sense. If beating wings can produce a song, and if aural harmony comes down to multitudes tuned to agreement, then the dream-world is offering us an image—seemingly one not even marveled at by the dreamer himself—of its power to elicit the assent of the heart's confession.

Here begins the gradient between the sensuous and the intellectual. *Pearl* insists on forms of experiential complexity that go beyond the domain of optics to comprise the very fabric and texture of the poem itself. It makes sense that in a poem fairly obsessed with cut glass and translucent jewels, proper seeing means attending to images refracted in prismatic simultaneity. Recall the quatrain that launches the *Pearl*-dreamer into his vision.

For spot my spyryt ther sprang in space;
My body on balke ther bod in sweven
My goste is gon in Godes grace
In aventure ther mervayles meven.

These lines enact a psychosomatic fission, the dreamer both springing from the ground and noting the *bulk* of his body on the *balke* where it lies. Locally the effect is one of double vision; but beyond this, the lines activate additional senses in which *Pearl* imbricates its reader in a layered reality. Evoking a biblical model for spirits springing into space, the lines help constitute the poem as biblically derived by adopting the form and the uncertainty from one of Scripture's best known visionary ascents. Where Paul is coy about both the mode and the agent of a certain,

otherwise quite specific vision of the third heaven, *Pearl* offers a visual clue that the ensuing narrative may be the genuine flight of the spirit or merely a dream of the embodied, disordered consciousness lying there.¹⁹⁷ These alternatives sustain the ambiguous veridicality of this experience to the very end of the poem. Between the “body on balke [that] ther bod in sweven” and the blithe spirit that seems (but may *only* seem; this seeming will be key) to rejoice in its “veray avysyoun” (1184), four counters delimit the ambiguous interval in which *Pearl* takes place: body and soul contest the provenance of the vision, and as specialized vocabulary “sweven” and “avysyoun” debate its truth-value.¹⁹⁸ *Pearl* carefully suspends its dream among the criteria that might determine its reception; another such “mote in at a munster dor” as Jonah, the poem conceals its choice between the gate of horn and the gate of ivory.

A second important complexity informs this moment, in this case, a generic entwining. At a moment invoking Paul’s own empyreal rapture, a biblical locus especially sacrosanct, the declared object of the dreamer’s flight—to go “in Godes grace / In aventure ther mervayles meven”—conjoins two orders, divine grace and the aleatory marvelous, and envisions religious questing, or rational ascent, as a *chanson d’aventure*. Such generic layering itself is not surprising or uncommon, but it is instructive for considering *Pearl*’s *surplus de sens* for two

¹⁹⁷ 2 Cor. 12:2. *Scio hominem in Christo ante annos quattuordecim sive in corpore nescio sive extra corpus nescio Deus scit raptum eiusmodi usque ad tertium caelum.*

¹⁹⁸ A. C. Spearing discusses at some length the *Pearl*-dreamer’s specialized vocabulary. “Once the narrator’s dream is over,” Spearing says, “he identifies it as a ‘veray avysyoun’ (1184); but he has earlier referred to it more humbly as a ‘sweven’ (62) and a ‘drem’ (1170).” Parsing these and other medieval dream terms, Spearing suggests that calling the dream “a veray avysyoun” allows the *Pearl*-dreamer to cast his experience in a particular way. “Past writers about dreams, from Macrobius onwards, considered the vision, coming from some supernatural source outside the visionary’s body and mind, as one type of dream. The same terminology continued to be used by medieval writers on spiritual life, though they were perfectly aware that there was an element of metaphor involved in this way of talking about supernaturally granted visions, because the highest ‘visions’ of this kind do not really take the form of things seen.” A. C. Spearing, *Medieval Dream-Poetry*, p. 116.

reasons.¹⁹⁹ First, in a text that enjoins the ruminative tumbling of its catchwords and key concepts, our protagonist's stated aim of "aventure," of lighting out to meet the world come-what-may, models the poem's own receptive biblical hermeneutic. Here, in the words of one critic, "the poet . . . absorbs modes of reading Scripture into the texture of his own fiction, . . . delight[ing] in strategically revolving words and images in such a way as to invest them with different meanings in close succession."²⁰⁰ Another reader adds that chivalric *aventure* has a "reflexive dimension [in which,] both active and in some central way passive, a submission to what events have to show and tell, the *chanson d'aventure* offers the possibility that the landscape and what the narrator finds in it are a manifestation of something in him."²⁰¹ Together these points suggest conflictual trajectories of scriptural information in *Pearl*. On one hand the dreamer learns at the maiden's knee, iteratively revising his ideas as she guides him to do; yet on the other hand as we have noted, and as we will substantiate more fully, even the corrective information meted out by the maiden is produced by the dreamer in dreaming. This is the oneiric secret of *Pearl*—not the secret at the heart of the poem, so to speak, but the secret that is its encapsulating shell. Like the Chaucer who dreams the *Parliament of Fowls* after seeking "a certeyn thing to lerne" in the *Somnium Scipionis*, the *Pearl*-dreamer evidently falls asleep reading the Bible, and having read the Bible, certain parts of it anyway, for a long time. The

¹⁹⁹ Maureen Barry McCann Boulton has argued that the *chanson d'aventure* form, as a subset of *chansons de geste*, offered a common formal option to medieval writers of narrative theology. *Sacred Fictions of Medieval France: Narrative Theology in the Lives of Christ and the Virgin, 1150-1500*, Rochester: D. S. Brewer, 2015, p. 16.

²⁰⁰ James Simpson, *Reform*, p. 488. Such semantic gathering mimics the agile receptiveness of a knight *en aventure*, and it also maps his itinerary: just as the dreamer in Guillaume de Lorris's *Roman de la Rose* finds himself first in an enchanted landscape and then in a privy garden within it, so too does the *Pearl*-dreamer journey toward, then provisionally into, the New Jerusalem.

²⁰¹ Nicolette Zeeman, "Imaginative Theory," in Paul Strohm, ed., *Middle English (Oxford Twenty-first Century Approaches to Literature)*, New York: Oxford UP, pp. 222-240, p. 229.

consequent poem represents dreamwork spent brokering between the existential difficulties of his reading life and the contradictory doctrinal pressures of which he is aware as he reads. The traditional genres of *consolatio* and *chanson* thus blend into a certain kind of *psychomachia*, one in which catechumen and confessor coinhere, and theoretical figures for teaching are borne out of the Bible by the very intelligence they are intended to inform. If we have now begun to witness the narrator in some rudimentary stage of integrative dreamwork, this is useful both for him and for us, because the overwhelming experiential features of the verse will now body forth kindred amazements he feels, on an intellectual and theological register, when face to face with the maiden as she bespeaks Scripture.

“A tale unresounable,” an objection “apert”

The lexical behavior we saw in “I dewyne” is a key behavior of the poem itself, a tendency beyond any poetic norm to say two (or more) things at once, and to require of its participants—the pearl, her dreaming father, their reader—a nimbleness to recognize, assess and inhabit subject positions within *Pearl*’s discursive arena appropriate to the divine information imparted therein. Like its ubiquitous scriptural backdrop, the landscape to which the *Pearl*-dreamer is transported is laden with meaning upon meaning. No wonder, then, that the dreamer can sometimes lose his way among them. Although he is thrust by grief into an ethereal landscape, one that becomes a properly Apocalyptic landscape, the extent to which the *Pearl*-dreamer recognizes his biblical surroundings is often—and thematically—unclear. Throughout the poem he has at least partial knowledge, to be sure, and his ignorance is most painful not with regard to landscape, but with regard to the nature and stakes of the eschatological debate in which he tries to engage his beloved pearl, the redeemed soul of his daughter.

At the poem's structural and philosophical center, when the dreamer cannot comprehend how she deserves such blessedness as he finds her in, the pearl answers her father by invoking Christ's Parable of the Vineyard (Mt. 20:1-16). In the parable, a landowner goes out several times in a day—at early and late morning, noon, at the sixth, ninth and eleventh hour—to hire laborers he finds idle in the marketplace. At the end of day, when some have toiled through the heat of the day while others but one cool hour, the landowner pays the men newly arrived first, and pays everyone an equal penny. This rankles the longest serving of his men, who feel more deserving. "Uus think uus oghe to take more," they grunt in the pearl's version (552); and herewith comes the parabolic point, Christ's own, and the *Pearl*-maiden's alongside Him. The landowner answers, "Friend, I do thee no wrong: didst thou not agree with me for a penny? Take what is thine, and go thy way: I will also give to this last even as to thee. Or, is it not lawful for me to do what I will? is thy eye evil, because I am good? So shall the last be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen" (Mt. 1:13-16).

The *Pearl*-dreamer, needless to say, shares the indignation of these most tired laborers. "That cortaysé is to fre to dede, / Yyf hyt be soth that thou cones saye," he insists, sure of his own power to discern the right proportions between earthly travail and heavenly reward (481-82). "I may not traw, so God me spede, / That God wolde writhe so wrange away" (487-88). Noting, perhaps, the blasphemous tautology of his oath ("Were God Himself to help me to it I could not believe God could go so wrong!"), the pearl responds tactfully and at length. Her opening formulation is rich in significance for thinking about *Pearl*'s parabiblical experiments.

Al is trawthe that he con dresse,
And he may do nothynk bot ryght,
As Mathew meles in your messe,
In sothful gospel of God almyght. (495-98)

This is the moment of the dreamer's most acute crisis of biblical reading. After the pearl's long explanation of divine plenitude among the blessed—a speech of some two-hundred lines recasting the vineyard parable—the dreamer's objections rise to a new polemical pitch. It is clear that he has been paying close attention, weighing his daughter's words in the poem's own characteristically ruminative way, but still he cannot enter imaginatively into her reality. Neither can he withhold the doubts that occur to him.

Then more I meled and sayde apert:
 “Me thynk thy tale unresounable.
 Goodes ryght is redy and evermore rert,
 Other Holy Wryt is bot a fable.
 In Sauter is sayd a verce overte
 That spekes a poynt determinable:
 ‘Thou quytes uchon as hys desserte,
 Thou hyghe kyng ay pertermynable.’
 Now he that stod the long day stable,
 And thou to payment com hym byfore,
 Thenne the lasse in werke to take more able,
 And ever the lenger the lasse, the more.” (589-600)

The friction between the dreamer's intractability here and *Cursor Mundi's* ongoing exegetical guidance cannot be missed: surely the *Pearl*-poet seems not to miss it. Recall the translated verses from Psalm 93 on which *Patience* draws to admonish Jonah: “Intelligite, insipientes in populo; et stulti, aliquando sapite. Qui plantavit aurem non audiet? aut qui finxit oculum non considerat?” Following Cassiodorus, the *Glossa Ordinaria* explains this passage in words that may find their way into the *Pearl*-poet's lexicon here. “*Stulti . . . qui aperte blasphemant, dicentes Deum non videre. Vel ita: Vos insipientes, id est nescii, intelligite, qui jam bene vivendo estis in populo, id est, in numero bonorum. Et vos stulti, id est, improvidi, et si scitis, aliquando sapite.*” That this gloss relates thematically to *Pearl's* large thought-structures—its own questions about the *numerus bonorum*, the *insipientes*, etc.—is plausible enough. The gloss “si scitis, aliquando sapite” might even pass as motto for the *Pearl*-dreamer's biblical education.

Yet what is most uniquely interesting is the possibility that the moment of the dreamer's shrillest incredulity is marked by the macaronically-borrowed descriptor "apert," from those "stulti" in the *Glossa* "qui aperte blasphemant." It is as though the *Pearl*-poet, with knowledge of Psalm 93 demonstrable in *Patience*, has the dreamer cry out with sincere indignation even as he registers doing so as "open" recalcitrance.

