

SPEAKING FROM THE THRESHOLD:
LIMINAL AND LITERARY SUBJECTIVITY
IN LATE MEDIEVAL MYSTICAL NARRATIVES

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In the corpus of Western mystical literature, many writers claim that mystical union melds the human soul with God, exacting a temporary loss of awareness of their being apart from the divine. This phenomenon particularly intrigued Christian mystics in the late Middle Ages, a period coinciding with a noted increase in first-person narration and a renaissance of the idea of selfhood as a central concern in literary texts. This study argues that mystical writers face a unique challenge in conveying their sense of standing at a liminal point or threshold, in-between states of being, negotiating (before the gaze of their readers) where the “self” ends and the divine other begins. Many assert that the ineffable nature of their experience makes this impossible to convey directly.

This dissertation traces representations of the experiencing and narrating *I* in mystical literature to analyze how writers portray such a liminal state. After exploring liminality as a valuable critical concept for understanding mystical narrative, and as a central component of medieval Christian mystical experience, focus turns to the texts of Elizabeth of Spalbeek, whose “text” is actually a performance, and then to Marguerite Porete and Julian of Norwich, mystics from Lowland regions and England, but all of whose works circulated in some form in late medieval England. The author argues that these mystics are distinctive because they creatively

manipulate conventions of narrative in order to represent spiritual experience and its potentially disruptive, divisive effects on perceptions of selfhood and ontological status. Evidencing a keen awareness of how consciousness and its divisions can be represented in narrative, they turn to structures that destabilize the narrating voice or *persona*, including dialogic discourse that melds multiple voices, inverted chronologies that suspend time, and recursive patterns, and use narrative form to depict their experiences.

The study's claims proceed from close analysis of the texts in conversation with discourses of narratology, speculative theology, performance theory, anthropology, and psychoanalytic and philosophical theories of the subject. The dissertation bridges scholarship on narrative and mysticism, and contributes to the history of subject-formation and the medieval development of a literature of the self.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Corey Lyn Wronski-Mayersak grew up in New Jersey. Even at a young age, she was often found around books. This inclination stayed with her, and when her initial plans for a dance career had to end, her love of books and the joy of teaching and sharing them took over and became her vocation. She earned a B.A. in English from Goucher College, an M.A. in English from Georgetown University, and an M.A. and Ph.D. in English from Cornell University.

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of two wonderful Cornellians lost during my time at the university. Prof. Scott McMillan first welcomed me to Cornell with graciousness and encouragement, and taught with both intellectual rigor and elegance. My graduate student colleague, Deborah Marcum, was an inspiration to many of us and certainly would have written an outstanding dissertation of her own.

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Arnold Sanders originally set me on the path of studying medieval literature, and the support he has extended to me since has gone ludicrously beyond the call of duty. Sarah McNamer and Penn Szittyta were excellent mentors during my M.A. work at Georgetown. Dr. McNamer first introduced me to Elizabeth of Spalbeek's intriguing performance and supervised my first concentrated writing on Julian.

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Portions of chapters three and four and of my introduction to the English *Mirror* will appear in *Viator: Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 42.2 (Autumn 2011), published by Brepols on behalf of the Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies at UCLA, under the title "Dialogic Melting: Representing Mystical Union and its Instability in Marguerite Porete's *Mirror of Simple Souls*," and are included here with permission. They have been reintegrated with the larger study with some revision and additions.

A great deal of thanks is due to my loving and supportive parents, Maria and Leonard Wronski, who instilled in me a love of reading and learning from the start. My husband Jerry always has my love and my heartfelt thanks for his unwavering support, sense of humor, reminders that there is life outside academia, and willingness to endure Ithaca winters.

My deepest gratitude is to the one who makes “all things well,” and who for reasons that I do not understand has blessed me with this path and the people on it. And so, like Marguerite’s translator “M.N.,” let me begin by saying, “to þe worschip and laude of þe Trinite be þis werk begunne and endid. Amen.”

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

This dissertation argues that, in several late medieval narratives of personal encounter with the divine, form becomes content when vocabulary fails; content, therefore, itself becomes a means of representation. In a reassessment of late medieval mysticism that sees a sense of being “in-between,” what I will refer to as being liminal, as a central and inescapable feature of mystical experience, I suggest that some medieval mystics turn to alternative narrative structures to represent their ineffable experience and its effects on perceptions of selfhood and ontological status. Negotiating a conflict between, on the one hand, the desire to describe and reflect upon the liminal experience of mystical union and, on the other, the challenge of its inexpressibility, they use their texts not only to name, but also to recreate and represent, through a verbal portrait, the experience of mystical union.

The project is, therefore, a study of literary subjectivity, of the narrating and experiencing *I* and the consciousness it represents, that brings together analysis of narrative structure and the unique ontological and linguistic circumstances that underlie mystical writing.¹ And the consciousness that we find in the mystical texts is one vividly aware of the *I*'s essential liminality. In the mystical texts I explore, the narrating *I*, what in the terms of narratology we can see as a retrospective *I* recalling events, is one with the experiencing *I*, a speaker/protagonist in the very process of experiencing the effects of mystical union being described. Moreover, the texts force us to reconsider some other basic questions about the possibilities of “narrative”: can you narrate a story without knowing who you are as narrator? How do you tell a story about

¹ Particularly in medieval studies, the phrase “literary subjectivity” was popularized in large part by Michel Zink in *La Subjectivité littéraire* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1985). I draw in part on his definition of the terms, but with some important distinctions I discuss below.

yourself if you aren't sure who you are? What happens when the available vocabulary cannot meet the demands of description, offering only an elementary wordlist for an advanced task?

Mystical union constitutes a temporary dissolution or loss of awareness of one's being as distinct from the divine. The mystic becomes one with God for a moment, a fleeting union of identity, but only to return to a jolting recognition of distance from God. The experience therefore creates a sense of being in-between, a perception of ontological instability with profound effects on the mystic's grasp of who and what she is. It is a state of being on a threshold between the mortal and the eternal, between standing as a distinct being and blending into God.

As I discuss in chapter one, the critical terms "liminal" and "liminality" in current scholarly discussion derive from Victor Turner's development of the concept, drawing on Arnold van Gennep's work in the field of anthropology.² It is important to note at the outset that my use of the terms, while at points engaging that discussion and influenced by it, is intended to be broader than in that tradition. My use of the terms has to do with a number of thresholds encountered in mystical experience (including the cusps of being and language), but particularly what it means to be neither entirely one with God nor apart from him.

Signs of such a liminal experience appear in the types of metaphors and images that the mystics generate to describe their experiences – melting, swimming, knitting – and also in the theological explanations that they provide. But writers throughout the mystical tradition testify that the ineffable nature of mystical union makes it impossible to convey fully in words, even with the most dramatic metaphors. As mystical writers try to articulate such an experience, and

² See esp. Victor Turner, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites of Passage*," *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1967), 93-11; and idem, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969), esp. 94-130.

so negotiate where the “self” ends and the divine other begins, they face the difficulty of describing life in a liminal state from the point of view of a soul that questions, as does the personified Soul in Marguerite Porete’s *Mirror of Simple Souls*, “Qui suis je donc maintenant?”, or “Who am I now then?”³

Tracing the relationships between content and structure in their texts, I show how the mystics in this study creatively manipulate narrative structures and conventions in order to communicate their perception of what it is to be liminal. They turn to structures that destabilize the narrating voice or *persona* in the text, including dialogic discourse that melds multiple voices, the simultaneous adoption of multiple personas, inverted chronologies that suspend time, and recursive patterns. And they subvert the very structure of “narrative” by producing non-linear personal stories without resolution, without conclusion.

The texts therefore reveal a provocative paradox: experiences that risk self-loss actually produce narratives that are richly self-reflective and remarkably self-aware. The mystics in this study, unlike many of their contemporaries, were not writing for patrons or an academic audience. Driven by the challenge of expressing inexpressible spiritual experience, but with freedom to experiment with form, the text and its shape become a space of self-reflection. And the mystics’ innovations demonstrate a keen awareness of how consciousness and its divisions can be represented in narrative. Examining how they do so not only can help us better understand the mystics’ distinct projects, but can offer new contributions to long-standing debates regarding whether and how medieval narrative structures represent consciousness and internal division.

³ *Marguerite Porete: Le mirouer des simples âmes / Speculum simplicium animarum*, ed. Romana Guarnieri and Paul Verdeyen, *Corpus Christianorum: Continuatio Mediaevalis* 69 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1986), 294.3-4.

I focus on the texts of three mystics from the Continental Lowland regions and England, but all of whose works were written in or translated into Middle English and circulated in late medieval England: Elizabeth of Spalbeek's Passion performance, in which the "text" is actually a public dance; Marguerite Porete's allegorical dialogue *The Mirror of Simple Souls*; and Julian of Norwich's *Revelation of Love*, an account of visions and her decades of meditation on them. Taken together, the project's core texts represent a trinity of modes – a performative text, a dialogue, and a visionary text – with strikingly similar pressures, concerns, circumstances, and resulting experimentation manifesting across them.

In the cultural and theological milieu of the late Middle Ages, writing about how one dissolves into God entails a great deal of risk – including the danger of perpetrating heresy, or at very least, theological misunderstanding – and in the worst case for Marguerite Porete, it meant her death as a heretic. But the risk that most concerns me here is destabilization: the risk of unstable ontology in the liminal experience of mystical union, the narrative risks of a spiraling rather than linear story, and the assumption – indeed, the embrace – of an unstable narrating identity in and through language.

Critical Context and Methodology: Reconsidering the Narrative

Although scholarship has often tried to compartmentalize mystical texts, they are themselves liminal: spiritual memoirs relying heavily on artistic forms of expression, and therefore between genres. To analyze layers of influence on these texts – how religious experience, with its unique psychological aspects and linguistic challenges, intersects with literary developments of the ages of Guillaume de Lorris and Chaucer – I engage discourses and methods of narratology, performance theory, speculative theology, psychoanalytic and

philosophical theories of the subject, and even anthropology from which the critical construct of liminality derives, as I proceed through a close reading of the texts. Such a broad and varied methodology, a holistic approach, begins a synthesis of scholarship on narrative and the genre of mystical literature and best brings to light what these texts reveal about late medieval literature of the self and understandings of how to represent mystical experience with words.

Previous studies of personal narrative and of mystical language have rarely overlapped. Modern narratology, when it attends to medieval texts at all rather than to the novel, tends to focus on the fictional tales of authors such as Chaucer. On the other hand, study of mystical language is usually concerned with categorizing approaches, vocabularies, or writers' maneuvers to assume authority. The present study brings these two branches of scholarship into conversation, but because of their traditionally disparate realms, the first question to address is whether and how mystical texts can be read as narratives, and how such a reading can expand our understanding of narrative strategies for representing the self and individual experience in both mystical writing and the work of other medieval narrative writers. My use of the label "narrative" is broad, incorporating texts with ambiguous narrators and without a clear plot progression. But it is precisely this breadth that allows new inroads in understanding both medieval approaches to mystical union and ideas for how spiritual (and self-defining) experience could be put into words.

The key figures of twentieth-century narratology established the "narrator" as the *sin qua non* of "narrative." Scholes and Kellogg emphasized that narrative requires "a story and a storyteller," a standard that excluded materials such as drama.⁴ Käte Hamburger pointed to process and used a comparison to visual art to explain how literary narrative "does not exist

⁴ Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (New York: Oxford UP, 1966), 4.

independently of the act of narration”: painted art and its figures are the products of a visual artist, and likewise a narrative and “persons of a novel” come into being by having been narrated.⁵ The narrow definition that a proper “narrative” must have both a story and a narrator remains dominant in German narratology today; however, more generous definitions of what can constitute a “narrator,” such as Seymour Chatman’s development of the narrator of visual media (e.g., ballet, drama, film, etc.), have gained traction in the English-speaking world.⁶

In medieval studies, debate is ongoing as to the type of narrator, and more specifically the type of narrative consciousness, that can be ascribed to texts of the medieval period. A few key markers can be illustrative of the discussion. French scholarship in the 1980s, drawing on Lacanian psychoanalysis, argued that medieval texts were marked not only by narrative self-consciousness, but a consciousness that could be divided, an author’s perspective infused in a character/narrator’s. Michel Zink’s seminal study *La Subjectivité littéraire* saw thirteenth-century French literature coinciding with a growing cultural awareness that art “held no other truth than the subjectivity it embodied.”⁷ Thus literary texts of the period “can be read as attempts to fix in language – and, it must be acknowledged, possibly on language – a subjectivity’s desire, and its representations”; these were signs of growing awareness that an

⁵ Käte Hamburger, *The Logic of Literature*, 2nd ed., trans. Marilyn Rose (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1973), 136. A. C. Spearing offers a thought-provoking reading of this analogy in Hamburger’s work, and ultimately suggests problems in applying Hamburger’s theories to the context of medieval literature. See his *Textual Subjectivity: The Encoding of Subjectivity in Medieval Narratives and Lyrics* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005), esp. 19-23, which I discuss in greater depth below.

⁶ See Monika Fludernik, *An Introduction to Narratology*, trans. Patricia Hausler-Greenfeld and Monika Fludernik (New York: Routledge, 2009), 4-5, which analyzes this contrast between German and Anglophone scholarship, and sees the latter following the path of Seymour Benjamin Chatman’s *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1978). In another interesting variation from Hamburger that I would add here, Chatman contrasts narrative with painting, suggesting that in the former “the number of plausible immediate actions or properties is virtually infinite” (29).

⁷ Michel Zink, *The Invention of Literary Subjectivity*, trans. David Sices (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1999), 10-11. Originally published as *La Subjectivité littéraire* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1985).

author asserted himself in his text.⁸ Michel de Certeau similarly describes the rise of “the presence of the subject as a speaker in the text,” associating this shift with the twelfth-century, and the age of “the troubadours and Dante.”⁹ Evelyn Birge Vitz’s analysis of the *Roman de la Rose* and other medieval French narratives argues for a medieval awareness that a narrating subject could be multiple and yet “harmonized,” for instance be both dreamer/character in the text and a narrator standing outside it, although she asserts that this is not an attempt to represent the psychic life of an individual.¹⁰ For Zink, “literary subjectivity” is that which “marks the text as the point of view of a consciousness.”¹¹ I adapt, but do not entirely adopt, this definition of “literary subjectivity” in the present study as I try to trace a unified narrating and experiencing *I* and examine what constitutes it. In my approach “consciousness” is the real experience of the mystic and her awareness of a liminal, split, ontological status.

In scholarship on Middle English texts, H. Marshall Leicester Jr.’s study of *The Canterbury Tales* further developed the discussion of medieval literary subjectivity by challenging the critical tendency to analyze the tales through the *General Prologue* descriptions or assume Chaucer fitted tales to stock figures. He encourages analysis of the speaking *I* of the individual tales and the characters’ processes of telling their tales, arguing that several characters show signs of “disenchantment,” an awareness that they are negotiating a social system; they are endowed with a self-consciousness that allows them to stand outside their society and see it for

⁸ Ibid. 11, 21.

⁹ Michel de Certeau “Mystic Speech,” *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, trans. Brian Massumi (1986; reissued Minneapolis: University of Minnesota P, 2006), 93-94. Also see Sarah Spence, *Texts and the Self in the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), who sees the twelfth-century as a key transition for thought about texts and subjectivity.

¹⁰ Evelyn Birge Vitz, *Medieval Narrative and Modern Narratology: Subjects and Objects of Desire* (New York: New York UP, 1989), esp. chapters 2-3.

¹¹ Zink, *Invention of Literary Subjectivity*, 4.

what it is. Thus Leicester suggests that Chaucer was aware of assigning not just a narrator but a consciousness to each tale.¹²

Recently, A.C. Spearing countered by critiquing analyses that automatically view literary texts as “the utterance of a speaking subject” and assume that in them “a human consciousness is given a voice.”¹³ Spearing argues that this is not entirely applicable to medieval texts because the association between narration and the representation of human consciousness was just beginning in the Middle Ages; his reading implies that the approaches of S.-Y. Kuroda, Scholes and Kellogg, Roland Barthes, and others are incompatible with medieval narrative.¹⁴ In this model, analyses such as Leicester and Zink’s would fall into anachronism. In Spearing’s view, Chaucer’s fourteenth-century perspective of narration was a reverse of our own: he claims that whereas “for us, the notion that every text must have its speaker, every narrative its narrator, may be beginning to dissolve; for late medieval writers...it was a new discovery, just beginning to crystallize.”¹⁵

Mystical writing, its varied forms of narration, and the purposes of those forms have rarely been part of this discussion, and revisiting the debate with consideration of the narrating and experiencing *I* in mystical texts is overdue. My reading shows that the texts in this study offer evidence as early as the mid-thirteenth-century of not only narrative self-consciousness, but concerns with representing psychological and ontological dilemmas in creative ways. They illustrate a striking awareness of how consciousness itself and its divisions can be revealed in narrative. It demonstrates a vibrant medieval concern with such representations and expands current debates by bringing a new realm of texts into evidence.

¹² H. Marshall Leicester Jr., *The Disenchanted Self: Representing the Subject in the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley: University of California P, 1990), esp. 10-13, 24-28.

¹³ Spearing, *Textual Subjectivity*, 1.

¹⁴ See *ibid.* esp. 24, 29, which specifically address Kuroda and Barthes; on Zink, see 31.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 30.

In my reading, the *I* in the texts is associated with the author/creator of the narrative, and thus a consciousness existing not only in an imagined world of the text, but also a real world of lived experience.¹⁶ Elizabeth's performance, Marguerite's dialogue, and Julian's visionary text are all stories of first-hand spiritual experience, accounts of the experience of mystical union and the conflicts, namely the sense of liminal being, that it engenders. They have not always been read in this way. Perhaps only Julian's record would qualify as unambiguously the personal history of a first-person narrator interspersed with theological reflection. Elizabeth's performance has generally been approached as an act of *imitatio Christi*, a form of worship or devotion, rather than as an attempt to express personal experience.¹⁷ There is debate as to whether it is appropriate to identify the *Mirror's* multiple speaking subjects with the author.¹⁸

This is one place where "mysticism" begins to live up to its name, where things are obscure, hidden, and indistinct. This is where some might dismiss the texts in this study as not strictly "narrative" with a clear and present narrator at all. But it is also precisely where we can see innovations in response to the unique needs of recounting inexpressible spiritual experience and its disruptive (however glorious) effects on the self. One branch of medieval mystical writing, often associated with Marguerite and the beguine mystics such as Mechthild of Magdeburg and Hadewijch, relies on multiple allegorical figures to narrate the text, and the reader must determine whether and how they represent the experience of one speaking subject. As Zink points out, such strategies are not new to narrative: from ancient literature "allegory was

¹⁶ Cf. Fludernik's recent textbook definition of narrative as, "a representation of a possible world in a linguistic and/or visual medium, at whose centre there are one or several protagonists of an anthropomorphic nature who are existentially anchored in a temporal and spatial sense and who (mostly) perform goal-oriented actions (action and plot structure)" in *Introduction to Narratology*, 6.

¹⁷ For instance, see Jennifer N. Brown, *Three Women of Liège* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008), 191-217 on what she refers to as Elizabeth's "*Performatio Christi*," and Ellen M. Ross, *The Grief of God: Images of the Suffering Jesus in Late Medieval England* (New York: Oxford UP, 1997), 110-117.

¹⁸ On the issue of an ambiguous authorial voice in the *Mirror*, see esp. Amy Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame P, 1995), 90ff.

the favoured mode of expression for the relationship of the soul with the universal principle and with God.”¹⁹ Marguerite’s use of allegorical dialogue for *personal* narrative, however, deserves special attention. In Elizabeth’s case, she adopts the personas of other individuals as she narrates, sometimes telling a story as Elizabeth, and sometimes telling the Passion story from the point of view of Christ, Mary, or scripture.²⁰ For Elizabeth, this becomes her own story. In all these texts that convey “secret knowledge of God,” special insights from an encounter with God, what can be said is neither entirely controlled nor owned by the mystic narrator: these insights are both God’s story and the mystic’s, divine words in the mystic’s voice.²¹ We have a narrator who is two entities at once.

Michel de Certeau saw this blending of the mystic’s voice with God’s as the very “locus” of mystic speech. The mystical text, then, is an engagement of the mystic with God in a moment in which there is a “disappearance of the actors (the lover and the loved one, God and man).” He quotes Eckhart to capture the sentiment: “God and I are one in the transaction.”²² It is a struggle to determine a common language, and to find the Other in it: “a *dialogic* discourse: *I* and *thou* seeking one another in the thickness of the same language.”²³

It follows that one way to express an experience of blending into God is to draw attention to multiplicity in the narration of “secret knowledge,” to draw attention to a narrator who is already destabilized by mystical union (and often further by speaking God’s speech), and then go a step more – to revel in the instability of overlapping and interpenetrating voices, to make this a

¹⁹ Zink, *Literary Subjectivity*, 122.

²⁰ Such a narrative stance has a relationship to devotional lyrics on the Passion, in which sometimes the speaking voice shifts from an onlooker’s perspective to Christ’s or to Mary’s. See especially the Middle English devotional lyric “Stond wel, moder, under rode,” based on the Latin “Stabat juxta Christi crucem,” a dialogue between Christ as he hangs on the cross and his mother Mary as she watches below, and the Harley lyric “In a vaile of restles mynd,” which I discuss in greater depth in chapter four.

²¹ Here I draw on David Knowles’ oft-cited definition of mysticism, deriving from Pseudo-Dionysius, as attainment of “secret knowledge of God.” *The English Mystical Tradition* (London: Burns & Oates, 1961), 2.

²² Certeau, “Mystic Speech,” 99.

²³ *Ibid.* 90.

symbol of mystical union with God. This is one of the key innovations that the mystics in this study achieve, particularly evident in the texts of Elizabeth and Marguerite.

Lasting union with God is the mystics' ultimate goal; the story of getting there is the action – the plot – of their narratives. It is a story of individual experience, and for those attempting to describe mystical union, it is a story of living in a liminal state. For this reason, in modern narratology's distinction between the narrative or "story" and "discourse," the texts have a "story" to analyze, and the distinction itself is a useful concept in beginning to articulate the narrative dimension of the mystical texts. The division between *histoire* and *discours*, the distinction between a tale's "action" and the "discourse" that is its modes, aspects, and tenses, was developed by French narratologists such as Gérard Genette and Tzvetan Todorov, and also elaborated by the Russian formalists.²⁴ Chatman further developed the concept as he expanded the forms that narrative can take, seeing "discourse" as "the class of all expressions of story, in whatever medium possible to it (natural language, ballet, "program" music, comic strips, mime, and so on)," a range of modes of expression.²⁵

Given what I argue is the mystics' central concern with liminality, their stories are largely stories of "not progressing," stories of being stuck on a threshold. The action is that of an encounter with the divine, and being ensnared in semi-union. Far from plots that progress through conflict to resolution, they are stories about the impossibility of resolution, about how the soul cannot escape liminality until permanently uniting with God after death. But they are "stories."

²⁴ See esp. Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1980), esp. 27; Tzvetan Todorov, "Les Catégories du récit littéraire," *Communications* 8 (1966): 125-151; and Todorov's introduction to structuralist approaches in his translation of essays by the Russian formalists, *Théorie de la Littérature: Textes des formalistes russes réunis, présentés et traduits par Tzvetan Todorov* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1966).

²⁵ Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 27.

As personal stories, we can situate them as part of the dramatic late medieval rise in first-person narration and a renaissance of the idea of selfhood as a central concern in literary texts. The rise of autobiographical writing in twelfth-century France, for instance in the autobiographies of Abelard and Guibert of Nogent, and in which “attention [was] given to the subject itself, not merely as witness,” has been associated with thirteenth-century literary developments in first-person narration such as the *Roman de la Rose*.²⁶ In England, the crucial stage of literary developments was the fourteenth-century, the age of the self-reflective dream vision. It is the age of *Pearl*, one of the earliest Middle English texts to sustain and consistently develop the limitations and interests of a first-person perspective, of Chaucer’s *Book of the Duchess*, which features a dreamer arguably engaging with an alter-ego of himself; perhaps most notably of *Piers Plowman*, which as Anne Middleton argues, evidences a “strong insistence on the first-person as the necessary locus of...meditation,” as what allows access to knowledge of spiritual matters and modes of true piety, with the personal narrative of self-discovery being the beginning of understanding one’s place in the world.²⁷ Such developments also open the way for more explicit self-reflection and reflexive writing in Hoccleve, whose autobiographical *My Complainte* focuses on negotiating the difference between an internal, private self (aware of his madness and subsequent recovery) and an external, public self in order to meet the expectations of his social position.²⁸ Among mystical literature written in fourteenth-century England, Julian’s writing, alongside that of Richard Rolle, is one of the most vivid reflections of this movement.

²⁶ Zink, *Literary Subjectivity*, 154. Also see Vitz’s assessment of Abelard’s *Historia calamitatum* and the *Roman de la Rose* in *Medieval Narrative*, chapters 1-3.

²⁷ Anne Middleton, “William Langland’s ‘Kynde Name’: Authorial Signature and Social Identity in Late Fourteenth-Century England,” *Literary Practice and Social Change in Britain, 1380-1530*, ed. Lee Patterson (Berkeley: University of California P, 1990), 78.

²⁸ For one excellent analysis of this split self phenomenon in Hoccleve’s writing, see Matthew Boyd Goldie’s reading in “Psychosomatic Illness and Identity in London, 1416-1421: Hoccleve’s *Complaint* and *Dialogue with a*

The mystical texts in this study also raise important issues on the level of “discourse,” issues of what gives shape and power to these narratives. If the text is a forum in which union with God both occurs (in the act of mystic speech) and is expressed, what it is about the text’s modes that allow this to happen – what underlies and permits, what makes available, the stories of liminal existence that they offer?

While such distinctions are useful as a starting point for analysis, my reading of the mystical texts ultimately reveals that they challenge a strict structuralist distinction between “story” and “discourse.” The division breaks down in situations in which form and content are one, and the distinction proves inadequate for addressing the unique composition and goals of these texts. Jean-François Lyotard writes that Augustine’s “poem” of his experience of God in the *Confessions* “does not give testimony, it is the testimony,” and such a phenomenon proves to be the case in the texts I consider here.²⁹ The writing of the text, and the engagement in its unique modes of operation, is part of the spiritual experience itself, not only the trace of it. It is for this reason that I refer to both the narrating and experiencing *I* in these texts, challenging a traditional separation; in my reading the *I*, the speaking subject, indeed fits both of these narratological categories: the mystic reflects on experience in the past, and simultaneously develops a sense of self in the present, the self that is still in the process of becoming one with God by speaking to and about him.³⁰

Friend,” *Exemplaria* 11.1 (1999): 23-52. Also see Ethan Knapp, *The Bureaucratic Muse: Thomas Hoccleve and the Literature of Late Medieval England* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania UP, 2001).

²⁹ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Confession of St. Augustine*, trans. Richard Beardsworth (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000), 7. Lyotard offers this description in the context of discussing the form of union, the “embrace of the inner man,” which Augustine identifies as the essence of what is loved in the act of loving God. Lyotard’s statements suggest that in his analysis this “inner human” is both the witness of God and is the “singular witness” provided in the poem, the poem being the manifestation, extension, and/or production of the “inner human.”

³⁰ On the traditional distinction, see the discussion of the “experiencing self” in Fludernik, *Introduction to Narratology*, 152.

If narratologists have overlooked the complexity and richness of medieval mystical narratives, scholars of mysticism are hardly less at fault. Much scholarship on medieval religious literature, including literary dream visions, has considered problems of expression and particularly the problem of ineffability in attempts to describe God or mystical experience.³¹ There is a long history of Christian writers grappling with this linguistic dilemma, and scholarship on mystical language is often determined to situate texts within either the apophatic or cataphatic traditions. The apophatic path involves approaching the ineffable divine through negation of words and images, and is usually traced back to Pseudo-Dionysius' treatises on the naming and knowledge of God (ca. 500). Writers who have recourse to metaphors and synesthesia as a means to circumvent the problem of inexpressibility are usually associated with the opposing cataphatic tradition of verbose, even repetitive affirmation of God's nature. Numerous studies focus on erotic metaphors drawing on the imagery of the *Song of Songs* and/or, particularly in late medieval women's mysticism arguably influenced by the ethos of courtly love, and themes and images of *fine amour*.³² Often scholars' determination to fit texts into one of the categories ends up overlooking the breadth and variety of medieval mysticism.³³

³¹ On the dream vision *Pearl*, for instance, see Ann Chalmers Watts, "Pearl, Inexpressibility, and Poems of Human Loss." *PMLA* 99, no.1 (1984): 26-40; J. Allan Mitchell, "The Middle English *Pearl*: Figuring the Unfigurable." *Chaucer Review* 35, no.1 (2000): 86-111; and *Ineffability: Naming the Unnamable from Dante to Beckett*, ed. Peter Hawkins and Ann Howland Schotter (New York: AMS, 1984).

³² Among the primary texts in this project, the text most often analyzed in this way is Marguerite's *Mirror*. For some examples of such treatments of her text, see Barbara Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania P, 1995), esp. 137-167 and eadem, "The Mirror and the Rose: Marguerite Porete's Encounter with the Dieu D'Amours," *The Vernacular Spirit*, ed. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, Duncan Robertson, and Nancy Bradley Warren (New York: Palgrave, 2002) on the influence of the courtly romance on beguine mystical texts and their distinction from traditional bridal mysticism. Also see Peter Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984), esp. 218-220 on distant love and tests of love in Marguerite's text, and Amy Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame P, 1995) on the conventional image of the absent lover in Marguerite's text. Analyses of the erotic are also common in studies of the performative elements of medieval women's mysticism; for instance, see esp. Nancy Partner, "Reading the Book of Margery Kempe." *Exemplaria* 3.1 (1991): 29-66. Sarah Salih offers an important reminder that mystic speakers may be stretching for expressions to encapsulate their experience "as a gesture to the unrepresentability of the divine," rather than mirroring the literalism of our modern age. See "When is a Bosom Not a Bosom? Problems

Still worse, there is a tendency to dismiss as mere topoi religious writers' protests about the ineffability of their experiences. This is a scholarly shrinking that, as Nicholas Watson puts it, "is to resign any possibility of writing a real account of the text."³⁴ I take seriously the mystics' frequent claims about inexpressibility as part of what drives their experimentation with narrative form. Taking them seriously means facing the challenge of getting, as Watson says, "involved in theological questions of language and the divine," and I would add getting involved in theoretical questions about language itself and what the narrating and experiencing *I* can represent.³⁵ But only by taking their stated problem seriously and trusting their search for a solution do we see mystics' theological understanding of the power of language to connect one with the divine (in prayer and mystic speech) and how to manipulate representations of the speaking subject and her consciousness.

Surprisingly few scholars working from either literary or theological approaches to mysticism (or for that matter, religious texts more broadly) have taken on the issue of what happens to the narrating and experiencing *I* in texts of mystical experience. When studies turn attention to a speaking *I*, their focus is usually on the writer's self-positioning to claim a voice of authority, particularly in the case of authors writing in the vernacular.³⁶ These are increasing

with 'Erotic Mysticism,' " *Medieval Virginites*, ed. Anke Bernau, Ruth Evans, and Sarah Salih (University of Toronto P, 2003), 20.

³³ For instance, among theologians studying the apophatic tradition and its influence, perhaps the most prominent work is that of Denys Turner, who argues that the tradition dominates Western mysticism throughout the Middle Ages. See esp. his *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), which excludes many (particularly female) writers whose texts tend in the cataphatic direction. By contrast, studies of women's mysticism tend to overemphasize cataphatic elements.

³⁴ Nicholas Watson, *Richard Rolle and the Invention of Authority* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991), 2.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Among contributions in this area, no doubt also of great value to medieval studies, see Watson, *Invention of Authority*; on gender and authority more specifically, Lynn Staley, "Julian of Norwich and the Late Fourteenth-Century Crisis of Authority," *The Powers of the Holy: Religion, Politics, and Gender in Late Medieval English Culture*, ed. David Aers and Lynn Staley (University Park: Pennsylvania State University P, 1996): 107-178; Michael G. Sargent, "The Annihilation of Marguerite Porete," *Viator* 28 (1997) 253-279; on scribal manipulation of mystic authors' status, Sarah Poor *Mechthild of Magdeburg and Her Book: Gender and the Making of Textual Authority* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania P, 2004); Katherine Zieman's *Singing the New Song: Literacy*

analyses about status in a literary and devotional milieu, about who has the right to speak about God and in what circumstances, and fewer about momentary identification with God and the effects this has on perceptions of selfhood. The issue of potential empowerment in taking on a pseudo-clerical role or inhabiting the divine voice is about negotiating a position within an ecclesiastical hierarchy, not about negotiating one's ontological status, the nature of one's being in terms of spiritual existence and order.

But new writing on mysticism is emerging and raising new questions. Very recently, the work of Carmel Bendon Davis turned attention to how medieval understandings of space were entwined with understandings of God, and how the period's mystical texts imagine intersections of a space of the soul with the space of God and of creation, and various spaces in which they meet. Davis points toward mystics' liminality, dwelling visibly in a space in-between that most of their contemporaries could not reach.³⁷ Although my study does not share Davis' concern with space in precisely the same contexts, and I do not see the mystics' liminality as a mediating phenomenon in the way she does (this project is concerned with crises in an ontological liminal), Davis' attention to concepts of the liminal and spatial in mysticism are important steps forward toward scholarship beginning to address the complexity of mystics' conceptions of selfhood. Robert McMahon has recently explored "meditative structure" and "texture" in medieval writings of the soul's ascent, beginning to break down some of the barriers between the "literary"

and Liturgy in Late Medieval England (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania P, 2008), was an important step forward in analysis of liturgical reading and devotional speech as "re-presentation" of the voice of God, but is primarily concerned with how these issues relate to authority.