The uncertainties of God

The Bible's ungovernable meanings are for *Pearl* not just a challenge to the dreamer to hold them still, but the powerful native expression of the late-medieval God for whom the dreamer's Bible speaks. This, for the historically-situated *Pearl*-poet, is how the deity speaks: it is His own sublime idiolect. The poet's orchestration of the debate between *Cleanness* and *Patience* over questions of vision illustrates his broad interest, and that of other late-medieval thinkers and texts, in seeking mimetically to investigate divine *surplus de sens* by mobilizing biblical and traditional discourses in contrary directions. The conflict, locally in *Pearl*, is at least twofold: first, the dreamer invokes Psalm 61 (*et tibi, Domine, misericordia: quia tu reddes unicuique juxta opera sua* [Ps. 61:13]) to counterpoise Matthew 20, the pearl's parable of abundant grace. His gesture reminds the reader that recourse to scriptural variety can meet by turns with succor or frustration, and that Scripture's dynamic relationship to itself exponentially multiplies its available meanings. Second, efforts to delimit or to prescribe signification, here represented authoritatively by the *Glossa Ordinaria*, yield in *Pearl* not control of scriptural meaning, but further complexity—the dreamer voicing his anguish, voiced as literal scriptural truth, with a submerged exegetical marker of blasphemy.

The fact that human beings experience the Bible's apparent contradiction and contrariety as "a tale unresounable" is a key disclosure for *Pearl*—and a key argument for the pearl herself. Recalling her words—

Al is trawthe that he con dresse,
And he may do nothynk bot ryght,
As Mathew meles in your messe,
In sothful gospel of God almyght.

—we should note that the pearl's initial rejoinder to her father's insistence that he "may not traw" is fraught with the language of fourteenth-century philosophical debate. In an important sense the pearl answers her father's tautological denial with a tautology of her own: rather than objecting to the seeming injustice of her the vineyard parable, the dreamer should instead understand the relationship of identity between God's actions, his goodness and his absolute truth. "Al is trawthe that he con dresse / And he may do nothynk bot right": God's actions are, *de facto*, coterminous with the true and right. The formulation bespeaks fourteenth-century concerns to free God of the kinds of necessity, and even determinism, to which increasingly sophisticated forms of Aristotelian thought brought Him in the thirteenth century. Best known in the binary terms *potentia absoluta* and *potentia ordinata*, the discourses of God's utter freedom have logical entailments that help shape the concerns of imaginative literature.²⁰² "First and foremost," writes Gordon Leff, "they are to be seen in the affirmation of God's freedom and the contingency of creation expressed in his absolute power to do whatever is not contradictory."²⁰³

²⁰² The best single volume on this crucial theological distinction is William J. Courtenay, *Capacity and Volition: A History of the Distinction of Absolute and Ordained Power* (Quodlibeta 8: Recherche e strumenti di filologia medievale), Bergamo, Italy: Pierluigi Lubrina, 1990.

²⁰³ Leff, *Dissolution*, p. 29.

In *Pearl*, the fact of God's freedom from all circumscription is felt most palpably in paradoxes that demand their own reconciliation—in the thematic idea, for instance, that the pearl maiden's beatitude rankles her loving father's intellect; or the fact that the dreamer, so evidently steeped in scripture at some times, cannot understand its most basic lessons at others; or perhaps in the reader's sense that the landscape of marvelous plenty, rendered so exquisitely by the poem, cannot wholly map the terrain of God's grace. At every turn both dreamer and reader must confront the knowledge that the apparent contracts of perception and cognition, emotion and reason, can at a moment be thrown open to renegotiation. Such experiences seem in many respects to be agonistic workings-through of new spiritual and intellectual realities. As Leff writes elsewhere of theology after Ockham,

with nothing beyond his range, God could be judged by the farthest flights of fancy. It was this which made God's *potentia absoluta*, rather than mere probability, the real heart of fourteenth-century skepticism: it served the double end of freeing God from reason and experience from faith. To say that anything is possible for God and to apply this to generally accepted tenets was to dissolve the whole foundation of a natural theology: where probability simply questioned, God's absolute power destroyed. Where reason ended, God's *potentia absoluta* began, taking care of what was not subject to verification and showing how uncertain and unknown it was. It removed all effective standards of judgement. In that sense, the God of scepticism ceased to be the God of tradition: He was so unknowable that His attributes melted in a blaze of His omnipotence, leaving no certainty.²⁰⁴

Parabiblical poems such as *Pearl* grow up in the space of this uncertainty and by the light of this blaze. They are fostered by, and minister to, an intellectual world that denies the knowability of God, whether by the terms of "probability" or of the more trenchant skepticism born of God's *potentia absoluta*.²⁰⁵ Seen as developing provisionally, from probability, such texts weave

²⁰⁴ Gordon Leff, *Medieval Thought: St. Augustine to Ockham*, Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1958, pp. 289-90.

²⁰⁵ See Adams, *Ockham*, pp. 1235-1236, on Ockhamite "scepticism about our having scientific knowledge of the created world."

choices about interpreting the bible into imaginative experiences whose implicit scriptural and theological claims might somehow answer, in their provisionality, to new epistemological conditions: what we cannot know about God, we can nevertheless choose to experience through texts that foreground their self-consciousness as “not truth,” but contingency.²⁰⁶

With an acute awareness that the Kingdom of God’s distinctive teeming may entail heterogeneities even at the level of heterogeneous truths, *Pearl* configures a space where the rival claims of its sibling poems remain in dynamic oscillation. From a human standpoint, this is a space of fiction in the radical sense of the word, assembled (made up) in the reader’s field of vision in order to admit antithetical statements of unknown, potentially irreconcilable truth-value. *Pearl* develops fiction itself into a multifaceted mode of parabiblical interaction, one especially apt for an intellectual world convinced of the limited human purchase on the determination of God’s truth. *Pearl*’s various fictions of fiction—its moments of constructing onstage provisional frameworks for encountering the excessive truth of Scripture from the drastically limited perspective of human life—show in action the strengths and key features of the parabiblical imaginary as we have been developing it all along.

Considered in light of God’s *potentia absoluta*, the conditions of parabiblical praxis become even more starkly sublunary, for if reason simply cannot avail the slightest certainty about God, and if the appearances of the world can no longer even be used semiotically, in Augustine’s sense, to indicate the realm of divine truth, then the separation of biblical truth from its subsequent rehearsals creates discursive spaces for what we might term—anachronistically—

²⁰⁶ In the introduction to this study and in our treatment of *Cursor Mundi*, we considered provisionality in its rhetorical dimensions—the nimbleness it allowed authors faced with potential ecclesiastical censorship, and the parameter of difficulty provisionality offered, *qua* fictionality, for energizing treatments of the truth of scriptural narrative. Here, I wish to suggest that these powers of provisionality were fostered in a philosophical environment congenial to provisional thinking on bases explored in this section.

certain modes of imaginative play. Indeed this might follow in the path of a larger trend Leff discerns in fourteenth-century epistemological theory, of which

the keynote is disengagement: of concepts from reality, of natural reason from what cannot be known naturally, of belief from the limits of what has been ordained. It operated on two planes of what we may call the epistemological and the positivist, the first involving a new awareness of the conditions regulating knowledge and belief and the relation between them; the second the physical nature of the world and what can be known generally.²⁰⁷

The pearl's speech to her father includes this separation by doubling it. She instructs her father that God's actions are by definition "ryght," and reminds him that indeed he already ought to know so, for it is "As Mathew meles in *your* messe, / In sothful gospel of God almyght" (my emphasis). Her attribution—"your messe" and its apposite, the "sothful gospel"—seems to stipulate that such forms of instruction are distinctly earthly, suited to members of the Church Militant who do not yet participate in the immediate truth of seeing *facie ad faciem*. According to her implicit analogy, then, what such mediated truths are to Truth itself, parabiblical discourses may be to the bible from which they radiate, namely, explorations of the absolute freedom of God's will which, although they cannot accommodate his nature to human minds, enjoy particular liberties of their own for the very fact that they cannot lay claim to ultimate truth. Parabiblical texts remain "disengaged," in Leff's sense—or qualifiedly "autonomous," in a sense posited by other scholars—from the realm of divine truth to which reason does not extend, and from which faith, although it abides securely there, cannot truly build a bridge.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁷ Leff, *Dissolution*, p. 21.

²⁰⁸ Collaborating, respectively, as an Old Testament exegete and a philosopher of hermeneutics, André Lacocque and Paul Ricoeur assert that "the first factor [biblical] exegesis takes into account has to do with the role writing played in the formulation of the biblical corpus. Reading is a response to this writing . . . the first effect of [which] is to confer an autonomy, an independent existence of a text, which thereby opens it to subsequent developments and subsequent enrichments, all of which affect its very meaning." André LaCocque and Paul

“The belief in the inherent uncertainty and contingency of all existence, other than God’s, was a tenet common to all Christians. Its widespread explicit acknowledgement by the majority of thinkers in the period from the 1320s to the 1360s is among the most significant of (fourteenth-century theology’s) new developments,” Leff writes.²⁰⁹ The division between God’s existence and the uncertain, contingent existence of his creation thus offers “widespread” sanction for the consciously removed, secondary status of contemporary parabiblical discourse. But because such literature conceives of itself, in turn, as speculative to the extent that it works—and ranges—from the authoritative truth of revealed scripture, it can concern itself thematically with the simultaneous truth and alterity of God’s word in the bible. Like *Cursor Mundi*, *Pearl* is anchored in the world of Scripture—its allusions are clear, its borrowings traceable, and its general tendency is toward that full divine *apocalypsis* to which the Bible also orients itself. Rather differently from *Cursor Mundi*’s mode of enlarging Scripture, though, *Pearl* continually questions biblical meanings, rather than ventilating them, by stressing the incommensurability between relied-upon modes of human understanding and the divine objects that escape them. Alongside its dreamer, the poem seems often to cry out, in its human drama, “Me thynk thy tale unresounable.” By now it should be clear that such an objection, in addition to expressing an idiosyncratic pain, invites the reader to see *Pearl*’s involvement in fourteenth-century considerations of God’s incognoscibility, his utter hiddenness to human ratiocinative powers.²¹⁰

Ricoeur, *Thinking Biblically: Exegetical and Hermeneutical Studies*, trans. David Pellauer, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998, p. xi.

²⁰⁹ Leff, *Dissolution*, p. 26.

²¹⁰ Almost too conveniently, the dreamer’s objection to the vineyard parable might even suggest a more specific link to the developments Leff outlines. In asserting that Psalm 61 “spekes a poynt determinable”—i.e., that God will reward each man according to his deeds—the stanza echoes the language of determinism that pervades the 219 propositions, condemned at Paris in 1277, which galvanized fourteenth-century efforts to free God of all such obligations, including

A vision of the vision

Returning from philosophy back to the poem in its scriptural nexus, we rejoin the *Pearl*-dreamer in the earliest moments of his vision. Genuine pathos suffuses the scene when his eye alights upon his lost beloved as she stands over the bourn: “A faunt, / A mayden of menske, ful debonere,” he sees, “Blysnande whyt was hyr bleaunt / I knew hyr wel, I hade sen hyr ere” (161-64). That “blysnande”—shining, resplendent, from OE *blysiān*, “to blaze, burn”—contains semiconscious biblical echoes (Moses’s burning bush, Christ transfigured) helps the reader share in the father’s uncanny sense of knowing this figure already, and subtly encodes the *Pearl* as an unviewable glory on par with the culmination of the poem to which we now proceed.²¹¹ Glad to the point of fear on seeing his child, he awaits her recognition marveling at her appearance, stately in a white gown bedecked with pearls, crowned too in pearls, “her semblaunt sade for doc

the *potentia ordinata* that for so long had been thought to stabilize his absolute freedom (q.v. Leff, *Dissolution*, Chapter I, “Orientations,” *passim*).

²¹¹ For Moses’s burning bush, see Ex. 3: “Now Moses . . . came to the mountain of God, Horeb. And the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush: and he saw that the bush was on fire and was not burnt. And Moses said: I will go and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt. And when the Lord saw that he went forward to see, he called to him out of the midst of the bush, and said: Moses, Moses. And he answered: Here I am. And he said: Come not nigh hither, put off the shoes from thy feet: for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground. And he said: I am the God of thy father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Moses hid his face: for he durst not look at God” (Ex. 3:1-6). For Christ’s Transfiguration, see Mt. 17, Mk.9 and Lk. 9 (I quote Mt. 17:1-8): “And after six days Jesus taketh unto him Peter and James, and John his brother, and bringeth them up into a high mountain apart: And he was transfigured before them. And his face did shine as the sun: and his garments became white as snow. And behold there appeared to them Moses and Elias talking with him. And Peter answering, said to Jesus: Lord, it is good for us to be here: if thou wilt, let us make here three tabernacles, one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias. And as he was yet speaking, behold a bright cloud overshadowed them. And lo, a voice out of the cloud, saying: This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased: hear ye him. And the disciples hearing, fell upon their face, and were very much afraid. And Jesus came and touched them: and said to them, Arise, and fear not. And they lifting up their eyes saw no one but only Jesus.”

other erle,” her radiance mindboggling: “A mannes dom moght dryly demme / Er mynde moght malte in hit mesure” (223-24).

Soon begins their converse, their exchange quickly taking form as their shared volley of misunderstanding and correction. The pearl resists the natural effusions of her father’s relief, resituating his impressions that fate had robbed him of a jewel, that her postmortem state had been something to lament, and later—especially—that having found her now, he will joyfully remain with her where she stands. “Thre wordes has thou spoken at ene,” she chides, “Thou ne woste in worlde quat on dos mene; / Thy worde byfore they wytte con fle” (291-94). This sense of tumbling excess, of language’s oversaturation with ungovernable meanings, is key to *Pearl*’s ruminations upon the Bible. What the pearl stresses here is the basic premise of the poem’s parabiblical hypothesis: namely, that in Scripture and as expressed in historical time, it is for God’s Word—not the myopic understandings of human beings—to show the suppleness and agility of disidentical self-relation. Indeed for the *Pearl*-poet the disidentities explored and artistically framed in parabiblical renderings are strong expressions of the Bible’s power and value: what in human behavior could be called raving or instability is, where it is found in the Bible, an essential dynamic of God’s message for His world. The dreamer ought to have learned this lesson when arguing over the vineyard parable, ought to have developed some sense of the economy of abounding grace and understood how the pearl could aver that though others struggled more mightily, “more haf I of joye and blysse hereinne / . . . Then alle the wyyes in the worlde might wyne” (577-79). Too fair-minded to abide this logic, though, the dreamer had no qualms about saying so, impugning both the quality of the tale she tells and, if pressed, the very truth-value of the Bible she claims to represent.

Yet by stanza-group XVII, the dreamer who once could not see his way into the parable has been fully absorbed into the text of St. John's Apocalypse. Few of *Pearl's* refrains have the same mounting urgency, or the same density of concatenation, as the lines have here. They continually drive home the dreamer's inhabitation of the place before heavenly Jerusalem that scripture reveals to him; again and again, he sees it as did John:

In the Apokalypce is the fasoun preved,
As devyses hit the apostel Jhon.
As John the apostel hit syy with syght
I syye that city of gret renoun. (983-86)

What is more, his visual knowledge even comes somehow to outstrip what the pearl has cautiously promised him. She has answered his entreaty—"Bring me to that bygly bylde / And let me se thy blysfyl bor" (963-64)—by allowing not quite what he asks:

"That God wyl schylde;
Thou may not enter wythinne hys tor.
Bot of the Lombe I have the aquylde
For a sight therof thurgh gret favor." (965-68)

Yet through the powerful lucidity of John's biblical account, the *Pearl*-dreamer sees further and more exactly into the holy city than ever he was allowed:

As John devysed set saw I thare;
Thise twelve degres wern brode and stayre.
The cyté stod abof ful sware,
As longe as brode as hyghe ful fayre;
The stretes of golde as glasse al bare,
The wal of jasper that glent as glayre.
The wones wythinne enurned ware
Wyth alle kynnes perré that moght repayre.
Thenne helde vch sware of this manayre
Twelve forlonge space, er ever hit fon,
Of heght, of brede, of lenthe to cayre,
For meten hit syy the apostel John. (1021-32, my italics)

“John saw the city measured,” yet from his account the *Pearl*-dreamer knows not merely the proportions John reports,²¹² but detailed features of the city’s interior—the paving of the streets, the adornment of the edifices, even the fact that these draw fully upon heaven’s plenteous store of jewels.

The reader may remember, too, that the shape of the heavenly city (its standing “abof ful sware”) visually echoes the heavenly book John sees in the hands of the saints “inmydes the trone” (835). Here is another compelling emblem for *Pearl*-poet’s parabiblical experiments, for it is as though the pellucid jasper walls that both contain and display the holy city are aligned, in the *Pearl*-poet’s imagination, with the pages of the holy book that inspire his poetic vision.²¹³ As we look with him through the walls into the streets of the New Jerusalem, we too are thrust into the role of biblical seer John who “saw as bare” the host of saints who sit enthroned, “lesande the boke with leves sware / There seven syngnettes wern sette in seme” (836-38). It is a moment of paradoxically mediated revelation, yet all along *Pearl* has treated its biblical substratum paradoxically: it has required the dreamer to encounter the Bible as alternately familiar and foreign, dramatizing in his determined ignorance the painful otherness of biblical lessons; it has demonstrated the great contrariety within the integrity of biblical truth; and it has ended by reminding us, when the dreamer is jolted unwillingly from his vision, that everything that has

²¹² These the dreamer gets wrong; Revelation 21.16 describes a far vaster city: “And the city lieth in a foursquare, and the length thereof is as great as the breadth: and he measured the city with the golden reed for twelve thousand furlongs, and the length and the height and the breadth thereof are equal.” [*Et civitas in quadro posita est, et longitudo ejus tanta est quanta et latitudo: et mensus est civitatem de arundine aurea per stadia duodecim millia: et longitudo, et altitudo, et latitudo ejus æqualia sunt.*]

²¹³ The thematics of penetrative vision are continued in stanza-group XVIII, where the dreamer for instance exclaims “Thurgh wowe and won my lokyng yede; / For sotyle cler noght lette no lyght” (1049-50).

happened to him has occurred inside his mind. Just as a child upon a swing in the heart seems for *Piers Plowman* to iconize in-dwelling truth—

And if Grace graunte thee to go in in this wise
Thow shalt see in thiselwe Truthe sitte in thyn herte
In a cheyne of charite, as thow a child were,
To suffren hym and segge noght ayein thi sires wille²¹⁴

—so too does *Pearl* offer the suggestion that truth, some piece of it at least, lies hidden in the psyche.

The intensely experiential quality of the process of getting at this truth is fundamental to *Pearl*'s project of parabiblical thinking. As a poem it seeks not merely to transmit the Bible, but to steep its reader in a defamiliarized realm of *biblia qua experientia*, to elaborate a mode of biblicism that both demands and enables its own replaying as radical empiricism. *Pearl* effaces in itself the necessity of recognizing the biblical *as biblical*, so as to reharass the energy of biblical discourse and direct it into the service of ever more immediate imaginative plenitude. In this it departs from the more conservative translatory projects of poems like *Cursor Mundi*; as Piero Boitani puts it with regard to *Pearl*'s textual relation *Cleanness*, the *Pearl*-poet sets an artistic milestone: "Per prima insomma essa trasforma il testo sacro, parola di Dio, in pagina umana, parola d'artista."²¹⁵

Pearl's power as a parabiblical text consists in its frank recognition of scriptural "unresoun" for human beings, and its demonstration of how we might confront that sense of the scriptural sublime. In the mutual hailing of perhaps the poem's two most visually gorgeous passages—the reflective pool he borrows from Narcissus in *Le Roman de la Rose*, and the

²¹⁴ V.605-08. William Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman: A Critical Edition of the B-Text Based on Trinity College Cambridge MS B.15.17 (B-Text)*, 2nd ed., ed. A.V.C. Schmidt, London: J.M. Dent (Everyman), 1995.

²¹⁵ Piero Boitani, "La Prima Narrativa Inglese," *Studi inglesi: Raccolta di saggi e ricerche*, ed. Agostino Lombardo, Bari: Adriatica, 1978, pp. 11-52; p. 52.

Johannine blazon of the heavenly Jerusalem—we observe some of this work in aesthetic expression. Each passage gleams with light, and in *Pearl* each reflects the other. At some imprecise point, the volative sensation of *Pearl*'s early stanzas came to land, we recall, and on a riverbank “of beryl bright” (110), the dreamer had a moment of almost synesthetic awareness, his ear leading his eye to gaze into a pool. As though flowing from Scripture itself—it could be Revelation, or Ezekiel, or the Song of Songs—a sound of many waters swept through the scene.

Swangeande swete the water con swepe,	<i>swirling</i>
Wyth a rownande rourde raykande aright.	murmuring sound flowing straight on
In the founce ther stonden stones stepe,	<i>bottom . . . deep</i>
As glente thurgh glas that glowed and glyght,	
As stremande sternes, quen strothe-men slepe,	<i>human beings, lit: marsh-men</i>
Staren in welkin in winter nyght. (111-116)	

The light of this image irradiates the whole of the poem: drawn into the scene, we gaze with the dreamer down into the pool, and receive aesthetic training for understanding this supernal world, and for undertaking the painful education in scriptural dialogics with which the main of the poem is concerned. In an eddy of a rushing stream, bright gems sparkle in a pool. Condensations of colorful light themselves, the gems glisten beneath the surface of cold water as though through a pane of glass. *Pearl* has it both ways here with Paul's comment, *videmus nunc per speculum in ænigmatē*. No sooner do we register the image's layered glassiness than our gaze is reflected skyward where “stremande sternes”—both riverine and gem-like in appearance—mimic, reflect and illumine the scene below. The image converts the gaze *in ænigmatē* into a reflected gaze upon the face of heaven itself, which in turn resembles the glassy pool below. The dream world stretches large to infinitude, its bounds forever pushed out by the dynamics of *mise en abyme* double reflection. To look down in *Pearl* is in effect to look up, to find in the mirror of enigmatic life a reflex of heaven; moreover, *Pearl* seems to offer itself, under the intensely self-

reflexive habit of attention here demonstrated, as a version of the Bible from which it emanates, as both a structure of experiences and a derivative text.

Again, we are inside a single sleeping consciousness; that God's paradoxically heteroglossic idiolect prevails there is a product of the dreamer's inured reading. At the bottom of a sparkling pool, the poem performs an act of *inventio* in the classical rhetorical sense, simultaneously finding and composing the strangeness that occurs there. Like the reflective optics of the pool in its glassiness, the dynamics of *inventio* are multidirectional: the dreamer *comes upon* phenomena as they outwardly exist (*invenio*), yet also *invents them* where no such thing had been (*inventio* in the modern sense).²¹⁶ The conditions of dreaming are ideal for this paradox. Associatively conjured by the sound of many waters, Narcissus's fountain pools before our eyes, gleaming like its original with "stones stepe" at its "founce." As we look closely enough to identify the stones though, their aspect changes, and their source-text transforms from romance to Scripture: "Uche a pobbel in pole ther pyght / Was emerad, saffer, other gemme gente, / That alle the loghe lemed of lyght" (117-119). Guillaume de Lorris does not specify his stones so, and in fact his chromatics—"devient ynde, jaune et vermeil" (1556)—depart from the aqueous tints in *Pearl's* pool; but he does endue them with an ultimacy and an "allness" that may be what sends the *Pearl*-poet's imagination back to Scripture. For where Guillaume's crystals reflect the entirety of their surrounding world in perfect order, *Pearl's* partake of God.