³⁷ Carmel Bendon Davis: *Space and Spatiality in the Works of Richard Rolle, The Cloud of Unknowing Author, and Julian of Norwich* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America P, 2008). For her discussion of liminality, see esp. 87-92. Following Van Gennep's model much more closely than I do (see my discussion of liminality in chapter one, which emphasizes the mystics' ongoing crisis), Davis suggests that the mystics experience the third stage of reintegration (*reaggregation*) through the writing of their texts as service to others. On this point, see Davis esp. 96-98.

and the “philosophical,” the form and the philosophical and theological ideas being conveyed.³⁸

It is my hope that my analysis of mystical texts, with attention to the divided self seeking a voice and inspiring experimental narrative, moves us further toward understanding the complexity of medieval ideas of selfhood and shifting ontological status, the degree of awareness of that status, and its means of representation.

Two additional notes on my method are necessary here. My understanding of a “self” that is revealed in mystical narrative proceeds from recognition that the fundamental concern of Christianity is an ontological one, not a moral one: the project of the Incarnation, the central event of Christianity, is not merely to change man’s bad behavior, but to give him eternal life, to so alter the relationship between God and man on the ontological level as to restore the unitive relationship present at creation, or indeed, in one’s pre-existence.³⁹ Thus to speak of the “self” in the Christian mystical context is always, at least to some degree, to speak of one’s status in a cosmic order. For the Christian mystics, this “self” is synonymous with the immortal soul on its way to recovering its initial being. While I assume that the *I* of the text stands for the lived experience of the mystic, based on my reading of the narratives within a specific Christian context, my use of the word “self” refers to the mystic’s internal self-concept and awareness as an entity undergoing this process. As theologian Tarjei Park has recently put it, “what exactly is meant by self and God in Christ is to be understood by analysis of self as *process* in relation to

³⁸ Robert McMahon, *Understanding the Medieval Meditative Ascent* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America P, 2006). Unfortunately, McMahon’s attention to form, to the way what he calls a text’s “texture” can “embody” meditative ascent, came to my attention too late in this study to engage with in depth. While not working from modern narratology and differing significantly from my view of the mystical text as an experience and response to ineffability, he shares several of my concerns with how the shape of a text and its content can intersect.

³⁹ My very concise framing of this aspect of Christian theology, which it is beyond the limits of the present study to address in detail, is inspired and influenced by Stephen Freeman, “The Nature of Things and Our Salvation,” *Glory to God for all Things* (blog), March 10, 2010, <http://fatherstephen.wordpress.com/2010/03/18/5867>.

the Trinity.”⁴⁰ Accordingly, my references to “ontological status” are a means to address and name these transitions of the soul. The question of how ontological status is portrayed in the texts is a question of how the mystics represent a soul’s place on this path of transformation. While “ontology” can be defined broadly as the science or study of being, I am concerned with “being” from Christian theology’s perspective on the soul.⁴¹

Text Selection and Textual History: Spiritual “Stories” in England

I have chosen Elizabeth’s dance, Marguerite’s *Mirror*, and Julian’s *Revelation* for their differences as much as their similarities. The three mystics use three very different narrative modes for expression of their experiences – a body performance, an allegorical dialogue, and a visionary text – at the same time that they share concern with the boundaries of the self. The selection allows analysis of three different manifestations of the same core experience of liminality. Beyond diversity in mode, I aimed to examine texts that present direct experience of mystical union and that found an audience in the devotional milieu of late medieval England.

Because my concern is with personal narratives that report a direct encounter with the divine, I do not consider texts that are primarily didactic, such as texts designed to instruct others in devotion or contemplative ascent to mystical union. For instance, Bonaventure’s *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* (ca. 1259), which addresses “the six progressive illuminations by which the soul is disposed...to pass over” into God, is concerned with the soul’s potential and limitations in

⁴⁰ Tarjei Park, *Selfhood and ‘Gostly Menyng’ in Some Middle English Mystics: Semiotic Approaches to Contemplative Theology* (Lewiston, NY; Lampeter, Wales: Mellen, 2002), iii. While I use the term “self” to refer to internal self-awareness or self-concept, I use the term “subject” to indicate the individual acted on and positioned by forces internal and external, and “subjectivity” to signify the forces or condition of forces on the subject, both internal and external. I use “identity” to refer to the self-construct resulting from any of the above.

⁴¹ This is as opposed to “ontology” and “ontological status” as general philosophical or phenomenological concepts. Use of the term in Christian theology has often been connected with the question of whether and how humans can have knowledge of their own being. See *A Dictionary of Christian Theology*, ed. Alan Richardson, s.v. “ontology” (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), 241-242. My concern in analyzing the mystical texts is with the expression of perceived changes in states of being, whether accurately perceived or not.

trying to achieve union with God through ascent of the mind, a union in which one is eventually “transported to God, and transformed into Him.”⁴² But Bonaventure’s goal is to provide a guide to this process, not to convey personal experience of union and its effects on his perception of selfhood and ontology. In fact, his program is an interpretation of Saint Francis’ vision of the six winged seraphim as a symbol of contemplation.⁴³ For similar reasons, I exclude *The Cloud of Unknowing*, which again is a work of instruction in how a soul can, theoretically, be united with God, but not a verbal portrait of what that union looks like. Walter Hilton’s *Scale of Perfection* and Nicholas Love’s *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ* fit the same category of the didactic. Yet because the *Itinerarium* and *Cloud* do provide insight into influential medieval concepts of mystical union and (especially in the latter case) mystical language, they are part of the context in which I situate the texts in chapter one.

A second parameter was to focus on texts that were part of the devotional milieu of medieval England in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. The texts were all composed or translated during the rise of the English vernacular as the language for literary pursuits both secular and religious. A focus on narratives circulating in Middle English allows for comparison of terms used to describe the self, the soul, union, and aspects of direct experience. The continuity of word choices among the texts yields insight into how a particular culture articulated these issues. Commonalities among these few texts circulating within one medieval culture is a starting point: this study addresses a microcosm of the broad world of mysticism, and as such is a sort of prelude to addressing conceptual questions that are worthy of a larger, comparative study.

⁴² Bonaventure, *Journey of the Mind to God*, ed. Stephen Brown, trans. Philotheus Boehner (Indianapolis: Hackett 1993) 1, 38.

⁴³ *Ibid.* 1-2.

Of the three main texts considered here, Julian is the only native English mystic. Elizabeth and Marguerite require some introduction of their place in a study of mystical texts in England. The record of Elizabeth's performed narrative comes down to us in her Latin *vita*, originally composed by Phillip of Clairvaux in the mid-thirteenth-century after visiting the chapel where Elizabeth lived at Herkenrode near Liège. The *vita* seems to have enjoyed some popularity in late medieval England, particularly among Carthusian houses but possibly also among other orders and devout lay readers. Of the ten known surviving manuscripts of Phillip's Latin account, half have been found in England.⁴⁴ One of these, Oxford, St. John's College MS 182, presents Elizabeth's *vita* together with the lives of two other women from Liège, Christina Mirabilis and Marie d'Oignies, and was owned by the Carthusian house at Witham. The manuscript was among the books given to the house by John Blacman in the gift of his personal library to the monastery.⁴⁵ Elizabeth's *vita* was probably used for contemplative reading by the brothers at Witham, but given Blacman's interesting possession of the text prior to his entry, it seems to have circulated at least among some clerical readers outside the monastery, even if only within a small, elite circle.

A Middle English translation of Elizabeth's *Life*, probably early fourteenth-century, places Elizabeth's story firmly in the hands of an English audience of vernacular literature, and is the version that will be my focus. The one extant copy appears in the fifteenth-century Bodleian MS Douce 114 alongside Middle English translations of the lives of Elizabeth, Christina

⁴⁴ These include one excerpted version, Oxford, MS Bodley 240, and five mostly complete versions of the text: Cambridge, Corpus Christi College MS 138; Cambridge, Jesus College MS 24; Oxford, MS Bodley 694; Oxford, St. John's College MS 182; and Durham, Durham Cathedral MS B. IV. 39. See Brown, *Three Women of Liège*, 13.

⁴⁵ See *ibid.* and also Roger Lovatt, "John Blacman's Library and Contemporary Carthusian Spirituality," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 43.2 (1992), 206. It is not particularly remarkable that Elizabeth's *vita* would appear in Blacman's collection: his library contained a number of other works by Continental mystics, including Latin texts of works by women such as Bridget of Sweden, Catherine of Siena, Elizabeth of Schönau, and Mechthild of Hackeborn, alongside many other Continental devotional texts. See Lovatt, esp. 204-207.

Mirabilis, and Marie d'Oignies, collected with Stephen of Siena's *Life of Catherine of Siena* and the Middle English translation of portions of Suso's *Horologium sapientiae* under the title *Tretyse of þe Sevene Poyntes of Trewe Love and Erlastyngre Wisdom*.⁴⁶ Douce 114 therefore has a clear relationship to St. John's 182, the only surviving Latin codex that specifically links the same three mystics from Liège, and common variants in these two versions further suggest a common source.⁴⁷

A notation at the end of Douce 114 states that the manuscript belonged, at least at one point, to the Carthusian house at Beauvale in Nottingham, although the later hand of this note leaves open the possibility (perhaps even suggests) that the manuscript may have been produced elsewhere.⁴⁸ Jennifer Brown has recently proposed that although the surviving text of the English lives was owned by the Carthusians of Beauvale, the translation more likely originated elsewhere, perhaps the Augustinian priory at Thurgarton.⁴⁹

Seeming transcription errors in Douce indicate that this one surviving English version is likely a copy rather than the original translation, suggesting a possibly wider audience and circulation.⁵⁰ Moreover, the apology of the "Englisshe compyloure" that appears in Douce 114 offers further evidence that the English texts circulated beyond Carthusians houses. His reference to "alle men and wymmen that in happe redith and herith this Englyshe" opens the

⁴⁶ See the entry by Valerie Lagorio and Michael G. Sargent in "English Mystical Writings," *A Manual of Writings in Middle English 1050-1500*, ed. Albert Hartung (New Haven: Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1993), 3114.

⁴⁷ Brown, *Three Women of Liege*, 13-14. Brown goes on to suggest that these two manuscripts seem conscious that the women's lives are related, and argues that the order of presentation is purposeful, progressing from the less-known Elizabeth to the more famous Marie, and aiming to explain the piety of the first two saints by relationship to Marie. Ibid. 15. However, and interestingly, the two manuscripts that link the three women are the exception, rather than the majority of surviving codices.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 15.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 12, 18-19. Brown highlights the Augustinian practice of preaching and circulating texts beyond the walls of the monastery. She explains that her Thurgarton thesis is supported by a surviving booklist from the priory that lists a book of the lives of "three virgins," namely "Elizabeth Cristine et Marie Oegenes," immediately followed by mention of "a book of the Life of St. Catherine." This may have been the origin for the later Douce grouping of the Liège women with Catherine. Brown also notes the close proximity of Thurgarton and Beauvale.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 15.

possibility of an intended lay audience. A subsequent (although arguably conventional) plea that clerks, if they should read the text, “wol be fauorabil” is additional evidence of broader circulation.⁵¹ As Brown notes, at very least, the “compiler” (who could be the translator, selector, or scribe) seems aware of a potentially shifting audience. The wide popularity of Marie d’Oignies in England is evident in Margery Kempe’s adoption of the saint as a model. Margery’s *Book* records how her priest and scribe better understood Margery’s excessive tears after reading about Marie’s weeping, and it has been suggested that Margery’s knowledge of Marie could have come from the same English translation that appears in Douce.⁵²

Elizabeth’s Middle English *Life* itself provides clues of a relatively wide circulation. The translator states that he has undertaken the task for the “edificacyone of deuoute soules þat are not leeryd in latyn tunge.”⁵³ The category of “devout souls,” instead of a more specific term referring to brothers of the house, suggests a broader audience was probably intended.

Carthusian Nicholas Love’s *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, his English reworking of the *Meditationes vitae Christi*, is contemporaneous with Douce 114 and uses similar terminology to describe the intended audience. Love states that he has written “at þe instance & þe prayer of some deuoute soules to edification of suche men and women,” having noted the need in current times for meditations on Christ’s life not only in Latin but “also in Englyshe to lewde men & women.”⁵⁴

⁵¹ Ibid. 18. However, the apology precedes Stephen’s letter and may only have been connected with that text.

⁵² Ibid. 21-22, which cites on this point an argument made by Ute Stargardt in “The Beguines of Belgium, the Dominican Nuns of Germany, and Margery Kempe,” *The Popular Literature of Medieval England*, ed. Thomas Heffernan (Knoxville: University of Tennessee P, 1985), 280. For the relevant anecdote in Margery’s text see *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Lynn Staley (Kalamazoo, MI: TEAMS/Medieval Institute Publications, 1996), 149.

⁵³ “Prosalegenden: Die legenden des ms Douce 114: S. Elizabeth of Spalbeck, ed. Carl Horstmann, *Anglia* 8 (1885), 107. My references to “The Life of S. Elizabeth” refer to this edition. In my suggestion of a possible broad audience for Douce 114, I am in agreement with Brown, who suggests a lay and religious readership was at least on the translator’s mind. See Brown, *Three Women of Liège*, 19.

⁵⁴ See *Nicholas Love’s The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ: A Critical Edition Based on Cambridge University Library Additional MSS 6578 and 6686*, ed. Michael G. Sargent (New York: Garland, 1992), 10.17-18

One of the main adjustments made to the English version of Phillip’s account of Elizabeth is a reduction of the scholarly apparatus found in the Latin original: the translator eliminates many of the scriptural references with which Phillip glosses Elizabeth’s actions as well as some of his related commentary. The translator explains in his preface that he took this step to ease transmission and understanding of the text for the less learned English audience: he notes that while he tried not to add to, cut from, or “chaunge þe substaunce of þe story,” his translation process required “leuyng legeauns and auctorites of holy writte, þat wolde be ful dymme to vndirstonde, if þey were turnyd in to englisshe with oute more declarynge of glose.”⁵⁵ The translator’s fear that readers would not grasp scriptural references without elaboration further suggests an intended readership beyond the walls of Carthusian communities. And again the basic sentiment expressed here is comparable to one offered by Love in his *Mirror of the Blessed Life*. In addition to truncating and eliminating some material from his original, Love repeatedly stresses the public necessity of “deuovte meditacions of cristes lyfe more pleyne in certeyne parties þan is expressed in the gospell of þe foure euaungelistes.”⁵⁶ His prologue highlights that “simple creatures” require “pleyn sentence to comun vndirstondyng,” and he employs the traditional metaphor from 1 Corinthians 3: 1-3 to stress the necessity of feeding beginners in the spiritual life with only “mylke of lyzte doctryne & not with sadde mete of grete clargye & of [hye contemplacion.]”⁵⁷ Thus there are several clues that Elizabeth’s translator and Love present their texts for the same type of audience. Love’s audience eventually became

and 5-6. Love’s numerous references to “simple souls” also allude to a broad intended audience. These labels could refer to a lay fraternity associated with Love’s house, or simply his fellow brothers. See Sargent’s “intro.,” esp. xxiv, xxxii, and Jonathan Hughes, *Pastors and Visionaries: Religion and Secular Life in Late Medieval Yorkshire* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 1988), 231.

⁵⁵ “Life of S. Elizabeth,” 107.

⁵⁶ Love, *Mirror of the Blessed Life*, 10.15-17. On this passage, also see Sargent’s intro. xxx-xxxii.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

devout laity, which is suggestive, even if it cannot prove that Elizabeth's Middle English *Life* was intended for and embraced by devout laity.

The Mirror of Simple Souls, originally written in French ca. 1300, has a most intriguing textual history. The author, identified in her trial records as "Margarita dicta Porete," a native of Hainaut, perished in defense of her text in 1310 when she was burnt at the stake for perceived heretical teachings in her book. This was a sort of finale: a culmination of public clashes with ecclesiastical authorities over the course of several years, during which Marguerite had refused to stop circulating her book even after it had already been pronounced heretical and burnt in her presence.⁵⁸

Despite ecclesiastical attempts to eradicate the *Mirror*, copies of the French text not only survived but spread, and by the fifteenth-century there was a translation into Middle English, two into Italian, and two into Latin, including one Latin version based on the Middle English text. The Middle English translation survives in three fifteenth-century copies of Carthusian origin, with dating of the translation ranging from the mid-fourteenth-century to the early fifteenth-century.⁵⁹ Although the identity of the translator is unknown, he left behind a clue by signing his glosses to the text with the initials "M.N." Beyond these facts, and M.N.'s mention that the surviving text represents his second attempt at translation, we know little more about the translator and transmission of the English *Mirror*.

⁵⁸ On the details of Marguerite's trial, see Paul Verdeyen, "Le procès d'inquisition contre Marguerite Porete et Guiard de Cressonessart (1309-1310)," *Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique* 81 (1986), 47-94.

⁵⁹ Extant manuscripts containing the Middle English text include London, British Museum, Add. MS 37790; Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS 505; and Cambridge, St. John's College, MS 71. Early dating of the translation has generally been an attempt to attribute it to Michael Northburgh (d. 1361). Claire Kirchberger first suggested this identification in her modern translation of the Middle English text, *The Mirror of Simple Souls' by an Unknown French Mystic of the Thirteenth Century* (London: Burns & Oates, 1927) xxxiv-xxxv, although she admits it is unlikely. The argument has most recently been repeated by Robert Lerner in "New Light on the *Mirror of Simple Souls*," *Speculum* 85.1 (2010), esp. 103-107. Alternatively, Nicholas Watson has suggested that the Middle English is probably later. See "Melting into God the English Way: Deification in the Middle English Version of Marguerite Porete's *Mirouer des simples âmes anienties*," *Prophets Abroad: The Reception of Continental Holy Women in Late Medieval England*, ed. Rosalynn Voaden (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1996) 31, n. 35.

Because none of the accessible copies appears to present entirely precise renderings of Marguerite's original, choosing any one as a base text means confronting a set of textual surmises, omissions, and alterations of some sort.⁶⁰ Most analyses of the *Mirror* rely on the one nearly-complete accessible French copy in the late fifteenth-century Chantilly Musée Condé MS F.xiv.26 (hereafter Chantilly). The question of a "best text" is ongoing, but the Middle English version is worthy of much more consideration than it has received. In fact, scholarly attention to the Middle English *Mirror* is more warranted and timely now than perhaps ever before, following Robert Lerner's recent persuasive and detailed case that the Middle English may in fact be our best witness of what Marguerite originally wrote. Lerner suggests that, notwithstanding that it is a translation, with regard to both specific details and the general spirit of text, M.N.'s *Mirror* appears to derive from an earlier and more pristine exemplar than does Chantilly, which seems to have undergone numerous alterations. He offers the most thorough case for this to date, incorporating Hasenohr's discovery of the Valenciennes chapters alongside his own readings, and elaborating her initial link between those chapters and the Middle English translation. Particularly thought-provoking is Lerner's analysis of portions of the Middle English that seem to preserve more daring framings of Marguerite's theology.⁶¹ This is a conversation that is sure to continue.

⁶⁰ A recent and momentous development in study of the *Mirror* has been Geneviève Hasenohr's identification of a two-chapter excerpt from the *Mirror* in a late fifteenth-century manuscript at Valenciennes, which appears to preserve a portion in Marguerite's dialect. Hasenohr discusses her discovery in "La tradition du *Miroir des simples âmes* au XVe siècle: De Marguerite Porete (+ 1310) à Marguerite de Navarre," *Compte rendus des séances de l'Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres, l'année 1999 novembre-décembre* (Paris 1999), 1347-1366. Unfortunately, this rich discovery only offers us a fraction of the text to evaluate in trying to judge a "best text."

⁶¹ On preservation of Marguerite's daring theology in the English text, see Lerner, "New Light," esp. 102-103. It was long recognized that the Middle English may preserve a more accurate reading at least at some places, as Edmund Colledge and Romana Guarnieri note in their early study, "The Glosses by 'M.N.' and Richard Methley to *The Mirror of Simple Souls*," *Archivio italiano per la storia della pietà* 5 (Rome 1968) esp. 364, 366. Notable among the few previous studies to attend to the Middle English text (beyond the orthodoxy of the glosses) are Watson, "Melting into God," Marleen Cré, *Vernacular Mysticism in the Charterhouse: A Study of British Library MS Additional 37790* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006) esp.191-197, and Laurie A. Finke, "'More Than I Fynde Written':

For the aims of the present study, the Middle English version is particularly valuable because the choices and glosses of M.N., one of the few medieval readers beyond Marguerite's inquisitors to leave behind his detailed impression of the text, aid in exploring Marguerite's understanding of mystical union and her use of dialogue to represent it. Moreover, some distinctive elements in the less-examined Middle English version point to the tensions in the text (as well as M.N.'s apparent awareness of them) that I wish to bring to light here; this is especially true with regard to the alternate ending present in the Middle English version and its resonance with the text's larger project of representing liminality through narrative structure.

For all of these reasons, I adopt the Middle English as my base text for this project with reference to other versions where notable differences occur. The Middle English is not a perfect text, but as renewed discussion of the *Mirror* continues to evolve, I hope that my reading may draw additional attention to what the Middle English text does and does not offer for our developing sense of Marguerite's project. It will be clear, however, that my core thesis about Marguerite's innovative dialogue does not depend on that version alone, and I am speaking to Marguerite's literary techniques more broadly. My intention is not to debate the relative integrity of the texts, a debate I leave to those more skilled in textual criticism and philology, but to open the *Mirror* to new forms of analysis; part of that involves my close attention to narrative structure, and part involves taking a broader perspective on the surviving material at hand.

In the corpus of mystical writing in medieval England, there are certainly other texts that report first-hand experience of mystical union and a sense of being liminal. But not all of them reveal the type of experimentation with narrative evident in the core texts of this study. A

Dialogue and Power in the English Translation of *The Mirror of Simple Souls*," *Performance and Transformation*, ed. Mary A. Suydam and Joanna E. Ziegler (New York: St. Martin's 1999): 47-67. Finke's essay is an enlightening look at the "dialogue" she observes between Marguerite's writing and M.N.'s translation, although its main concern is not with how the dialogue between Marguerite's personifications unfolds in the text.

striking example that might seem to fit the parameters of the study as well as add a male writer's work to the discussion is Richard Rolle's *Incendium amoris*, or *Fire of Love*, written in England in 1343 and translated into Middle English by Richard Misyn in 1435. Much of the text is a personal account of direct experience of God and mystical union, most notably the prologue which opens with Rolle's famous description of heat within his chest, an experience so intense that he reports repeatedly touching his chest to make sure that he is not literally on fire.⁶² He describes how the soul's ecstatic inner song actually transforms the soul into the God of whom it sings: the soul that is in "a peace that sings and loves and burns and contemplates...is altogether ablaze with heavenly fire. And he is transformed into the likeness of him in whom is all melody and song."⁶³ These are only two images in a text thoroughly concerned with describing mystical union, and we also find evidence of a liminal experience when Rolle describes alternating between union and longing.⁶⁴

Rolle certainly thinks that he is moving into new narrative territory in the *Fire*, trying to explain an experience that he says he has "never found in any learned writing or...heard expounded, namely that this song will spring to his very lips, and he will sing his prayers in a spiritual symphony of celestial sweetness."⁶⁵ And in several ways he is: the text melds together a remarkable number of genres, including autobiography, ecstatic prayer, estates satire, pastoral instruction, and treatises expounding various subjects. Rolle's innovation in bringing together diverse theological discourses and practices of speaking about God has also received some recent

⁶² Richard Rolle, *The Fire of Love*, ed. and trans. Clifton Wolters (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 45.

⁶³ *Ibid.* 76-77.

⁶⁴ Perhaps the best example of this is chapter 35, which alternates between ecstatic lyric meditations on Rolle's love for God and apparent moments of crisis due to intense yearning and uncertainty as to how to proceed, even how to go on living. After verses affirming that Rolle is "in" his beloved and "on fire with joy," and almost simultaneous laments that a "vast wilderness" separates "the lovers' homes," Rolle returns to question, "But alas, what am I to do? How long have I to wait? To whom shall I flee to enjoy what I am longing for?" *Ibid.* 154-155.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* 146.

scholarly attention.⁶⁶ But for all Rolle's ecstatic prayer and lyrics, the *Fire* is not primarily an experiment in form that illustrates, through the text's very structure, an experience of mystical union.⁶⁷ He is writing for a Latinate, academic audience more than using the space of the text for free reflection. These already would be a few reasons to exclude the *Fire* from the present study, although the narrative structure created by Rolle's alternating discourses and recursiveness deserves further critical attention. Above all, I omit the *Fire* here because its inclusion would not add a distinct, additional mode to my discussion of the performative, dialogic, and visionary.

My analysis aims to trace narrative structures in the most innovative and creative attempts to portray mystical union and its effects, which are ultimately a minority of mystical texts. It is not an argument that these writers, whose texts all seem to have had rather limited circulation, ushered in sweeping changes in the way that writers reflect a self in transition. My objective is much smaller in scale: to reveal what a few medieval writers realized they could do with narrative in order to represent liminality. This is evidence of how at least some medieval individuals conceptualized the self, the nature of mystical union, and the narrating and experiencing *I* in literary representations; it is an indication of medieval subjects with an awareness of these pressures of description and how consciousness and its divisions could be represented in words. Applied in future to a wider scope, it may further inform our reading of how other narrative writers such as Chaucer and Langland may have viewed narrative form itself

⁶⁶ Watson attributes this variety to Rolle's attempt to find an appropriate voice and structure for this book, his first work that does not stem from explanation of a biblical text. See *Invention of Authority*, esp. 113-119. Denis Renevey sees Rolle engaged in another form of adaptation, namely creating a new language to describe God for his audience, adjusting and adopting metaphors used by the exegetical tradition, and in so doing reconciling the language of *amor carnalis* and *amor spiritualis*. See Renevey, *Language, Self, and Love: Hermeneutics in the Writing of Richard Rolle and the Commentaries on the 'Song of Songs'* (Cardiff: University of Wales P, 2001), esp. 67, 83.

⁶⁷ Similarly, most of Rolle's English writings are primarily didactic and composed for patrons or those under Rolle's spiritual direction, with little innovation in terms of creative form.

as a representation of experience. But it is not a claim that these narrative techniques and modes were necessarily dominant or even widespread.

The mystics in this study are in fact exceptional in several ways. Unlike many of their contemporaries, they all composed their texts, as best we can tell, by themselves: they were writing neither with a collaborator or amanuensis (as were, for instance, Margery Kempe and her model Angela of Foligno) nor for patrons (as Rolle was in most of his vernacular works). Under these circumstances, the textual space – and indeed, the shape of discourse – was entirely their's as a forum for reflection and experimentation. Whether or not their texts would even be understood by audiences seems to have been a minimal concern.

Marguerite announces several times that she does not expect all readers to understand her book, especially not scholastics but not even beguines either; and of course, most of the establishment did not. Still, she stood by her book to the death, and although she appears to have sought approval from sympathetic scholars after the first condemnation, she refused to defend it at her trial or even to take the oath that would allow a trial to proceed. In essence, she would not condescend to answer questions from “Holy Church the Little,” the Church of Reason, even when her life was at stake. Elizabeth attracted an awe-stuck audience with her performance, yet notably the performance itself appears to have been entirely her own creation. There is no indication that she adapted any of it to suit a particular audience or visiting ecclesiastic such as Phillip. Julian appears certain that the message of her revelations is meant for her to share with all Christians. The twenty years of meditation on her “showings” is a personal quest for understanding, and indeed, she could take so long in producing her final text precisely because she was answerable only to self and God rather than any human patron. Moreover, she recognizes that readers will not understand some aspects of her experience, and sometimes

distances herself from the responsibility of conveying meaning; in a few moments that prefigure what Barthes would observe of literary meaning in the modern world, she leaves it to her audience (with God's grace and help) to complete the text's meaning. These are among the reasons why the texts may stand out in their experimentation with narrative.

Ultimately, however, I am not interested in tracing a history; although my analyses proceed in the chronological order of the texts, I am not charting a chain of influence or development. While I stop short of Rudolf Otto's assertion that it is entirely "immaterial to us how mysticism historically arose," the issue is largely immaterial to this project, and I agree that an analysis of the "essential nature" of mysticism cannot be done solely through "inquiry into the genesis of [the] thing," or for that matter, through inquiry into the genesis of its stock images and forms.⁶⁸ The mystics undoubtedly draw on other writers and their common theological context and devotional practices. Like all texts, medieval mystical texts "appropriate signs operating within a cultural coding or *langue*," as Park puts it, and there is value in recognizing those signs.⁶⁹ But when it comes to analysis of the human experience of ontology across eras and generations, a phenomenological core, a view of the narratives primarily through a narrow lens of path of influence, or even genre, risks an accordingly narrow set of discoveries.⁷⁰ To try to standardize or explain away peculiarities of the texts, to try to arrange them in a neat line, overlooks what they wish to tell us and underestimates these mystics who use the forum of the text to explore personal spiritual experiences, even if their next move is to try to share them with others or try to generalize their applicability.

⁶⁸ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (1923; reprint Oxford UP, 1977), 21-22.

⁶⁹ Park, *Selfhood*, 4.

⁷⁰ Also see Christopher Abbott, *Julian of Norwich: Autobiography and Theology* (Woodbridge, Suffolk; Rochester, NY: D.S. Brewer, 1999) 3-4, who similarly cautions against overemphasis on genre in scholarship on mystical writing.

The Study's Narrative

The chapters move from the questions that I am asking to the narratives that unfold their implications. Chapter one establishes liminality as both a central component of medieval Christian mystical experience and a valuable critical concept for understanding what the mystical narrative strives to represent. To illustrate the pervasiveness of liminal elements in mystical writing and explain their origin, I trace the overlap between epistemological, ontological, and linguistic concerns in contemplative literature and theology of the medieval Christian West with a special attention to the writings of Augustine, Bonaventure, and Julian of Norwich as central examples. After establishing how problems of knowledge and ontological confusion contribute to the mystics' "in-between" condition, I analyze the mystics' situation through modern theorists of liminal concepts, tracing them from Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner to Julia Kristeva and Jacques Lacan in order to delve further into the unique psychological factors of such a state and better understand its need for a means of expression. Finally, preparing for the mystics' use of narrative, I explore medieval Christian understandings of how language can both draw souls to God (e.g., in prayer discourse or dialogue), and still fail to represent the effects and emotive power of such relationships. In the last section, I examine mystical texts as a forum in which the above tensions are negotiated and represented, and explore alternative modes of narration that transcend these tensions.

In terms of the narratives themselves, I move from the most visibly experimental to the most subtle. Chapter two turns attention to a performance text, the cyclical Passion performance and representation of the love of Christ performed by the thirteenth-century mystic dancer Elizabeth of Spalbeek. Although our only access to Elizabeth's narrative is indirect, through the description of her performance captured in her Latin *vita* and its later Middle English rendering, I

analyze what we can reconstruct of Elizabeth's performance as a mystical text that she narrated through the medium of her dance. I demonstrate, first, how clues in the *vita* reveal that Elizabeth and her original audience "read" her performance as a text. I then argue that Elizabeth's movement in and out of what her hagiographer calls "ravishment," along with her cyclical and simultaneous adoption of various roles in the Passion story, uses the body to tell a story of crossing ontological boundaries. In so doing, Elizabeth exceeds the seeming physical limits of the body, and makes it a means to represent transition and the transcendence of time. Comparison of her narrative with both medieval art and the work and commentary of modern body performers provides further insight into how the structure of Elizabeth's narrative represents liminality.

Chapters three and four work in concert with one another and turn to Marguerite Porete's *Mirror of Simple Souls*. Chapter three analyzes tensions in the *Mirror* between ineffability and the irrepressible drive to narrate the personal experience of mystical union. This conflict emerges as the allegorical personification of Soul both proclaims aspects of union and critiques her own speech for its inadequacy and for its negative consequence of distracting her attention from God. But I show that ultimately the *Mirror* dramatically puts its "stakes in language," to borrow Michel de Certeau's terms, as a means to both express the experience of, and create a bridge to, union with God.⁷¹

Chapter four argues that the dialogic structure of the *Mirror* is a partial answer to this dilemma of ineffability. The dialogic form represents the transitory nature of experiences of mystical union, and the psychic division that the experience enacts on the subject. For even as the dialogue helps to represent mystical union, it also makes clear that Soul is caught in a liminal

⁷¹ The phrase is taken from Michel de Certeau, "Mystic Speech," *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, trans. Brian Massumi (1986; reissued Minneapolis: University of Minnesota P, 2006), 92.

position, a transitory state in which she is both herself and not herself, split between a former self and a self in union with God. As the text's structure moves between distinguishing Soul's voice and commingling it with others – including allegorical representations of the divine – it portrays the union possible between God and a soul, a union necessarily incomplete as long as the soul remains in mortal life. I further propose that M.N., the translator of the Middle English text (the version that emerging research suggests may best preserve what Marguerite wrote), recognizes and takes up these concerns with particular fervor in his reframing of the text. This indicates an intuitive awareness (perhaps from familiarity with a shared devotional culture or understanding of narrative) of what Marguerite wants to convey and how she adapts her narrative to convey it.

The fifth and final chapter returns to Julian of Norwich's *Revelation of Love*, the text with which I begin the exploration in chapter one, and pursues a closer reading of Julian's preoccupation with ontological status and its articulation. Julian is the most visibly liminal of the mystics, reportedly having experienced her revelations while literally (in her illness) on the border between life and death, and in her later anchoritic lifestyle participating in a form of living death. But her text also charts a liminal existence as she looks toward future union that has already been partially attained but not yet fulfilled – a form of Christian theology's "already but not yet." She reveals a sense of entrapment in visionary experience itself, struggling to express what she sees and the nature of the human soul's potential union with the divine, and repeatedly returning to revisit the moments of her visions. Julian's attempt at narrative becomes an endeavor as ensnaring as attempts to know God: neither can be fulfilled in her current life. I argue that this shapes her recursive, non-linear text, and creates a portrait of liminal experience.

My conclusion reflects on the insights gained when, now informed by developments in critical theory over the past decades, we actually return to the starting point of considering these

mystical texts on their own terms – namely, in light of their concerns with ontological status and Christian concepts of the self in the process of becoming one with God – rather than through forced categorization of the texts in terms of modern genres or distinctions such as “women’s mysticism.” By doing so, we unveil the literary mastery of these “writers,” their striking trust in narrative forms despite the limitations of human language, and the creativity of late medieval portrayals of an experiencing and narrating *I*. The conclusion looks hopefully toward the field of comparative mysticism to explore these phenomena across not only cultures and religions but eras. It emphasizes that while these texts invite readers into contemplation, their audience may well be the narrating self.

CHAPTER 1

POINTS OF INTERSECTION

In the middle of the long text of her *Revelation of Love*, the late fourteenth-century English mystic Julian of Norwich writes,

And thus I saw fully sekirly that it is ridier to us to cum to the knowing of God than to knowen our owne soule; for our soule is so deepe groundid in God...we may not cum to the knowing therof till we have first knowing of God, which is the maker to whom it is onyd. But notwithstandyng, I saw that we have of fulhede to desiren wisely and treuly to knowen our owne soule, wherby we are lernid to sekyn it wher it is, and that is in God.⁷²

For Julian, the epistemological problem of her inability to know God is linked with the ontological problem that the soul is one with that God. Knowledge of one's "owne soule" is desirable, something we wish to know "wisely and truly." This type of self-knowledge – complete knowledge of one's own being – is only possible through knowing God, but Julian has established earlier in her text that full knowledge of God is impossible during mortal, "transitory" life. The point of knowing God, also the point of full understanding of the self, can only occur after death.⁷³ For now, God can only be known in brief insights, "privy tuchyngs." This initiates a problem of language: because Julian cannot yet know and therefore cannot *describe* what God is, she cannot know and *describe* the soul in its ontological state of union with God.

⁷² Julian of Norwich, *A Revelation of Love*, ed. Marion Glasscoe, rev. ed. (Exeter: University of Exeter P, 1993), 56.89-90. All citations from Julian's text refer to this edition of the Long Text. I cite the chapter followed by the page number.

⁷³ *Ibid.* 43.61-62; 46.64.

This chapter explores the overlap between epistemological, ontological, and linguistic concerns in medieval mystical writing. Such concerns are interwoven in Christian mysticism: they bring about and reinforce one another. To analyze the way that mystical texts narrate liminality is to consider one nodal point where these concerns converge. We can see it this way: the mystic's ontological problem of union with God, which traps her in a liminal state, creates a problem of expression; the linguistic problem is in turn fed by an epistemological problem. As Denys Turner has put it succinctly, "it follows from the *unknowability* of God that there is very little that can be *said* about God."⁷⁴ For the soul that is "onyd" to its creator, the problem of God's inexpressibility reaches a new level: a breakdown in description of the God to whom she is joined is likewise a breakdown of possible description of the self.

To look for signs and effects of these phenomena in mystical writing is not simply a metaphysical question or a study of this overlap in the abstract. It is, rather, one way to approach the lived experience of an individual negotiating these problems, trying to give voice to them, and trying to understand and describe the boundaries of him/herself. To analyze these issues in a text is to study discursive space, to examine how the text itself becomes an arena for these negotiations, for confronting limits of knowledge and expression, and for the attempt to transcend them. It is, therefore, to study the act and art of representation. Before moving on to analyze how texts represent these conflicts, this chapter parses the problem itself: the mystic's liminal condition and the interrelated circumstances that produce it.

⁷⁴ Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), 20. His emphasis.

Problems of Being: Union

I stated in the introduction that my use of the term “mystical union” signifies loss or dissolution of awareness of one’s being apart from God, a sense that one’s state of being, or ontological status, does not, or more accurately cannot, stand entirely distinct from the divine. It is a view with a long and winding history in Christian thought, and that underwent a particular period of development in the high and late Middle Ages. It was then that the concept of “mystical union” as most Christian theologians define it today, as a merger intrinsically related to identity, was largely codified. The roots of the concept run far deeper. This idea of *unio mystica* is present in the Greek scriptures, particularly in Johannine and Pauline writings, and yet further back in Greek philosophy’s commentary on the soul’s relation to God, the First Principle and Highest Good. Plotinus, whose philosophical writings became one of the influential forces on the Church fathers and developing Christianity, writes specifically of union (employing the term *henosis*) “as merging or essential identity.”⁷⁵

But it would be the twelfth-century, as previous scholarship has well documented, that saw a marked investment in the further development of theories of mystical union. Writers such as William of St. Thierry and Bernard of Clairvaux promoted “the idea that union with God was the basic way to describe the immediate experience of God.”⁷⁶ For these writers, the issue is one of access, more epistemological than strictly ontological. William, Bernard, and Bonaventure as well viewed “union” primarily as a contemplative state of the mind, not necessarily a

⁷⁵ Bernard McGinn, “Love, Knowledge and *Unio Mystica* in the Western Christian Tradition,” *Mystical Union in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: An Ecumenical Dialogue*, ed. Moshe Idel and Bernard McGinn (New York: Continuum, 1999), 60-1. McGinn’s history of the concept of mystical union has become a standard in the field and has influenced my framing of key developments here.

⁷⁶ Giles Constable, “Ideal of the Imitation of Christ,” *Three Studies in Medieval Religious and Social Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), 246

commingling of the soul with the divine. Still, these writers offered an important contribution to the history of mysticism by conceiving of “union” as something that can be experienced.

Thirteenth-century Continental mysticism took a step further, reviving Neoplatonic concepts of “the union of identity or indistinction.”⁷⁷ Scholars frequently point to the writings of the Flemish beguine Hadewijch, the German beguine Mechthild of Magdeburg, the French writer Marguerite Porete following them around the turn of the century, and Meister Eckhart soon after, as characteristic of the period’s concern with the soul’s rediscovery of its essential, ontological link to God. In contrast to a concept of union concerned with the soul’s potential elevation through contemplation or transcendence of the limits of the mind, in this type of union the subject directly confronts the complexity of the boundaries of the self, recalling the soul’s origin in God. To say the soul can perceive a return to that origin, or can somehow reinhabit that origin, raises questions as to where the self ends and the divine other begins. To perceive the self as wholly united to God leaves little or no place for status as creature apart from creator.

Daring framings of such union gave rise to the Continental debates over *deificatio*. Those writers who were less careful to clarify (as, for instance, Bernard of Clairvaux and Richard of St. Victor had done explicitly) that such experience of ontological union was only temporary or only “appeared” to unite the soul to God in such a way that the two were indistinguishable risked a dangerous slip into heterodoxy. Such formulations would, as Nicholas Watson has detailed, simultaneously spread and “hereticate” the early concepts of Christian Neoplatonism.⁷⁸ The official Church position, and likewise dominant opinion among theologians in medieval England, held that if such a union occurred, it was only for a brief moment and did not dispel

⁷⁷ McGinn, “*Unio Mystica*,” 71.

⁷⁸ Nicholas Watson, “Melting into God the English Way: Deification in the Middle English Version of Marguerite Porete’s *Mirouer des simples âmes anienties*,” *Prophets Abroad: The Reception of Continental Holy Women in Late Medieval England*. Ed. Rosalynn Voaden (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1996), 42-43. On some of the strategic formulations of Bernard and Richard to avoid this heresy, see esp. 39 and 44.

one's human nature.⁷⁹ For example, Carthusian Richard Methley, who translated the Middle English version of Porete's *Mirror of Simple Souls* into Latin, counseled his readers to "beware lest you believe that the creature, through rapture, loses essentially its own essence and is converted into its Creator, for to feel or to say this is not of grace but of blasphemy."⁸⁰ Because rash word choice to describe union could easily drift into a heretical position, the question of the potential fullness of union, and appropriate ways to talk about it, were inherently fraught topics.

In many ways, such tensions have come to define "mysticism" in the modern era. In the early twentieth-century, as commentators on mysticism worked to define the genre and formulate a canon of classics, attention turned again to the question of union as an experience and how to clarify its potential means and degrees of completeness. A concept of mysticism as a direct personal experience and a claim of some union with the divine (through knowledge or being) became the dominant definition. Evelyn Underhill's famous definition of mysticism as "the science of ultimates, the science of union with the Absolute, and nothing else," is primarily concerned with the merger between the soul and what paradoxically transcends it.⁸¹ Rudolf Otto's study of reported encounters with the "numinous" (in practice, the divine) argues that such experiences result in, on the one hand, a self-depreciation, "an estimation of the self, of the personal 'I', as something not perfectly or essentially real," yet also an acknowledgement of union with the holy as "identification, in different degrees of completeness, of the personal self with the transcendent Reality."⁸² Both are concerned with the loss of a former self-awareness in the perception of mystical union.

⁷⁹ Ibid. 39.

⁸⁰ Quoted in Edmund Colledge and Romana Guarnieri, "The Glosses by 'M.N.' and Richard Methley to *The Mirror of Simple Souls*," *Archivio italiano per la storia della piet * 5 (Rome 1968), 379.

⁸¹ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (1911; reprint Oxford: One World, 2002), 72.

⁸² Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (1923; reprint Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977), 22.

In the example from Julian's text, tension arises at the point of recognition that "union" cannot be entirely complete, for even if no longer entirely separate from God, she cannot completely join with him either. She is, therefore, both part and apart from God.⁸³ This sense of being caught "in-between" is the core of what I will refer to as liminality.

Problems of Instability: Liminality

A sense of liminality is intrinsic to the Christian framing of human experience in which one's mortal journey is a type of exile. Men are, in the words of the *Letter to the Hebrews*, only "pilgrims and strangers on the earth."⁸⁴ They are in-between, on their way to another state of being. Similar sentiments fill medieval theology and contemplative writing. Bernard of Clairvaux claims that through development in the spiritual life, the soul united with God enters an interior "New Jerusalem," a sort of consolation for the temporary inability to meet him in the celestial city, which one can only enter after death.⁸⁵ The author of the *Meditationes vitae Christi* similarly considers the tension of perceiving the self to be in two disparate places at once, between continuing earthly pilgrimage and momentary access to what is beyond it: sometimes, he or she explains, "a fullness of inner sweetness" can cause one to remark " 'Lord, it is good for us to be here.' Clearly not this trouble-filled pilgrimage where he is detained in body, but in that sweet and salvific pondering which has taken possession of his heart."⁸⁶ Bonaventure urges in his *Itinerarium mentis in deum* that through contemplative ascent, "the soul, entering into itself,

⁸³ Julian, *Revelation*, 46.64.

⁸⁴ Hebrews 11:13. Bible references refer to the Douay-Rheims text, as noted in my bibliography.

⁸⁵ See especially his Letters 58, 60, and 67 in *The Letters of Bernard of Clairvaux*, ed. and trans. Bruce Scott James (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1998).

⁸⁶ *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, ed. and trans. Francis Taney, Anne Miller, and C. Mary Stallings-Taney (Ashville, NC: Pegasus, 2000), 178, chap. 52.

enters into the celestial Jerusalem.”⁸⁷ A partial “transport” can be induced by the mind contemplating God in the world, within itself, and finally beyond itself. Bonaventure closes by citing Pseudo-Dionysius, asserting that by abandoning world and intellect one can enter “union with Him Who is above all essence and all knowledge.”⁸⁸ Yet this, Bonaventure qualifies, is not union in its entirety, but only “in so far as it is possible in our state as wayfarer,” in our present ontological state.⁸⁹ Even after an ideal ascent through the levels of contemplation and brief access to an experience of union, this union is not a sustainable state for the soul still living on earth and in the body: the soul is instead trapped in a liminal condition.

For many mystical writers, the fleeting nature of the experience of union only serves to make boundaries of the self more indistinct, and “liminal” becomes an even more accurate label for the subject as she alternates between the temporary unified state and distance from it. Throughout the tradition, union is described as a momentary feeling of access; as Augustine claims in describing his spiritual ascent at Ostia, it is “touched...in a small degree by a moment of total concentration of the heart.”⁹⁰ The author of the Middle English *Cloud of Unknowing* reminds those who would work to scale the heights of contemplation that “ravisching,” the goal of the work, occurs on God’s schedule, only at moments one cannot control.⁹¹ Jean-François Lyotard encapsulates this element of Augustine’s complaint and Christianity’s promise by summarizing belief that God’s door will be opened, “it will be crossed, entry will be had, for certain, it’s a promise – for those at least who are the elect. But it is for tomorrow, it still lies in

⁸⁷ Bonaventure, *The Journey of the Mind to God*, ed. Stephen Brown, trans. Philotheus Boehner (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), 25.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* 39.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.* 37.

⁹⁰ Augustine, *The Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998), 171.

⁹¹ *The Cloud of Unknowing*, ed. Peter Gallacher (Kalamazoo, MI: TEAMS/Medieval Institute Publications, 1997), 97.

the future, one has to be dead already, once time is over.”⁹² The subject is caught alternating between his ordinary state and the one he glimpses beyond it, or even more specifically, glimpses of a state beyond that is yet to come. His state is therefore liminal.

It is not my intention to judge the orthodoxy of writers’ descriptions of union and the theological risks they take. I will allow those questions to stand. My concern is with the expression of experience, of the real feelings and problems of being in any way “in the middle” or “in-between” within the mystics’ descriptions of union in its various forms and degrees; my concern is with description of being in a liminal state. It is a state in which the subject negotiates being between “self” and “deified,” a state in which the very boundary between “self” and “other” is unclear.

Several modern theoretical perspectives have approached the issue of liminality and boundaries of the self, specifically as regards being or becoming something else, becoming (in part) Other. Some of these approaches provide a conceptual schematic and vocabulary that is helpful for a discussion of liminality and complications of self-understanding that emerge in the context of mysticism. To better frame my own use of the concept of liminality and its distinctions from other critical discourses, I turn now to a brief review of the concept’s history in critical discourse and in a few of its main permutations, all with an eye to the ways that such constructions of liminality – drawn from anthropology, psychoanalysis, and phenomenology – can ultimately help theorize the liminal ontological position that characterizes mystical union.

The concept of liminality in modern critical discourse initially gained wide recognition through the work of British anthropologist Victor Turner. In his study of social ritual in pre-industrial cultures, Turner drew upon but also revised Arnold van Gennep’s tripartite model of

⁹² Jean-François Lyotard, *The Confession of St. Augustine*, trans. Richard Beardsworth (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000), 14.

“rites of passage.” In a seminal 1908 study, Van Gennep had argued that three stages of progression are evident in most ceremonies by which an individual changes social rank or position, such as rituals surrounding puberty: these include a rite of separation from one’s social role (*rite de separation*), a transitional rite that occurs between established roles (*marge* or *limen*), and a rite of reincorporation (*agrégation*) in which one assumes a new role in the established social order.⁹³ Turner drew special attention to the middle, transitional stage, which he referred to as “liminal,” and suggested that at its core the “liminal” is about ambiguity: a state of not having a specific position in the social order.⁹⁴

Those occupying the liminal state, “threshold people,” are in-between positions and identifications, and “elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space.”⁹⁵ A boy undergoing a rite of transition to adulthood, for instance, could for a time be considered to have no status at all, neither that of a boy nor that of a man, a “not-boy-not-man.”⁹⁶ To represent this, individuals undergoing the liminal phases of rites are often stripped of all markers of social identity (including markers of sex, clothing that indicates social position, sometimes even names) to reflect “a limbo of statuslessness.”⁹⁷ Turner

⁹³ See Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (1908), trans. Monika B. Vizedon and Gabrielle L. Caffee (Chicago: University of Chicago P, 1960).

⁹⁴ See esp. Victor Turner, “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites of Passage*,” *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1967), 93-11; and idem, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969), esp. 94-130.

⁹⁵ Turner, *Ritual Process*, 95.

⁹⁶ Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, 95. Turner also observes that the liminal stage often involves abasement of the individual and a suspension of the community’s entire system of established social roles. A key example in Turner’s work is the rite of installation for the chief of the Ndembu tribe in Zambia, in which the candidate undergoes a liminal period of exile on the margins of the village; he is then harassed by other members of the community, who for a time assert power over him before later submitting (after his reincorporation) to his new status as chief. On these issues, see *Ritual Process*, esp. 97-102.

⁹⁷ Turner, *Ritual Process*, 97. Although Turner’s study of liminality began with pre-industrial societies and with a focus on rituals of the Ndembu tribe in particular, he argued that a comparable process is evident in almost all transition rites. One of Turner’s notable examples relevant to the current study is a Western monastic rite of entry, which “levels” novices of an order by stripping them of name and clothing and making them as identical as possible. This is an observation he says he takes in part from Erving Goffman’s analysis of Benedictine monasteries in *Asylums* (1962). Ibid. 108.

later usefully expanded his concept of the liminal, eventually applying it to “all phases of decisive cultural change” and coining “social drama” as a term for society’s response to such changes. The liminal is, he argued, “not only *transition* but also *potentiality*, not only ‘going to be’ but also ‘what may be.’”⁹⁸ The situation is not altogether unlike Augustine’s waiting to change states, or the *Cloud* Author’s surrender to God’s timing for moments of rapture.

Turner’s primary concern is with the potential flexibility of social position, with the circumstances under which such positions are ambiguous as opposed to fixed. His focus on social identity differs from my concern with ontological status of a soul as it melds with the divine, experiencing a form of liminality in the process. But Turner’s theory certainly helps lead us to questions of ontology not yet fully explored.⁹⁹ Turner’s view of a state in which an individual not only shifts in status but has no identifiable position is essentially about recognition of a shifting ontological status. The boy undergoing the liminal phase of his puberty ritual lacks not only an established position in the tribe, but any clear state of being. He is literally in-between states, and in-between modes of experiencing reality: as a boy and as a man. The situation of the mystic, caught negotiating between two states of being – one as a creature distinct from the divine and a new state of being in which she has lost awareness of the self apart from God – mirrors the boy in Turner’s liminal stage.

The mystic who experiences brief moments of mystical union and then is left, as Julian puts it, “evermore to leven in swete prayor and in lovely longyng,” finds it impossible to return

⁹⁸ Victor Turner and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives* (New York: Columbia UP, 1978), 2-3.

⁹⁹ Turner’s work does refer to “ontological” change, for instance in rites related to puberty. See his *Forest of Symbols*, esp. 101-102. He also later applied the concept of liminality to pilgrimage, purgatory, and even mysticism as “interiorized ritual liminality.” See esp. “Death and the Dead in the Pilgrimage Process,” *Process, Performance and Pilgrimage* (New Delhi: Concept, 1979), 121-142. On mysticism, see *ibid.* 125.

to her prior state.¹⁰⁰ Like Turner's "liminal *personae* ('threshold people')," she lacks a fixed identity, retaining a former sense of self but having to reconcile it with a perception of a self inextricably linked to God. And as discussed in the previous section, she must negotiate the degrees of "completeness" of that link. Even if union is seen as a *reunion* with God who is the source of being, or a circular return to one's virtual existence in the mind of God, the process is the same: an understanding of the self as distinct must fade, and a new understanding of the self in union must develop.

An important difference from Turner's "threshold people" is that the mystic's situation is not quite one of total "statuslessness," but rather too many identities as once, competing states of being. Caught in-between, still in the process, she is *partially* stripped of a previous identity and *partially* inhabiting a new one.

Mystical union that so blurs the boundaries of the self might be seen as an invasion by the divine Other. It potentially creates, on the one hand, a sense of fluid identity, but along with this comes the disturbing prospect of destabilization.¹⁰¹ This is the uncanny aspect of liminality: to be neither whole nor static, to be cut off from wholeness, to be internally divided. Here one relevant theory of invasion and consequent division in the subject is Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, in which a threat opposed to the *I* places the subject "literally beside himself"; in her framing of subjectivity, it is the move to expel that threat, and thus create an opposition, that allows (or rather forces) the *I* to come into being.¹⁰² In the Christian paradigm, according to Kristeva, this threat comes from within as the inborn inclination to sin, an Other inside the self that notably (not entirely unlike the mystics' experiences with their texts) emerges and is

¹⁰⁰ Julian, *Revelation*, 40.55.

¹⁰¹ In Turner's model, this is dramatized in the forced exile and/or debasement of individuals during liminal phases.

¹⁰² Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon Roudiez (New York: Columbia UP, 1982), 1-2.

“reabsorbed” in language, in confession of its presence.¹⁰³ In her formulation, the abject is a negative, that which is repulsive. It may seem the opposite, really, of the presence of God for the Christian mystic. But I turn briefly to her formulation here because its relative concreteness – before I begin to address intangible souls and more abstract states of being – helps articulate how recognition of a foreign entity within oneself can split the subject and make him “henceforth [a] divided and contradictory being.”¹⁰⁴ The core of the abject is that which “disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.”¹⁰⁵ Although Kristeva does not draw from him directly, this is in essence a version of Turner’s liminality, a state in which discrete identity is destabilized and ambiguity reigns instead; although here, closer to the unique drama of the mystics, it is invasion by another presence that destabilizes the subject.

Perception that such an invading force is a good one, even divine, does not shore up the subject against a psychic split. Augustine’s writing is again an example that illustrates the phenomenon quite clearly. His effort to understand himself and his own mind, an issue developed most explicitly over the course of his *Confessions* narrative, is famously complicated by the recognition of God not in the world, but within him. “You were within,” Augustine laments to God, “and I was in the external world and sought you there.”¹⁰⁶ This spurs meditation on “where in [Augustine’s] consciousness” God dwells, but also a conflict between God’s perfection and Augustine’s various ways of falling short; as Augustine exclaims, “because I am not full of you, I am a burden to myself.”¹⁰⁷ Here in the *Confessions*, much more than in Augustine’s attempt to parse the human mind as an image of God in his treatise *On the Trinity*,

¹⁰³ Ibid. esp. 113-120.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. 116.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. 4.

¹⁰⁶ Augustine, *Confessions*, 201.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. 200 and 202.

we see struggle and division. An internal split derives from encounter with God and recognition of God moving within. From the “shattering visit of the Other,” as Lyotard has put it, we find that while Augustine is “delighting with [God’s] presence in such sudden ecstasy, he feels more dissociation from himself, cleaved, alienated, more uncertain of what he is than usual.”¹⁰⁸ Unable to merge self and Other smoothly, Augustine notoriously becomes “a problem to himself.”¹⁰⁹ The liminal position is anything but comfortable.

Both Kristeva’s formulation and the problem of an ambiguous identity also resonate with psychoanalytic theories of the process of subject formation, which further address the role of desire in the subject’s “becoming.” At a basic level, psychoanalysis postulates a subject who comes into being through the recognition of relationship to that which the *I* is not (cannot fully be, but again only “*in so far as it is possible*”) and desires to rejoin. In the Lacanian formulation, this is the chief result of the “mirror stage,” in which the infant comes into being as a subject and has its borderlines established as a result of observing its image in a mirror, and also discerning that that image is “other,” an ideal outside of the limits of what the subject can be. Thus the *I* is organized, but this necessarily enacts a loss of the former self, or more specifically, of the former potential for a multitude of selves.¹¹⁰ Thus this subject in progress is always caught looking backward and forward at the same time, a condition I view as liminal in that the subject does not accept stasis and instead pursues a continuous project of becoming. One of the best summaries is offered by Aranye Fradenburg:

To be a “me” I have to *not* be other things – I have to *not* be, at the same time, “you.” Desire is the result. It is my response to the fact that “I” can come into

¹⁰⁸ Lyotard, *Confession of Augustine*, 18.

¹⁰⁹ Augustine, *Confessions*, 208.

¹¹⁰ Jacques Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function, as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience,” *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2002), 3-9.

being only by being differentiated from everything else, which “I” now feel that I “lack” (and which I can never recover).¹¹¹

To be one *I* is necessarily not to be another *I*. The condition is not unlike that of Augustine and the medieval mystics in union who are “both/and” rather than “either/or,” and trying to reconcile a former self with a new one.

There are of course some important differences. The psychoanalytic subject desires, but does not achieve, his desired (re)union, whereas “both/and” status is precisely the problem for the mystic. The psychoanalytic subject seeks a lost sense of wholeness and will seek in vain to recover it; the mystic’s position in the mortal world makes it temporarily impossible to obtain the wholeness of complete union that is to come, but she believes that it will come. In many ways the medieval religious subject and the subject theorized by psychoanalysis are incommensurable, but as Fradenburg points out in her influential comparison of the two, both cases involve a tearing away from identities.¹¹² Both feature a subject remade through sacrifice and having an aim of pleasure, though this goal is *jouissance* in psychoanalysis and union with God in religion.¹¹³ Ultimately both are cases of a subject left hanging in-between, and psychoanalysis articulates processes of “becoming” driven by a desire for union and wholeness, a desire to reconcile competing portions of the self. Therefore it can help advance an analysis of liminality beyond the “limbo of statuslessness” theorized by Turner precisely because it speaks to the pull of contradictory forces on the subject.

Augustine’s “dissociation” and confusion as to the nature and boundaries of the self occurs upon recognition of God’s presence within him. His status as a convert, or any subject

¹¹¹ L.O. Aranye Fradenburg, *Sacrifice Your Love: Psychoanalysis, Historicism, Chaucer* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota P, 2002), 6.

¹¹² *Ibid.* 73.

¹¹³ L.O. Aranye Fradenburg, “‘Be Not Far From Me’: Psychoanalysis, Medieval Studies, and the Subject of Religion,” *Exemplaria* 7.1 (1995), 41-54. See esp. 43.

moving into deeper intimacy with the divine, poses additional difficulties. In his converted state there is no longer one but now two voices competing for expression. As Lyotard divides them, now present are old Augustine and newly converted Augustine, the grace-filled soul and the former appetitive, sensuous self; and “what a scandal, the other flesh, the other voice parasiting his own voices, what an aversion, the conversion,” writes Lyotard, interpreting the result as turmoil and confusion of voice which precedes alienation and confusion of self.¹¹⁴ Kristeva, too, notes the ambiguity of the speaker in the case of Augustine’s warring good and sinful natures.¹¹⁵

Even further, in such circumstances the speaking voice is divided. By this I mean to refer not only to the Lacanian observation that one cannot speak about (or listen to) the self without becoming divided, for “the signifying chain imposes itself, by itself, on the subject in its dimension as voice,” but to a lack of clarity as to who the speaker is.¹¹⁶ Once Augustine (or any mystic, for that matter) has found a new union with God, there is a question as to what degree his words are divine and to what degree they are the mystic’s own. For all his use of the vocative and banter with God throughout his narrative, Augustine’s addresses acknowledge a debt of words. “You hear nothing true from my lips which you have not first told me,” he laments to God, noting that all his own knowledge has been conveyed through scripture and mystical insight.¹¹⁷

Potentially, to speak with one voice is necessarily not to speak with another: to convey God’s words threatens the mystic’s autonomous words, and so as Michel de Certeau has poignantly phrased the problem, the mystic speaker “inhabits the torture, ecstasy, or sacri-fice of

¹¹⁴ Lyotard, *Confession*, 13.

¹¹⁵ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 125.

¹¹⁶ Lacan, “On a Question Prior to Any Possible Treatment for Psychosis,” *Ecrits*, 171.

¹¹⁷ Augustine, *Confessions*, 179.

a language that can *say* the absolute, endlessly, only by erasing itself.”¹¹⁸ The mystic’s speech must, to some degree, undercut itself. Two voices blend as the mystic attempts to convey anything of the nature of God, or any knowledge given by God. And thus speech becomes both a means of expression and a means to achieve union. The purpose of mystic speech (that speech which takes shape as the mystical text) is to engage the subject with God; and as Certeau goes on to detail, the text itself functions as a site of union and interchange with the divine, a merger that takes place through words.

Here psychoanalytic theory can be helpful again, having as one of its foundational concepts the idea that unconscious processes, as well as their manifestations, depend upon language. It is drawing on this foundation that Lacan could offer not only his famous claim that “the unconscious is structured like a language,” but also its corollaries: that subjectivity occurs in relation, and that the *I*, the ego, is really a position in a chain of meaning. Just as all the elements in a sentence’s syntagmatic chain depend on each other and putting thoughts into language necessitates choice and dependency (basic conditions Lacan draws from linguistics), the same is true for the Lacanian subject who comes into being through a system of absence and presence, self as opposed to Other. Again, it means that something must be given up, as discussed above in relation to the mirror stage, or as Lacan puts it elsewhere, “presence as absence connotes possible absence and presence. As soon as the subject himself comes to be, he owes it to a certain non-being on which he raises his being.”¹¹⁹ The *I* signifies one subject precisely because

¹¹⁸ Michel de Certeau, “Mystic Speech,” *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, trans. Brian Massumi (1986; reissued Minneapolis: University of Minnesota P, 2006), 81.

¹¹⁹ Jacques Lacan, “The Purloined Letter,” *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book II: The Ego in Freud’s Theory and the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954-1955*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli (New York: Norton, 1988), 192.

it does not signify another. This is a tenuous situation that depends on the *I* not slipping, not marking another place instead, and on the subject's identification with the *I*.¹²⁰

Just as Certeau reminds us of the unique situation of the mystic's voice intermingling with God's, so psychoanalysis reminds us that to some degree the *I* and whether it can represent the subject (grammatically as well as in terms of conscious identification) is always a problem from the start. Together they affirm how unstable the *I* and what it signifies can be in any first-person narrative, but this is especially true in mystical discourse in which the *I* opens itself as a channel for divine words. And both ultimately return us to the liminal, the place in which the nature of the self and what is signified by *I* is in question, by definition unclear.

We could say then that the *I* of mystical discourse is unstable because it adopts various stances. The work of Richard Schechner, who took Turner's concepts of liminality into discussion of theatrical performance, illuminates this potentiality. Schechner's theory of the simultaneous "me," "not me," and "not not me" addresses how the adoption of a stance as "other" can divide a performer. His classic example is of an actor playing Hamlet who is thus not the actor alone, for he is also Hamlet, but he is also "not not" himself because he is not only Hamlet.¹²¹ For Schechner, such enactments divide the performer and essentially make him liminal. The schema seems to capture the "both/and" element of mystical union, but relies on conscious adoption of roles more than the continuous, liminal identity of the mystic.

¹²⁰ On these points, see esp. Lacan, "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious," in *Ecrits*, 138-168; "The Subject and the Other: Alienation" in *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (1977; reprint New York: Norton, 1998), 203-215. Also clarifying on these elements of Lacanian theory is Antony Easthope's discussion in *Poetry as Discourse* (London: Methuen, 1983), 30-47, although notably the current project does not share his (or Lacan's) precise use of the word "discourse." I am applying "discourse" broadly to all modes of expression and structure in the narratives under analysis.

¹²¹ Schechner developed this formulation as part of his critical concept of restored behavior, a reconstructed performance that circulates and functions independently from any one individual performing it. See Richard Schechner, *Between Theatre and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania P, 1985), 35-6 and 110-111.

Even as mystical union between subject and God potentially blends voices and destabilizes the speaker – whether by invasion, conscious adoption, or a combination of the two – it also initiates a spiral of other linguistic complications. There is, first of all, the question of exactly who is speaking. But there is also the problem of describing the self when the self is an Other, or in the liminal state between the two. And the situation is exacerbated when that Other is ineffable. Here narrative production meets the problem of engaging and representing liminality and the unique circumstances of spiritual experience. And language is already a charged arena.

Problems of Description: Language

Nearly every religious tradition assigns a crucial role to language in encounters with the sacred. As Steven Katz puts it in his comparative study of mystical language,

in all the major mystical traditions, recognizing their real and undeniable phenomenological diversity, language as a psychospiritual means of radical reorientation and purification is present. And its presence points to the inherent linguistic element in spirituality: language is integral to mystical practice.¹²²

In many traditions, language is a psychological tool used to focus concentration or alter consciousness, as in the use of mantras or the paradoxical *koans* of Zen meditation that aim to extinguish thought. Such language, as Katz notes, is intentionally non-descriptive: “*Om* does not ‘say’ something, does not ‘tell’ something, but *does* something.”¹²³ It induces a different state of awareness. Language sometimes fulfills this function in the Christian mystical tradition as well, the fourteenth-century *Cloud* author’s suggestions for monologic prayer being one example; he

¹²² Steven Katz, “Mystical Speech and Mystical Meaning,” *Mysticism and Language*, ed. Steven Katz (New York: Oxford UP, 1992), 15.

¹²³ *Ibid.* 10.

suggests repetition of the words “love” and “God” not as means to contemplate the divine nature that they signify, but to suppress active thought.¹²⁴

Additionally, Christianity has long viewed language as a means to knowledge of God and also a reflection of union with the divine; the former view is shared by several traditions, the latter largely a distinctive element of Christianity. The notion of language as a means of knowledge is obvious in the central role of scripture. Gregory the Great, for instance, describes scripture as God’s “condescension” to reach humanity through its forms of language, a means by which limited human understanding can achieve “access to divine mystery.”¹²⁵ At the heart of Christianity is the assertion that God has expressed himself through the “Word made flesh”; indeed, the bold assertion of an incarnate divine is what most fundamentally sets Christianity’s view of “word” and God apart from other traditions. One of the most poignant, condensed summaries of this doctrine has been offered by Ewert Cousins:

The Trinity is primarily the mystery of the divine self-expression...from all eternity the fecundity of the divinity wells up in the person of God the Father and expresses itself in its perfect Image and Word, who is the Son... Thus we can say that the Son is the linguistic expression of the Father... One can say that at its very apex and center – on the level of the absolute – reality is linguistic.”¹²⁶

At least two key points extend from this. First, because it is a reflection of God’s own actions, human language is therefore not “merely functional,” a mere practicality, but grounded in the

¹²⁴ *Cloud of Unknowing*, 7.499-513. As Tarjei Park frames the *Cloud* author’s monologic prayer, such words produce a “vacuity of signification,” and are a means to dissolve the conceptual. See *Selfhood and ‘Gostly Menyng’ in Some Middle English Mystics: Semiotic Approaches to Contemplative Theology* (Lewiston, NY; Lampeter, Wales: Mellen, 2002), 259-260.

¹²⁵ E. Ann Matter, *The Voice of My Beloved: The Song of Songs in Western Medieval Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania P, 1990), 55.