I am lingering over this scene in order to stress that *Pearl's* submerged crystals represent knowledge we ought not have at this juncture in the poem's sequence. They reappear in the

²¹⁶ By way of corroborating such behavior in *Pearl qua chanson*, Zeeman notes that "*chanson d'aventure* openings . . . articulate aspects of the literary theory of the schools, describing very incisively the rhetoricians' notion of *inventio*, . . . rhetorical reworking that assumes composition is an erratic but sense-making encounter with 'found' texts or *materia*, whether textual or otherwise" (Zeeman, n. 11 *supra*, p. 230).

foundations of the New Jerusalem, as we have seen—“saffer . . . the second stale” (1002) in the city’s base structure, “emerade the furthe so grene of scale” (1005)—but their placement in this pool, some nine hundred lines early, gives us our experiential clue: as Borges suggests when ruminating on Paul’s *nunc in ænigmate*, “we see everything backwards. When we believe we give, we receive, etc. Then (a beloved, anguished soul tells me) we are in Heaven and God suffers on earth.”²¹⁷ The comment is apt for considering *Pearl*’s paradoxically fictive sanctity.

We see everything backwards: certainly the implied human story outside the poem supports a backward sequencing of its text. Grieving, a father turns to Scripture; in a swoon he dreams, the partial and conflicted knowledge he has taken from Scripture seeking to rectify and perfect itself through the agon of his dream. By a logic close to that of *inventio*, that is to say, the grieving dreamer does not come fully innocently to the stones in his pool. Rightly they astound him there, but he himself has imported them from an emotional and intellectual anteriority, his encounter with Revelation. Ravished by their beauty, he both *puts aside* and *puts on* their scriptural dimension, presenting them in their freshness for the sake of his poem, but planting them as a scriptural trace for the sake of his parabiblical theology. The “gemme gente” of the pool are instruments of *Pearl*’s parabiblicity in that they are literally dazzling. Recalling that “dazzle” (a word *Pearl* does not use) is the frequentative of “daze” (to bewilder the vision with an excess of light, and a word it does use to strong effect: “I stod as styлле as a dased quayle / For ferly of that frech figure,” sc., the New Jerusalem [1085-86]), we have a model for how a tincture of Scripture can escape its canonical bounds. *Pearl* is adamant that heaven has no need of light by secondary means, that “the self God [is] her lambe-lyght” there (1046). But when the gems that form its fabric can project heaven’s light into a multiverse plotted to encompass

²¹⁷ Jorge Luis Borges, “The Mirrors of Enigma,” in *Labyrinths*, Donald A. Yates, et al., eds., trans. James E. Irby, New York: New Directions, 2007, pp. 209-212; p. 211.

radical disparities—different imaginative worlds and conceptions of reality per se, skewed phases in eschatological time—the suggestion *Pearl* makes is that Scripture is not identical to itself because it is so infinitely reflexive, reflective and refractive and refractory. What text is not awash in holiness in the light of the Sainte-Chappelle?

Transition to further reflection

Just as *Cleanness* experiments with beatific optics and *Patience* with the Bible's discursive registers and generic kinds, *Pearl* finds its own way of insinuating its scriptural status. That status begins with *Pearl's* evident dependence upon the dreamer's reading of the Book of Revelation. *Pearl* is a vision of a vision of a vision, that is to say, an imaginative experience designed to bear back to its reader the *Pearl*-dreamer's sojourn in the mind of John the Divine. Such an experiment is self-sanctifying because it constructs itself as a prismatic view, an alternate turn of the glass, onto a privileged reality already sacrosanct by catholic consensus. Yet of the three sibling poems, *Pearl* handles its scriptural ambitions with the most complication, qualification and ambivalence. Such nuance is due to the dream-conditions of *Pearl's* experiment, which have distinct effects on the logic, narrative time and ontological purchase of the dream vision. Not only does John's apocalyptic vision explicitly control *Pearl's* narrative from the fourteenth stanza-group through the end, but the Book's influence in the dreamer's mind streams already through the image of the river's gems and their starry originals.

By a kind of outsider poetics, then, the dreamer has framed a vision of the vision, a liminal experience that respects, *because it must*, a twinned exigency—first, the need for the spiritual succor of a life inside Scripture, and yet the no less urgent knowledge that Scripture brooks no such entry. Not only “If any man shall add to these things, God shall add unto him

the plagues written in this book.” Scripture’s own final warning harbingers the pressures on vernacular biblical translation in the fourteenth century; as we reflect upon what is characteristic of parabiblical imagining, let us note that the *Pearl*-dreamer crosses a boundary of Scripture, in the sense of bridging it *and* traducing it, in a way that illuminates its either side. Barred describing the New Jerusalem from the inside—“Utwyth to se that clene cloystor / Thou may, bot inwyth not a fote,” the pearl warns—the dreamer nevertheless sees quite a lot, just “as John devised” (1021). He shows the self-consciously tenuous nature of the parabiblical experiment by reminding us that the imagination’s raids upon the Bible are regulated, but also energized, by the threat of discursive expulsion. Turning the Bible into something new means, literally, inducing its foliation—its burgeoning under attention, yes, but also its issuance in alternative copies available to manifold new, nontraditional modes of understanding.

In the second movement of this chapter, we shall reflect on the *Pearl*-poet’s parabiblical imagination more generally. Looking in succession one moment, hitherto unconsidered, from each of his biblically-based poems, we will think carefully about the grammar of parabiblicity in a very literal sense. *Pearl* is the natural starting point for this consideration. For as I have suggested, *Pearl*’s distinct mode of thinking biblically entails gazing indirectly at theological truths not otherwise assimilable to human thought and cognition: the poem’s nested mediations of John’s visionary experience make this clear. Just so, we shall think now about an important grammatical marker of indirection in narrative theology: in the poet’s use of the seemingly (and often truly) unremarkable conjunction “if,” we find entry into speculative worlds, and into important imaginative practices that sustain this poet’s texts as a central literary *corpus* of the parabiblical imaginary.

Coda and Conclusion

“Dysplese not if I speke error”: The *Pearl*-poet as subjunctive visionary

One pleasure of reading the *Pearl*-poet completely is the experience of noting, poem to poem, his distinctive habits of mind.²¹⁸ For all his famous namelessness, his works afford a sense of someone there, of not just a learned, creative intelligence, but also a mind marked by recognizable humanness.²¹⁹ In addition to salient intellectual features of his verse (its obvious

²¹⁸ The scholarly debate over whether the four poems of BL MS Cotton Nero A.x (in order as they appear there, *Pearl*, *Cleanness*, *Patience* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*) share an author is well summarized in R.A. Cooper and D.A. Pearsall, “The *Gawain* Poems: A Statistical Approach to the Question of Common Authorship,” *RES* 39 (1988), pp. 365-85. Although they exclude *Pearl* from their statistical analysis due to its use of a metrical structure different from the MS’s other long-lined poems, Cooper and Pearsall conclude that their evidence “offers the strongest support [sc., thus far in the debate] to the hypothesis that the [other] three poems . . . are by the same author” (385). Further they affirm, even as they survey dissenting arguments, that “generally . . . it is admitted that there are strong *a priori* grounds for assuming common authorship of the four poems” (367). “One may wish to call him the author the *Gawain*-poet,” writes William Vantuono. “One may wish to call him the *Pearl*-poet. A comprehensive analysis of the [MS] leads one to the conclusion that . . . the ‘same’ poet [wrote all four poems].” William Vantuono, “*Patience, Cleanness, Pearl* and *Gawain*: The Case for Common Authorship,” *Annuaire Mediaevale* 12 (1971), 37-69, p. 69.

²¹⁹ Malcolm Andrew usefully surveys the theories of authorship around these poems, canvassing evidence for the common authorship of *Pearl*, *Cleanness*, *Patience* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (plus evidence for excluding *St. Erkenwald* from the group); the history of hypothetical identifications of the poet, including the relatively prominent Massey hypothesis of mid-twentieth century scholarship; and some of the authorship tests scholars have applied in evaluating these matters. Malcolm Andrew, “Theories of Authorship,” in Derek Brewer and John Gibson, eds., *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet (Arthurian Studies XXXVIII)*, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997, pp. 23-33. Dorothy Everett confirms the poet’s objective anonymity, but has a sense of her own of his subjective personhood, especially his independence of mind. “No attempt to identify this author has so far been successful, and curiosity has to be satisfied with what can be learned from the poems themselves. Though these reveal a good deal about the poet’s opinions and outlook, they provide little evidence for any life-history. . . . The poet’s intimate knowledge of the Bible and his evident familiarity with Biblical commentary and interpretation suggests that he may have had an ecclesiastical education. If so, his independence of mind is the more remarkable. . . . Menner has remarked that, in *Purity*, he is ‘less fettered than most homilists by theological doctrine and conventional interpretations,’ and in *Pearl* he employs both in a manner still more individual.” Dorothy Everett, *Essays on Middle English Literature*, ed. Patricia Kean, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1955, pp. 68-69.

fluency in the Bible, say, or its prosodic proof that the poet, like Yeats after him, felt “the fascination of what’s difficult”), time with the *Pearl*-poet stirs something akin to personal familiarity.²²⁰ It happens almost osmotically, with attention to his work yielding psychostructural byproducts, implications about features of his mind that underlie his poesis: attending to what he thinks and what he thinks about, we also learn how he does his thinking. Our knowledge is thus shaped by evidence most telling for its inexplicitness—incidental details, recurrent patterns of thought and expression, or certain susceptibilities of mind or heart betrayed, as it were, only secondarily, only as faint traces of human idiosyncrasy. Such perceptions are provisional, of course, but abundant across his poems. To cite ready examples, we sense the poet’s sympathy for rigid, childlike notions of justice, even as his higher mind resists them; we watch him think associatively, as with the catchwords linking verses in *Pearl* or the seemingly chaotic tumble of Bible stories comprising *Cleanness*; and we feel his somatic delights, cool shade in the heat of day and the dapple of sunlight through leaves or in water. His emotional life, too, seems knowable: we feel he must share the prophet Jonah’s petulant gripe that “þe Fader þat hym formed were fale of his hele” [careless of his wellbeing] (*Patience* 92); that he knows from within the cycle of recalcitrance and reconciliation undergone by such of his characters as Jonah, the *Pearl*-dreamer and *Cleanness*’s Nebuchadnezzar; and that he wonders much at the divine complex of ubiquity and alterity suggested by Psalm 93, a scriptural locus that seems never far from his meditations.

²²⁰ Charles Muscatine cites two exemplary assessments of the *Pearl*-poet’s versification—A.C. Cawley’s claim that *Pearl*’s metrical form is “probably the most complex in English,” and Dorothy Everett’s more certain remark that while “the same stanza form, and the linking, are found elsewhere in Middle English . . . nowhere else is there anything like this complex scheme, nor is the stanza handled with such mastery.” Charles Muscatine, *Medieval Literature, Style, and Culture*, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999, p. 90 n. 8.