¹²⁶ Ewert Cousins, “Bonaventure’s Mysticism of Language,” *Mysticism and Language*, ed. Steven Katz (New York: Oxford UP, 1992), 240-241.

divine.¹²⁷ The second is the idea of creation as God's expression through language. The thirteenth-century Franciscan writers were particularly keen to develop this branch of theology. Bonaventure, for example, asserted that humans' own use of language was a reflection of the Trinity in man and a sign of man's ontological link to God, that this link could be brought into conscious awareness, and that (like the Trinity's capacity for expression) it could manifest through giving expression to internal thought.¹²⁸

Cousins has suggested that such a perspective on religious discourse, an authentic adoption of Bonaventure's view, leaves room for us to understand "mysticism based on the Logos as the objective ground of truth or of the forms of language participating in the divine Logos itself."¹²⁹ Narrating an experience of God can be seen as a manifestation of union with the divine on two levels, namely in the basic act of expression and in the narration of particular feelings. It is a circular process: the expression of union itself becomes a means to strengthen the link between God and man. Language is a location of union, for it is a means of revelation and participation in the divine. And if to speak of God is not only to affirm him, to celebrate him, but to participate in his *being*, language and ontology are inextricably linked.

But as evident in the example from Julian's text, the limits of language can also be an obstacle for the mystic, and this problematic side of language is prominent in the Christian mystical tradition. While the structure of language may approximate, imitate, or reflect God's communication, it can fully address neither his divine nature nor the blurred boundaries of the subject in union with God. The struggle for language that adequately signifies, and in the process approaches the divine is a central tension in the writing of Pseudo-Dionysius (ca. 500). His treatise *The Divine Names* discusses how one may use conceptual labels to assert the

¹²⁷ Ibid. 240.

¹²⁸ Ibid. 244, 251-2.

¹²⁹ Ibid. 255.

qualities of God (“The Good,” Beauty,” “Light,” etc.), although he concedes that this approach to the reality of God inevitably falls short. His *Mystical Theology* alternatively approaches God by negations, the embrace of silence and “unknowing” and the negation of all ascriptions, including all linguistic signifiers.

These two alternatives represent the two methods of approaching God in language that would be taken up by later medieval mysticism. On the one hand is the cataphatic path of verbose metaphor and analogy, synesthesia, and anaphora, a method which inevitably exhausts itself in the attempt to describe the ineffable. On the other hand, the apophatic path, “apophasis” in its Greek etymology referring to that which is negative or a way of negation, recognizes that “in the face of the unknowability of God, [language] falls infinitely short of the mark.”¹³⁰ Both of these channels (“channels” being an appropriate conceptualization for these rhetorical modes that try to convey divine nature) exert a marked influence on later medieval Continental and Insular mysticism, wherein the challenge becomes one of also describing ineffable *experience* of God, describing the perception of union.

Many writers employ both channels simultaneously, a paradox that has received surprisingly little critical attention; the tension between these modes, even more than straightforward regret about the limits of language, demonstrates just how fraught language is for the mystic. The two collide very vividly, for instance, in the writing of the fourteenth-century English mystic Richard Rolle. Rolle demonstrates a dramatic use of the cataphatic mode as he strives to explain the soul’s experience of God, employing synesthesia and traditional metaphors in his *Fire of Love* to describe the soul’s experience of divine union. He writes that such a soul is “taken into the sweet, warm caress of God...overwhelmed and enriched with the most intense

¹³⁰ Turner, *Darkness of God*, 20.

ardour through his unique consolation, and carried on his glorious way.”¹³¹ This jubilant soul is purified and simultaneously experiences both the “warmth” and “sweetness” of an embrace.

Yet Rolle frequently undercuts his own language. Among his passionate metaphors, he laments that the joyful soul in union “is unable to express what he is savouring of heaven.”¹³² He reaches for a traditional trope to describe the impossibility of putting such joy into language, comparing it to the task of emptying the sea drop by drop.¹³³ He turns at points to outright negation, admits he must simply “give up” description of the soul’s experience of internal song because of “the limitations of [his] sense.”¹³⁴ Still, he demonstrates a drive to give voice to his experience. Indeed, he claims that the soul can do nothing but shout in response to union with God, that he will simply “burst out with splendid song.”¹³⁵ Here the cataphatic drive to exhaustion meets apophatic negation.

Both approaches also point to further connections between language and ontology. As evident in Rolle, the cataphatic path attempts to capture experience in language. The apophatic path often promotes annihilation of the self that is distinct from God just as it advocates the negation of words and images. The *Cloud* author, probably the most devoted propagator of the apophatic way in late medieval England, exemplifies this tendency when he claims that a conscious awareness of oneself as a being distinct from God can stand between the soul and its access to God.¹³⁶ He advises that one attains contemplative union by elevating the mind to the “darkness” of non-knowledge, a darkness accessible by erasing (as noted in the discussion of

¹³¹ Richard Rolle, *The Fire of Love*, ed. and trans. Clifton Wolters (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 150.

¹³² Ibid. 113.

¹³³ Ibid. 151.

¹³⁴ Ibid. 153.

¹³⁵ Ibid. 156.

¹³⁶ The *Cloud* author appears to have translated the *Mystical Theology* into Middle English, and it circulated alongside his own vernacular writings on contemplation. A translation of the *Mystical Theology*, entitled *Deonise Hid Divinite*, appears in Bodleian Library MS Harley 674, a manuscript containing the complete *Cloud* author corpus. MS Douce 262 contains, among other spiritual writings, *The Cloud of Unknowing* and a section of Hugh of Balma’s *Viae Sion lugent*, a commentary on the *Mystical Theology*.

monologic prayer) conceptual knowledge.¹³⁷ Ultimately, to enter into “unknowing,” one needs to move beyond images and intellection, the same movement that is at the heart of the *Mystical Theology*. Similarly, thoughts of a distinct self must (like all thoughts) be negated, or rather transcended. “A naked wetyng and a felyng of thin owne beyng,” the *Cloud* author advises, it “behovith alweis be distroied.”¹³⁸

The *Cloud* author offers a Middle English example (one of the first English vernacular examples) of this concept, although he echoes earlier texts that similarly characterize the final step of contemplative ascent as a transcendence of the mind itself. Again, the seventh stage of Bonaventure’s program is one such example. Bonaventure invokes Pseudo-Dionysius on this goal when he advises his readers, “oblivious of yourself, let yourself be brought back, in so far as it is possible, to union with Him Who is above all essence and all knowledge.”¹³⁹ Another example of this element of contemplative experience is Augustine’s vision at Ostia described in the *Confessions*: looking out a window, the minds of Augustine and Monica ascend beyond the corporeal, turn to enter into their minds themselves, and eventually ascend “beyond them” to the “inexhaustible abundance” of divine truth.¹⁴⁰

As for Julian’s words at the start of this chapter, this is not without consequence: to ascend beyond one’s own being requires abandonment of a prior ontological status and the prior sense of self that accompanied it. As I explored above, in a loss of awareness of oneself as distinct from God, no “self” is left to describe but that which is one with God, who is himself ineffable.

¹³⁷ This non-knowledge or “unknowing,” a term the *Cloud* author coins, is more accurately an “acquired ignorance” because it can only occur through advanced consideration of the nature of God’s unknowability. Turner, *Darkness of God*, 19.

¹³⁸ *Cloud of Unknowing*, 71.

¹³⁹ Bonaventure, *The Journey of the Mind to God*, 39.

¹⁴⁰ Augustine, *Confessions*, 171.

The situation is further complicated for the liminal mystic whose loss of a distinct self may be a momentary loss. Can the self in these circumstances ever be described if the liminal subject is unsure how to mark, much less narrate, its boundaries? To try to narrate the experience of being in these circumstances, to describe the ontological status of the self in such a position, is to try to represent amorphous boundaries of the self, boundaries that are ever changing.

We return again to the crux: where the attempt to narrate an experience of liminal being and shifting identity comes up against the limitations of language. It is here that the unique issues of mystic speech stand apart from general negative theology and the problems of human expression later articulated by Derrida and the deconstructionist critique of language and its instability. Here, the problem is first the liminal ontology of the speaking subject, exacerbated by the incapacity of language to describe that status.¹⁴¹ The face-off between the two key problems (of self and speech) frequently crystallizes in the seemingly contradictory, even hypocritical, movement toward “annihilation” of the self (illustrated in the *Cloud* author’s warning) and simultaneous exclamations of personal experience (as in Rolle’s *Fire*) that would seem to affirm that self. The problem is taken on in some form by all the texts in the current study, and is in essence a problem of expressing relation: of defining one’s relationship to God and of the ability to represent it in language.

In discussion of the potentially shifting *I* and Christian emphasis on language as participation in the divine, I have already gestured toward the idea of the mystical text as a location for encounter with God. Modes of discourse itself, in their movements, can be both representation and location. The subsequent chapters argue that the work of the mystical text is

¹⁴¹ A phenomenological reading could be called for here, one addressing questions of consciousness and mastery over the meaning of experience. Much work remains to be done analyzing mystical writing from this critical perspective.

to represent in form as much as in content – indeed, that in these matters of representing ineffable liminality, form becomes inseparable from content. In preparation, the remainder of this chapter begins to set out some of the ways in which the mystical text itself, functioning as a location of interaction, can open the way to this.

Problems of Location: The Text and Encounter

To engage the divine through language is to enter into an exchange. Dialogic interaction is prominent in the Hebrew scriptures and inherent to the Judeo-Christian concept of a personal God. Yahweh speaks, and Abraham, Moses, and the prophets respond: there is a call and a response, the beginning of an ongoing exchange. God declares Jeremiah a prophet, and Jeremiah protests that he is a child; God rebukes and advises him, and they begin a conversation about what Jeremiah sees.¹⁴² Dialogic movement is also prominent in the back and forth exchanges that fill the psalms. The speaker (“David” to the medieval reader) engages God in a conversation, offering up praise, repentance, pleas for help, and notably, questions. Sometimes these are asked of God, and David receives a response. Sometimes David addresses and answers himself. “But be thou, O my soul, subject to God,” David instructs first himself and then the people of Israel in Psalm 61, continuing, “Trust in him, all ye congregation of people.”¹⁴³ Another notable example is Psalm 14; David poses the question of the opening line, “LORD, who shall dwell in thy tabernacle? or who shall rest in thy holy hill?” and either God, David, or God-through-David responds by answering that such a one is “he that walketh without blemish and worketh justice.”¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² Jeremiah 1:1-19.

¹⁴³ Psalm 61:6, 9.

¹⁴⁴ Psalm 14:1-2.

For the Christian with his personal God, any knowledge or access, and certainly any attempt at an active relationship with the divine, begins from this point.¹⁴⁵ As Merold Westphal notes in a recent study of the phenomenology of prayer, Christian prayer cannot be entirely apophatic.¹⁴⁶ It relies on receiving messages, reaching out to another (usually through language, but always a gesture of reaching out), and on anticipating a response. Westphal notes that even Pseudo-Dionysius, whose *Mystical Theology* eventually advocates moving beyond all words and concepts for God, opens his text with a prayer to the Trinity; this extension to the divine grounds the author's endeavor in the God whose nature he wants to celebrate.¹⁴⁷ Such actions, however, present a challenge to the wisdom of the apophatic tradition.

In the realm of contemplative literature, as Certeau points out, “*invocatio* has long been the first moment of religious knowledge,” the beginning of more profound access.¹⁴⁸ Epistemological concerns may precede ontological questions; invocations are often an attempt to know the divine. But such interactions are about relation: such moments render visible the perceived distance between God and the human soul, but paradoxically also bridge the two by uniting them in an exchange of words.

The English monk Anselm of Canterbury begins his *Proslogion* by “rousing” his own mind to turn to the divine. “Come now, insignificant mortal,” he begins, “...just for a little while make room for God, and rest a while in him. Enter into the chamber of your mind...Speak now, my whole heart: say to God, ‘I seek your face; your face, Lord, do I seek.’”¹⁴⁹ Embedded within

¹⁴⁵ Although in the Christian context, of course, God is always the initiator of contact and the exchange. This occurs most visibly in creation and the Incarnation, which as discussed above can be seen as God's language.

¹⁴⁶ Merold Westphal, “Prayer as the Posture of the Decentered Self,” *The Phenomenology of Prayer*, ed. Bruce Ellis Benson and Norman Wirzba (New York: Fordham UP, 2005), 20.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ Certeau, “Mystic Speech,” 89.

¹⁴⁹ Anselm of Canterbury, *Monologion and Proslogion with replies of Gaunilo and Anselm*, ed. and trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1995), 97. Gloss omitted.

is an address to Anselm's own heart about how to frame his words to God; before reasoning comes an address to himself about how to begin a dialogue with God, and even more, a gesture of opening himself for dialogue and awaiting response. Anselm goes on to explore what he has come to understand not only to God and his readers, but to himself as well, a representation of the steps of his internal thought processes. I begin with Anselm here in part because of his canonical position and the enduring influence of his works in late medieval England, but even more because of his clear passion for reasoning, his use of written meditations as an arena in which both thought and feeling can flow freely.¹⁵⁰ Even his *Monologion* is in fact a sort of dialogue as well. Anselm describes it as a "meditation on the rational basis of faith, adopting the role of someone who, by reasoning silently with himself, investigates things he does not know."¹⁵¹ Contrasting it with the *Proslogion*, he notes that the *Monologion*'s title "means a speech made to oneself."¹⁵² Both texts privilege back and forth exchange as a way to progress in understanding of God.

Ever present in this process is the invocation of the divine beyond the self: "Come now, O Lord my God," Anselm continues in the *Proslogion*, "Teach my heart where and how to seek you."¹⁵³ It is typical of Anselm (though not unique to him), to alternate passages of argument with prayer that offers up one half of an ongoing dialogue between Anselm and God. After issuing the central claim of his *Proslogion*, asserting that being "cannot be thought not to exist,"

¹⁵⁰ Such vigorous meditations and warm devotional instruction famously being Anselm's passion, as opposed to the later administrative duties of which he lamented to Abbess Eulalia of Shaftesbury, "I am so harassed in the archbishopric that if it were possible to do so without guilt, I would rather die than continue in it." "Letter to Eulalia," cited in Anselm of Canterbury, *The Major Works*, ed. Brian Davies and G.R. Evans (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998), viii.

¹⁵¹ Anselm, *Monologion and Proslogion*, ed. Williams, 93.

¹⁵² Ibid. 94.

¹⁵³ Ibid. 97. Certeau highlights the *Proslogion*'s opening as an example of how invocation is an "initial step" from which a "rationality of faith" can develop. See "Mystic Speech," 89.

there immediately follows an address in the second person with Anselm declaring, “And this is you, O Lord our God. You exist so truly...that you cannot be thought not to exist.”¹⁵⁴

And there is a response: these gestures are not empty apostrophe, for it is God who is behind the turns of reasoning and even many of the words that comprise the text. Anselm declares in one of his addresses to God, “what I once believed through your grace, I now understand through your illumination, so that even if I did not want to *believe* that you exist, I could not fail to *understand* that you exist.”¹⁵⁵ It is God’s intervention that allows Anselm’s understanding and, as Anselm frames it, allows production of the text itself. The text is therefore not only Anselm’s treatise, but like mystic speech defined by Certeau, represents a union between the voices of Anselm and God. It is a type of overlapping that we will see particularly in Marguerite’s text. The soul’s relationship to God, here explored through Anselm’s questions about the link between human thought and God’s existence, is both described and enacted through the movements of the text.

One model for similar layers of dialogue can be found in Augustine (among other patristic writers), one of Anselm’s inspirations. The *Confessions* similarly alternates between invocation and analysis, prayer and examination. Indeed, the opening pages of the *Confessions* are both an invocation and a meditation on whether and how it is possible to call upon God and for God to enter the soul, epistemological and ontological questions emerging at the start here again. Augustine confronts the conundrum of knowledge of God, asking, “But who calls upon you when he does not know you...but surely you may be called upon in prayer that you may be known.” Yet he goes on to remark that invocation and the opening of a dialogue is the first step not only of reason but of *union*. “Surely when I call on him,” Augustine asserts, “I am calling on

¹⁵⁴ Anselm, *Monologion and Proslogion*, ed. Williams, 100-1.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 101. Editor’s emphasis.

him to come into me. But what place is there in me where my God can enter into me?”¹⁵⁶

Therefore, reasoning is a gift from God, but also calls God’s presence into Augustine.

Anselm and Augustine offer examples of hybrid writing: human and divine voices meld in the narration of these texts. In both cases, the underlying dialogue in an ostensibly first-person text destabilizes the speaker’s voice: the turns of reasoning that form the core of Anselm’s analysis of being or Augustine’s recognition of God present within him are voiced through human narrators but originate in God. Augustine’s voice we can see as “the voice through which I call upon your voice to come and speak within me.”¹⁵⁷ The texts, comprised of Anselm’s reasoning of what can exist and Augustine’s making sense of his life, each take shape in the gaps between voices, from the space in-between God and the speaking soul, from the liminal space in which they overlap and intermingle.

Or to reverse this, the text offers not only content about union, but a representation of union. The interplay that brings understanding also reflects intimacy, that even when standing apart, God and the speaker are not so far apart, and in fact bridge their distance through the exchange. The treatises reveal one model of dialogic discourse, one precedent from which to draw, available to later mystical writers wishing to represent interaction between God and a human soul.

The phenomenon of a dialogue representing union is perhaps nowhere more striking than in the Song of Songs. The Song features two speakers, a bride and her desired lover seeking one another. It was an especially beloved text of the Western Middle Ages, a focal point of medieval monastic exegesis in the pre-scholastic period, crucial to the development of mystical narratives, and its influence manifests even in secular love poetry. Read allegorically, the two speakers and

¹⁵⁶ Augustine, *Confessions*, 3.

¹⁵⁷ Lyotard, *Confession of Augustine*, 65.

their discourse of desire were thought to represent Christ's love for the Church. This was the most widespread medieval reading, rooted in Jewish exegesis about the relationship of God to Israel, but undergoing numerous shifts of interpretation. Read tropologically, a view expanded during the twelfth-century's embrace of mystical contemplation, the Song was thought to typify the love between Christ and the human soul.¹⁵⁸ Emblematic of this tradition is Bernard of Clairvaux's tender and elaborate commentary, and from a slightly different angle, the writings of the Augustinian Canons with their concern for the soul's morality amidst the temptations and stresses of worldly experience.¹⁵⁹

The Song became one of the most influential texts on medieval mystical narratives because it provided a scriptural language of desire and longing, as well as a form to give voice to it.¹⁶⁰ And the structural form of the Song is, crucially, that of a dialogue. Narrated in the first person, it flows from *I* to *thou* and back, and features what E. Ann Matter has aptly called an "immediate verbal nature."¹⁶¹ The storyline of the lovers' search is largely represented by two voices circling one another. Theologians seized upon this "dialogical mood" by inserting rubrics to label the voices in the text. The practice was popular with medieval commentators on the Latin Bible, who frequently labeled the perceived voices of "Christ" and "the Church" and presented the Song as a drama.¹⁶² Such readings suggest that, narratologically, the "story" in fact

¹⁵⁸ For a comprehensive history of the Song and its role in the early church, see E. Ann Matter, *The Voice of My Beloved: the Song of Songs in Western Medieval Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania P, 1990), which lays out these and other key highlights. See esp. 13-14, 86-122.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid. 14. Also see 123ff.

¹⁶⁰ For many mystical writers, the Song provided imagery to express a sense of longing and languishing for God. The dynamic sixth book of Heinrich Suso's *Horologium Sapientiae* is a dialogue of passionate love between an allegorical figure of divine Wisdom and her disciple, and culminates with an invitation into the beloved's garden and expressions that directly echo the Song. We might also note Rolle's *Ego Dormio*, which both begins with and takes its tone from the Song. These are just two of countless examples of the intense impact of the Song on mystical consciousness and the forms in which it manifests in narrative.

¹⁶¹ Matter, *Voice of My Beloved*, 8.

¹⁶² See *ibid.* esp. 99. Particularly striking among the medieval commentaries that Matter highlights is Bede's *Capitula in Canticum Cantorum*, which outlines short descriptions of the various "events" in the Song, followed

only becomes apparent when the text is viewed as a dialogue. In addition to their emphasis on allegorical meaning, the rubrics demonstrate one “interpretative strategy through which the text achieves a narrative coherence.”¹⁶³ Actually, “story” and the mode of “discourse” come together here. Even more, the intimacy between the soul and God is represented by the interplay of the dialogue.

For many medieval interpreters such as Bernard, the intimacy implied by the dialogue was the Song’s central element. The first sermon of his commentary on the Song describes it as personal verses unfit for the public arena, and declares that “only the singer hears it and the one to whom he sings – the lover and the beloved.”¹⁶⁴ In it the lover, God, is “intimately present” even though “incomprehensible,” *made present* in the dialogic exchange.¹⁶⁵ Indeed, as Ann Astell observes, in Bernard’s commentary the bride’s love is God’s love to begin with: “that love, poured out into our hearts, comes from God...and urges our return to him.”¹⁶⁶ Most important for our purposes, the love between God and the soul is made visible, given a form, by the dialogue.

This love, however, is not union: it is the continuous desire for union still unattained. It represents the liminal condition of a soul consumed with love and no longer distinct, yet still unfulfilled. The Song illustrates this most vividly: even if rubricated, the fact is that the narrative closure – the lasting, uninterrupted union of the lovers – is missing. It must be missing in order to reflect by its absence the impossibility of attaining union during mortal life. In so doing it

by a rubricated version of the text to demonstrate the dramatic element. Matter also notes earlier evidence of this practice in the similar insertion of *personae* in the second-century Codex Sinaiticus. See *ibid.* 56-57.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.* 57.

¹⁶⁴ Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs*, ed. and trans. Kilian Walsh, (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1971), 7.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.* 24.

¹⁶⁶ Ann W. Astell, *The Song of Songs in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1990), 18-19.

creates a verbal portrait of that reality, a strategy similar to what the mystics adopt as they blend form and content and create an image through narrative structure.

My exploration above considered how a mystic speaker's voice alternatively blending into and receding from God's voice can reflect a liminal subject. The shifting *I* of mystical discourse is sometimes the mystic subject, sometimes God, sometimes both (Certeau's "empty space," Lacan's place in the "symbolic order"). This "empty space" functions as an echo chamber: as the *I* utters words that are both the *I*'s and the Other's, the words of God are reiterated again for the mystic.¹⁶⁷ The textual forums that I have examined in this section – Anselm's *Proslogion*, Augustine's narrative, the Song – offer another light on the same drama, this time occurring in the structure of the discourse.

In all these cases, mystic subject and God enter into a unique space of interaction. They enter what Certeau would call the rules of communication to which they ascribe, union through speech being made possible by three requirements: an ability to speak in the present, an "*I* that addresses a *thou* (the allocutionary relation)," and established "conventions" between the mystic and God, speaker and allocutor.¹⁶⁸ As is the nature of dialogue, these interactions are circular rather than linear: they lack closure, reflecting that in fact there can be no closure if the mortal subject continues to yearn for the divine. By using dialogue to create a portrait of an intimate yet fraught relationship, the texts offer one partial solution to the limitations of human language for conveying the ineffable experience of mystical union. In so doing they offer a model for expressing the shifting boundaries of the self that are part of the mystic's liminal condition.

¹⁶⁷ The speaker also, I have shown, speaks back to himself: David answers his own question, Augustine offers a corrective to his own claim that one must know God in order to call upon him, Anselm reminds his own heart to seek God.

¹⁶⁸ Certeau, "Mystic Speech," 90.

In making an ontological assertion about who and what she is – a claim to a status – Julian comes right up against the limits of knowledge and language: our substance is in God, but we “knowith not what ourself is...we may never full know ourselfe into the laste poynte; in which poynte this passend life and manner of peyne and wo shall have end,” writes Julian, and so her narration faces a paradox.¹⁶⁹ Issues of knowledge, ontology, and language are ultimately inseparable, as interwoven as, to borrow a figure from Julian, the human soul is “knit” to God. From the point where issues of ontology meet the complications of expression come a special set of pressures and benefits that the mystic must balance in any narrative of her experience. But I have also walked through some varieties of narrative movements and elements of discourse that attempt to reconcile or circumvent these conflicts so that representation of liminal experience can emerge, even if imperfectly. These strategies differ in each of the three texts I examine in the following chapters, but they are different means to the common goal of expressing liminality. I begin with a dance.

¹⁶⁹ Julian, *Revelation*, 46.64.

CHAPTER 2

“A NEW AND UNHEARD OF MANNER”:

ELIZABETH OF SPALBEEK’S PERFORMED NARRATIVE

In the middle of the thirteenth-century, Abbot Phillip of Clairvaux wrote a Latin record of the activities of Elizabeth of Spalbeek, at the time a twenty-year-old woman who lived alongside a chapel built for her near the Cistercian Abbey of Herkenrode, to which Phillip was making pastoral visit. Sometime after 1266, a Middle English translation of Phillip’s account was completed and began to circulate among a relatively diverse readership in late medieval England. According to Phillip’s account, Elizabeth was a stigmatic, and among other remarkable abilities, regularly acted out the events of the Passion, doing so largely through a day-long sequence coinciding with the set hours of the liturgical office.

In the case of Elizabeth, a body performance is the primary means of narration, the means by which she “speaks” about spiritual experience, and an outward expression of Elizabeth’s closeness to God. Her performance likely had several functions, including being her own form of devotion and worship, and a means to encourage others in deeper devotion to God and contemplation of the Passion. But it also presents a story about experience, an exercise and expression of forms of being in relationship with God. Part of that relationship is the mystical union that makes ontological status, and the narrating *I* that attempts to represent it, ambiguous.

This chapter concerns what Elizabeth’s body could and did “say” in this context, focusing on the narrative that her performance presents. Because her representation of being “in-between,” being in the world and yet united to God, relies on the physical body, Elizabeth’s performance is the most concrete demonstration of liminality in this study, and therefore a logical starting point. It is not so much a narrative about moving from one state of being to

another, but about the blurring of the boundaries between them; it is not a narrative of progress and clarification, but circularity and ambiguity. In using the physical body to adopt and overlap ontological and temporal states, Elizabeth's performance offers the most readily observable challenge to narrative linearity.

It is also the clearest illustration of experience and text being united. Elizabeth's daily actions, the proceedings of her everyday life, are inseparable from her narrative. While for Marguerite and Julian also the process of composing a text is inextricably linked to the experience of mystical union it tries to represent, an engagement with God through the realm of language (as was the case in the examples of Augustine, Anselm, and scriptural passages I discussed in the previous chapter), out of all of these writers it is Elizabeth who most clearly lives her narrative. What she does in her daily performance *is* her text, and she writes it with the use of the body in which she experiences the world, including both her experiences of materiality and her spiritual life. In this way, she offers the most concrete starting point for analysis of a text that, "does not give testimony [but] is the testimony," a text in which experience and expression are also one as form and content become one.¹⁷⁰

We know rather few biographical details of Elizabeth's life, but she has left behind a teasing trail of brief appearances. Her name, age, and location come down to us in Phillip's account. It has become standard for scholars to refer to her as a beguine. This assumption is based in part on the manuscript circulation of her *vita* alongside those of Christina mirabilis and Marie d'Oignies, the latter often considered the foundress of the beguine movement. Elizabeth, like Christina and Marie, lived in the Continental Low Countries, the birthplace of the beguine movement, and her piety has much in common with beguine practices in that area, particularly in

¹⁷⁰ Cf. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Confession of St. Augustine*, trans. Richard Beardsworth (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000), 7.

its apparent independence from a traditional rule. However, neither Phillip nor the Middle English translator ever refer to Elizabeth as a beguine, and as Jennifer Brown notes, Elizabeth's dwelling in a cell alongside a chapel actually suggests a lifestyle more akin to that of an anchoress than a beguine.¹⁷¹ Phillip mentions that Elizabeth was attended by her mother and sisters, but it is unclear whether this refers to her biological family or members of a religious community; a mention that neither her mother nor father would accept gifts suggests the former. Moreover, medieval usage of the term "beguine" was slippery: it could refer to a member of a bona fide beguine community or, quite often, any woman who pursued an independent form of devotion outside of a traditional order.¹⁷² Elizabeth certainly seems to have pursued a distinctive and independent form of devotion, although under the supervision, according to Phillip, of a nearby Benedictine abbot who also happened to be her cousin. Her association with several religious orders is perhaps another sign that she was not a vowed member of any particular one.

There is evidence that a local cult developed around Elizabeth and was active for several centuries. A chapel still standing at Spalbeek (near Liège in modern day Belgium) appears to honor her and contains wall paintings that seemingly memorialize the girl's piety.¹⁷³ Also suggestive of her local popularity is Phillip's comment that he first heard about Elizabeth by word of mouth while visiting the area. She must have gained some notoriety as far as the French

¹⁷¹ Jennifer N. Brown, *Three Women of Liège* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008), 2. It is clear that Elizabeth was not an anchoress, and she emerged from her cell throughout the day to perform in the chapel, but the comparison brings to light how different her lifestyle seems from that of a beguine. Walter Simons and Joanna E. Ziegler, although they call Elizabeth a beguine, also note the similarity to an English anchorhold. See "Phenomenal Religion in the Thirteenth Century and its Image: Elizabeth of Spalbeek and the Passion Cult," *Women in the Church*, ed. W. J. Sheils and Diana Wood (Oxford: Blackwell for Ecclesiastical History Society, 1990), 120.

¹⁷² Brown, 2. For another discussion of the term's use as a general pejorative, see Margaret Porette, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, intro., ed. Edmund College, J.C. Marler, and Judith Grant (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame P, 1999), xlvi.

¹⁷³ See Walter Simons, "Reading a Saint's Body: Rapture and Bodily Movement in the Vitae of Thirteenth-Century Beguines," *Framing Medieval Bodies*, ed. Sarah Kay and Miri Rubin (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1994), 11-13. Also see Simons and Ziegler, "Phenomenal Religion," which analyzes the chapel and paintings from the joint perspectives of history and art history. On Elizabeth's commemoration and its possible purposes, see esp. 125-126.

Court and been known for prophetic gifts, as Phillip III tried to seek out her council regarding plots of court intrigue.¹⁷⁴ Elizabeth was popular in some circles until at least the seventeenth-century, and particularly among the Cistercians.¹⁷⁵

Analysis of Elizabeth's narrative must begin by recognizing the layers of inscription at work in the text that comes down to us. First, there is Elizabeth's Passion enactment, a text of the body to be read visually by the original witnesses of her acts. Second, there is Phillip's written account of her activities. The written text chronicles the body's story, which in turn tells the Passion story of redemption (even warranting, we will see, near-scriptural status from Phillip) in the course of telling Elizabeth's own story. And because I will be focusing largely on the Middle English text that sets Elizabeth before an English vernacular readership, there is another layer of production in the Middle English translator's reframing of Phillip's account.¹⁷⁶ These layers are in many ways inseparable. We cannot access Elizabeth's performance is anything like a pure form. But in the name of trying to reanimate and explore her complex and interesting narrative of liminality, I try to access her performance and possible motivations as best as possible. And in fact, at many points the layers of intervention, which provide clues to how Elizabeth's performance was received, can help illuminate her narrative.

Elizabeth's Narrative: Performance as Text

Elizabeth's performance begins with her rising at Matins to enact the initial events of Christ's Passion. Yanking at her clothing, she drags herself from side to side, alternatively

¹⁷⁴ See Simons and Ziegler, "Phenomenal Religion," 117, and also Walter Simons, *Cities of Ladies: Beguine Communities in the Medieval Low Countries, 1200-1565* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania P, 2001), 218-219, n. 60.

¹⁷⁵ On her periods of popularity, see Simons and Ziegler, "Phenomenal Religion," 117-118, 120.

¹⁷⁶ Scribes other than Phillip the author and the Middle English translator each potentially add a layer as well.

bending forward and back, to represent Christ's violent arrest. She extends her arm to make a fist, adopts a grim countenance, and then brandishes her fist and makes the motions of one who is "wroop and angry."¹⁷⁷ She then proceeds to beat her cheeks, shoulders, and the back of her head with what is described as "wondrous" force that even causes her body to bend back at the strokes. She then proceeds to strike her head against the ground, sometimes pulling herself by her hair to do so. She continues to hit herself, and among other torments, gouges her eyes and cheeks.¹⁷⁸

With her performance continuing to coincide with the hours of the daily office, at Prime Elizabeth joins her arms and hands as though bound behind her back, and paces through the space of her chamber, "as a þeef were openly taken and his handes bounden ladde to the barre or to þe galous; representynge all the space of þatoure howoure lorde Jhesu was ladde fro Anne to Cayphas, to Pylate, fro Pylate to Herode, to Pilate azen efte." Following a period of rest, she beats herself again. At Terce she represents Christ at the pillar, her arms extended and joined in a circle in front of her as though embracing the pillar.¹⁷⁹

Elizabeth then continues her cycle by enacting the crucifixion at Sext, None, and Vespers. At these hours, she stretches herself as though on a cross and remains motionless in that position for up to several hours without aids to balance her. Sometimes she alternates this with lying on the ground as though on a cross, and inflicting more violent strokes on her breast. While in her vertical position, she is able to incline forward and side to side, remaining still in

¹⁷⁷ "Proslegenden: Die legenden des ms Douce 114: S. Elizabeth of Spalbeck," ed. Carl Horstmann, *Anglia* 8 (1885), 108. Except where I refer explicitly to the Latin text, all citations to "The Life of S. Elizabeth" refer to this edition of the Middle English text. The publication of Jennifer Brown's critical edition of Douce 114 (*Three Women of Liège*, 2008) while I was in the midst of this project offered the option of a more recent edition as a base text. I have chosen to cite from Horstmann because he preserves all Middle English features of the text, whereas Brown's edition aims to make the text more accessible through modernization.

Ibid. 108.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid. 108-109.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid. 111-112.

“þe schappe of the cros” and all without help, actions that Phillip identifies with Christ being taken down from the cross.¹⁸⁰

During Mass, Elizabeth enacts the crucifixion again. She hears mass from her bed, where she remains in an extremely weak physical state for almost the entire time that she is not enacting the Passion, and watches through a window in her chamber constructed to allow her a view of the chapel’s altar.¹⁸¹ Immediately upon the elevation of the consecrated host, “anone as she seep þe eleuacyon of the sacramente, in þe selfe momente of the sighte þere-of,” Elizabeth mirrors the sacrifice she sees in the host by springing upright into the position of a cross, and remains as if suspended, “hengiþ in þe eyre withouten sterynge.”¹⁸² This is an especially miraculous act given that she can hardly lift herself at other times, and needs to be propped up with pillows in order to view the earlier part of the mass. When she is going to receive the sacrament, her mother and sisters again prop her up in bed and she awaits with tears, “deuoute sighynges,” and “goostly greydlynes.” However, upon receiving the host in her mouth she freezes in position for a while, remaining elevated and with her mouth clamped closed, and then eventually relaxes and reflects a delighted and radiant countenance.¹⁸³

During her main cycle, Elizabeth enacts the moment of Christ’s death by bowing her head and moving it from side to side. She further represents Christ not only in action but also in expression and physiological state by going “pale and bloodles.”¹⁸⁴ At Compline she enacts the burial of Christ by hitting herself while holding her arms folded in front of her chest.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid. 112-113.

¹⁸¹ In this respect, again, the design of Elizabeth’s cell seems similar to an anchorhold. See n. 171 above.

¹⁸² Ibid. 115.

¹⁸³ Ibid. 115. It is not entirely clear whether Mass is said in the chapel for her everyday or at what hour. Phillip’s account of Elizabeth’s actions during Mass forms a separate section of the *vita* following his narration of her actions at the hours of the daily office. We are told that she “heeriþ [mass] ful gladly, whan sche maye haue a preste,” suggesting that she may not have one everyday. The phrase “if sche schal þan receyue þe sacrament” preceding the discussion of how she receives the Eucharist suggests that she did not receive at every Mass held in her chapel.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid. 113.

As Elizabeth performs, her body takes on the role of a scripture text, narrating the Passion story through dramatic action rather than written or spoken word. So perfectly does Elizabeth exemplify Christ in the perspective of her audience that she even becomes a model and source of new insights about the nature of the Passion. Describing how Elizabeth bleeds from her eyes and from under her fingernails in addition to bleeding from the more traditional five wounds, Phillip seems to view it as a new revelation and explains that all of this possibly happened to Christ: “happely felle in þe persone of oure lorde Jhesu for angwyshe & peynful bindynge of his armes and handes.”¹⁸⁵

Elizabeth becomes “Word,” then, on several levels as she represents Christ the “Word” and the words of scripture that relate Christian history. In the original Latin *vita*, Phillip solidifies a parallel between Elizabeth’s body and scripture by glossing several of her actions with appropriate verses. These do not, however, all appear in the Middle English version and were presumably among the passages the translator chose to omit for his audience less familiar with the references that Phillip takes for granted. An oft-cited passage that offers the most direct indication of Elizabeth functioning as a text occurs only in the Latin *vita*:

In sextu etiam virili, videlicet in persona beati Francisci, dudum revelavit idipsum: ut sic uterque sextus non solem ex testimonio Scripturarum, sed ex vivis exemplaribus conditionis humanæ in cruce Christi inveniat quod honoret, veneretur, revereatur, imitetur, amet, et nihil excusationis prætereundum possit homo, quantumcumque illitteratus aut simplex, quem intemeratæ Virginis partus redemit, ut dicat: “Non possum legere aut intelligere tam profunda mysteria, quia nescio litteram” vel “quia liber clausus est” cum non in membranis aut chartis, sed

¹⁸⁵ Ibid. 114.

in membris et corpore memoratæ nostræ puellæ, scilicet vivæ et apertæ Veronicæ, suæ salvationis vivam imaginem et redemptionis animatum historiam sicut litteratus ita valeat legere idiota.¹⁸⁶

In the male sex, namely in the person of blessed Francis, Christ has already revealed himself. Thus now both sexes, not only by the testimony of the Scriptures, but by living examples of the human condition may find in the cross of Christ what they should honor, venerate, revere, imitate, love, and so that no man whom the Child of the Virgin redeemed, however illiterate and simple, may say “I cannot read or understand such profound mysteries because I am illiterate,” or “because the book is closed.” In this way the illiterate man can read not in parchments or documents, but in the members and body of our memorable girl, a living and manifest Veronica, a living image and animated history of his redemption as if he were literate.

Phillip portrays Elizabeth as a visual text of the Passion for the sake of the unlettered. Those who are unable to read the story of the crucifixion can see it manifested through her. She functions like the “text” of devotional art for contemplation. And Phillip has remarkable confidence in the accuracy of the information: Elizabeth is a new Veronica, a “true icon.”

Phillip also frames Elizabeth’s performances, and particularly her self-inflicted, percussive strokes at Matins, as a psalm: they are her means of praise, but also an alternative scripture. Referring to Elizabeth’s self-inflicted percussive strokes at Matins, Phillip recalls that

¹⁸⁶ Phillip of Clairvaux, “Vita Elizabeth sanctimonialis in Erkenroke, Ordinis Cisterciensis, Leodiensis dioecesis,” *Catalogus Codicum Hagiographicorum Bibliothecae Regiae Bruxellensis. Pars I. Codices Latina Membranei*. (Brussels: Polleunis, Ceuterick et Lefébure, 1886), 373. All citations from the Latin *vita* refer to this edition. Translations my own.

“hir strokes may be herde acordaunte sowne and cleer. And so in þe steed of psalmes as in tymbyrs and wele sownynge cymbals she solempnyzes þe watches of the firste nocturne.”¹⁸⁷ Her body becomes both instrument and text of prayer. Even more specific is the comment that,

in the steed of salmes, þis newe tymbrer settiþ her flesche for an harpe, and hir chekys for a tymber, and ioy for a sawtry, and hir handys and fingers for a wrast – þat is an instrument of organsonge – and so with a newe maner of syngynge sche folowith forþ wakynge of þe secounde nocturne.¹⁸⁸

Each element of Elizabeth’s performing body – flesh, hands, fingers – literally plays a part in this new song.

At first, Elizabeth’s narrative may seem like a straightforward, linear retelling of the Passion, from arrest to entombment, in its scriptural, chronological order. Her crucifixion performance during Mass is an interlude that mirrors of the sacrifice of the Eucharist, but still has a natural placement in the order of the day’s liturgical events and does not seem, from Phillip’s description, to break the logical order. However, neither her joy at receiving the Eucharist nor the burial enactment construct an “end” of her performance. Like the daily office with which it is aligned, or indeed the liturgical year and other liturgical elements such as the rotation of readings, the performance is cyclical: it concludes only to begin again the following morning, circling back rather than reaching an end point.

Even more, within the performance Elizabeth adopts several *personas* and transitions between them with striking seamlessness. For much of the performance, she adopts two or more at once. For instance, she is both arresting soldier and Christ, simultaneously both tormentor and sacrificial victim during the self-inflicted beatings at Matins. This is a wonder to Phillip, who

¹⁸⁷ “Life of S. Elizabeth,” 108.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid. 109.

exclaims that “in a newe and vnherde of manere sche schewith in her-selfe boop þe persone of Criste suffrynge and þe persone of enmye turmentyng.”¹⁸⁹ Here Elizabeth inhabits at least three *personas* at once if we include her status as “Elizabeth.” She adopts the *personas* of other witnesses to the Passion as well. For instance, she represents “how oure blessyd lady, Crystes moder, stood be-syde þe crosse”; modeling iconography of Mary in the period, Elizabeth inclines her head and holds her right breast. In another pose of lamentation, she “shewiþ in an oþere liknesse blessyd John Euangelist” by glancing upward while holding her hands clasped together.¹⁹⁰

At points Elizabeth even exceeds overlapping *personas* and events, and moves into the metaphysical by representing abstract concepts. She becomes “the gladnes of þe resurrexione and fruyt of the passyone” through her expression, wherein we might read Elizabeth using her face to represent Christian joy or resurrection glory itself, becoming an embodiment of that abstract concept.¹⁹¹ Indeed, Phillip essentially takes this interpretative step when he writes that in her daily routine Elizabeth:

Figures and expounes not allonly Cryste, but Cryste crucified, in hir body, and also þe figuratif body of Cryste, þat is holy chirche. Loo in þe distinxione of oures she representys þe custome of holy chirche, ordeynid by god.¹⁹²

Elizabeth, then, is both Christ, a member of the Church, and the whole Church, as well as a body whose actions recapitulate Christian history, miracles, and associated sentiments. She is liminal not only in the sense that she adopts multiple personas rather than one distinct figure in the Passion story, including the ontological circumstance of being simultaneously “Elizabeth the

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid. 114. Here Phillip again implies an instructive and/or revelatory purpose to the representation.

¹⁹¹ Ibid. 113.

¹⁹² Ibid. 118.

young woman” and “Christ the God-man,” but in that she becomes non-human and intangible entities. The record continues,

In woundes and peynes she affermiþ þe feith of þe passyone, in ioye and myrþe after peyne gladness of þe resurrexyone, in rauishynge þe ascencyone, in rodynes of hir reuelacyouns & spritual lyfe sche figurith þe sendynge of þe holy goost...¹⁹³

Thus Elizabeth’s ontological status starts to become something beyond humanity, beyond Christ, and maybe beyond divinity. Her performance, it seems, can make her into anything. The entities are seemingly endless and unbound: she figures the Eucharist, the sacrament of confession, desire for all men’s salvation, and sorrow at unkindness and the damnation of mankind, embodying what we might consider to be the desires of God (an extension of the divine).¹⁹⁴

So Elizabeth’s performance is a narrative text to be read. And if we look closely at exactly what that text narrates, it is an experience of being radically in-between, transcending any one particular identification, position, or ontology. It is a narrative of liminality.

Elizabeth’s Liminality: Performing the In-Between

The distinction between “showing” and “becoming” Christ clouds in the course of Elizabeth’s narrative. The nature of the performance makes it increasingly difficult to view even her physical body as solely that of the girl Elizabeth. The ambiguity that haunts the performance brings her liminality to the forefront. It is not clear that her audience considered Elizabeth to merge with Christ just in spirit or also in her body, a co-mingling *in flesh*, Christ becoming

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid. This list I translate from the text.

present and visible in her as in the Eucharist. Her ecstasies and her bleeding suggest both. What is clear is that the line between “Elizabeth” and “Elizabeth as something other” (Elizabeth having merged with the divine) blurs continuously. That it blurred in Phillip’s perspective as well is evident in the difficulty he has articulating her states of being.

Much of the confusion surrounds the issue of what happens to Elizabeth when she is taken up into ecstasy (“surgat rapitur”).¹⁹⁵ There are several overlapping and sometimes contradictory indications. Her supposed rapture occurs, first, at the beginning of each hour, with Elizabeth being “rauisched a good while, alle starke as an ymage of tree or stoon, wiþ-outen felynge or mouynge and brethe, as hit were a deed body.”¹⁹⁶ Such moments evoke Augustine’s commentary on ecstasies whose bodies go lifeless, “senseless though not yet really dead,” while the soul is swept into a direct encounter with God.¹⁹⁷ We might presume that these are moments of mystical union. Elizabeth reportedly claimed that she was carried off at times and that during some moments of “ravishment” she had contact with a young woman named Mary, a mystic living in another town whom Elizabeth had otherwise neither met in person nor heard about.¹⁹⁸ Phillip’s word choice suggests Elizabeth being carried off, somehow taken away.¹⁹⁹ But the representation of changing ontological states is much more complex than alternating between

¹⁹⁵ *Vita Elizabeth*, 364.3

¹⁹⁶ “Life of S. Elizabeth,” 108.

¹⁹⁷ Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, trans. John Hammond Taylor (New York: Newman, 1982), 223. (Book 12, Chap. 32).

¹⁹⁸ “Life of S. Elizabeth,” 117. Phillip asserts that he is familiar with the said Mary from his visitations in Flanders, and testifies that Elizabeth’s knowledge of Mary and her great sufferings is accurate.

¹⁹⁹ Brown further argues that Phillip’s word choice is intentional and suggests that “pain and violation are encoded within Elizabeth’s ecstasy.” See Brown, *Three Women of Liège*, 207. In their study of Elizabeth through the lens of anthropology, Susan Rodgers and Joanna Ziegler point out that transportation to another place and/or into a distinct “traveling self” that separates from the body is a common element of trance in the rituals of many religions, and Elizabeth seems to fit this model well. See Susan Rodgers and Joanna E. Ziegler, “Elisabeth of Spalbeek’s Trance Dance of Faith: A Performance Theory Interpretation from Anthropological and Art Historical Perspectives,” *Performance and Transformation: New Approaches to Late Medieval Spirituality*, ed. Mary A. Suydam and Joanna E. Ziegler (New York: St Martin’s, 1999), 313ff.

lifelessness and performance. Although “ravishing” initiates Elizabeth’s performance, it also recurs throughout it.

During other periods of “ravishing,” far from lying lifeless, Elizabeth has the great strength to endure her self-inflicted torments and enact the Passion. These moments are specifically contrasted with times in between rapture when she does not even have strength to move. The account emphasizes that “whanne sche commith to hir-selfe or is lafte to hir-selfe, [she] wantys bodily strengthes.”²⁰⁰ It is as though her body is at points invaded, taken over by another force that allows for its miraculous actions (suspension, levitation, endurance, etc.) and miraculous signifying potential such as her stigmata, the ability to represent the glory of God, sorrow, etc.

Third, some moments suggest that Elizabeth’s soul is caught up into divine union while she is frozen in an immobile state – not quite lifeless, but not enacting the Passion. Phillip here again seems to consider her to be somehow absent from the body, experiencing ecstasy in the pure sense of standing beside the self, having been thrown out of the self. For instance, he describes Elizabeth as “ravished” when she grasps a diptych with the image of Christ crucified and freezes in place. She holds it so fiercely that if someone tries to shake the tablet, she does not loosen her grip, but moves her entire body back and forth with the motion of the tablet.

Phillip then discusses a return of her spirit:

²⁰⁰ “Life of S. Elizabeth,” 111.

Ben þe spirite, turnynge ageyne fro þe contrey of goostly ioyes, quykenes þe body, gladith the mynde, lightsomnes þe semblaunte and bishines hit with a gracious cleerte.²⁰¹

In this interpretation of the performance, Elizabeth's own spirit, though one renewed and delighted by divine encounter, returns and is present again when she appears glad and enlightened.

Phillip reasons that her spirit returns from "the country of spiritual joys" and reenters and re-enlivens her body, suggesting that during the ravishment her spirit was elsewhere, presumably united to God. She is said to have tasted momentarily the "unspekabil swetnesse."²⁰² The English lacks a line in the Latin that claims by concentration on the diptych Elizabeth is "raised to contemplation of truth," an interpretation that suggests an ascent of the mind similar to the models of Augustine and Bonaventure I discussed in the previous chapter.²⁰³ Elizabeth's whole manner changes when she returns to herself, suggesting a new, altered presence in the body.

Phillip himself may be grappling with how to best understand Elizabeth, perhaps struggling to fit her into categories of rapture and vision outlined in Augustine's *Literal Meaning of Genesis*, which addresses Paul's confusion as to whether he was "caught up" into the third heaven in body, soul, or both.²⁰⁴ The reader is left as confused as Phillip. Ultimately there seems to be no static pattern as to when and why Elizabeth changes states. What can be said is that, during these continuous transitions (whether through contemplative ascent or another

²⁰¹ Ibid. 110. The Latin clearly refers to Elizabeth's spirit: "Denique revertens spiritus de patria spiritualium gaudiorum corpus vivificat, mentem laetificat, vultum exhilarat et gratiosa claritate perlustrat." *Vita Elizabeth*, 368.1-2.

²⁰² "Life of S. Elizabeth," 110.

²⁰³ The Latin line reads, "et de consideratione imaginis ad contemplationem veritatis elabatur." *Vita Elizabeth*, 367.31-2

²⁰⁴ Augustine, *Literal Meaning of Genesis*, esp. Book 12.

spiritual transportation), Elizabeth appears to experience some form of mystical union, possibly multiple forms and levels of identification with God.

The descriptions of “returning” to the self, as though from another state or location of the spirit, echo throughout the text despite the lack of clarity as to exactly what returns and from where. Elizabeth “turn[s] agayne to hir-selfe” just before some of the Passion enactments. This is mentioned in the accounts of Matins and Prime, and also twice in the discussion of her actions during Mass. Elizabeth is said to collapse from her suspended cross position and “turniþ ageyne to hir-selfe” once the priest removes his chasuble, and to “commith agayne to hir-selfe” when her body relaxes from its immobile position some time after she receives the Eucharist.²⁰⁵ The latter two examples seem to correlate Elizabeth’s “return to herself” with a normal, baseline state of being as distinct from rapture, but it is still not clear exactly what she is when she is “not herself,” in a union with God that makes her “not herself.”

Yet Elizabeth is also “not not herself,” to adopt Richard Schechner’s terms for performance dynamics.²⁰⁶ That is, an identity as “Elizabeth” is never entirely obliterated even if it is occasionally transcended by her union. Although at points in the performance she adopts other personas, there are (sometimes simultaneously) signs that she maintains self-awareness as Elizabeth for much of the time, and thus she alternates between being self and other. This awareness is particularly evident in her reported confessions. At these moments, distinct from her periods of rapture, she is self-aware enough to accuse herself of not loving and thanking Christ perfectly. Her confession thus demonstrates a consciousness of her distinction from Christ, despite how she might seem to slip into identification with him for much of her daily ritual. She appears not to consider herself completely dissolved into God, deified, or

²⁰⁵ “Life of S. Elizabeth,” 115.

²⁰⁶ Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology* (University of Pennsylvania P, 1985), 110-111.

indistinguishable from God. She does not seem to think herself to be Christ, Mary, or John instead of Elizabeth, or at least not permanently and continuously.

A conscious identity as Elizabeth, lover of Christ, is sometimes present even in the midst of her Passion performance. She engages in affective devotion and also adopts an eroticized *sponsa Christi* role. Lying on the ground while fiercely grasping the tablet with an image of the crucified Christ, she speaks to the image, exclaims “sweet Lord, sweet Lord,” and then proceeds to kiss the feet of the image.²⁰⁷ The description conveys the apparent depth of emotion and the potential eroticism of Elizabeth’s actions with the image, palpable in the text and most likely in its original performance. Among the kisses, “she makij fro hire priue herte rotys large, depe, iocunde & lufsum sighes wiþ a clere stiryng of breste and þroot and with a swete sounyng whysperyng of her lippes.”²⁰⁸ Here she is distinctly *not* enacting Christ: there is a clear distance as Elizabeth relates *to* the image, something external to herself. The distinction recalls the distance she maintains between herself and the Eucharistic host at Mass regardless of how she springs to mirror it by assuming the bodily position of the crucified Christ. However she may impersonate Christ, her worship of and sexualized attachment to the diptych draws a dividing line between prayerful subject (the girl who shows devotion by caressing the image) and the worshipped Christ who is represented by that image.

Still, the states overlap. Moments of ravishment, of being swept up to the country of spiritual joys, alternate and sometimes coincide with moments of Elizabeth enacting the role of

²⁰⁷ “Life of S. Elizabeth,” 110. In one of their shared variations, St. John’s 182 and Douce 114 render Elizabeth’s words as “3ouche here, 3ouche here,” instead of the Dutch “soete here” (“sweet Lord”) that appears in other Latin manuscripts, one indication that the two copies likely share a common original. Brown suggests that the cause of the error may be the use of “zoete” as an alternate spelling for “soete,” with the “z” then becoming a yogh. See Brown, *Three Women of Liège*, 34, n. 54. The English translator clarifies with the following sentence: “Þat is to sey in Englysche, ‘Swete Lord, swete Lord.’” (“Life of S. Elizabeth,” 110). The Latin offers, “id est *Domine, dulcis Domine.*” (*Vita Elizabeth*, 367.24).

²⁰⁸ “Life of S. Elizabeth,” 110.

lover, as well as with her moments of enacting Christ's arrest, torture, and crucifixion, during which she figures Christ, various saints, and the Church itself. Even during her actions with the diptych, she freezes in place just as she does before the scenes of the Passion, and again has miraculous strength. Her miraculous grip on the diptych suggests she is again "outside" her baseline self, or inhabited by some spiritual power, and this comes just after the moment in which she was so clearly "Elizabeth" as she kisses the image. It is difficult to determine, especially without Elizabeth's direct testimony, exactly when she may slip into a lack of awareness of her distinction from God. But this much is clear: her narrative represents an unstable ontological status, one that shifts between standing apart from God and experiencing a closer union, and sometimes encompasses both at once. The one place we can situate her is on the borderline.

Herein lies perhaps the greatest paradox of Elizabeth's performance: when she is at her most physical and concrete, reaching even beyond her own body and incorporating elements of the material environment such as the diptych, she most transcends the body and its limits. Theater scholarship has long noted that props used in performance are not only semiotic in function, but ground the performing body in the materiality of a scene. As Stanton Garner explains, "props extend the body's spatializing capacities and its projective operations...by extending and physicalizing the body's operation on its material environment, props situate the body more firmly within it."²⁰⁹ Yet it is while both adoring the image of the crucified and enacting crucifixion herself that Elizabeth's one body seems to most exceed physical limits by signifying two distinct entities at once.

²⁰⁹ Stanton B. Garner, Jr., *Bodies Spaces: Phenomenology and Performance in Contemporary Drama* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994), 89.

To sum up the complexity of Elizabeth's apparent ontological status: cyclical and fluid movement between positions, a sort of layering of identifications, is central to her performance. Vacillation between the stances of Christ and Christian is also continual: as the account notes, "*O while* sche representiþ wiþ signes and berynges of hir lymmes oure lordes passyone, and *opere while* she schewith in weymentacyouns & turment; hir *owne* compassyone boþ of herte and of body."²¹⁰ This phenomenon also manifests in her alternate positioning as Mary and John in the midst of her crucifixion performance, and perhaps even more poignantly when "in a newe and vnhearde of manere" she simultaneously embodies both Christ and his tormentors during the arrest and pillar reenactments.²¹¹ Her Passion cycle as a whole notably necessitates a fluid movement in and out of status as male, female, human, and divine. Further, Elizabeth's transitions are never complete, but begin anew, cyclically at the start of each day and at each holy hour. And finally, her spirit participates, according to Phillip, in a cyclical movement in and out of the body that enacts all this. Put another way, from a narratological rather than a phenomenological perspective, these shifts and multiplicity are the shape or discourse of her narrative.

The best way to describe this situation is to say that Elizabeth is, on several planes, liminal – existing in-between states, categories, personas, locations – and all of these forms of liminality fall under one essential type, which is the liminality of being united to and apart from God. This is the story of her narrative: the tale of Elizabeth expressing what she is in mortal life, a mortal reaching toward, and occasionally experiencing a glimpse of, the union that can only be attained in death.

²¹⁰ "Life of S. Elizabeth," 113. My emphasis.

²¹¹ Ibid. 109.

Working from the dual perspectives of anthropology and art history, Susan Rodgers and Joanna Ziegler have compared Elizabeth's "trance" moments – their term for her moments of rapture – to the in-between states of non-personhood that frequently feature in rituals of tribal cultures, applying to her Turner's theory of the liminal. As I have, they observe that at points in her performance Elizabeth is neither one thing nor another, a situation comparable to what occurs in many rites of passage of pre-industrial societies. Rodgers and Ziegler are right to see in Elizabeth a "chaotic personhood," one consonant with a "selfhood...in transition toward its climatic union with her vision of Christ."²¹²

But there are important differences from Turner's model. One is that Elizabeth is offering a narrative. Second, in the narrative that she presents, Elizabeth never permanently crosses over to become that "something else," to permanent union, and seems to have no expectation of doing so. Elizabeth is in fact caught in a *perpetual* in-between as Christ/Elizabeth, Soldier/Elizabeth, Mary/Elizabeth, and even between locations of the spirit – present in her body that stands before the audience, in spiritual conversation with Mary of Lille, and in the "country of joys." Thus Elizabeth's narrative expresses a paradoxical stasis of "transition" or "becoming" in one mortal, physical body we might consider invariable. Phillip clearly reads her body as an extraordinary object. His labeling of her simultaneous embodiment of multiple individuals as "new and unheard of" implies his surprise. In the discussion of the multitude of concepts (Christ, Christ crucified, the body of Christ that is the Church, etc.) that

²¹² Rodger and Ziegler, "Trance Dance of Faith," 311-312. Notably Rodgers and Ziegler also see Elizabeth as ritual theater that challenges cultural ideas of who could "bring Christ's body into public view" (302-303), but do not read her performance specifically as a narrative.

Elizabeth can represent at once, we find the exclamation that her “lyfe is alle mirakil, 3e moorouer alle hir-selfe is but myrakil.”²¹³

We can view her as a liminal speaker, a destabilized narrator, for it is from the threshold between earthly experience and the union with God that lies beyond that she “narrates” through her performance. In fact, we lose a clear experiencing and narrating *I* as she moves through her cycle and becomes a range of people and things. Here in the encounter with the divine, which for Elizabeth means various forms of merging with God through the body and by the spirit’s rapture, “the *I* explodes.”²¹⁴

Precedent and Experiment

The innovation of Elizabeth’s narrative becomes clearer in comparison to medieval precedents for her actions. Locating where and how Elizabeth departs from and adapts devotional and hagiographical models can move us closer to understanding the purpose, as well as uniqueness, of her narrative structure.²¹⁵ Elizabeth’s use of the body as a means to identify

²¹³ “Life of S. Elizabeth,” 118.

²¹⁴ Cf. Lyotard on Augustine: “You, the Other...if he encounters you, the I explodes, time also, without a trace.” *Confession of Augustine*, 36.

²¹⁵ In the absence of surviving explanations of the performance from Elizabeth, inquiry into the motivations behind her performance, the degree to which she controlled it, and how she viewed it can only proceed indirectly. Such an inquiry must proceed with caution and awareness of its speculative nature. At the risk of sounding trite, I repeat the commonplace disclaimer of modern studies of medieval devotional texts written for or about women: these texts cannot offer access to women’s subjectivity and their perception of influences on it. Robert L.A. Clarke, among others, writes of the difficulty of understanding women’s subject construction through male-authored devotional manuals, noting that the women’s “presence, which is also an absence, is available to us only through language and discursive practice.” See his “Constructing the Female Subject in Late Medieval Devotion,” *Medieval Conduct*, ed. Kathleen Ashley and Robert L.A. Clarke (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota P, 2001), 163. Such practices often include male hagiographers’ tendencies to fit their subjects to conventional models of sanctity, and Phillip certainly appears to engage in this type of careful framing. For instance, he inserts a brief background story of Elizabeth’s special sanctity since childhood, a fixture of hagiographical discourse. Since the age of five, he explains, she has mortified “here owne flesche,” and remains a virgin at the age of twenty. See “Life of S. Elizabeth,” 108. This is somewhat unusual evidence. Childhood sanctity is more frequently attested by an intense prayer life and/or lack of interest in the material things. For instance, *The Life of Marie d’Oignies* offers a scene of the nightly prayers that

with Christ's suffering is in line with traditions of *imitatio Christi* and affective piety that were a part of her devotional milieu. Her abilities in enacting the Passion are undoubtedly exceptional, even a "miracle" in Phillip's view, but there are precedents for the type of exercise she pursues. She lived during the rise of forms of devotion focused on Christ's humanity, forms particularly popular in England in the early fifteenth-century, the time of the Douce's manuscript's production, and that would have been recognizable (if extreme) to English readers of her *Life*.

The early centuries of the Church through the late antique period had emphasized imitation of Christ's divinity as the model of sanctity, proposing a goal of deification "in the sense of the recovery within man of the image of God and assimilation with God after death."²¹⁶ Such ideas persisted into the twelfth-century, and in discussing his "deifying vision" (*deifica visio*) in *On Loving God*, Bernard of Clairvaux (founder of Phillip's own order and monastery) asserts that "What is made will at some time conform itself and be united with the maker."²¹⁷

But also in the twelfth-century, and even in the writings of Bernard, a change began to place in the type of imitation of Christ encouraged by the Church. There is a well-documented shift in the twelfth-century toward identification with Christ's humanity and personal participation in the events of his earthly life, particularly the Passion. This is particularly visible in the spirituality of the Franciscans, whose order was developing during this period and began to spread its characteristic piety through the preaching of its traveling friars. In their special devotion to the person of the incarnate Christ, whose poverty and humility Francis emulated in his own life and modeled for the order, the Franciscans saw themselves identifying with Christ. They advocated meditation on Christ's life and especially the Passion, including imagined

she said as a child, and stresses her early rejection of worldly goods and the fine clothes her parents provide.

Phillip's odd choice is explored by Brown, *Three Women of Liège*, 197.

²¹⁶ Giles Constable, "The Ideal of the Imitation of Christ," *Three Studies in Medieval Religion and Social Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), 150-152.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.* 165.

engagement in particular scenes and moments such as the Nativity.²¹⁸ Sometimes this meant adopting the role of a bystander and sometimes adopting the role of Christ himself. In his *On the Perfection of Life*, for instance, the Franciscan Bonaventure instructs nuns under his direction to contemplate the Passion “incessantly”; he advises that, aligning themselves with Christ’s suffering, they ought to “wish for no consolation other than to be able to die with Christ on the cross.”²¹⁹ Francis, to whom Phillip compares Elizabeth, was the first well-known figure to manifest stigmata of supernatural origin, a visible identification with Christ’s suffering. During the twelfth-century, the terms “stigma/stigmata” would shift from referring to a mark of servitude to an explicit association with suffering, and by the mid-thirteenth century the term “stigmata” usually referred specifically to Christ’s wounds.²²⁰ Another of the clearest manifestations of this shift in the ideology and practice of devotion are changing representations of the crucifixion, which gradually place more emphasis on Christ’s suffering instead of depicting him as “victorious king.”²²¹

Numerous women mystics on the Continent engaged in extreme acts of devotion to honor or identify with Christ’s humanity and suffering. Among the most striking of Elizabeth’s predecessors and thirteenth-century contemporaries are Angela of Foligno, Beatrice of Nazareth, and Dorothy of Mantau, whose canonization proceedings defended her self-mortification by

²¹⁸ As Michael G. Sargent has noted, however, such practices significantly pre-date Francis. One outstanding example he cites is Aelred’s meditations on gospel events in his *De Institutione Inclusarum*. See Michael G. Sargent, “Intro.,” *Nicholas Love’s Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ: A Critical Edition Based on Cambridge University Library Additional MSS 6578 and 6686* (New York: Garland, 1992), xii.

²¹⁹ Bonaventure, “On the Perfection of Life,” *The Works of Bonaventure*, trans. Jose de Vinck (Paterson, NJ: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1960), 239-240. Sargent also highlights this tract and passage as an extension of Aelred’s ideas and a key example of Franciscan piety. See Sargent, *Love’s Mirror*, xiii. It is particularly relevant to my own discussion because it concerns specific directions for women to align themselves with the crucified Jesus, as Elizabeth does so vividly.

²²⁰ Constable, “Imitation,” 199-201. There were numerous cases of self-imposition of the stigmata during this period, some intentionally deceptive and others simply an attempt to subjugate the body or identify with Christ; Elizabeth could have been one, although Phillip is adamant that there is no evidence of fraud. “Life of S. Elizabeth,” 107. On a possible controversy, see Simons and Ziegler, “Phenomenal Religion,” 123.

²²¹ Constable, “Imitation,” 197.

claiming it is a higher ideal to imitate Jesus' suffering than his actions.²²² The other women profiled in the Middle English Douce 114 manuscript, Christina Mirabilis, Marie d'Oignies, and Catherine of Siena are additional examples of this type of piety.²²³ Marie imposed the stigmata on herself. One anonymous early fifteenth-century French work of devotional instruction advises its laywoman reader to rise at midnight to pray, weep, prostrate before God, and notably, "stretch [her] body out on the ground or standing, as on a cross, in great compassion."²²⁴ This analogue to Elizabeth's self-crucifixion, though here in a context of private devotion and without Elizabeth's miraculous abilities, demonstrates that comparable devotional acts were part of the sphere of popular piety. Such imitative gestures were often intended to create a link through physicality, a link between the suffering of one's own body and that of Christ.

Paramystical experiences involving the body – e.g., states of trance, levitation, seizures, elongation, rigidity, ability to subsist on the Eucharist, spontaneous lactation, and mystical pregnancy – are also common occurrences in medieval hagiography. Indeed, Elizabeth's case appears precisely during a great rise in such phenomena in Continental *vitae*. Examples include Marie d'Oignies' unstoppable tears, and later in England, Margery Kempe's reportedly uncontrollable (and suspiciously similar) bouts of weeping. Some paramystical phenomena associated uniquely with the female body, such as miraculous lactation, were first reported in Elizabeth's devotional milieu of the Low Countries in the first part of the thirteenth-century.²²⁵

²²² Ibid. 226-228.

²²³ Catherine of Siena and Angela of Foligno, who both engaged in care for the sick and such extreme actions as drinking the secretions of lepers, could be seen as pursuing what Karma Lochrie and others have identified as a third means of imitation: imitation of Christ's charitable works, which was gradually subsumed as part of affective piety. See Lochrie, "The Language of Transgression: Body, Flesh, and Word in Mystical Discourse," *Speaking Two Languages: Traditional Disciplines and Contemporary Theory in Medieval Studies*, ed. Allen J. Frantzen (Albany: State University of New York P, 1991), 117.

²²⁴ Cited in Clarke, "Constructing the Female Subject," 176, whose translation is quoted here.

²²⁵ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone, 2002), 186-187.