Another mental reflex of just this kind creates the atmosphere in which biblical source texts open up and come alive to the *Pearl*-poet's imagination. It is a technique of vibrancy, an unsuspected spark in the cloud chamber of his experiment. Its tersest lexical marker is "if," and a brief survey of its traces in this form will plot a few points of its interest for the poet's work.²²¹ Sketched together, these points help outline a space of "biblical hypothesis," a notionally bracketed space in which the *Pearl*-poet can put questions to the Bible, and ask questions about it widely and even stridently, because such activity is circumscribed within terrain both distinct from the Bible itself and emphatic about that separateness. The poet is especially interested in the kinds of speculative and counterfactual potency available in (but surely not limited to) "if"—in thinking along the lines, for instance, of "what if" and "as if." Admittedly, these are simple syntactic structures, but the poet never explicitly poses his questions in their basic terms. What he shares with them—with a statement like, "It was as if God Himself were present before my eyes," or an unfettered question like "What if the Bible itself did not exist?"—is a willingness to relinquish any claim to doctrinal verity, and to leave truth invested in those grounds from which such suppositions depart. No matter the experience, and whatever the experiment, God remains transcendent, the Bible does exist. The poet earns the right to imagine otherwise only by granting the untruth of his own thought. And yet within the bounds of that condition, the *Pearl*-poet appoints a space for asking theologically errant questions and following them wheresoever they go: How can I get a glimpse of the beatific vision? How can a poem make God appear before earthly eyes? Why do I seem to know more about the Bible than the Bible knows about itself? What if the Bible were somehow not supremely true, and had to adjust to us, rather than

²²¹ Subjunctive constructions using "if" are not all that statistically significant in the *Pearl*-poet's work. I count twenty-five in *Cleanness*, eleven in *Patience* and eight in *Pearl*, all unremarkable numbers for works of these poems' length. What is important about the poet's use of if is not mere frequency of the word's occurrence, but the kinds of thought work so often introduced by the word's use as a marker of radical possibility.

our adjusting to it? Is the Bible really all that different from secular literature? What might be truer than Scripture? Make me John of Patmos, please, not Moses: I wish to see God not from behind as He rushes by, but face to face on His own turf. It is this kind of audacity—visionary, but tempered by a wry perspective on its own essential limitedness—that the *Pearl*-poet adopts and explores throughout his work.

As this study concludes, I want to pause and consider how the *Pearl*-poet's intrepid "iffing" typifies the work done by the parabiblical imaginary more generally. Not all our writers flag their speculations with *if*, of course: Langland favors the conjunction "ac" to coordinate the clash of different ideas, and for all its inclusiveness I have yet to discern any grammatical tic in *Cursor Mundi* (though a paratactic "and" might befit the poem's comprehensiveness). A brief tour of the *Pearl*-poet's *if*-moments will underscore the visionary freedom he achieves by shifting into the subjunctive mood, and clarify some key features of the parabiblical tradition he does so much to shape. One *if*-moment apiece from *Pearl*, *Cleanness* and *Patience* will indicate the imaginative range of thinking with *if*. For *Pearl*, *if* is the hinge in an *a fortiori* comparison of disparate glories. "If hit was fayr ther I con fare / Wel loveloker was the fyrre londe" (147-148): if the earth is fair, how much the more so must heaven be, from which fairness itself derives? The very thought-structure inscribes a gradient of intensity between Scripture and its discursive others, experientiating the confluence of heaven and earth for the dreamer in ways that educate him dazzlingly. *Cleanness*'s select *if*-moment concerns angels—"If thay wer farande and fre and fayre to beholde, / Hit is ethe to leve by the last ende (605-08)—and is still more daring. Here, *if* proves a portal, allowing Scripture and parascripture (the poem) surprising dynamics of mutual participation, and empowering a two-part conjectural claim—namely, the claim of the poem to share in Scripture's own veridicality, and second the claim that Scripture and parascripture alike

conduce homologously toward the Real Presence of beatific vision. Finally, *Patience's if* points up tensions between the Bible as a ground for belief and its tendency, as narrative, often to strain everyday credulity. Of the Jonah story, the poem remarks, “Hit were a wonder to wene, yif Holy Wryt nere” (241-44). If it were not for its authoritative framing as Holy Writ, says *Patience*, this whale of a tale would hardly be plausible. The observation throws open the matter of credence per se, and suggests that, once lifted out of its biblical biome, the Jonah story sanctions questions that could not otherwise be put to Scripture. Provisionally emboldened thus, the poem conducts a searching meditation on the codicological asymmetry of Scripture, reminding us that even where intrinsic disidentity may rob Scripture of its own reflection, there are other registers of expression—prophecy, prayer, psalmody, blessing, malediction—to supplement and supplant the potency of descriptive narrative. At each of these junctures, *if* imparts contingency and conditionality, and with its protactic open-endedness bespeaks the experiential, entered-into quality of the *Pearl*-poet’s biblical explorations. Speaking with *if*, the *Pearl*-poet promises more to seek than to have found, and questing with it he gains entry onto paths of thought to be pursued.

“If hit was fayr ther I con fare”: *Pearl* and desirous seeing

Pearl's if-moment bears out this sense of geographic exploration. In it the grieving father, still dazed by the “dubbement dere” of his dreamscape and unaware of his daughter’s ghostly presence there, wanders agog along his side of the river that will separate him from her when they come to speak. His thirst for knowledge, and for immersion in his surroundings, increases as he proceeds.

More and more, and yet wel mare,
Me lyste to se the broke byonde;

I desired

For if hit was fayr ther I con fare,
Wel loveloker was the fyrrre londe. (145-48)

*where I walked
lovelier; farther*

If does a substantial amount of work here. Straddling extrapolation (“if this bank of the river is beautiful, how much more so the other side must be”) and comparison (“if this bank is beautiful, the other side is even more so”), it comports with the passage’s mixed sense that the dreamer *wants to see* the distant land and yet *can see* that it is “wel loveloker” than where he stands. The phrase itself, “the broke byyonde,” also avails such oscillation, the dreamer straining both to visualize the brook in the distance and to see past the brook into the divine realm it borders. Now, it bears remembering that near poem’s end this landscape will eventually “unhyde” (973) for the dreamer its divine ultimacy. It turns out that the brook is the *fluvium aquae vitae* that flows from God’s own throne, and that while its course affords distant views of the New Jerusalem, the river itself marks the boundary beyond which the dreamer may not pass.²²² He has dreamed his way into a landscape adjacent to holy ground, but *only* adjacent to it. “Bow up towarde thys bornes heved, / And I anendes the on this side / Schal sue,” the pearl will invite him (974-76). But by insisting that they keep to separate sides, she pointedly limits his welcome to her realm: one bank is for him, the far richer one opposite for herself. And as for entry into the heavenly city, “That God wyl schylde; / Thou may not enter wythinne his tor” (965-66).

For the dreamer a good deal rides on the tantalized desire to see, on “wishing his foot were the equal of his eye,” as Richard of Gloucester will put it in Shakespeare. The verses’ vacillation between seeing and seeing-beyond, and between empirical comparison and imaginative extrapolation, hints at the fact (unknown to the dreamer himself) that he struggles here and throughout the poem not just to ford rivers, but to pass from one ontological plane, or

²²² Rev. 22.1: “And he shewed me a river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb.” [*Et ostendit mihi fluvium aquae vitae splendidum tamquam cristallum procedentem de sede Dei et agni*]

one eschatological phase, to another. Mix of “mokke and mul” that he is (905), he will never do so in this life, and the pearl is firm about not offering help. Yet as a favor bespeaking Christ’s kindness (and perhaps her own desert, but certainly no merit in the dreamer), she will eventually procure for her father an exterior glimpse of the heavenly city: “Utwyth to se that clene cloystor / Thou may, but inwyth not a fote” (969-70). These existential facts—the dual traps of body and sinfulness, plus the ineligibility of the living for an afterlife of any kind—take on an additional valence in light of the *intertextual* fact that the dreamer stalks, too, around the perimeter of John’s vision of the New Jerusalem. Here, the pearl’s ban bespeaks the toughness of Scripture itself, its refusal to accommodate human wishes and its resistance to efforts to see it from within. Where a grieving father’s pain finds expression in *Pearl*’s elegiac dimension, it is the challenge put by Scripture to the dreamer as reader that provides impetus to render the Bible parabiblically. Bereft of comfort and locked (just) out of doors, the *Pearl*-dreamer’s predicament becomes the *Pearl*-poet’s characteristically liminal aesthetic.

A. C. Spearing has described the poet’s tendency toward “realizing Scripture,” noting “how completely pictorial is his imagination, how fully it enters into the shadowy spaces suggested by his original and fills them with objects and events.”²²³ But behind this technique of expansive composition lurk spiritual hopes and readerly insatiety: the poet is not so much at home in the Bible as a novice there, longing to *see* the biblical scenes he recreates, and recreating them foremost in order to vivify his own attention and to drive home—to *feel*, in addition to knowing—the inexhaustible values and significations they contain. His efforts yield not defined, delimited restagings but a provisionally shareable mode of restaging per se. Inviting himself into biblical spaces—landscapes, enigmas, hidden soteriological structures—even against the decorums he himself takes pains to have enforced, the *Pearl*-poet pressurizes his own

²²³ A.C. Spearing, *The Gawain Poet: A Critical Study*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1970, p. 60.

brash experimentality. Even while he is still reading, as it were, the poet anticipates in his activity the structure of parabiblical reading: checked corporeally and epistemologically in his effort to enter into the space of the Bible proper—checked here especially, perhaps, by the rare difficulty of reading Revelation—the dreamer finds recourse in the vivifying and personalizing effects of looking closely, wondering carefully and positioning himself as both mediator and exemplar for iterative engagements with biblical narrative. Parabiblical texts in this consideration are records of prior acts of reading biblical texts, where Bible texts and their myriad discrete imaginings comprise growing, interconnected biblical lexemes. “No man may see my face and live”: the supreme stakes in God’s warning here (beatific vision, life itself) reappear *sub specie temporis* as counters in the poet’s interim strategy of contingent proliferation. Denied the singularity of direct vision, biblical encounters with the Word may yet yield vivid snaps of His infinitude that accumulate to approach asymptotically to His presence. This, as we have seen, is especially important to how *Cleanness* envisions the experience of reading Scripture.

The *Pearl*-dreamer’s *if*-moment thus equips the poet’s broader work of biblical representation. As at this stage of *Pearl*, the poet’s narrators across his poems both discover biblical terrain for the first time and show prior familiarity with it; they strive to crystallize their vision of biblical phenomena and to read through to the stores of divine energy from which they emanate; and they maneuver within a gap between received knowledge (the Bible) and speculation (its literary restaging). Most importantly, this *if*-moment encodes in two ways the *Pearl*-poet’s understanding of imagining parabiblically. First, insofar as the dreamer has averred that “I thocht that Paradyse / Was ther over gayn tho bonkes” (i.e., across the river [137-38]), he implies a locus of human activity (“ther I con fare”) that takes its coloration and its

ontological guarantee from the adjacent, established site of sacred truth (“the fyrre londe”). Second, insofar as the dreamer will never manage to cross—a rash attempt to fling himself “over marvelous meres” (1166) is after all what ends his vision—his checked desire figures the encounter with sacred space (the New Jersusalem, the Bible itself) as both a hailing and a buffeting, and imparts to the narrative an ongoing suspense. Suspense, in this case a condition of somehow knowingly not knowing, is among this poet’s key tools. In *Pearl*, the dreamer’s hope for translation to the brook’s other side proves futile, and thereby exposes this particular suspense to be manufactured by the poet not to pressurize narrative tension in advance of a final catharsis (a goal never met), and not in order merely to tantalize his reader, but as part of his paradoxical project of trailblazing the Bible with the Bible itself in hand as roadmap. Against the pearl’s authoritative warnings not to expect entry into her realm, and against the reader’s growing sense that this dream is governed by equally preventative literary conventions, the suspense that swells in the dreamer’s “if” emerges as hollow. Or if not hollow, then all too solid—for this cliffhanger has feet planted firmly upon the ground.