One way to read these acts is as a means of access, even communication, with the divine. Like imitation of Christ in affective devotion, they are in Caroline Walker Bynum's terms examples of "behavior in which bodiliness provides access to the sacred."²²⁶ However, in these cases the body is not only a means to experience Christ's suffering, but to be overtaken by a foreign presence. The abilities of Elizabeth's body, for instance, are not those of the normal body, but a body possessed. She becomes, in part, Other.

Although some paramystical phenomena draw on the unique capacities of female bodies, women's acts of *imitatio Christi* generally require (as does Elizabeth's) a crossing of gender boundaries as the women attempt to identify with the suffering body of Jesus. In so doing they indicate a surprisingly fluid understanding of gender when it comes to figuring or communing with Christ in this particular context of affective devotion. And here we find some precedent not only for Elizabeth's basic acts of *imitatio*, but also her smooth movement between categories as she embodies both herself and Christ's male body, sometimes at once. Phillip is strikingly delighted to draw the reader's attention to the fact that, in Elizabeth, Christ has now made himself visible in a woman's body: her depiction is a valid "Veronica," a true icon of Christ. Bynum's studies of the medieval treatment of "Christ's flesh as female," particularly in its "salvific functions," can perhaps contextualize Phillip's matter-of-fact acceptance of Elizabeth's stigmata and Christ-like body.²²⁷ Proposing one explanation for such surprising fluidity compared to medieval society's strict division between the sexes, Bynum argues that,

Women could fuse with Christ's body because they *were* in some sense body, yet women never forgot the maleness of Christ. Indeed, exactly because maleness was humanly superior, the God who especially redeemed and loved the lowly

²²⁶ Ibid. 186.

²²⁷ Ibid. 204-5.

stooped to marry *female* flesh. Hildegard of Bingen saw *ecclesia* as both Christ's bride and Christ's body. Julian of Norwich...never ceased to refer to "Christ our mother" with the male pronoun...But women mystics often simply became the flesh of Christ, because their flesh could do what his could do: bleed, feed, die, and give life to others.²²⁸

The dynamics are visible in iconography as well, for instance in images that align Christ's bleeding side with Mary's nourishing breast. Such metaphors may not necessarily reflect social practices, but are evidence that "medieval thinkers used gender *imagery* fluidly, not literally."²²⁹ Many hagiographers describe holy men as nurturing mothers and holy women as "virile," considering women to be man-like if they are able to control their sexual impulses and maintain a state of virginity.²³⁰

Elizabeth's performance reveals many similarities with these contemporary practices, but it is difficult to align it precisely with the goals in the above analogues and precedents. Portions of her narrative detail the brutality of the crucifixion and seem to suggest an attempt at union through shared suffering. Indeed, her stigmata is the most literal of identifications with Christ's suffering body. At the same time, however, her serene suspension before the Eucharist and the reflection of resurrection joy on her face reference the crucifixion but do not emphasize suffering. They suggest, instead, union with Christ's divinity and glory. Elements such as her transportation and her spiritual conversations with Mary of Lille are not characterized by affectivity at all. Her enactment of scenes from the Passion and placing herself in the positions of Mary, John, and others also evokes the tradition of meditative engagement in the scenes of

²²⁸ Ibid. 221-222.

²²⁹ Ibid. 218. Italics Bynum's.

²³⁰ Ibid. 206-118. Also see Barbara Newman *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania P, 1995) and Brown, *Three Women of Liège*, esp. 197.

Christ's life characterized by texts such as the *Meditationes vitae Christi*; but Elizabeth exceeds this model as well by taking on multiple positions at once.

What emerges again as the fundamental and most visible element of Elizabeth's performance is fluidity – a life lived in a transitional and ontologically ambiguous state, or at a liminal point – to be all of the above, “both/and” rather than “either/or” at any given moment, and an attempt to represent that situation. Standing out in this way, her performance raises semiotic and narrative issues: How can a performance that relies so much on the body appear to transcend the limits of one body? How is it that a body performance so tied to materiality, to the physical body of *one* specific individual in time and space, counterintuitively narrates the story of being liminal?

The remaining sections of this chapter try to reconcile this by examining the narrative potential of the body and the relationship between body performance as discourse and the story of liminality. I approach this from three related angles: the paradoxical disembodiedness of Elizabeth's performance, her ability to represent transition and process, and ultimately Elizabeth's gesture toward the intangible and her narrative's transcendence of time.

Transcending the Body

Like her female mystic contemporaries, Elizabeth reappropriates (arguably redeems) her potentially risky, female, and abject body. The barely averted risk of her sexuality, Elizabeth's place on the verge, is written into the *vita* by Phillip's almost constant emphasis on her chastity. He stresses that despite all her vigorous movement there is “no þinge vnsemely nor no þinge þat may displese mannes syghte.”²³¹ She redirects sexual desire to the diptych; her body is made

²³¹ “Life of S. Elizabeth,” 114.

available to embody Christ in her stigmata and in her Passion performance. In this way, we could say that Elizabeth uses the potentially abject, the potential for sin that according to Kristeva's formulation "disturbs identity," in a way that draws her closer to the divine.²³² From this perspective, Elizabeth's actions begin to reflect what Lochrie has observed of women mystics who achieve transcendence when the "excess of drives - those heaving powers of the flesh - topples over into the love of God."²³³

But to leave the explanation of Elizabeth's body performance here, with an analysis of reappropriating the distinctly female body (which is where studies of women's mysticism tend to leave such analyses), to see Elizabeth's performance as another instance in which the woman mystic's body can become, in Bynum's words, "not so much a hindrance to the soul's ascent as an opportunity for it," seems too simple, perhaps even too easy, for the ontological messiness of Elizabeth's performance. Elizabeth most recalls Kristeva's formulation of the abject when she takes on characteristics of "the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite," and in her case this involves the seeming invasion of her body by the presence of Christ and the other entities she figures, the adoptions that make her liminal.²³⁴

Elizabeth relies on the body to signify all of this, to represent liminality. But through her body she presents a surprisingly disembodied narrative. At the same time that she uses the body for representation, Elizabeth actually creates a narrative about moving beyond it through the very

²³² Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon Roudiez (New York: Columbia UP, 1982), 4.

²³³ See "Language of Transgression," 128-129. Tracing these dynamics in Angela of Foligno, and in an analysis influenced by Kristeva's theory of abjection, Lochrie suggests that for Angela the "taboo" of the open and accessible female body (as opposed to the safe, sealed, and chaste body) allows access to the divine through its own excess. She moves "through corruption to perfection" (134). For a similar reading specifically of Elizabeth, see Elliott Visconsi, "She Represents the Person of Our Lord: The Performance of Mysticism in the *Vita* of Elisabeth of Spalbeek and *The Book of Margery Kempe*," *Comitatus* 28.1 (1997): 76-89. Drawing on Lochrie and Bynum's work, Visconsi observes a distinctive feminine *imitatio Christi* in Elizabeth, one related to the "disorderliness of the female flesh" (79) and its openness.

²³⁴ Cf. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 4.

act of adopting a range of positions and states of being. She appears to transcend, if not her physical body itself, at least many of its limits of signification. Elizabeth's transcendence of any one identification or figure or abstract concept, her embodiment of all of them in the course of the cyclical narrative (and sometimes at the same time), is an exceeding of the body and a breaking down of its limits.

This is perhaps an instance in which we should heed Amy Hollywood's warning that the frequent scholarly claim of a medieval "ideal of sanctity as grounded in bodily experience, asceticism, and their mystical correlates" may not reflect women's actual experience or perspective.²³⁵ In some ways, the structure of Elizabeth narrative makes the most sense if she was *less*, rather than *more*, conscious of the specific boundaries of her body, however counterintuitive this may at first seem. A lack of self-consciousness of her own body may be what allows the fluidity of her narrative, the embodiment of other "bodies." Phenomenology reminds us that while "embodiedness" constitutes and ensures the borders of the human being, it need not always be present to consciousness.²³⁶

Elizabeth's performance itself may have been a means to break away from the body, an attempt to alter consciousness not just through affective piety or asceticism, but by inducing psychological effects through movement. Scholars of dance and kinesthetics have long recognized body movements as a means of moving to another "plane." They have observed the use of the body as a means of spiritual or psychological transportation, a use of the body in essence to break free from the body. In their comparison of Elizabeth to trance dancers in other

²³⁵ Amy Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame P, 1995), 30.

²³⁶ Of particular relevance here is Drew Leder, *The Absent Body* (Chicago: University of Chicago P, 1990), which explores diverse ways in which the body and its functions stand outside conscious awareness, for instance while concentration is elsewhere or while the body's organs are functioning in a healthy way. Also see Hollywood, *Virgin Wife*, esp. 13-14, which challenges Leder's claims with regard to the female body, but nonetheless argues that mystical writers, including women, were perhaps far less conscious of the body in their means of devotion than modern scholarship usually recognizes.

traditions, Rodgers and Ziegler make such a claim. They suggest that her percussive blows, for instance, may have been a rhythmic means of altering psychological state.²³⁷ They also fruitfully compare Elizabeth's dynamic to what Sally Ann Ness observes in her anthropological work on traditional Phillipine dances to suggest yet another way in which Elizabeth's dance may have altered her consciousness:

[K]inesthetic movement within the dance acts as a sort of memory bridge between the individual dancer's own self and larger realms of symbolic meaning out in the culture as a whole...[after practice] "bodily memory" took over and allowed [Ness] to feel the aesthetic of the dance in question, for essentially the first time. Elizabeth too may well have reached a state of her dance experience where the sheer physicality of her Holy Hours movements may have begun to drive her overall apprehension of what was happening in her traces.²³⁸

The description will sound familiar to many dancers, and raises the possibility that what Rodgers and Ziegler call Elizabeth's Passion "trance dance," and what I would refer to as her "narrative" – the story of a relationship with God – could foster a connection with the divine. It is a path to being other things, for to dance in this way is to dance without attention to the specifics of movement and therefore the specifics of one set body in time. I would go even a step further, however. As Elizabeth's performance potentially lifted her to another state of consciousness, it could have opened new narrative possibilities of the body by releasing her from ties to one human body. Thus the narrative not only represents but furthers and perpetuates her liminal condition – the process of storytelling inspires and perpetuates its own story.

²³⁷ Rodgers and Ziegler, "Trance Dance of Faith," 312.

²³⁸ Ibid. 327-328.

Representing Transition

We have made a start now in thinking differently about Elizabeth's body performance, moving beyond *imitatio Christi*. To explore another way in which Elizabeth's performance narrates liminality, I want to approach her text from a radically different angle: through a brief comparison with the modern body performance artist Orlan. Comparison with an artist whose commentary we can access can help clarify dynamics of Elizabeth's narrative first by making them more concrete for analysis. Second, and more importantly, such an exercise forces thinking further beyond the hermeneutics articulated by previous scholarship, namely precedents of the body's role in medieval devotion, affective piety, and as a sign of sanctity in hagiography (as I have already enumerated). Having set Elizabeth against her contemporaries, setting her against a modern performer further illuminates the innovation of her medieval narrative.

Despite some radical differences from Elizabeth, Orlan's oeuvre reveals body performances that paradoxically challenge materiality. In the early years of her career, Orlan gained notoriety for her impersonations of holy women from the Christian tradition and the adoption of the persona "Saint Orlan," and more recently for her "Reincarnation" project of performative surgery. Like Elizabeth's, Orlan's past performances have relied on the body as narrative medium, represented pain and trauma through it, contorted the body into new personifications (enacting figures of Catholic history and shifting between characters), and taken place in the traditionally patriarchal spaces of former abbeys and churches.²³⁹

²³⁹ With regard to spaces, I refer specifically here to Orlan's "Measuring" performances in which she dragged her body along the floors of chosen locales. This has been interpreted as a critique of the practice of using the male body as a standard for measurement in anthropometrics. See Kate Ince, *Orlan: Millennial Female* (Oxford: Berg, 2000), esp. 35-37. Ince's book offers an intriguing reading of the psychoanalytic and textual elements of Orlan's work, which I do not have time and space to explore here in relation to Elizabeth, my primary subject. The comparison with Orlan in this study, and comparison with other modern performers, warrants additional future attention.

There are certainly differences between the two women and the contexts of their performances. In addition to their historical distance, they have obviously different relationships to the Church and the models of sanctity it raises for imitation. Orlan's critique of feminine sanctity as constructed by the Church and its devotional practices is overt and seemingly a main goal of her early performances.²⁴⁰ While Elizabeth narrates from the margins of the patriarchal Church, challenging those structures does not appear to have been her goal.²⁴¹

Yet both present the body as a text to be "read" and interpreted. Discussing her performances and their purpose, Orlan asserts that "Carnal Art transforms the body into language and reverses the Christian principle of the word made flesh into flesh made word."²⁴² Thus the performances might be considered her "writing," the equivalent of a language, and notably a narrative that is not merely self-expression (which is an element of any art form), and not merely an iconic representation for the devotional exercise of others (as we may say of most religious art, both medieval and modern). Rather, she raises the body's language to the level of a divine act, an alternative incarnation, not unlike Phillip's scriptural interpretation of Elizabeth.

Orlan's "Reincarnation" project, begun in the 1990s, consisted of cosmetic surgeries to alter her face and body into a composite of identifiable women of Western culture (e.g., Da Vinci's Mona Lisa, Botticelli's Venus, and several others). These surgeries took place before a live audience, and made public the alteration of the body. As in Elizabeth's performance, onlookers watch, voyeuristically, a continual transition. Indeed, the alterations themselves *are*

²⁴⁰ This is particularly true of Orlan's depiction of Mary and other saints and her radical deconstructions of the chastity and modesty traditionally associated with these women, including depicting the saints while stripping, appearing partially nude, in leather, in vinyl robes, etc. In her "Saint Orlan" project, begun in the 1970s, she took on a public persona as a saint and had herself photographed in saintly posture and guise. On this project, see esp. Ince, *Millennial Female*, 13ff.

²⁴¹ On this point my reading of Elizabeth contrasts with that of Rodgers and Ziegler, who see Elizabeth specifically engaged in a challenge to the Church's right to represent and "mediate divinity" (303) and to control sacred space. See their "Trance Dance of Faith," esp. 302-306.

²⁴² Orlan quoted in Ince, *Millennial Female*, 54.

the narrative. Orlan has claimed that she was not interested in the final results of her “Reincarnation,” but rather in the process of transformation and the “modified body as a site of public debate.”²⁴³ Her goal was never “a sequence of fixed identities, but a material exploration of the transitional space between them.”²⁴⁴ Among other projects, in the 1990s and early twenty-first century, Orlan has produced a series of digital “self-hybridization” projects which merge images of her face with images of faces from various artworks, cultures, and periods.²⁴⁵

In the case of Orlan’s work, the form of her narrative is itself “story.” And it is a story of transition, of becoming. Significantly, this is not “becoming” with an end point in mind. It is not simply a path to permanent transformation. Rather, it is a perpetual “in-between,” and her performances are characterized by the liminality that they allow her to achieve. While Orlan’s surgical projects did cause a permanent physical alteration, they lacked a definite end point. Further, no operation could provide a finale or conclusion by full “Reincarnation” into all idealized female models, and most certainly not into any single figure; “open-endedness,” as Kate Ince argues, is an essential element of the project, not a side effect.²⁴⁶ This is her story, and the shape-shifting discourse of the body is the means to tell it.

For both Elizabeth and Orlan, ontological status is at stake: what constitutes “Orlan” is under continuous change; Elizabeth is frequently “outside” herself and becoming other. Through a “Reincarnation” performance or the “hybridizations,” the audience watches a story of gaps, of transitional space, not a final product. The performance emerges as a way to be “in-between,” but also expresses what it is to be beyond what any one figure, name, or word can contain, and shows the audience a portrait of liminality.

²⁴³ Orlan quoted in Ince, *Millennial Female*, 46.

²⁴⁴ Ince, *Millennial Female*, 46.

²⁴⁵ Examples of the “hybridizations” and some previous projects can be viewed on the “Photo” page of Orlan’s official website, www.orlan.net/works/photo, Accessed July 2011.

²⁴⁶ Ince, *Millennial Female*, 110-111.

And it is the series of figures and positions that creates meaning, something that Orlan's attempt at a new amalgamate and shifting self brings to light. The transitions depicted in the performance only have meaning as part of a larger narrative, as part of a continuous process of becoming multiple entities. In an even more constructed way in Elizabeth's narrative, the body may not limit what she can be a "true icon" of, yet the various positions Elizabeth adopts are only recognizable as part of the larger cycle: her position as Mary, for instance, is only recognizable as a part of the crucifixion scene she enacts, and her moments of "ravishment" gain significance from alternating with her "return to herself."

There is another distinction: even as both women exceed Turner's model of the liminal by not transitioning to an end point or new, fixed status, Orlan seems to relish the in-between. Elizabeth's desire to move beyond it is evident particularly in her longing for the Eucharist and in her embrace of the diptych. Her liminality is one of a yearning soul. For all her moments of ravishment, all her signs, and even imaging resurrection joy, Elizabeth must "return to herself." And the "Elizabeth" to which she returns is a liminal self – one that never remains permanently as any of the figures (including "Elizabeth") that she enacts, and that waits to be caught up in rapture again a few hours later. One way to think of this is as the tragic element of her narrative, an expression of longing and incompleteness built right into the structure of her text.

Elizabeth's Christian context and the view of the self it puts forth also take the transitions to a different realm of significance and signification. All the boundaries that are crossed in Elizabeth's performance – between sexes, between human and divine, between states of being generally – are only reflections of the most poignant crossing of all: dissolution into God. The shifting body that visibly transitions between states, positions, and allegorical representations

gives a concrete shape to this, but the body is being used to reflect a soul ultimately capable of dissolving back into God.

Transcending Time

By embodying multiple figures and states of being, cyclically and at once, Elizabeth also overturns the standard linear structure of narrative and claims a stance outside of time. Unbound by the limitations of chronology, the performance figures divine transcendence of time. And in doing so it both relies upon and exceeds some of the ways in which her culture looked at time and narrative.

On the one hand, it may appear that Elizabeth's narrative is closely tied to temporality. Her standardized series of enactments coincides almost entirely with liturgical celebrations and the hours of the daily office. Phillip seems to think about the performance in these terms, given that he structures his own narrative chronologically and divides it by the hours. While his visit to the area and Elizabeth seems have been significantly longer, he takes pains to present his account as Elizabeth's story throughout a typical day.²⁴⁷ The daily performance also forms a complete circle in narrating the chronological story of the Passion from arrest to entombment, and it generally aligns with the traditional associations between specific hours and events of the Passion.²⁴⁸

While all of this seems to situate Elizabeth's performance in time, what it ties her to is liturgical time, which itself is designed to reflect not only the spiritual and intangible breaking into the visual and tangible, but also and inextricably united with this, the eternal breaking into

²⁴⁷ On Phillip's attempt to create a "day in the life" structure, also see Brown, *Three Women of Liège*, 193.

²⁴⁸ See *ibid.*, and also Ellen M. Ross, *The Grief of God: Images of the Suffering Jesus in Late Medieval England* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997), 110, which notes alignment with Hours. However, to be entirely accurate, Elizabeth's countenance figures the resurrection at several points in the day, and it is her representation of entombment (not resurrection) that ends the day's cycle at Compline.

perceived time. Her narrative takes place in sacramental time, in which the intersection with the eternal is figured through physical signs of invisible grace: initiation into an unseen and eternal community of Christians through the water and oil of Baptism, or the entry of the eternal God into the Eucharistic host. Both the daily office and Elizabeth's performance that coincides with it do not merely delineate human time: like the liturgy, they both reflect the atemporality of the divine by affirming the continued relevance of Christ's redemptive act on human life in the present time. While Brown suggests that Phillip attempts to place Elizabeth in "sacred time," even more complex is how Elizabeth's own daily performed narrative seems consciously crafted to transcend time.²⁴⁹

As Elizabeth creates a narrative of divine time, she gestures toward a theology of atemporality and a view of human time itself being an illusion. She evokes the perspective of a God who is changeless and sees at once everything that appears to humanity as events in time: the God of Christian theology who is himself eternal and whose view encompasses all of history.²⁵⁰ It is a view of time that, as Evelyn Birge Vitz outlines, informs even the linear, fictional medieval tales that progress from a problem to a resolution. She has shown that the structure of the *récit* usually contrasts a human perspective on change with the perspective of

²⁴⁹ See Brown, *Three Women of Liège*, 193-194, which reads Phillip's narrative structure as a reminder of the relevance of the Passion and a contrast of chronological and sacred time. I agree with her assessment of Phillip's goals, but see Elizabeth's narrative doing this itself as well, and very consciously.

²⁵⁰ The atemporality reflected in Elizabeth's performance requires more exploration than this chapter and project now allow, particularly in relation to Augustine's theory of God's view of eternity, addressed in Books X and XI of the *Confessions*, and Aquinas' discussion of how God's "eternity comprehends all phases of time," an issue taken up in the *Summa Theologiae*, 10.2. Moreover, Aquinas' tension between defining a God who is eternal and "utterly unchangeable" in that eternity (10.2), and yet seems situated in time by his changes in response to human events in time (13.7), is similar to the temporal tensions in Elizabeth's narrative and deserves further study to determine in what ways she may be drawing on a similar idea of atemporality circulating in her cultural milieu. While her narrative attempts to transcend time, she undeniably lives in time. References to Aquinas above are from *Summa Theologiae, Questions on God*, ed. Brian Davies and Brian Leftow (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006), and this concise summary of the problem in Aquinas draws on Davies and Leftow's discussion of timelessness (xxiii-xxvi).

God who sees the whole at once.²⁵¹ The adoption of a divine perspective on time is another way in which Elizabeth's performance represents union with God, for her performance evokes *his* experience of time, and interestingly draws her audience into it.

Elizabeth's representation of atemporality is not an anomaly. In fact, in this way her text seems to be in relationship with several artistic representations of time in the Middle Ages, expressions that, like her own performance, also challenge linearity. Drama is one striking analogue. Through its simultaneous presentation of multiple layers of time and space, medieval drama takes advantage of this quality of live theater, as Max Harris has analyzed.²⁵² He highlights the process, for instance, in the twelfth-century Fleury play of the *Slaughter of the Innocents*: in this play the opening scene is a parade of the "sanctified ones," a procession of the slaughtered children already in their glorified state. The scene is one of multi-layered "temporal mimesis."²⁵³ The play suspends the chronological order that separates the children's deaths from their later salvation, and the scene also figures mortal and eternal worlds at once. When the figure of "Rachel" enters the scene, she symbolizes at least six historical moments at once: the crying of Jewish mothers in anguish for the slaughtered children, earlier Jewish mothers lamenting the deportation to Babylon, the biblical figure of Rachel, the sorrowful Mary as she flees to Egypt, Mary at the cross, and tribulations of the persecuted church in general.²⁵⁴

Like Elizabeth's performance, dramatic representations use the body to create an image of timelessness.²⁵⁵ However, Elizabeth's performance is strikingly unique as a narrative of

²⁵¹ Evelyn Birge Vitz, *Medieval Narrative and Modern Narratology: Subjects and Objects of Desire* (New York: New York University P, 1989), esp. 117-121. She notes that the final (generally positive) outcome of such stories is attributed to God's will and foresight.

²⁵² Max Harris, *Theater and Incarnation* (1990; reprint Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 2005), esp. 32.

²⁵³ *Ibid.* 54.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 54-56. On human and eternal time, also see 78.

²⁵⁵ Not relying on the body but nonetheless tied to materiality, tympana are another example of medieval artistic representations of atemporality. Vitz compares them with the *récit* and suggests that both "collect images into a sort of contemporaneity." Vitz, *Medieval Narrative*, 119.

personal experience, her own love of and union with God, attempting to reflect timelessness. She achieves this not only by telling the Passion story, but by melding it with her own story of relationship.

Part of Elizabeth's project, part of her becoming "Word," may have been to represent Christ and the Passion story for others. As Ellen Ross puts it, the "christomorphized" Elizabeth affirms "the ongoing invitation to respond to the love of Jesus' Passion," and also models that response, demonstrating "possibilities of human intimacy with the Divine."²⁵⁶ But she narrates, most interestingly, the radical disruptions to selfhood and ontology that can result when one fully responds to that invitation: she models abandonment (by choice or force) of a stable and distinct identity in favor of being on the threshold.²⁵⁷ And she sacrifices a stable narrating identity.

As compensation, however, there is unique power in her narrative as well. "Written" through the body's performance, it actually overflows the limits of the body and time. In the process of figuring her own status, united yet still standing apart from God, she also figures the eternal nature of the divine. In so doing she reaches beyond the tangible and into the intangible. By bridging both worlds, that of the finite, physical body and the infinite, she models liminality in its essence. As in Lyotard's analysis of Augustine, "time," along with the narrating *I*, "explodes."²⁵⁸

It has been my goal in this chapter to use Elizabeth's performance as an initial example of what it means to narrate liminality, and as a way to analyze the power of narrative form to express a sense of being in-between. *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, to which I turn next, is a

²⁵⁶ Ross, *Grief of God*, 116-117.

²⁵⁷ I read this not as an "erasure of subjectivity," as Visconsi has suggested (See Visconsi, "Performance of Mysticism," 89), but a teetering; it is to engage ongoing instability over stability.

²⁵⁸ Cf. Lyotard, *Confession*, 36.

written narrative, a more traditional “text.” It relies on language (despite its limitations) and specifically dialogic exchange, rather than manipulation of the physical body in order to model the speaking subject’s liminality. While Elizabeth’s narrative created for her a literal stance in the liminal space between positions, eras, and several abstract manifestations of God’s glory, the speaking subject in the *Mirror* inhabits the liminal space between voices. Dealing in the realm of voice and linguistic expression, the *Mirror* more clearly confronts the problem of the ineffability of God and of the soul united to him.

CHAPTER 3

THE STAKES OF LANGUAGE: EXPRESSION IN *THE MIRROR OF SIMPLE SOULS**

The Mirror's Problem

When the allegorical personification “Soul” in Marguerite Porete’s *Mirror of Simple Souls* poses the question “Qui suis je donc maintenant?” (“Who am I now then?”), the answer is anything but simple.²⁵⁹ To our modern eye, it looks quite like an existential crisis. There is a palpable sense of struggle to understand herself, notwithstanding that the term and concepts of an “existential crisis” are anachronistic in Marguerite’s early fourteenth-century France, and Soul is an allegory, not an individual. Still, something has become ambiguous about the “soul” she represents. Something has changed: who she is *now*, at this point in the text, is different from who she was before, opening the question of how her state of being has shifted and why it occasions the remark.

The *Mirror*’s history is no less intriguing. It was not until the mid-twentieth-century that Romana Guarnieri reconnected the anonymous mystical text with its authoress by noticing the text’s echoes in excerpts used to condemn a woman in Paris in 1310, a woman the trial records refer to as “Margarita dicta Porete,” a native of Hainaut.²⁶⁰ Marguerite’s burning at the stake was a final culmination of clashes with ecclesiastical authorities over the course of several years,

*Portions of this chapter will appear in *Viator: Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 42.2 (Autumn 2011) under the title “Dialogic Melting: Representing Mystical Union and its Instability in Marguerite Porete’s *Mirror of Simple Souls*.”

²⁵⁹ Marguerite Porete: *Le mirouer des simples âmes / Speculum simplicium animarum*, ed. Romana Guarnieri and Paul Verdeyen, *Corpus Christianorum: Continuatio Mediaevalis* 69 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1986), 294.3-4. All citations from the French *Mirouer* refer to Guarnieri’s edition based on Chantilly, Musée Condé, MS F.xiv.26 as it appears in this volume. I cite page and line numbers. Translations are my own.

²⁶⁰ Romana Guarnieri, “Lo *Specchio delle anime semplici* e Margherita Poirette,” *L’Osservatore romano*, June 16 1946, 3. On the details of the trial, including names assigned to Porete, see Paul Verdeyen, “Le procès d’inquisition contre Marguerite Porete et Guiard de Cressonessart (1309-1310),” *Revue d’histoire ecclésiastique* 81 (1986), 47-94.

during which she had refused to stop circulating her book even after it had been pronounced heretical and destroyed in her presence.²⁶¹

It is hard to ignore such a past, and I am not at all suggesting that it should be ignored. But questions of the *Mirror*'s heterodoxy and transmission have often preoccupied study of the book, and can overshadow the literary innovation of Marguerite's allegorical portrait of a soul and its ontological state. It is this portrait that will be my focus in the two-part discussion that follows in chapters three and four, which argues that Marguerite uses the dialogic form of the *Mirror* in order to illustrate the transitory nature and instability of an experience of mystical union. This is a liminal experience that, according to Marguerite's text, has profound and disruptive effects on one's perception of who and what one is; and it is an experience that direct language fails to describe.

Marguerite does provide guideposts as to what Soul's apparent crisis involves. The start of the book announces that it will be the story of a soul's gradual "annihilation," or dissolution of self, through a series of seven stages. This begins when a soul is touched by God, "Ame de Dieu touchee," an encounter with the divine. The prologue explains that the soul is relieved of sin in the first stage, and with the help of God, eventually ascends to perfection in the seventh.²⁶² Given the clue about divine encounter and spiritual progression, we can expect the book to be a narrative of, in the words of the Middle English translator in his prologue, "hize felynges of þe werkinges of diuine loue" and their cumulative effects on a soul's state of being.²⁶³

²⁶¹ Modern scholars have identified evidence of a few specific heretical tenets in Marguerite's book. For one summary, see the entry on the *Mirror* by Valerie Lagorio and Michael G. Sargent in "English Mystical Writings," *A Manual of Writings in Middle English 1050-1500*, ed. Albert Hartung, vol. 9 (New Haven: Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences 1993), 3117-3119.

²⁶² *Mirouer*, 10.2-5.

²⁶³ "The *Mirror of Simple Souls*: a Middle English Translation," ed. Marilyn Doiron, *Archivio italiano per la storia della pietà* 5 (Rome 1968), 248.11-12. All citations from the Middle English *Mirror* refer to this edition. I cite page and line numbers. Translations are my own.

Yet Marguerite's book, like Elizabeth's performance, is not a linear narrative of progression. It is instead a dialogue between a large cast of personifications. The featured players are Soul, who is our subject, for it is her experience of annihilation that the text follows; Love, who assists in Soul's gradual annihilation, her abandonment of individual will and transformation into a state of "nothingness" in which she can be united to God; and Reason, who demands logical explanations for a divine love and union that Marguerite seems to view as beyond the realm of rationality. The discussion progresses most visibly through Reason's requests for explanations and the meditative responses offered by, among others, Love, Soul, Truth, and even God appearing in several allegorical guises.²⁶⁴

At the time Marguerite composed her text (ca. 1300), there was already a rich field of literary precedent for both religious and secular allegorical dialogues, including *The Consolation of Philosophy* and *La Roman de la Rose*. Particularly close to the *Mirror* in structure and theme are the texts of beguine mystics such as Hadewijch and Mechthild of Magdeburg. Links with these texts, as well as a possible connection to the allegorical *Règle des fins amans*, a rule for beguines composed by a French cleric around 1300, have all been explored by recent scholarship, and most thoroughly by Barbara Newman.²⁶⁵ And as several modern readers have

²⁶⁴ The text might more appropriately be called a "trialogue," as Kathryn Kerby-Fulton observes. *Books Under Suspicion: Censorship and Tolerance of Revelatory Writing in Late Medieval England* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame P, 2006), 275. However, I use the term "dialogue" in accord with most critical discussions of the book and my view of the *Mirror* as ultimately the representation of a single soul engaging with God.

²⁶⁵ Barbara Newman, *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1995), esp. 142ff; and eadem, "The Mirror and the Rose: Marguerite Porete's Encounter with the Dieu D'Amours," *The Vernacular Spirit: Essays on Medieval Religious Literature*, ed. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, Duncan Robertson, and Nancy Bradley Warren (New York: Palgrave, 2002), esp. 109ff. As is the case with Elizabeth, whether or not Marguerite was technically a beguine remains an open question. Her trial documents suggest this but do not prove it absolutely. Thus the degree of Marguerite's engagement with beguine literature is difficult to establish.

detailed, Marguerite undoubtedly draws on the language and concepts of *fine amour* as one of her literary techniques.²⁶⁶

However, Marguerite's use of dialogue stands apart as a verbal portrait of what she seems to think is involved in the liminal experience that results from mystical union.²⁶⁷ The *Mirror's* dialogic form is not only a vehicle to tell the story of a soul's advancement, but itself a representation of that experience and the shifting ontological status it entails, a narrative means to register that experience. I pursue this claim through a close analysis of how the text of the *Mirror* proceeds on a narratological level – an immersion in the dialogic world of the text – which yields insight into Marguerite's use of narrative to represent consciousness, internal division, and a self in transition.

The current chapter begins my investigation with analysis of the problem of inexpressibility in the *Mirror*. In order to understand why Marguerite needs to experiment with dialogic form, an experiment I analyze in chapter four, it is necessary to understand how she sees herself up against the linguistic dilemma faced by so many mystical writers and that I explored in chapter one: that human language is inadequate for conveying ineffable spiritual experience. Marguerite's text is marked by a tension between the need to speak about God and the limits and consequences of that speech. On the one hand, there is the issue of ineffability and the fact that concerns of the mortal world, including human communication, cause the soul to regress on her

²⁶⁶ Among many studies, see Newman, *Virile Woman* and "Rose" (n. 8 above) on the influence of courtly romance on beguine mystical texts and their distinction from traditional bridal mysticism; Peter Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984) esp. 218-220 on love from afar and tests of love in Marguerite's text; Amy Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame P, 1995); Michael G. Sargent, "The Annihilation of Marguerite Porete," *Viator* 28 (1997) 253-279; and Suzanne Kocher, *Allegories of Love in Marguerite Porete's "Mirror of Simple Souls"* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008), which discusses Marguerite's adaptation of the themes and language of romantic love. Kocher's recent book is one of the few literary studies to share my concerns with Soul's potential to change her state, and similarly begins to explore how allegories in the text change and overlap to represent Soul's mutability.

²⁶⁷ As discussed in my introduction and chapter one, I define mystical union as a loss of awareness of one's being as distinct from God, and thus a union of identity. I see this most aligned with Marguerite's seventh and sixth stages, the latter of which the soul can enter briefly, but only to be removed again to the fifth.

path to God. On the other, narrating spiritual experience can draw the soul into God and ultimately create an image of union with God. Marguerite very firmly places her “stakes in language” as a means to both express the experience of, and strengthen the bridge to, union with God.²⁶⁸

Unstable Words

At points in Marguerite’s text, the reader can feel as though he or she is watching a tennis match, as the figure of Soul volleys back and forth, affirming and then alternatively undercutting her own language. In its verbose, cataphatic moments, the *Mirror* offers some of the most radical, most theologically daring framings of union that we find in the entire corpus of mystical writing. Although Marguerite draws on many traditional images of mystical union, she frequently presents them in a way that implies little or no substantive distinction between creator and created soul.²⁶⁹ She blurs boundaries by asserting that the annihilated soul is melted into the Trinity, even so united to God that she herself is inebriated by what her divine lover drinks.²⁷⁰

Yet even as Marguerite lays down bold metaphors of union with God, including some that risk slipping into heterodoxy, she laments the inadequacy of words to convey divine mystery and the experience of union with God. One of the clearest admissions, a turn toward the apophatic approach or *via negativa*, is when Love offers a disclaimer that,

²⁶⁸ Cf. Michel de Certeau, referring to the relationship between God and the mystic: “‘I place my stakes in language,’ or ‘you can be certain that my desire awaits you in words.’ That is the assurance every addressee is given.” See his “Mystic Speech,” *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, trans. Brian Massumi (1986; reissued Minneapolis: University of Minnesota P, 2006), 92.

²⁶⁹ On her provocative framings, see Sargent, “Annihilation,” Nicholas Watson “Melting into God the English Way: Deification in the Middle English Version of Marguerite Porete’s *Mirouer des simples âmes anienties*,” *Prophets Abroad: The Reception of Continental Holy Women in Late Medieval England*, ed. Rosalynn Voaden (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1996), 19-48, and Robert E. Lerner, “The Image of Mixed Liquids in Late Medieval Mystical Thought,” *Church History* 40.4 (1971), esp. 399-400.

²⁷⁰ The statement on melting is clearest in the French text. See *Mirouer*, 190.1-192.5. For the metaphor of drunkenness, see *Mirouer*, 84.1-88.42 and *Mirror*, 275-276.

al þat þis soule haþ herd of God and al þat myȝte be seid is not, properli to speke,
as anentis þat þat is in him, þat neuer was seid ne neuer seid schal be, þat may not
be seid, and þat is sumþing þat I haue seid may not be seid.²⁷¹

Language, then, is untrustworthy; it can convey neither the nature of God nor direct experience of him. It limits what can be communicated about the God that Soul comes to know in mystical union. Similarly, there is Love's warning (following a definition of paradise as a vision of God) that one should "Gloseþ þese wordis and ȝe wole vndirstande it or ȝe schal mysyndirstande it, for it haþ sum semblaunce of þe contrarie... and semblaunce is not trouþe, but trouþe is trouþe and noþing ellis."²⁷²

Perhaps the strongest statement of concern about language is Soul's seeming disclaimer before she begins a series of exuberant verses. She explains, "For al þat may be seid of god or written or in herte may be þouȝt, þat arechþ to moost seiȝnges, it is more gabbinges þan it is true seiȝnges."²⁷³ If she cannot conceptualize God in thought, certainly she cannot offer adequate verbal description, only a glimmer of truth. The late Middle English word "gabbinge," used here by M.N. in place of the French "mentir," to lie or fool (although he also uses it elsewhere for "mesdire," to missay), stresses potential deception. While it can refer generally to gossip, the Middle English term is most specifically associated with lying, deceitful speech.²⁷⁴

²⁷¹ Ibid. 279.34-36 - 280.1. As discussed in detail in my introduction, my analysis of the *Mirror* focuses on the Middle English text. Equivalents to most examples I cite in Middle English also appear in the French; I discuss when they do not or when they differ considerably, and so aim to keep the texts in conversation. My discussion also references the French where occasionally necessary to clarify a passage seemingly distorted in the Middle English, or to illustrate a striking choice in M.N.'s rendering. At points I refer to either Marguerite or M.N. as the writer in order to distinguish, respectively, between elements of the text clearly present in all versions and the distinctive movements of M.N.'s English version.

²⁷² *Mirror*, 325.19-21. Chantilly identifies the speaker here as "the Supreme Lady of Peace," a reference M.N. seems to confuse with the unencumbered soul.

²⁷³ Ibid. 343.9-11. Also cf. 351.31-2, the conclusion of chapter 132 in the Chantilly.

²⁷⁴ The *Middle English Dictionary* records several instances of the word to refer specifically to spiritual deceptions, including in the Wycliffite sermons, the Wycliffite Bible, and in contrast to "gospel" in Chaucer's translation of *The Romance of the Rose*. *Middle English Dictionary Online*, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/>, s.v. "gabbing(e)."

Thus despite the authoritative and at times elitist tone of the *Mirror*, the text is problematized by its own impossibility, and the reader watches the language unravel. Even as Marguerite's images and metaphors stretch to the very limits of language and intellect, she exhausts them and falls into paradox and circularity. For instance, the union of wills she describes is a "coniuncion [that] puttþ a soule in beyng wipoute hir beyng þat is beyng," a tangled statement that ends up spiraling into obscurity.²⁷⁵

Sometimes Marguerite seems to tease the reader with extreme depictions, for instance in the account of how Soul "melts" into God when he ravishes her into divine love. Soul claims, "I am ydrent. Þanne is it riȝt þat he sustene me of him for I am leid in him."²⁷⁶ But she hesitates and claims that such union cannot be put into words. "Me bihoueþ to stynte," Soul continues, "for I may not seie."²⁷⁷ She flirts with a wild metaphor, makes a dramatic gesture, but then backtracks.

The French text in Chantilly includes an additional reflection, partly absent in the English, on the human limitations of the book:

Et si a esté fait par humaine science et humain sens; et humaine raison et humain sens ne scevent rien d'amour denentraîne, ne denentraîne amour de divine science.²⁷⁸

And so this is made by human knowledge and human senses; and human reason and human senses know nothing about inner love, inner love from divine knowledge.

²⁷⁵ *Mirror*, 335.33-4.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.* 314.36-7.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.* 314.37-8.

²⁷⁸ *Mirouer*, 334.16-19.

The sense here is that human powers can in no way understand, much less address in language, divine nature and the experience of the love of God. Notably for Marguerite, as for Julian in the opening passage of this project, at the core of the issue is a problem of knowledge as well as the limitations of human language to convey the infinite. Only God knows the fullness of his being, and the created speaker (however united to him) can only make a gesture that is “nothing” compared to the full truth, a truth that is both unknowable and (the reciprocal problem) unspeakable. It is in such moments that the *Mirror* most closely resembles the tenets of Pseudo-Dionysius’ apophatic program and its reframing in the Middle English *Cloud of Unknowing* that I discussed in chapter one. Soul admits that even in her exalted state human powers of perception, reasoning, and language are inadequate means of approaching God, and implies he must be sought through non-knowledge, or “unknowing,” that English term coined by the *Cloud* author.²⁷⁹

The text is marked by particular distress when Marguerite comes to explaining liminality, the state of the annihilated soul. Attempting to explain the nine points of the annihilated life, of what a soul can achieve and experience, Soul decries the impossibility of description, bemoaning her own words: “O, what seie I? seiþ þis soule. Al it is nouȝt...in regarde of þat I loue in him.”²⁸⁰ She cannot say what she wants, cannot explain the mutual love between God and the soul, because the language at her command is as if nothing at all. Her words fall drastically short of the task at hand, and she does not even understand the garbled words she utters in desperation.

²⁷⁹ The *Mirror* is associated with the *Cloud* in several manuscripts. The Amherst Manuscript, in which one of the English texts of the *Mirror* appears (along with the short text of Julian’s *Revelation* as well) also includes excerpts from the *Cloud* corpus. The Latin translation of the English *Mirror* stands alongside a Latin translation of the *Cloud* in Cambridge, Pembroke College, MS 221, a copy of Carthusian Richard Methley’s translation of both texts. Both texts assert that one must eventually move beyond images and beyond all intellection, a perspective that also recalls Bonaventure’s *Itinerarium mentis in deum*. In the *Mirror*, Soul claims that this non-knowledge is where she finds joy in her beloved, explaining, “I loue bettir þat þat is in him out of myn vndirstandinge þan I do þat þat is in him in myn vndirstandinge.” This non-knowledge is more intimate, “better myn,” she says, than what she can know (*Mirror*, 282.5-6).

²⁸⁰ *Mirror*, 264.24-25.

And the *Mirror* sets out to describe not only Soul's potential advancement, but the challenges of advancing through all the stages of annihilation. In fact, it is largely about the situation of not advancing and instead being trapped in particular stages along the way. Taken as a whole, the *Mirror* is a narrative of waiting and yearning. For all its bold metaphors, it depicts the allegorical personification of Soul still awaiting her permanent and complete union with the divine. Generally, the text situates Soul in the fifth stage, the abyss of "nothingness" after having abandoned her will, which is the highest state a soul can maintain during moral life.²⁸¹ From that stage, she is at points raptured into the sixth stage, "ofte into þe sixte yrauysched," but does not fall back to the fourth state of will.²⁸² An emptying of the self in the fifth stage reportedly allows her some sense of union with God and an intimate knowledge of divine goodness. Here we find the assertion that, "Now sche is al and sche is noon, for hir loued haþ made hir oon."²⁸³ But this oneness is incomplete. In the fifth stage, the soul stands on a borderline with a simultaneous experience of union and an implacable separation from her beloved. Here we might recall Marguerite's label for the divine, "*Loing-prés*," "far-near," M.N.'s "fer ny3h," a paradox introduced from the start in the prologue's framing of a "fer loue" that is "so ny3," presented in the language of courtly love and through an exemplum based on the romance of a princess and King.²⁸⁴ Her divine beloved is both near and inaccessible.

The fifth stage is therefore a liminal state: Soul is neither in her glory nor entirely distinct from the divine. From this stage she can occasionally touch the sixth, but only to be returned, for access to the sixth stage "is a swift openynge and an hasti schittyng."²⁸⁵ The sixth

²⁸¹ Ibid. 340-342.

²⁸² Ibid. 298.16, 22-23.

²⁸³ Ibid. 341.30-31.

²⁸⁴ Ibid. 250-251.

²⁸⁵ Ibid. 298.17.

stage is the highest stage that a soul can achieve (although not *maintain*) during mortal life.

Love explains that it is a momentary access to union with God in his glory:

And þe sixte is gloriouse for þe openyng of þe swete meuynges of
glorie þat þe gentil fer [nyʒ] ʒiueþ. And þat is noon oþir þing þan sum
apparicion þat God wole þat þe soule haue of his glorie self whiche sche
schal haue wiþouten ende...þe whiche schewinge is so soone ʒouen þat þe
same to whom þis ʒifte is ʒouen haþ of hir ʒifte, in þe tyme, no
perceyuynge.²⁸⁶

The sixth stage is thus not a continuous state, but brief glimpses of future glory, granted for a moment but taken away so quickly that the soul can barely process it. Temporarily, the soul in this stage “ne seep but God himsilf.” She sees herself in God, God in herself, and nothing else – but only for a brief moment before regressing to the fifth stage.²⁸⁷

M.N.’s commentary offers an orthodox reading of the text, careful to stress the incomplete nature of Soul’s union with God from the start with his first gloss on the prologue.²⁸⁸

No soul, he clarifies, can be “free” during mortal life, though one can have a *temporary*

²⁸⁶ Ibid. 300.24-27, 29-30.

²⁸⁷ Ibid. 342.13.

²⁸⁸ The orthodoxy of M.N.’s reading has already been addressed by a number of scholars. Among them, Colledge and Guarnieri propose that M.N.’s glosses respond to the same propositions used to condemn Marguerite and her book, and were an effort to defend his honest belief that the book offered profitable spiritual reading. See “The Glosses by ‘M.N.’ and Richard Methley to *The Mirror of Simple Souls*,” *Archivio italiano per la storia della piet * 5 (Rome 1968) esp. 364, 366. Michael G. Sargent alternatively argues that, rather than a response to the list of propositions, the glosses are the result of M.N.’s own decisions as to where clarification is necessary to guide an orthodox reading. See “*Le mirouer des simples  mes* and the English Mystical Tradition,” *Abendl ndische Mystik im Mittelalter: Symposion Kloster Engelberg 1984*, ed. Kurt Ruh (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1986) 443-465. Particularly relevant here, Sargent also notes M.N.’s emphasis that many of the author’s assertions should be taken to apply only to moments of temporary rapture. See esp. 447, 458. On M.N.’s special concern with the temporary nature of union, also see Marleen Cr , *Vernacular Mysticism in the Charterhouse: A Study of British Library MS Additional 37790* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006), esp. 184-188. Watson, “Melting into God,” argues that M.N. was likely unaware of the *Mirouer*’s condemnation and Continental *deificatio* debates when he offered his own orthodox explanations of the text. Kerby-Fulton proposes what she calls a *via media* by arguing that M.N.’s glosses may not respond to specific condemned propositions, but do respond to passages suggestive of Free Spiritism. See *Books Under Suspicion*, 281.

experience of union with God and freedom from sin. This lasts only a short time, he explains: “As for þat tyme of vnyoun, ful litel tyme it is. And whanne [the soul] comeþ doun þerfro, þanne is sche þralle, fallynge or fadinge.”²⁸⁹ Thus from early on M.N. highlights how Soul moves in and out of complete union with God, and that she is standing on the threshold of union. It becomes a theme in his glosses. He similarly clarifies that Soul’s words suggesting perfection during earthly life should be taken to apply only to a fleeting “tyme of rauysching and vnyon in God.”²⁹⁰ He makes the point again in his fourteenth gloss, drawing on Paul’s description of union and asserting that the soul in this condition loses awareness of herself: “Wherof þanne,” M.N. queries, “in þe tyme of þis vnyon, schulde hir inwardnesse fele or sche hirsilf meue? O, sche may not do it, for sche is al molten in God for þe tyme.” Having melted into the divine, she is no longer her former self. But again, this is temporary: “þis blessid oonnesse lasteþ but litel while in ony creature þat is heere in þis deedli liif, for sensualite of mankynde may not suffre it.”²⁹¹

M.N.’s commentary points us deeper into what Marguerite is describing: it is the experience of a subject neither wholly detached from the divine nor wholly in the union she will achieve in the future, split between two worlds. The *Mirror*’s debate over linguistic labels for Soul is one reflection of this problem, and of the failure of human language to convey perception of a shifting ontological status. She is neither entirely a distinct self nor united to the divine Other. And her in-between status is, much like the liminal state Victor Turner describes, a stage of namelessness.²⁹²

²⁸⁹ *Mirror*, 251.27-8.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.* 304.28.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.* 313.27-37.

²⁹² See Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969), 102 for a discussion of anonymity and liminality.

A debate over Soul's name begins when Reason asks why Love refers to Soul as "soul" as opposed to "spirit." Even within the allegory, Marguerite resists assigning "the Soul" a firm and stable signifier. Love acknowledges the logic of Reason's question, but does not specifically answer it; soon after, Love instead offers a list-like name to express several of Soul's attributes, "pure heuenli spirit of pees."²⁹³ Moving through a list of conceptual names, the process recalls the cataphatic elements of Pseudo-Dionysius' *The Divine Names*, though in this case the problem is not only how to label God, but a soul in union with him. If, as Nicholas Watson suggests, Marguerite aimed ultimately to take her readers "beyond words," this is a natural precursor.²⁹⁴ Then like Pseudo-Dionysius in the *Mystical Theology* that follows his *Divine Names*, Marguerite turns to negation when all signifiers fail, and Soul loses her name altogether.

Soul's namelessness haunts the next several chapters, appearing as a central element in the commingled liquids metaphor of chapter 82.²⁹⁵ The metaphor illustrates union while stressing that no name can encapsulate Soul in her new, exalted state. As Soul rises in "soueraynte," she,

lesip hir name and is draynt and in þis drenching left of him, in him, for him, of himsilf. So leesip sche hir name, rizt as doiþ a watir þat comeþ of þe see, þat is clepid Oise or Muese, and whanne sche entriþ in þe see sche lesip hir name and þe cours of hir bi whiche sche ran in many cuntreis in doynge hir werk and stintep in þe see. Pere sche restiþ hir and haþ lost þis labour, and rizt so soþeli it is of

²⁹³ *Mirror*, 307.25-38, 308.1-4, 34. Also cf. Love's earlier list of Soul's names at 260.13-19.

²⁹⁴ Nicholas Watson, "Misrepresenting the Untranslatable: Marguerite Porete and the *Mirouer des simples âmes*," *New Comparison* 12 (1991), 133. Watson offers one of the most insightful analyses of inexpressibility in Marguerite's text, noting resonance with the *Mystical Theology* (ibid 132), although he does not address issues of naming and failures of naming. While I share Watson's view of the *Mirror* as a type of attempted image (ibid. 128ff.), in my reading it is of a radically different type and method: an attempt to represent a real experience of instability through dialogue. On naming and essence, also see Hollywood, *Virgin Wife*, 108.

²⁹⁵ Although the Chantilly chapter divisions do not appear in the English text, I reference them here in order to indicate the proximity of passages and, in this case, the continual flow of the discussion about Soul's appropriate name.

þis soule...þere haþ sche lost hir labour and hir name. Sche haþ no name but þe name of him in whiche sche is partfiitli ymeued, þat is, in loue...Sche is, þanne, þis þat is.²⁹⁶

Just as a body of water loses its previous name as it flows into a larger sea and takes on the name of that sea, the same is the case for Soul as she is annihilated.²⁹⁷ The English passage above declares Soul's namelessness five times, one instance more than what appears in Chantilly.²⁹⁸ In both texts, the section equivalent to Chantilly chapter 83 begins with a further affirmation, "Now is þis soule wiþouten name."²⁹⁹ The name of the Beloved is no real substitute, for the text stresses that he is ineffable and their union is in any case temporary. The message that neither Soul's previous name nor any replacement is adequate draws attention to her ontological fluidity as well as the limitations of language to convey that fluidity. Marguerite thus marks Soul's condition through the operating terms of the discourse. Once touched by union with God, Soul loses a stable identity and, accordingly, a name.

Unstable Progress

The writing of the book transgresses other boundaries of its own construction as well: the text asserts that divine secrets are not only beyond human language to convey, but should not be

²⁹⁶ *Mirror*, 316.19-30. One of the potentially significant differences in the Middle English occurs here. Chantilly has "Aise ou Sene" for "Oise or Meuse." Lerner argues that the identification of the rivers in the Middle English version is one of the indications that this text is closer to Marguerite's original, naming the Oise and Meuse that run near Marguerite's native region of Hainaut. See "New Light," 97-98.

²⁹⁷ Marguerite's frequent metaphors of commingled liquids are among her most potentially heterodox. As Robert Lerner and others have detailed, commingled liquid metaphors were usually employed by medieval mystics and theologians with saving phrases that avoided suggestions of *deificatio*, the soul becoming divine. He notes that Bernard of Clairvaux stipulates the water added to wine only "seems to" or "is seen to" (*videtur*) become wine. Likewise, he notes that Jacopone de Todi, a Franciscan mystic who uses similar imagery, adds the saving phrase "*par che*" to note that one liquid does not actually become the other. For these examples and their relation to Marguerite's writing see Lerner, "The Image of Mixed Liquids," esp. 397-400.

²⁹⁸ Soul's namelessness is mentioned four times in Chantilly, from which M.N.'s version has some minor variance here. At line 27, M.N.'s text has an additional, repetitive affirmation that Soul has "lost hir labour and hir name."

²⁹⁹ *Mirror*, 316.32.

shared with a wide audience. Unlike many other mystics of her time, Marguerite reports no divine command to write. The text depicts the opposite, with God specifically warning Soul *not* to divulge secrets revealed to her. The Trinity appears to plead with Soul in a song, “I preie 3ou, my deere dou3ter... þat 3e seie no more þe secre3 þat 3e wite,” expressing concern that those who may read the book without having first attained Soul’s advanced state may risk condemning themselves through it.³⁰⁰ This may be Marguerite’s gesture, or perhaps blow, to those who she was sure would misunderstand her words, as many did.³⁰¹ But it also means that the book’s narration transgresses the limits that it establishes for itself. It crosses another borderline – that of what is appropriate and inappropriate to share.

Moreover, in writing the book, Marguerite (or “þis soule”) allows her desire to witness to a relationship with God to rekindle her will. Under the terms of the *Mirror*, the same can be said for M.N. as composer of the translation, who states his hope that by hearing about divine love the souls of readers will “entriþ and walkiþ in þe wey of illuminacion,” “be cau3t into þe goostli influences,” and eventually themselves be “vnyed to God.”³⁰² There is no way around the fact that the act of writing the book is an exercise of individual will, and according to the *Mirror*’s schema of advancement, that will is supposed to have been martyred. The hallmark of the fifth stage of annihilation is for the soul and its will to separate from one another and the will to be dissolved and returned to God: in the fifth stage, Soul “a3en putt iþ it and 3iueþ it and 3ildeþ it in God þere it was first.”³⁰³

Amid traditional tropes of ineffability, Soul discusses the foolishness of composing the text, comparing the task to trying to enclose all of the sea in one’s eye and similar

³⁰⁰ Ibid. 344.17-18.

³⁰¹ The Chantilly proem also stresses that misunderstanding is inevitable for most readers. *Mirouer*, 8.1-28.

³⁰² *Mirror*, 248 esp. 11-15.

³⁰³ Ibid. 341.1-2.

impossibilities. She explains, “I am a more folt þan he þat þis wolde do, whanne I putte so price þing in speche þat may not be seid ne write. I encombre me of þese wordis to write.”³⁰⁴ This is a lamentation not only about ineffability, but the detrimental effects of narration on the Soul trying to break free from will: she becomes again one of the “encumbered” rather than the annihilated and free.

The same is the lament of the “beggynge” creature, who is also “þis soule þat þis boke lete write.” She wishes that

hir euen christen fond God in hem bi writings and bi wordis. Þis is to seie and to vndirstonde, þat sche wolde hir euen christen were parfittli so made as sche deuseþ, specialli alle þo to whom sche haþ good wille. Þus to do and þus to seie is beggynge, for in þis doynge and in þis seiyng & in þis willyng, sche dwelliþ a begger – witeþ þis forsoþe – and encombred of hersilf.³⁰⁵

Soul has an inclination to bring others to God, to make them understand, to bring them to her level. But this means that she desires something other than God, and so wanders like a beggar or “mendicant.” She is caught between human cares (even if the goal of those cares is evangelism) and the life in God she has already begun to live, and so is caught in another form of the liminal, between her desired life and what ties her to her current life. Stephanie Paulsell poignantly remarks that it appears Marguerite “write[s] with a divided heart,” one of the signs of which is this opposition between her writing and the spiritual life she advocates.³⁰⁶ It would be even more accurate to say that she writes from a divided life, or at least that this is the experience of a soul that she depicts: a soul standing on two sides.

³⁰⁴ Ibid. 325.30-32.

³⁰⁵ Ibid. 325.1-7.

³⁰⁶ Stephanie Paulsell, “Dreaming the King, Writing God: Hope, Desire, and Fiction in Marguerite Porete’s *Mirror of Simple Souls*,” *Literature, Religion, and East/West Comparison: Essays in Honor of Anthony C. Yu*, ed. Eric Ziolkowski (Newark: University of Delaware P, 2005), 67

At the same time, however, Soul seems to insist on the necessity of writing the book. She notes that although she exercised will in sharing insights with other Christians, one cannot reach perfection without such an act of begging. She asserts, “Certis, don it þei moste er þei come to parfite freedom of alle poyntes.” This important argument is emphatically clear in both the English and French.³⁰⁷ As begging is inextricably linked with narrating one’s experience of God and secret knowledge of him, that very narration is likewise portrayed as part of the soul’s progress toward union with God.

It is through the narration of the experience of mystical union that Soul can achieve freedom from her former self; it is through its expression that she comes to annihilation, a more complete union with God. Soul refers to writing the book and then continues,

But þus I take my recourse for to come to my strengþe and socoure and to my last crowne, of þe beyng of whiche we haue spoke of þat sittip al in freedom, þat is whanne a soule restip in pure nouzt wipouten þouzt, for til þanne sche may not be fre.³⁰⁸

While Soul seeks to be free from her distinct thought and will and dissolve into God, paradoxically the path to get to that point is the very narration that makes her exercise her own will distinct from God. And so the narrator, mirroring the condition of a soul *in the process* of becoming one with God but not yet able to achieve complete and lasting union, is caught in a liminal position by these two opposing forces: on the one hand moving closer to union by indulging the desire to produce the book, to celebrate the soul’s relationship with God, and on

³⁰⁷ Ibid. 325.25-26. Chantilly reads, “Certes, faire l’esconvient ains que on viegne de tous poins a l’estat de franchise.” *Mirouer*, 226.1-5.

³⁰⁸ *Mirror*, 325.32-35. Soul’s debate about mendicancy is an inherently self-reflective debate, and doubly so. The debate itself depicts a reasoning process – the various pros and cons of narration of divine things – and simultaneously asserts that the complex questions and lengthy answers that compose most of the dialogue are a necessity for Soul’s progress toward perfection.

the other, still partly held to the individual will that distinguishes the mortal subject. To try to understand this conflict and how Marguerite negotiates it, the next step is to consider precisely what the narration of the book achieves.

Language and Image

When Soul utters a song about her experience of God, she makes herself a model for others. Soul sings, she explains, “al for hem þat 3it schulen be free, for þis þat þei may heere in þis booke lerne sum poynt of frenesse,” so that others may see something of her experience of God and likewise move toward the freedom of being annihilated souls.³⁰⁹ Her songs transcend the type of thinking that could separate her from God and retain her as a member of “Holy Church the Little.” As Soul declares,

Penkinge no more is worþ, ne werk, ne eloquence, loue drawiþ me so hiȝe.

Penkinge no more is worþ, for his diuine biholding it haþ but oon entent.

Penkinge no more is worþ, ne werk, ne eloquence. Loue haþ made me bi nob[l]esse seuene uersis of songe to fynde þat is of þe deite pure wheroff reson kan not speke.³¹⁰

Thinking is no longer of worth, nor work nor speech, Love has drawn me so high.

Thinking is no longer of worth, for divine beholding makes the soul have only one intention. Thinking is no longer of worth, nor work, nor speech. Love has

³⁰⁹Ibid. 314.12-14.

³¹⁰Ibid. 345.1-5.

made me find by nobility these verses of a song that is of the pure deity, about whom Reason cannot speak.³¹¹

The verses here do not strictly convey information. Instead, they model a state of being. On the one hand, the song declares that Soul's experience cannot be expressed through normal description, again a lament of the limits of language. These verses of the divine cannot be put into coherent thoughts and words. They cannot be "reasoned"; in fact, they take Soul beyond thought and beyond all language with its limits of specific meaning. But this is of little consequence, for the *Mirror* glories in the sheer act of singing even without conveying knowledge.³¹² Like Augustine's ecstatic blazon poems about God, Soul's song "does not give testimony, it is the testimony": utterance of these "uersis of songe" represents a form of union with God, for the songs are not Soul's alone but "of þe deite pure," a merger of her song with his.³¹³

Here the *Mirror* closely resembles the writing of Richard Rolle, for whom the experience of God and expression of the experience become one in the composition of the text. In Rolle's

³¹¹ Because it informs my reading, I include a translation of M.N.'s rendering informed by consultation with the French. Chantilly has: Penser plus ne m'y vault / Ne oeuvre, ne loquence. / Amour me trait si hault / Penser plus ne m'y vault / De ses divins regars / Que je n'ay nulle entente. / Penser plus ne m'y vault / Ne oeuvre ne loquence. / Amour m'a fait par noblece, / Ces vers de chançon trouver. / C'est la Deité pure / Dont Raison ne scet parler. *Mirouer*, 342.27-38. The second and fourth sentences of M.N.'s rendering appear particularly garbled. M.N.'s version may suggest that the soul observes Love's ways, or that Love practices her nobility in sharing the verses with the soul; there is ambiguity in both versions as to whether it is love or the soul that is noble (or both). Also in question here is whether the soul is beholding Love/God (and M.N. often assigns a male pronoun to Love) or Love is gazing on the soul. Recent translators disagree regarding the best rendering of the French as well. Cf. Ellen Babinsky, *Mirror of Simple Souls* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1993), 198-199 and Edmund Colledge, et. al, *The Mirror of Simple Souls* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame P, 1999), 150-151. M.N. transcribes the song, a rondeau in Chantilly, as prose, as he does with almost all of the lyric passages in the text. The Middle English breaks off in the middle of this song passage and resumes in the middle of the meditations that comprise chapter 126 of the Chantilly text. Given these textual problems, it is likely that Chantilly preserves a better rendering here.

³¹² The passage also evokes Rudolf Otto's suggestion that undefined or untranslatable words in liturgical worship are valuable in their non-specificity, for in it they signify the incomprehensible phenomena of the experience of God. See Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (1923; reprint Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977), 65, 17. Soul's song seems to function similarly, giving voice to experience without elucidation, testimony as opposed to explanation.

³¹³ Lyotard, *Confession*, 7. *Mirror*, 278.28-32.

experience of *canor*, the soul is sent into song, and that singing itself is an image of union. The soul overflows with joy that must be expressed in an utterance, and also becomes like the source of joy. The soul that is in “a peace that sings and loves and burns and contemplates...is altogether ablaze with heavenly fire.” In Rolle’s approach, in the act of releasing praise in joyful song, the soul becomes like God who sings continually: “he is transformed into the likeness of him in whom is all melody and song.”³¹⁴

Did Marguerite intend only to mark the verse song just mentioned, Chantilly chapter 122, as divine verse? The French *Mirouer* includes many sections of lyrical verse scattered throughout the text. I would suggest that the “verses” that have been given by Love refer to all the linguistic movements of the text – including all the dialogue that engages Soul with God. The prologue’s opening statement from the figure of “Author” announces that the book will illustrate the workings of Love, later identified as the source of the verses, and the text’s dialogue is all a discussion, in essence, of Soul’s experience of divine love and mystical union, albeit a discussion that falters under the impossible task of description. As for the Middle English text in particular, M.N.’s version includes most of the verse sections of the *Mirror*, but generally renders them as prose without distinction. It would seem he understood the “versis” to refer to the movements of the entire text. English readers following his rendering that does not set off

³¹⁴ Richard Rolle, *Fire of Love*, trans. Clifton Wolters (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 76-77. Notably, despite a dominant scholarly view that most English mystics and translators tried to distance themselves from Rolle’s ecstatic piety, there is evidence of his corpus circulating in the same communities as the Middle English *Mirror*. The Mt. Grace Charterhouse, where Methley translated the English *Mirror* into Latin, was particularly rich with Rollean piety, as was the Sheen Charterhouse, which owned copies of the *Mirror* in English and Latin. Although Rolle could not have influenced Marguerite, and her text likewise probably did not influence Rolle directly, the texts’ presence in similar communities seems to suggest a taste for similar language modeling the glories of union. On circulation of Rolle’s works among the English Carthusians, see Michael G. Sargent, “The Transmission by the English Carthusians of Some Late Medieval Spiritual Writings,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 27 (1976), 231-4. Rolle’s *Incendium amoris* was also the only mystical text by a native English writer in the book collection that John Blacman donated to the Witham Charterhouse. See Roger Lovatt, “John Blacman’s Library and Contemporary Carthusian Spirituality,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 43.2 (1992), 207.

verse passages from the rest of the text would also be likely to interpret “uersis” as a reference to the whole text.³¹⁵

In the prologue’s exemplum of the princess and her “image,” Marguerite implies that her book as a whole is an “image,” one of the relationship between Soul and God. She writes that a princess, “Lete peynte an ymage, þat presentide þat kynges semblaunce as nyȝ as sche myȝte. . . . And bi þe siȝt of þis ymage, wiþ oþir usages, sche was eesid; and þus sche apeside hirsilf of þe presentacioun of loue, þat sche was updrawe.”³¹⁶ And this applies directly to Soul’s experience:

Sopeli, seiþ þis soule þat þis boke lete write, þis I seie for me: so fare I. I here speke of a kyng of greet myȝt þat for curtesie and greet largesse is a noble Alisaundre. But so fer is he fro me and I fro him, seiþ þis soule, þat I kan not take comfort of mysilf. And to clepe me he ȝaue me þis boke, þe whiche presentep summe vsages of þe loue of hirsilf. But not for þanne I dwelle not in freedom of pees, þouȝ I haue his ymage; but I am in a straunge lond fer fro þe pees, where þat þese noble louyers of þis lord dwelle þat ben al endid and pure, and bi þe ȝiftes of þis lord maad fre, wiþ whom þei dwelle.³¹⁷

Soul is emphatic and repetitive in paralleling the princess’ experience and her own, particularly in the English version. The comparison therein includes three first-person pronouns: “Sopeli, seiþ þis soule þat þis boke lete write, þis *I* seie for *me*: so fare *I*.”³¹⁸ The “boke” is the equivalent of the princess’ “ymage” for Soul and for the writer, Marguerite, who is the “soule þat

³¹⁵ The Middle English version includes most of the verse sections from the French *Mirouer*, most notably excepting the opening verse proem and the latter part of Soul’s song from chapter 122, as the English omits part of that chapter.

³¹⁶ *Mirror*, 251.9-12.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.* 251.13-20.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.* 251.13. Cf. the equivalent in Chantilly: “semblablement vrayement, dit l’Ame qui ce livre fist escrire, au tel vous dis je” (*Mirouer*, 12.34-5).