“Ethe to leve by the last ende”: *Cleanness*’s parabiblical typology

Our *if* passage from *Cleanness* will help explain such usage of *if* to create moments of factitious suspense. It begins with Abraham, who, according to Genesis 18, receives three unknown visitors to his tent. Hiding out in the shade, he watches their approach in a glare of sunlight. As the *Cleanness*-poet imagines the story, *if* conveys Abraham’s amazement—at the men’s sudden appearance, and at their comeliness as they shimmer into view.

He was schunt to the schadow under schyre leves; Thenne was he war on the waye of wlonk wyes thrynne; If thay wer farande and fre and fayre to beholde, Hit is ethe to leve by the last ende. (605-08)	<i>retreated; bright road; three lordly men handsome; noble easy; believe</i>
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In one sense these lines make a comparison like *Pearl*'s: if the visitors' comeliness strains belief, simply chalk it up to their provenance. Keep reading to find out how—and who—they can possibly be. But because this truth is momentarily, teasingly withheld, its assurance is harder to come by, and the lines complicate the effect we see in *Pearl*. By marking in it what is tentative, or contingent, or difficult to believe, *if* helps disclose in this passage's aporetic elements. First, these lines omit the first part of Gen. 18.1 ("And the Lord appeared to him in the vale of Mambre as he was sitting"), "apparently . . . [in order] to preserve Abraham's uncertainty regarding the identity of the visitors."²²⁴ Without the Bible's upfront assurance that Abraham's visitors either are or somehow represent his God, the scene inscribes in *Cleanness* a nonbiblical suspense. Readers are given a chance to wonder, with Abraham, who the approaching "wyes" are; though few readers of the poem probably *do* wonder, given the episode's wide familiarity, the poet yet invites our identification with Abraham *in tenebris*. Something else is missing here, too. A well-known exegetical tradition dating at least to Hilary of Poitiers (d. 368) had understood the "wyes thrynne" as the three Persons of God come to extend the terms of the covenant with Abraham. Writing *Cleanness*, the poet plainly knows this tradition, but his knowledge is not obtrusive.²²⁵ Rather than thematizing its Trinitarian hermeneutic potential, the poet restores the

²²⁴ Jane K. Lecklider, *Cleanness: Structure and Meaning*, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997, p. 117.

²²⁵ One of *Cleanness*'s best readers, Spearing claims that the poem makes the "theological implications of [Abraham's visit] . . . explicit," citing such details as the passage's play with grammatical number. It is true, of course, that Abraham "haylsed hem in onhede" [i.e., greets his guests as one] (612) and shows general awareness of his guests' triunity, but such details are as easily biblical as traditional. At Gen. 18:2-3, for instance, he immediately recognizes their divine provenance and adores all three as "Lord." I would argue that passing on the Bible's own Trinitarian hints does not alone constitute explicitness; in poem as in Bible, whatever Trinitarian implications there are remain isomorphically bound up with unique narrative features. They remain, indeed, implicated (Spearing, *The Gawain Poet*, 58).

scene to semiotic openness; his version includes the Bible's clues to Trinitarian reading, but it does not insist upon them. Instead of referring the episode to its dogmatic future—a plausible temptation given the poem's concern with seeing God *facie ad faciem*—the poet presents only the original (and originary) dramatic phenomena. Just as he does in the Bible, Abraham equivocates between singular and plural grammatical forms in addressing his guests, and his visitors alternate between speaking as one and speaking as three. The result is that the scene *allows* recourse to the original biblical narrative without *requiring* it, allowing us instead to experience the encounter innocently at first hand. (Ironically it is a nonbiblical addition to this episode that best communicates the poet's interest in experiential immediacy. Taking leave of Abraham, the visitors “sayden as thay sete samen alle thynne / . . . ‘I schal efte hereaway, Abram’” [645-47]. Cued by Gen. 18. 10, the poet intensifies the strangeness of three speaking as one “he,” choosing the most stark, surreal way he can to portray vocal triunity.²²⁶ To see and hear the three visitors speaking “as thay sete samen alle thynne”—in unison like automata!—is to feel oneself drawn unprepared into the strangeness of Abraham's position meeting God on intimate, homely terms.)

The uncertainty of *if* germinates as Abraham's encounter takes shape and requires his mind, and with it that of *Cleanness's* reader, to surpass in a flash its mundane limitations. Human and divine planes intersect *in ostio tabernaculi sui*, at the door of Abraham's tent, and from the outset of the experience these lines not only describe the attendant amazement, they induce it. Ostensibly an instance of narrative focalization—the term is Sarah Stanbury's, and ultimately Mieke Bal's—the lines render the sequence of Abraham's awareness: as he gazes

²²⁶ The pertinent portion of 18.10 reads, “And *he* said to him: *I* will return and come to thee at this time” (my emphasis); Vulgate phrasing (*dixit revertens veniam ad te tempore isto*) does nothing more to settle precisely how three speak as a grammatical first person singular.

from the shade, “what is seen is what is known.”²²⁷ Yet this perceptual sequence is most interesting because it breaks off just between seeing and knowing. Cognition (“Thenne was he war”) yields not recognition, but rupture, and instead of achieving empirical clarity, focalizing undergoes a kind of bottoming out, a sudden skip to subjunctive contingency: *if* the visitors are “farande and fre and fayre to beholde.” Are they? Rather than saying so directly, the *if* clause bears back an experience that Abraham has already had—namely, the thought upon seeing them that his visitors *are* “farande and fre and fayre to beholde.” The passage elides the moment of that thought’s generation, though, and with it initially unrecorded, the effect is one of an echo lacking its original, an aural hall of mirrors—literal amazement among irreconcilable experiential facts. *Cleanness*’s Abraham turns out to have, to be able to call upon, the memory of Scripture’s Abraham. This is the first stage of assembly in this *if*-moment’s extraordinary parabiblical gesture.

The second stage comes of how the *if*-moment recommends making sense of Abraham’s amazement. Momentary as it is, *if* jars readerly progress into Abraham’s own shattering surprise. Into Abraham’s shade shines the blinding light of God: we can hardly blame him if he blinks a time or two, and in this connection *if* answers, grammatically, to the slow somatic cognition of Abraham’s eyes. *If* the visitors are incredibly beautiful—they are, and the subjunctive mood conveys the paradox of his incredulous conviction of their beauty—there must be a way of accounting for their beauty. For Hilary and others after him, the explanation is Trinitarian: God has come in the form of three men, *of course* they are ravishing. But for the

²²⁷ Borrowing the concept from Bal’s seminal study *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, Stanbury understands “focalization” in the *Pearl*-poet to denote a process whereby “description creates its own audience by locating [a subjective actant] in the narrative, a technique that forces attention on the very act of perception.” In *Pearl*, writes Stanbury, a “description . . . carefully focalized by the dreamer, becomes not simply a precisely realized scene but also a perceptual frame that marks and signifies the fictional viewer’s epistemological horizon: what is seen is what is known” (Stanbury, *Seeing*, 4).

Cleanness-poet there is another way of filling out the conditional statement “if-then”: *if* the visitors are impossibly gorgeous, their appearance is not just credible, but “ethe to leve by the last ende,” *easy to believe* in light of the full story. As in the ruminative assent of *Pearl*’s linked catchwords, there is the assurance simply to wait and see, *lege intellege*. The reader patient enough to follow this advice will come to a rather odd surprise. Not only can the Abraham of *Cleanness* draw upon memories accrued in the Bible, but the reverse is true as well. As he experiences this *if*-moment, *Cleanness*’s Abraham—a traumatized victim in the fullest sense of both these words—gathers his bearings not just from his own biblical original, but from a particular version of that figure necessarily marked, in his turn, but the experience he has had here in the poem.²²⁸ By a kind of intertextual time-travel puzzle, *Cleanness*’s Abraham consults his biblical self, but this figure—chronologically, ontologically, and intertextually prior though he is—is only relatable because he, too, underwent the traumatic rupture recorded in *Cleanness* and only in *Cleanness*. By a strange logic permitted by *if*, the poem inscribes the Bible with a memory of the intertextual future, inserting itself into the very pages from which it claims to derive.

Explaining how this can be so will explain why it is important. Brashly innovative as it is, such proleptic intertextuality relies upon a wholly orthodox credal recursiveness: the Bible may often strain belief, but it is also the surest ground for overcoming any such challenge. Biblical narratives contain miracles, impossibilities, intrusions of divine providence into the contingency of the everyday. How can we best make sense of these difficulties? Alongside consultation, meditation, catechetical instruction, the means for doing include further Bible

²²⁸ For this discussion of trauma I rely on Cathy Caruth’s treatment of Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism*. Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996), 10-24.

reading, taking stock of connections among the Bible's various narrative parts. For the medieval reader especially, the Bible is palpably alive in its circuitry of self-reference, its difficulties and alterities becoming "ethe to leve by the last ende," more readily assimilated the more their contexts enlarge and overlap. In part this happens here in *Cleanness*: with his eyes dazzled, Abraham's trauma registers textually as perception's elision into apperceptive memory. "If thay wer farande and fre and fayre to beholde" is an echo of Abraham's mind in self-awareness, not *having* but *remembering having had* an impression of the men who approach him. So far the recovery of information meant to ease belief works in a plausible direction, and we are invited into Abraham's cognitive communion with his biblical ancestor-self. But the poem uncannily troubles this notion of biblical recourse. Excavating Abraham's memory of the visitors' ravishing radiance and momentarily incredulous myself, I identify with Abraham in *having found* his visitors fair and in expecting their subsequent behavior to nourish my belief in their beauty. The trouble, though, is that Genesis does not actually authenticate the experience of trauma discernible in *Cleanness's* Abraham. The estimative phrase "farande and fre and fayre to beholde," implicitly a transcript of the biblical Abraham's thought, translates nothing that is in the poet's Vulgate, seeming only to deduce Abraham's psychology from his deferent behavior. Thus *Cleanness's* epistemological and ontological rupture finds its trace not in any properly biblical text, but in a memory inscribed by the poet in the mind of the *biblical* Abraham as a symptom of *nonbiblical* trauma.

These features might dissever the two versions of the visitation story altogether, or at least evince *Cleanness's* version as a significant change upon its biblical original. After all, the Bible's Abraham experiences no crisis upon seeing his visitors, and as such never experiences the trace memory that marks his alter ego in *Cleanness*. Yet the poem can insist upon the viable

intertwining of the versions for two reasons. First, the episode cleaves closely to its biblical original in nearly all other places, rendering much of the Vulgate account of the visit in careful sense-for-sense, often word-for-word translations. Second, and more importantly, it is precisely here that *Cleanness* affirms its investment in the structure of recursive reading, that is, in the indelible mutual orbit of Bible and parable. Biblically faithful to begin, *Cleanness*'s depiction of the visit to Mambre casts as its protagonist an Abraham who is isomorphically he of the bible and he of the poem; the fission between the two identities is nearly imperceptible when the Abraham who "awakes," post-traumatically with his memory, is he of the poem alone. Even once we discern from its trace the fact of the trauma that has occurred, the very nature of our clue—a memory—forms a narrative ligature. Traumatized, *Cleanness*'s Abraham remembers an experience undergone by his original biblical self; but because that particular self does not exist biblically, the poem has managed a certain intertextual legerdemain, one that not only renders latent the original traumatic experience such that it is only knowable in memory, but also effaces the gap between biblical original and parabiblical retelling.

This structure of signification has the surprising effect of casting the Abraham of *Cleanness* a certain kind of typological fulfillment, in Erich Auerbach's sense, for the Abraham of Scripture. For Auerbach,

figural prophecy implies the interpretation of one worldly event through another; the first signifies the second, the second fulfills the first. Both remain historical events; yet both, looked at in this way, have something provisional and incomplete about them; they point to one another and both point to something in the future, something still to come, which will be the actual, real and definitive event. This is true not only of Old Testament prefiguration, which points forward to the incarnation and the proclamation of the gospel, but also of these latter events, for they too are not the ultimate fulfillment, but themselves a promise of the end of time and the true kingdom of God.²²⁹

²²⁹ Erich Auerbach, "Figura," 58.

The application of Auerbach's terms here may seem strange: I am suggesting a link not so much between two events or two historical persons, but between two versions—biblical and parabiblical, original and recension, authoritative and imagined—of the same event and the same character. But Auerbach's conception is useful for pointing up *Cleanness's* parabiblical ambition in two ways. First, the complex historical shuttling written into the poem as trauma suggests that Abraham becomes dynamically historical unto himself—able in his properly biblical guise to partake in his later, literary self, no less fully than *Cleanness* can look back to the Bible for source material. And in this connection, the Abraham of *Cleanness* epitomizes and embodies the poem's claim to a visionary status different only in degree, but not in kind, from that of Scripture itself. Its Abraham is now set on the kind of historical continuum Auerbach discerns in the logic of figuration; In the dynamics of memory that pass between the two versions of the patriarch, both merely point toward the “ultimate fulfillment, [and are] themselves a promise of the end of time and the true kingdom of God”—the *visio Deum* for which *Cleanness* proleptically trains its reader.

For the *Cleanness*-poet, Abraham's visitors appear in Genesis only to walk directly out of frame and into his poem. That his text fabricates this experience, rather than replicating it from a biblical source, is for him no trouble. Indeed, *Cleanness* is undeterred by the missing biblical evidence for “farande and fre and fayre to beholde,” pointedly *increasing* here its commitment to biblical authentication. *Cleanness's* visitors are fair, then, not because Scripture says so, and not only because Genesis 18 equips its reader to see narrative implications, but because the *Cleanness*-poet has rearranged these narratives, source and derivation as they are, into something like the “simultaneous order” of texts in T.S. Eliot's well-known picture of literary tradition.²³⁰

²³⁰ From his great essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” “simultaneous order” is T.S. Eliot's phrase for a widening of the significance of “tradition” beyond its usual sense of what

By this logic, Abraham's dramatized incomprehension is not explained by biblical details, but placed on equal footing with the Bible itself in a way that effects credibility. Quickly as they occur, these movements represent the imaginative process of this poet at work, for whom the Bible itself stands always already behind reading experiences biblical and parabiblical alike, and for whom parabiblical imagining stages the proposition that for the late fourteenth-century there is no such experience as reading the Bible for the first time.

Now, as to "ethe to leve by the last ende," one final remark: the eschatological resonance of this phrasing is, I think, almost incidental. *Cleanness* is concerned with *visio Deum* and with soteriological clarity, yes, but in its suspenseful context the phrase refers primarily to narrative eventuation, not the eschaton. The phrase's collocation of narrative and eschatological valences does have an upshot for the poet's work, though, one with special pertinence to *Cleanness* but some aptness for characterizing all his works. *Cleanness* explores a series of linked biblical narratives—chiefly the stories of Noah's flood, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and the demise of the debauched king Belshazzar—with an eye to their reverse exemplarity. Near its end the poet reveals the intention that has guided his work in *Cleanness*, and summarizes what he has accomplished. He concludes the scene of Belshazzar's brutal murder with the surmise

cultural pasts hand down to present moments. "[A]nyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year," Eliot wryly prescribes, must learn "by great labour" that "the historical sense [of tradition] involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer . . . has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity." Given Eliot's declared aim to "halt [his essay] at the frontier of metaphysics or mysticism," *Cleanness*'s attempt to marshal its meditations on the Bible into simultaneous order with the Bible itself may well show an audacity of which even Eliot in his boldness may have declined to take account. (T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* [New York: Knopf, 1920]).

that the wicked king will be “of lykynges on lofte letted” [deprived of the joys of heaven], and then reflects back upon his now-completed plan.

Thus upon thrynne wyse I haf yow thro schewed	<i>in three ways</i>
That unclannes tocleves in corage dere	<i>breaks the heart</i>
Of that wynnelych Lorde that wonyes in heven,	<i>lordly; dwells</i>
Entyses Hym to be tene, telled up His wrake. (1805-08)	<i>angry, mounts his wrath</i>

The lines evince the *Cleanness*-narrator’s complicated vatic confidence. On one hand he asserts here his ability, like that of the *Cursor*-poet before him, to “show” biblical narratives in the fullness of their revelation, his certainty coming through in the flat, untroubled declaration “I have yow schewed” over and against the arcane nature of what he claims to have shown. At the moral and dramatic center of this poem is nothing less than God’s own heartbreak and anger wrenched into legibility by the poem despite the feelings of reticence and embarrassment that they may entail for God Himself. On the other hand, *Cleanness* accesses the truths it deploys—truths of human wickedness, but also of God’s own emotional life, His actions in and through history, and of cosmic events that stand outside time altogether—by means of other texts. Where the *Cleanness*-poet conveys a biblical truth, there precisely he reveals the truth of the Bible; he lacks any other access to the events of salvation history which he narrates. At its most ambitious—the pitch at which it often operates in *Cleanness*’s thinking about beatific vision—this strategy of certitude even lays claim to God’s own representability. Such ambition, as we have seen, tends toward biblical cruxes in which questions of God’s identity are at stake, but it also animates a calculus of disclosure whereby *Deus* and *logos* become provisionally interoperable, such that attention to revealed narrative achieves, simultaneously *and* cumulatively, the very access to *visio Deum* that the poem is at pains to safeguard. In brief, to read God’s word as it is re-revealed in *Cleanness* is also to see God in His thematized concealedness. By cultivating vernacular selfhood in the practice of reading *Cleanness*, a reader

simultaneously prepares his soul for beatific vision and undertakes an experimental prolepsis of that ultimate experience. With its confidence in the efficacy of continued reading, “ethe to leve by the last ende” bespeaks the poem’s faith in its own power to condition both belief and blessedness.

“A wonder to wene, yif Holy Wryt nere”: *Patience* and belief’s re-expression

Patience’s *if*-moment is the simplest and most far-reaching of our tour. It occurs just as Jonah is tossed overboard from the ship carrying him toward Tharsis. The poem pauses, just as Jonah hovers about to plunge, to reflect on the extreme unlikelihood of what has transpired. At the expulsion of God’s fugitive, the roiling seas have calmed. The ship’s crew rejoice for their salvation.

Thagh thay be jolef for joye, Jonas yet dredes;	<i>sc., the sailors; light-hearted</i>
Thagh he nolde suffer no sore, his seele is on anter;	<i>well-being is in doubt</i>
For whatso worthed of that wyye fro he in water dipped,	<i>became</i>
Hit were a wonder to wene, yif Holy Wryt nere. (241-44)	<i>believe</i>

The scene is intensely visually imagined, nowhere more so than the split-second when Jonah is snatched by the whale: “The folk yet haldande his fete, the fysch hym tyd hentes” (251). In like fashion, this stanza captures a clutch of ironic simultaneities which, taken together, “insist on [God’s] all-wielding power.”²³¹ The sailors rejoice while, and because, Jonah hurtles into dread; the hapless fugitive is imperiled precisely by his risk aversion; the narration hints at a future unimaginable from what has come before, but directly determined by it; and—most crucial to our purposes—the Jonah story, *qua* Scripture, comes into the dissonant self-relation in which *Patience* finds it most interesting to consider. “Yif Holy Wryt nere,” the poem realizes, the ensuing action would be “a wonder to wene”—an unlikely fiction, a “tale unresounable” in the

²³¹ Adam Brooke Davis, “What the Poet of *Patience* Really Did to the Story of Jonah,” *Viator* 22 (1991), 272.

Pearl-dreamer's phrase. The comment is fair enough in passing: without its scriptural warrant, Jonah's tale would strain belief to say the least.

But the *Pearl*-poet's *œuvre* is designed to open up questions about the relative status of the Bible and its discursive descendants, and as such the passing assurance—"this would all be wondrous if it were not scripturally guaranteed"—invites more careful scrutiny. In a sense it may be logically fallacious, for the Jonah story's biblicity hardly diminishes its wonders: Holy Wryt is prime hunting ground, after all, for wonders to wene, and in some ways Jonah's biblicity surely *enhanced* medieval audiences' astonishment at his tale. The biblical framework of the Book of Jonah's would not have domesticated its wonders, but enhanced them.

To be sure, for a fourteenth-century English audience, Jonah's typological participation in Christ's Passion and redemption would be the highest of all the story's wonders. Christ Himself affirms this relationship to Jonah in no uncertain terms. Asked again and again by the Pharisees signs bespeaking his divinity Christ finally tires of the need to prove Himself. "An evil and adulterous generation seeketh a sign," Jesus says, "and a sign shall not be given it, but the sign of Jonas the prophet."

For as Jonah was in the whale's belly three days and three nights, so shall the Son of man be in the heart of the earth three days and three nights. The men of Ninive shall rise in judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it: because they did penance at the preaching of Jonas. And behold a greater than Jonas here!²³²

²³² Mt. 12:38-41 (cp. Mk. 8:11-12 and Lk. 11:29-32): "Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying: Master we would see a sign from thee. Who answering said to them: An evil and adulterous generation seeketh a sign: and a sign shall not be given it, but the sign of Jonas the prophet. For as Jonas was in the whale's belly three days and three nights: so shall the Son of man be in the heart of the earth three days and three nights. The men of Ninive shall rise in judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it: because they did penance at the preaching of Jonas. And behold a greater than Jonas here." [*Tunc responderunt ei quidam de scribis et Pharisaeis dicentes, Magister volumus a te signum videre. Generatio mala et adultera signum quaerit et signum: non dabitur ei, nisi signum Ioniae prophetae. Sicut enim fuit Iona in ventre ceti tribus diebus et tribus noctibus, sic erit Filius hominis in corde terrae tribus diebus et tribus noctibus. Viri ninevitae surgent in iudicio cum generatione ista et condemnabunt eam quia paenitentiam egerunt in praedicatione Ioniae et ecce plus quam Iona hic.*]

Thunderous as they are from Christ's mouth, these words in some ways reverse the logic of figuration we considered with *Cleanness's* Abraham, refusing the sense of eschatological futurity that animates Auerbachian figural relationships. Rather than aligning Jonah with His earthly ministry as projections toward the kingdom of God, Christ here puts a hard stop to such chains of signification. All signs now cease, Christ avows—all but Jonah whose efficacious preaching helps bring about the conversion of the world into the kingdom of God.

The stakes are impassably high, then, when *Patience* configures this suspenseful *if*-moment. As it does in *Cleanness*—*Patience's* truest companion poem in some many ways—*if* marks in *Patience* a moment of soaring ambition and carefully configured paradox. Our salient line, “Hit were a wonder to wene, yif Holy Wryt nere,” sets the bar for *Patience* as it strives to convey its bracing, counterintuitive claims about scriptural reading. Two key features of the line encode the task *Patience* sets for itself; let us take them in order as they appear here.

First, an extended consideration of “wonder”: in this line, the speculative powers of *if* coordinate with the wonder the *Patience*-poet finds in the Jonah story—or more precisely, *would* find in it, were it not Holy Wryt. This coordination does surprisingly complex work for *Patience's* parabiblical endeavor. As we have observed, the biblical setting of the Book of Jonah does two contrary kinds of work that bear on its reception: the story is only explicable for its placement in Scripture, yet that very placement classes it among medieval Europe's sacrosanct miraculous texts. In a gesture approaching doublespeak, *Patience* flags the story's wonderful quality only to tame it under the banner of its biblicity. More is at work here, I suggest, than an innocent exclamation of (near) incredulity: to be sure, by rinsing the story of wonder in the sense of its being incredible (“a wonder to wene”), *Patience* lays the ground for its own experimentation on the sacred text.

By separating the Jonah story—on biblical grounds—from the wonder it naturally inspires, *Patience* may assert a discursive right to follow in its path: to translate it as text, to vivify it with detail, to join it to unprecedented thematic interests, to give it fresh existential framing. Caroline Walker Bynum’s meditation on medieval conceptions of wonder helps us to see why. Wonder in the high middle ages was “cognitive, non-appropriative, perspectival, and particular,” Bynum writes; it was “a recognition of the singularity and significance of the [wonderful] thing encountered.”²³³ Keeping in view the prominent place accorded to “wonder” in this *if*-moment, we see how Bynum’s taxonomy of the experience of wonder might map onto *Patience*’s inset presentation of Jonah’s story: patience is an exquisitely singular “poynt” (1 and *passim*) of which the poet has “herde on a halyday, at a hyghe masse,” (9), the story of which he takes pains to pass along just “as Holy Wryt tells” (60). From the beginning of the poem readers are invited into a position of wonder vis-à-vis the Jonah tale; but even as this occurs, the tropological guidance offered by the story abrogates Bynum’s criterion that the position of wonder is one of non-appropriative distance. As soon as the poet asks rhetorically, “Did not Jonas in Judé suche jape sumwhyle?” the question is no longer rhetorical, and we are invited into this nested set of subject positions (those of Jonah, the narrator and the poet) for whom the story plays out.

We lay hands, that is, on both the experience and the text of the reluctant prophet Jonah, such that wonder takes a different turn. Bynum continues by developing the term in religious contexts that depart from our description so far. “In the homiletic and hagiographic tradition,” she writes,

we find that the wonder-ful was contrasted not with the known, the knowable or the usual, but with the imitable. The phrase *non imitandum sed admirandum* . . . had been

²³³ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity* (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2001), 51.

used since the early days of the Church to express the distance between heroes and martyrs, on the one hand, and the ordinary faithful, on the other. (Bynum, p. 51)

Here is the crucial speculation written into *Patience's* *if*-moment, the insistence on Scripture's imitability and iterability in texts like those of the *Pearl*-poet, but certainly not limited to them. Indeed, *Patience's* *if*-moment marks in its "wondering" the notional threshold of the parabiblical *per se*. If "Holy Wryt nere," *Patience* suggests, we would have to invent it—and as we have seen, the poem's thematic center contains just such energies of invention. Pressurized in the belly of the whale, Jonah's angst issues in a psalm of his own making; God's concern for creation takes shape precisely in His creative investments. *Patience* offers itself as an expressive scripture *in absentia Scripturae*, and as an imitable script in its own right for biblically derived expression.

Conclusion

From the acute moments of *if* we have just surveyed, we can extrapolate a good deal of broad information about the parabiblical imaginary. Indeed, each of our *if*-moments bespeaks a crucial behavior of the mode of literature we have examined, all of which rely on the elements of uncertainty, provisionality and playfulness contained in the tiny conjunction *if*. To be clear, my basic suggestion is that all these poems show the kind of behavior isolated in each of the *if*-moments. Moreover, links between the *Pearl*-poems and *Cursor Mundi* offer lineaments for the form the parabiblical imaginary itself.

Where *Pearl's* *if* is concerned, we saw the narrator inhabiting physical space (and therefore discursive space) adjacent, but only adjacent, to the body of Scripture proper. This arrangement bespeaks the power of fiction as exegesis, a hermeneutic whereby successive recensions manifest Scripture in particular, and particularly determined, ways. John Hollander

calls this a “kind of poetic answering,” in which

a poem treats an earlier one as if it posed a question, and answers it, interprets it, glosses it, revises it in poetry’s own way of saying, “In other words . . .” In these terms, the whole history of poetry may be said to constitute a chain of answers to the first texts—Homer and Genesis—which themselves become questions for successive generations of answerers. These answers which occur between poems and earlier, questioning ones are of a different sort from those which occur between parts of the same poem, but they may be related by the ways in which they trope, or make nonliteral, the rhetoric of answering.²³⁴

Cursor Mundi brings an apocryphal, mythic dimension of the Judas story to bear on the question of Christ’s divinity in just this way. Drawing this particular affirmation from the shadow-zone surrounding the spare Judas story of the Gospels, *Cursor Mundi* demonstrates adjacent texts’ hermeneutic purchase upon the Bible. Such texts are validated in turn by their ability to disclose new features of biblical truth, but they also stand, *Pearl*’s *if*-moment suggests, as artifacts of richness and value unto themselves.

Cleanness’s *if* makes a similar point in a different way. There, we saw Abraham elided into the poem as a typological fulfillment of his biblical type, a feat of textual legerdemain allowing *Cleanness* to bring itself into provisionally simultaneous order with Scripture itself. Both these brash achievements, however, point to the always already biblical status of scripturally derived poems. Scripture remains the touchstone for the parabiblical imaginary, and begets of itself the range of behaviors “in para” we have surveyed: parabiblicity itself, we saw in framing *Cursor Mundi*, is already a feature of biblicity per se. Terry Eagleton reminds us that

the “deviant” (childish babbling) is the condition of the non-deviant (adult language), just as play is the condition of non-play, and the non-pragmatic of the pragmatic. . . . To learn how to speak is also to learn how to imagine. Since language could not operate without the possibility of negation and innovation, the imagination, which cancels the indicative in the name of the subjunctive, is built into its very nature.²³⁵

²³⁴ John Hollander, *Melodious Guile: Fictive Pattern in Poetic Language* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1990), 57.

²³⁵ Terry Eagleton, *The Event of Literature* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2012), 30.

Eagleton's terms are especially apt for our consideration of *if* in its subjunctive power, but they gesture more broadly at the two-way conditionality of parabiblical poetry. On one hand, parabiblical poetry gathers much of its potency, beauty and interest by deriving from a recognizable scriptural center; but on the other, such texts remain a training literature in the service of pastoral care. Parabiblical playfulness is the condition of essential biblical truth, just as the reverse is no less true.

In this regard, *if* points in the direction of the very idea of literature, a category in many ways defined against Scripture in its absolute truth and salvific necessity. *Patience*'s *if*-moment calls attention to the Bible as simultaneously the height of implausibility and the ground of belief itself; the conflict between these suggestions subducts biblicity into the ostensibly ancillary domain in which the poem operates. Striking a blow for itself here, literature "professes to be important," in the words of Maurice Blanchot,

while at the same time considering itself an object of doubt. It confirms itself as it disparages itself. It seeks itself: this is more than it has a right to do, because literature may be one of those things which deserve to be found but not to be sought.²³⁶

"Literature begins," Blanchot says, "at the moment when literature becomes a question."

Patience portrays a version of this moment, constituting itself as a reflex of a Bible now *itself* construed as a question.

Of course, it is a truism that Scripture's authority never ebbed in medieval Christendom; authority is not our moving counter, and Scripture continues (unlike literature, as Blanchot says)

²³⁶ Maurice Blanchot, *The Work of Fire*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1949), 301.

in its demand to be urgently sought.²³⁷ Rather, our four main texts have plotted a long-arc change in the nature of Scripture's ulteriority in relation to the central presence of the *sacra pagina*: earlier in this period, *Cursor Mundi* thought of Scripture's ulterior dimensions as its traditionally assumed depth and largeness, its layers of interrelated meaning concealed beneath the scriptural surface. For this poem, the Bible had a kind of superabundant architecture: larger inside than outside, it included various kinds of pre-text—sources for remaking, excesses of narrative and meaning, opacities and aporias, all pretexts in the sense of being inexplicit and prior to writing—and so fostered a literary imagination that expressed the Bible's saturation and burgeoned in its interstices.

But as the fourteenth century thought increasingly about the Bible's accommodation in writing per se, the texts of BL MS Cotton Nero A.x evinced different notions of the scriptural ulterior. Older curiosities remained, and the texts continued in their faith that the Bible included an inexhaustible archaeology of needful knowledge; Jacob's well remained unfathomably deep.²³⁸ But as we passed from *Cursor Mundi* to our later texts, our terms "pretext" and "ulterior" began to activate their familiar association with subterfuge and evasion, relocating the domain of argument from traditional biblical discourses to individually configured spaces of provisionality. I mean these terms, subterfuge and evasion, in no morally valenced way, and I use them only to point out that where these texts achieved *parabiblicity* as we have explored it,

²³⁷ See for instance Ian Christopher Levy, *Holy Scripture and the Quest for Authority at the End of the Middle Ages*, Notre Dame: Notre Dame UP, 2012. Levy begins with the forceful reminder that Scripture was indeed "the principal foundation of authority in the late medieval church" (xi).

²³⁸ This image is that of the twelfth-century Cistercian Arnoul of Bohériss, cited by Leclercq, *Love of Learning*, 73. "When he reads, let him seek savor, not science. The Holy Scripture is the well of Jacob from which the waters are drawn which will be poured out later in prayer. Thus there will be no need to go to the oratory to pray; but in reading itself, means will be found for prayer and contemplation."

they placed their nontraditional thinking at an ironic remove from canonical Scripture. They sought *elsewheres* for thinking about the Bible *otherwise*. To the range of pastoral, educative aims that inspired projects of Englishing Scripture, parabiblical texts added the aim of preparing the Bible to disclose *horizontal ulteriorities*, discursive fields which it verges upon and irradiates, but where non- and even counter-traditional discussion destabilized, but did not dismantle, the biblical aegis. Making the Bible into something palpably not-Bible, that is, these texts earn their right to experiment by ensuring the discursive safety of their scriptural originals.

This may sound as though the parabiblical texts we have studied somehow trick Scripture into a game of topsy-turvy. Not the case—except, perhaps, in the special sense intended by a student of the first-century Jewish sage Hillel: “Turn it and turn it over again, for everything is in it,” the Mishnaic Rabbi Ben Bag Bag remarks of the Torah.²³⁹ Perhaps this picture is difficult to see, the rabbi’s Scripture somehow both fitted to the hand for continuous gazing, yet infinitely horizoned, once entered into. This is, indeed, the parabiblical shimmer: on the basis of the artifacts they have left us, we can surmise that our writers—“close readers par excellence” with regard to content, Morey says—intuited a Bible that is paradoxically larger than itself.²⁴⁰ Ben Bag Bag’s counsel provides a clue to late medieval parabiblical experience, bespeaking a tradition in which our writers also work: for them, no less than for the rabbis, Scripture unfurls an infinite internal expanse. Commingling pastoral care with relentlessly speculative, thematically counterfactual thinking, the poems we have looked at here give fresh artistic expression to such understandings of Scripture as a universal omnibus of truth.

²³⁹ Ben Bag Bag’s counsel is cited in the Mishnaic (first and second centuries CE) collection of ethical maxims, *Pirke Avot* (5:25). “Turn it, and turn it over again, for everything is in it. And contemplate it, and wax grey and old over it, and stir not from it, for thou canst have no better rule than this.” Qtd. in Joseph H. Hertz, ed., *Saying of the Fathers* (New York: Behrman House, 1945), 103.

²⁴⁰ Morey, *Book and Verse*, p. 11.

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