þis boke lete write.”³¹⁹ The connection becomes explicit when Soul admits that although she has “his ymage” she is not entirely at peace. This is only the “ymage,” not the real thing, and ultimately not enough. As Soul explains, “I dwelle not in the freedom of pees, þouȝ I haue his ymage, but I am in a straunge lond fer fro the pees.”³²⁰ Trapped in mortal life, Soul still remains distant and distinct from her beloved. She does not have a complete and lasting union with her beloved, which as the book develops will prove to be precisely the dilemma of the liminal soul in the fifth stage. And here from the start Marguerite offers a clue that the book is intended less to convey theological knowledge than as the portrait of a soul’s experience.³²¹

Another telling word in the exemplum is “usages,” which ties the book to the princess/Soul’s practices and customs. The French “usages” is used in Chantilly to describe the princess’ actions, such as viewing the image, that foster her love for the king, and M.N. includes “usages” in the same two places: for the princess, “bi þe siȝt of þis ymage, wiþ oþir *usages*, sche was eesid,” and for Soul the book/image “presenteþ summe *vsages* of þe loue of himself.” When Soul later declares that she has a continual “usage” of a vision of the Trinity, M.N. interprets this as a normal practice for Soul.³²² The “usages” mentioned in the prologue are probably best understood as the everyday practices that foster and sustain relationship with God.

³¹⁹ This is one of the most emphatic links between Marguerite and the personification of Soul.

³²⁰ *Mirror*, 251.17-19.

³²¹ Several scholars have pointed to this exemplum as a clue that Marguerite’s text should be understood as a type of image. Watson reads it as a “fictional suspension of the distance between God and the soul.” See “Misrepresenting,” 128ff. esp. 129. Paulsell also relates it to fiction-making. See “Dreaming the King,” esp. 67-69. In my reading it is an image of liminality conveyed through dialogue.

³²² In Middle English, the term has several possible nuances of meaning; in addition to general customs and use of language (e.g., idioms) it could refer to a general habit or practice, religious practices or ritual observance, a disposition, or an inclination. *Middle English Dictionary Online*, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/>, s.v. “usage.” Although as Michael G. Sargent notes, M.N. seems to suggest the Soul has “a habitual awareness of God,” clarifying that Marguerite is not talking about a continuous vision of God, as her statement could imply. See Sargent, “*Le Mirouer des simple âmes* and the English Mystical Tradition,” 457. Our medieval reader recognizes the soul’s liminal experience here: a vision of the divine has set her on a course of contemplating what she cannot always have. Dronke offers an insightful, alternative reading of the repetitive French term “usages” here as “bridging subjective and objective experience.” See his *Women Writers of the Middle Ages*, 219.

So this is what, according to Marguerite's prologue, the book shows us: an image of God and the ways in which a soul interacts with him. It is an image of her mortal life in love with her distant lover. Its primary purpose is not to lay down meaning. It is to create a forum in language for a soul's experience of and with God to manifest.

Such are the problems of expression that Marguerite faces in trying to write the experience of a soul in mystical union, the condition of the annihilated soul that she wants to represent, and her description of her book. I turn now to Marguerite's solution for negotiating these challenges and conveying Soul's liminal condition: her use of dialogic form.

CHAPTER 4

SPOKEN “FUL MYSTILI”: MARGUERITE’S DIALOGIC NARRATIVE OF UNION*

Soul’s Words

This chapter turns to the narrative structures that, working like a bridge to the “staunge lond,” create the portrait of mystical union in Marguerite Porete’s *Mirror of Simple Souls*. I argue that dialogue represents Soul’s experience of mystical union by allowing her to “melt” into the divine through the realm of voice. The union that the text portrays is, like Soul’s experience of God while still in mortal life, a temporary and unstable one: through the dialogic movement of the text, Soul’s speaking voice alternatively melds with and stands apart from the divine voice. The dialogue’s interplay is one strategy to overcome the ineffability of God and of the experience of union, but it is still marked by – and designed to reflect – all the complications of the soul’s liminal state, her fraught position “in-between.” M.N.’s prologue to the text announces that the book will reveal how souls can be drowned in and united to God, “drenchid in þe hize floode, and vnyed to God,” but also warns that the book is not always clear: “ful mystili it is spoken.”³²³ This proves true as the *Mirror*’s portrait of mystical union and its instability unfolds through a creative yet subtle union of voices in the text.

A moment in which Soul pauses to consider her own words – a description of her available means of expression – takes us right to the problem of her liminal condition and Marguerite’s structural techniques to represent it. Soul announces:

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³²³ “*The Mirror of Simple Souls: a Middle English Translation*,” ed. Marilyn Doiron, *Archivio italiano per la storia della pietà* 5 (Rome 1968), 247.15–248.15, 247.15. All citations to the Middle English text refer to this edition. I cite page and line numbers.

I syngē, seiþ þis soule, þe ton tyme song and þe toþir tyme vnsong, and al for hem þat ȝit schulen be free, for þis þat þei may heere in þis booke lerne sum poynt of frenesse & what þing hem bihoueþ or þan þei come þerto.³²⁴

Soul's song is not the stable line of one voice, but an utterance split between "song" and "vnsong": there are lines for two voices, one singing, another engaged in "un-singing," overturning or offering an alternative line as a counterpoint. We might say that Soul's one voice paradoxically achieves polyphony. The French terms for Soul's singing, *chant/deschant*, translated as *cantul/discantu* in the Latin version based on the French, appear to refer to a shift between the basic chant line of liturgical song, the *cantus firmus* of medieval plainchant, and the "discant" to which *deschant* likely refers.³²⁵ Discant, from the Latin *discantus*, "singing apart," was a form of added polyphony or extemporizing which added a second voice to the *cantus firmus*, imposed either in a specifically "note-against-note" counterpoint, by doubling, or simply by the addition of another voice or instrument, the ancestor of our modern counterpoint and hymn descant.³²⁶

M.N.'s English translation appears to miss the precise musical distinction here. I would suggest, however, that this was not because M.N. misunderstood the concept, but because he lacked an English vernacular term for this aspect of chant. Without an exact English equivalent,

³²⁴ Ibid. 314.12.

³²⁵ See *The New Harvard Dictionary of Music*, ed. Don Michael Randel, s.v. "discant" (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1986) 233-4, which also notes that the term "deschant" has transferred into modern English vocabulary as an alternative to "discant" or "descant."

³²⁶ Ibid. 233, which notes that the term was codified by the mid-thirteenth century (thus in plenty of time to influence Marguerite's word choice), with references to polyphony in Western plainchant recorded as early as the beginning of the tenth century. The reference to polyphony at this point in the text is noted by Max Huot de Longchamp in his modern French translation, *Le miroir des âmes simples et anéanties* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1997), 260, n. 80, and by Marco Vannini in the Italian translation by Giovanna Fozzer, *Lo specchio delle anime semplici* (Cinisello Balsamo, Milan: San Paolo, 1994), 332-333, n. 219, but to my knowledge not remarked upon in Anglophone editions. Among the surprisingly few analyses I have encountered of this remarkable passage is the reading of the French offered by Suzanne Kocher, *Allegories of Love in Marguerite Porete's Mirror of Simple Souls* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008), 97. Her reading differs from mine in stressing Soul's versatility and the potential crossing of gender boundaries in this metaphor rather than the drama of internal division and the attempt to give it expression. Vannini reads the moment as an example of dialectic.

M.N. aims nonetheless for a word that specifically sets the discant aspect apart from Soul's basic song. His use of the prefix "un-" implies a contrary and captures the tension between Soul's two modes of utterance, the basic song and its alternative.³²⁷

If we follow Marguerite's metaphor as a reference to simultaneous chant and added counterpoint, Soul speaks with two voices at once. Even if we understand it as alternating forms of singing, the passage centers on two modes of address and the tension between them. It depicts Soul as singing apart from herself. The subject's voice takes shape, therefore, through alternating movement between the two chant lines, between two speaking positions, with Soul essentially entering into a dialogue with the counterpoint of her own voice. M.N.'s choice of explicitly oppositional terms both marks a provocative division and emphasizes it: by both singing and not singing, Soul's voice inhabits two entirely contrary stances at once. It is as though she speaks as two separate selves, reflecting a split condition.

What she negotiates here parallels what, according to the text, a soul must negotiate in the temporary loss of awareness of self when melted into union with God. And the theme continues. Much more of Soul's discourse, beyond her "song" and "vnsong," also relies on her occupation of two distinct voices. Another striking illustration of this phenomenon comes in the discussion of the debt she owes for having stolen her will from God, when Soul reflects, "A seable and vnsuffrable dette, seiþ þis soule, who schal paie þis dette? A Lord, certis 3e."³²⁸ Marguerite could have assigned this line to Love, who speaks a few lines earlier and could now respond, "The Lord will pay it." But the text expressly identifies a dialogue between Soul and herself as she both poses and answers her own question.

³²⁷ M.N.'s choice of "vnsong" appears to be an otherwise unattested form, though evidence survives of the form "unsongen" used to refer simply to what is "not sung," such as a liturgy left unsung or uncelebrated. The *Middle English Dictionary* records two fifteenth-century uses, 1426 and 1450, possibly one suggestion of a late date for the translation. *Middle English Dictionary Online*, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/>, s.v., "unsongen."

³²⁸ *Mirror*, 314.25-26.

A comparable circularity occurs in a later consideration of Soul's debt to God, with Soul turning back to herself as she begins, "Now, soule, seiþ þis soule to hirsilf, [if] 3e haue al þis þat þis writynge deuseþ, ne seie we more, but al it is his of dette."³²⁹ Soul's statement uses a second person pronoun to address a "3e" that is also "hirsilf," a projection that is both self and, at least for the moment, other. The technique is especially striking because Soul continues her narration in the first person as she questions this projected self/other about the nature of her own debts.³³⁰ It is tempting to think about these processes as a Lacanian realization of discrete identity and its effects. Marguerite seems to dramatize an encounter with a parallel self; here is a subject who, like Lacan's infant, arguably sees an imago – a potential ideal self. But the issue is not yet one of psychic wholeness or desire. Here Marguerite casts the problem in terms of knowledge and its fulfillment: the split is between a superior "half," or alternate self consonant with the soul's enjoyment of momentary union, opposed against one still yearning and questioning.

These movements evoke texts of the consolation tradition in which dialogue is a method used to evaluate thoughts and beliefs and reorient one's point of view.³³¹ The *Mirror* also dramatizes introspection in a way that recalls Augustine and Anselm's writing and the scriptural texts that I discussed in chapter one. Anselm refers back to his *Monologion* as a "meditation on the rational basis of faith, adopting the role of someone who, by reasoning silently with himself, investigates things he does not know."³³² His soliloquy is a dialogue with the self, and at its core, so is the *Proslogion*, originally titled with the Christian philosophical maxim "faith seeking

³²⁹ Ibid. 332.3-4.

³³⁰ Ibid. 332.5-8.

³³¹ One example of reorienting dialogue is Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*. Although they could not have influenced Marguerite, I also think here of Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess* and Hoccleve's *My Compleinte and Dialogue with a Friend*, which demonstrate dialogic processes as a means of reforming and reordering thought and memory.

³³² Anselm of Canterbury, *Monologion and Proslogion with replies of Gaunilo and Anselm*, ed. and trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1995), 93.

understanding.³³³ While this sequel is more explicitly a dialogue between Anselm and God, alternating between Anselm's arguments and addresses to or invocations of God, the basis is essentially a self-reflective process. Like Augustine in the *Confessions*, he adopts an introspective structure – the posing of a question, sometimes of God but often of the self (e.g., “where was I heading and where have I come to? What was I reaching toward, and what do I long for?” and responds to himself, often adopting scriptural verses as the reply (e.g., “I have sought the good”).³³⁴ Soul's dialogue with herself is figured as a means of coming to understand atonement, reasoning to try to grasp the soul's own debt and contribution (or really lack thereof) to its salvation, but it simultaneously gives expression to her split condition.³³⁵

A particularly striking analogue in scripture is the structure of the fourteenth psalm (Vulgate numbering), which I discussed in chapter one. The speaker's opening query, “LORD, who shall dwell in thy tabernacle? or who shall rest in thy holy hill?” is followed by enumeration of the qualities of the righteous.³³⁶ One potential reading of these lines is as a reflexive moment of David discoursing with himself.³³⁷ Marguerite's structure has a particular resemblance to Augustine's perspective on psalm 14 in his *Enarrationes in psalmos*. Augustine does not comment directly on the dialogic element in the question and response, but frames the psalm as a whole as fulfilling David's need for introspection. Noting the psalm's superscription as “a Psalm for David himself” (which Augustine draws from the Septuagint) he goes on to remark that “this

³³³ On the title of the *Proslogion*, see Williams, “Intro.,” xiii, and *Proslogion*, 99.

³³⁴ Ibid. 98; Williams glosses the passage with Ps. 122:9.

³³⁵ Also noteworthy is that Soul's discussion of her sin is also similar to exploratory confession, another common introspective process in Marguerite's post-Fourth Lateran Council religious milieu.

³³⁶ Psalm 14:1.

³³⁷ These are the terms in which Langland reads the psalm in *Piers Plowman* when the allegorical personification of Conscience makes reference to it. See B.III.233-38; Cf. C.II.39. A discussion of this thread of commentary on the psalm and its role in *Piers Plowman* is offered by Andrew Galloway, *The Penn Commentary on Piers Plowman* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University P, 2006) esp. pp. 244-245 (on C.II.39-41 and B.III.236-237) and 328-329 (on B.III.234-245).

title offers no difficulty.”³³⁸ He accepts at face value that the process here is a discussion with oneself, whereas when expounding other psalms he clarifies to whom the reader should ascribe the speaking voice(s). For example, he directs readers to understand the following psalm’s superscription (psalm 15) “to David himself” as a song of Christ “in his human nature.”³³⁹

In M.N.’s late medieval England, Walter Hilton makes a similar point about the comparable structure in Isaiah 66:2. Interpreting the seeming dialogue in that line, he remarks, “For oure Lord asketh bi His prophete thus... Upon whom schal My spirit reste? And He answereth Himsilf and seith: upon noon but upon the meke, poverli and contrite in herte and dredynge My wordes.”³⁴⁰ Here it is God who questions and answers himself, utilizing the voice of Isaiah to do so.³⁴¹

Familiarity with such passages could have prompted Marguerite to adopt similar structures when shaping Soul’s discourse. However, if she did have them in mind, she took them as inspiration, as raw material, and manipulated them creatively. In the *Mirror* – and here it stands dramatically apart – Soul’s reflexive process only occurs through engagement with a counterpoint of the self, a dialogue with a second, alternative personification of the soul. This is not just apostrophe; it is not, for instance, Anselm’s address to his heart or Augustine’s pondering of what he seeks. The narrating subject divides into two voices, two distinct positions, as Soul splits to question herself and offer an explanation to herself. We do not have a soliloquy, but a dialogue that necessitates a reflection of the subject with whom to engage. As in her

³³⁸ St. Augustine, *On the Psalms*, vol. 1, ed. and trans. Dame Scholastica Hebgin and Dame Felicitas Corrigan (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1960), 157.

³³⁹ Ibid. 159.

³⁴⁰ Walter Hilton, *The Scale of Perfection*, ed. Thomas Bestul (Kalamazoo, MI: TEAMS/Medieval Institute Publications, 2000) 53. The English *Mirror* and portions of Hilton’s *Scale* appear together in British Museum Add. MS 37790.

³⁴¹ The echoes of David and Isaiah in Soul’s reflexive questions also implicitly align her statements with the divine-inspired speech of these biblical figures.

singing, Soul's questioning conjures an image of an "other" self by giving it a voice. Even more, the speaking subject, the subject *as* speaker, emerges through the interaction between two entities: if we try to locate Soul's voice, we have to say that the terms of the text only allow it a liminal position – between "þe soule" and "þe soule hirsilf," which both speak for her. Marguerite builds a reflection of Soul's status right into the structure of the narrative, into the way that exchanges circulate in the dialogue. It is a situation that, on the level of meta-narrative, reflects Soul's liminal ontological status. Polyphony demonstrates a condition that one narrating voice cannot.

The Other's Words

Just as Soul's narrating *I* shifts with remarkable seamlessness between two positions that we can read as two types of experience, Soul also adopts the voices of other personifications. Marguerite's adaptation of allegorical dialogue involves a striking interpenetration of voices, one that further destabilizes Soul's voice. After the text enacts the "death" of Reason, Soul adopts Reason's voice and appears alternatively in the dialogue under her standard label as "þis soule" as well as "þis soule þat spekiþ in þe persoone of reson."³⁴² This begins a series of interactions in which the personifications stand in for one another and their voices intermingle. Literally masquerading as Reason (the French has "en la personne de Raison," the Latin "in persona rationis"), Soul continues Reason's practice of posing questions, asking Love to detail the nature and lineage of "mekenesse," or Humility. Soul therefore inhabits Reason's voice, and engages with Love *as* Reason. After Love responds by saying none can articulate Humility's lineage,

³⁴² *Mirror*, 320.12. For the French and Latin respectively, see *Marguerite Porete: Le mirouer des simples âmes / Speculum simplicium animarum*, ed. Romana Guarnieri and Paul Verdeyen, *Corpus Christianorum: Continuatio Mediaevalis* 69 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1986), 248.21 and 249.16. All citations from the French *Mirouer* refer to this volume. I cite page and line numbers. Translations are my own.

Soul offers an answer in her original voice as “þis soule,” arguing, “þis is sooþe...but I shal puute heer to þis þat I schal seie.”³⁴³ Soul proceeds to describe Humility’s lineage, and thus provides a lengthy answer to her own (or “Reason’s”) question, another dialogue with herself.

This is an instance of uniquely explicit prosopopeia in the text – not simply the use of speaking personifications (like the allegorical figures that fill the text), but a moment that resonates with the original Greek *prosopa* (“masks”), the term for figures that appear in classical Greek drama, identities represented by a mask. Soul explicitly steps into Reason’s speaking position, *puts it on*.³⁴⁴ Love interestingly makes a similar move, announcing at the start of the same section that she will say what “Reson schulde seie.”³⁴⁵ Love’s comment does not have the speech tag of “þe persoone of reson,” but fluidly links all three of the figures’ voices together.

And Soul’s voice also blends with Love’s voice. Like the ambiguity of Soul’s name, this is written into the operating terms of the discourse. As Newman highlights, Soul and Love are united at the most basic level of word play because their names in French, *Ame* and *Amour*, reflect one another. She observes in their dynamic a “mutual mirroring,” one that almost evokes narcissism as “Love describes and praises Soul, while Soul explains and celebrates Love.”³⁴⁶ The overlap here is more fluid than the adoption of Reason’s “mask,” which by contrast draws attention to a crossed boundary. There is no specific moment when Soul adopts the “persoone” of Love in the latter’s absence. She becomes it rather than *putting it on*. Indeed, the transition

³⁴³ *Mirror*, 320.17-18.

³⁴⁴ I wish to point here to the root of the masking concept as it applies to this particular situation in the text, “persona,” of course, being a translation and adoption of the Greek term and concept. See *The Oxford Companion to Theatre*, 4th ed., ed. Phyllis Hartnoll, s.v. “dramatis personae” (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1983), 227-228.

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 319.35-36.

³⁴⁶ Barbara Newman, “The Mirror and the Rose: Marguerite Porete’s Encounter with the Dieu D’Amours,” *The Vernacular Spirit: Essays on Medieval Religious Literature*, ed. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, Duncan Robertson, and Nancy Bradley Warren (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 113. On this “specularity” and some of its implications for Newman’s concept of *mystique courtoise*, also see *Virile Woman*, 156. My reading is ultimately concerned with the instability of voices and being in this exchange.

into Love's voice is so smooth that in their exchanges we begin to lose clear sight of "Soul" as a distinct narrating subject.

A glance at a few moments in the dialogue illustrates this fluidity. Soul refers questions to Love, and Love answers on behalf of Soul. When Reason asks Soul what makes her glad, rather than answering, Soul redirects the question and affirms, "Lady loue...schal seie it for me," referring to Love for the answer to this question about personal joys.³⁴⁷ Among other examples, in a discussion of Soul's necessary three deaths, Love poses a question that stumps Soul, who simply turns back to Love for the answer, responding, "I noot, seip þe soule þat þis first wroot, but loue, 3e 3oureself seie it for me. I may not amende 3ou."³⁴⁸ The shift back to Love is especially striking here because the same sentence includes another mention of Soul as the writer of the book, "þe soule þat þis first wroot," and presumably possessor of all the knowledge offered in it. The experience being narrated is still Soul's – her joy, her deaths – but she does not or cannot narrate it herself. Her knowledge about divine mysteries is equal to Love's knowledge, and Love likewise knows Soul's perspective. Their shared meditations also work in the reverse with Soul speaking for Love, for instance when she responds to Love's question about the condition of the "unencumbered" by explaining Love's own nature to her; her response to Love's query is to explain "love" to Love.³⁴⁹

What, then, is Marguerite's motivation for so destabilizing Soul's voice? Certainly all dialogue, by virtue of featuring two or more debating voices, destabilizes authority by making it more difficult to locate. The drama in the *Mirror* is no exception, and a potentially efficacious move for Marguerite's daring theology. It disperses the responsibility of the authorial voice by creating distance between Marguerite and what is said by any one allegorical figure. Several

³⁴⁷ *Mirror*, 303.20.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 300.11-12.

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 314.8-11.

modern readers of the *Mirror* and similar beguine texts observe that allegorical dialogue allows an author access to a range of powerful mouthpieces. Newman traces a tradition of medieval women writers invoking allegorical goddesses to “legitimize their own writing,” and putting their words in the voices of such figures who could often double, conveniently, as a “representation of divine agency and intelligence as female.”³⁵⁰ Amy Hollywood explores how Marguerite both complicates the gender of the divine and also avoids an “external narrating voice.”³⁵¹ We may say that by blending the authoritative, semi-divine voices of Lady Love, Truth, or Peace, for instance, with that of Soul (throughout the text most closely identified with the authorial voice), Marguerite theoretically adopts those authoritative positions.

It is difficult, however, to imagine Marguerite planning to siphon authority from the mask of literary figures in her text or avoid responsibility for direct claims. Such a move does not quite mesh with what we can glimpse of her character and her own view of her writing. Her continued circulation of her book after its first condemnation, her attempts to obtain approval of her writing from theologians of her day instead of altering or abandoning the book, and her stalwart, silent defense at trial (spending a year and a half refusing to take the oath that would have allowed her trial to proceed) all suggest the exact opposite of eschewing responsibility: instead, a strong and public personal stake in the book.³⁵² The fact that Marguerite’s self-promotion contributed to her undoing warrants notice in light of a tendency to overemphasize her fraught status as a woman writing in the vernacular and on the margins of the patriarchal Church. She did write from the margins, and must have been aware of the dangers of doing so, but she

³⁵⁰ Barbara Newman, “More Thoughts on Medieval Women’s Intelligence,” *Voices in Dialogue: Reading Women in the Middle Ages*, ed. Linda Olson and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame P, 2005), 237.

³⁵¹ Amy Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame P, 1995), 6-7, 119, 92.

³⁵² I refer here to the letters of approbation from three clerics, which are absent in Chantilly but survive in the Latin translations and (in their best form) in the Middle English, although we cannot be certain at what point Marguerite obtained the clerics’ approval.

does not appear to have feared doing so, even to the point of death. Moreover, from the opening chapters, which frame the text as a narrative of Soul's experience by beginning "O soule touche by God," Marguerite establishes a close association between the allegorical Soul and the authorial *I*.³⁵³ I would venture to say that, while her authoritative allegories undoubtedly make bold theological claims, she employs them also for another, even more clever purpose: to represent shifts in ontological status.

In order to recognize this at work in Marguerite's narrative structure, we must consider the complications of how the allegorical figures interact. The *Mirror* is not a dialogue in which Soul, Love, and Reason simply speak individually, offering theological reflections that border heterodoxy. Rather, Soul speaks *as/for* all three, sometimes adopting their voices to speak back to herself, thus uniting her voice with their voices. The text's form therefore becomes a reflection of content: the interpenetration of voices in the text provides a symbolic expression of a soul in the process of becoming Other.

In the *Mirror*'s schema, the goal of the soul's advancement is for the soul to embrace and melt into God's love. Marguerite depicts a special connection between Soul and Love as the result of Soul's progress and as an essential, ontological change.³⁵⁴ The text repeatedly declares that love must overtake the annihilated human soul; thus Love is what Soul will become in her perfected state. Even a soul in the relatively early fourth stage of annihilation, when overcome with the brilliant light of love, reportedly sees nothing beyond love: "þe greete liȝt of loue haþ keuered hir," Soul explains, and "þat suffriþ hir not to se passynge loue."³⁵⁵ If the annihilated soul becomes Love itself, moments in the text in which Love and Soul speak for one another can

³⁵³ *Mirror*, 250.16

³⁵⁴ Among many instances, see Love's statement that Soul is "noon oþir þing þan loue" once she conquers the virtues (ibid. 319.32-33) and Soul's pronouncement that she is full only of the love of God (343.30-32).

³⁵⁵ Ibid. 340.10.

be read as a reflection of Soul's progress: she responds as would the soul transformed into love.³⁵⁶ This occurs only for a moment, a point to which I will return.

But first, it is important to recognize that the personification of Love in the text is a representation of God. This is how Love defines herself, asserting "I am God... for loue is God and God is loue," and at many points in the allegory, the figures of Love and God function interchangeably.³⁵⁷ Love is the main vehicle of divine knowledge, a role she fulfills, for instance, when she announces the seven necessary stages, associating her voice with God's voice.³⁵⁸ Moreover, descriptions of Love, like those of the ineffable God, are the object of critique and distrust. Echoing Soul's comment that all that can be said of God is more falsehood than truth, in M.N.'s English, "More gabbinges þan it is true seiynge," Soul addresses Love in the same terms. Soul says she prefers to hear lies about Love's goodness than nothing at all because given the ineffability of Love's goodness, all speech about her is necessarily lies. As Soul laments to Love, "al þat I seie of 3oure goodnesse, it is but gabbinge."³⁵⁹

M.N.'s English version not only presents Love and God interchangeably, but at several points strengthens the association beyond what appears in Chantilly. Both texts identify Love as the entity that allows access to glorification after death. In Chantilly, we find, "Et le septiesme garde Amour dedans elle, pour nous donner en parmanable glorie, duquel nous n'aurons cognoissance jusques ad ce que nostre ame ait nostre corps laissé" (And the seventh [stage] Love

³⁵⁶ Arguably Love's voice blends with Soul's authorial voice from the beginning of the text, for immediately after Soul is identified as the writer of the book and the figure of Author appears to announce (in a striking first-person plural "we") the book's aim of detailing the Lord's love, the second chapter features Love discussing the book as her own creation (ibid. 252.11-14). On this ambiguity, also see Hollywood, *Virgin Wife*, 90ff. In Chantilly, the second chapter is headed with the caption, "De l'entreprise d'Amour, et pourquoy elle fist faire ce livre" ("Of the work of Love and why she has made this book"). *Mirouer*, 14.

³⁵⁷ *Mirror*, 274.19, an oft-cited passage recalling 1 John 4:16. Readings of the gender implications of this overlap have been offered by Kocher, *Allegories*, esp. 93-96 and Newman, *Virile Woman*, 156.

³⁵⁸ *Mirror*, 300.17-30, prior to Soul's elaboration beginning at 338.14. Love also references the stages at the beginning of the text at 252.5-9, equivalent to the end of Chantilly's chapter one.

³⁵⁹ Ibid. 264.1-2. Cf. 343.9-11: "For al þat may be seid of god or written or in herte may be þouzt, þat arechiþ to moost seiynge, it is more gabbinges þan it is true seiynge." Also cf. 351.31-2.

keeps within herself, to give it to us in lasting glory, of which we will not have understanding until our soul has left our body).³⁶⁰ Love is here the gatekeeper of eternity, the means by which the human soul can enter it, and thus aligned with God. M.N. so equates Love with God that he inserts a masculine pronoun for a feminine one in the description of the seventh stage: “And þe seuenþe kepib *he* wiþynne *him* for to ʒiue us in euerlastynge glorie. If we wite it not now, we schulen wite it whanne the body oure soule leeuib.”³⁶¹ In light of this association, one Marguerite wrote into the text and M.N. (our medieval reader) appears to have assumed, to blend Soul’s voice with Love’s is to blend it with God’s.

The blending of Soul’s voice with Reason’s is harder to reconcile given that Reason is at many points Soul’s adversary. But in the *Mirror*’s overall schema, Reason has a crucial function in progress toward annihilation. This perhaps explains why her perspective (even if after her “death” resurrected only as a *persona* shell assumed by other figures) does not – moreover, cannot – vanish from the narrative’s portrait of Soul’s experience. As Ellen Babinsky summarizes, Reason provides “a particular kind of knowledge to the soul, molding her ability and thus producing a sort of intellect that can allow the soul to make further progress”; it is Reason that originally orients the soul toward God in the first four stages, stages that are certainly inferior to the annihilated state, but necessary steps toward it.³⁶² Like the Virtues,

³⁶⁰ *Mirouer*, 332.204-6.

³⁶¹ *Mirror*, 342.31-2 (my emphasis). M.N. preserves Love’s feminine gender elsewhere. Also see Marleen Cré, *Vernacular Mysticism in the Charterhouse: A Study of British Library MS Additional 37790* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006), 193-196, which identifies some instances in which M.N. fails to recognize shifting pronouns and perspectives.

³⁶² Ellen L. Babinsky, “Intro.,” *The Mirror of Simple Souls* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 34-35. Early in the text we find a list of several important lessons that Reason is capable of teaching, and her counsel specifically details actions and outlooks necessary for a soul to pass through the first two deaths of sin and nature. This is particularly evident in Reason’s instructions to seek contempt, poverty, and tribulation. *Mirror*, 266.28-35. This advice parallels stages of spiritual progress outlined later (*ibid.* 308.3).

Reason is not so much abandoned as transcended: when Soul “takes leave of” the Virtues, they remain with her but in obedience to her, aspects or skills she can exercise.³⁶³

When she appears in medieval contemplative literature, the allegorical figure of Reason is most frequently aligned with something essential to spiritual ascent. This may have been a more natural association for Marguerite and medieval readers than it is to the modern eye. The writings of the Flemish beguine Hadewijch offer perhaps one of the most relevant analogues, portraying Reason as a guide that enlightens the human soul and leads it to God. Hadewijch’s ninth vision features an allegorical figure of Reason appearing as a queen and directing Hadewijch on the path to the love of God. Hadewijch recognizes Queen Reason as her own soul’s faculty of reason that will lead to a “life of Love.”³⁶⁴

Several of Hadewijch’s poems depict Reason as inferior to Love, but similarly assign her a role as a “noble” step toward it, similar to the *Mirror*’s framing of Reason’s early lessons as necessary steps for the soul’s advancement. As one poem puts it, “By Reason’s counsel, work is noble; / I do not say that it cannot be nobler; / Reason promises us great rewards / But Love herself has rewarded at once.”³⁶⁵ And although in some poems Hadewijch chides Reason for delaying the embrace of God (as Reason likewise does in Marguerite’s text), the soul speaking in the poems recognizes that she cannot “avenge” herself on Reason, who is “Love’s surgeoness” and can orient the soul toward possession of “the highest glory.”³⁶⁶ These perspectives from Hadewijch do not identify Reason as “divine,” but they do suggest the soul cannot fully embrace God without utilizing its own powers of reason.

³⁶³ *Mirror*, 273.29.

³⁶⁴ Hadewijch, *Complete Works*, ed. and trans. Columba Hart (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 285-286.

³⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 253, stanzaic poem #43, lines 78-81. Also see her discussion of Love and Reason working together: “By Reason,” writes Hadewijch, “one can win Veritable fruition of Love.” *Ibid.*, 215, stanzaic poem #30, lines 79-80.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 196-99, stanzaic poem #25, esp. lines 81-88.

Similar depictions were popular in M.N.'s late medieval England, and the association probably would have been almost second nature to him. In the treatise known as *Vices and Virtues*, the oldest extant Middle English dialogue, it is the allegorical figure of Racio who appears to narrate a description of the virtues, and who is also identified as the reflection of God in the human soul.³⁶⁷ The fifteenth-century vernacular play known as *Wisdom* likewise identifies "Reason" with the image of God in the human soul, and its components (personified in the play as Mind, Understanding, and Will) help guide the figure of *Anima* back to God. Marguerite's explicit use of prosopopeia when Soul takes on Reason's voice connects the speakers while maintaining deliberate distance: Soul does not "become" Reason in the same ontological way that she "becomes" Love. Reason is adopted, but subjugated; as Soul demonstrates the ability to both anticipate and answer Reason's questions and objections, she reveals a capacity to control Reason and employ her powers toward the goals of faith.

To return to literary concerns in the *Mirror* specifically, in all of this we come up against the question that James Paxson asks about prosopopeia: "in a personification figure, exactly what gets converted into or personified as whom?"³⁶⁸ It would seem that Soul's speaking *I* is not only the *I* of Soul, but of the other allegorical figures of Love and Reason as well, and conversely their *I* is Soul's *I*. Therefore, is Reason actually Soul, or is Soul actually Reason? Is Reason the faculty of reason accorded to every soul, or the unique reasoning power of Soul? Is it a power of all annihilated souls? Here we seem to slip toward a teleology in which every voice is Soul's.

Yet Soul is not a conglomerate, not a set of faculties each with its own voice. In the dialogue with Love and Reason, as in Soul's singing with which I began, Soul's voice seems to

³⁶⁷ See for instance Racio's statement that she is "an leme of godes anlicnesse witen ðe was iscapen on ðe." *Vices and Virtues, Being a Soul's Confession of its Sins, with Reason's Description of the Virtues*, ed. Ferd Holthausen (London: Early English Text Society/Oxford UP, 1888), 23.

³⁶⁸ James J. Paxson, *The Poetics of Personification* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994), 18. Paxson draws this "semiotic question" from an ancient source: analysis of Quintillian's commentary on juridical proceedings.

be less what embraces all others than what emerges from the interplay between them. Love and Reason are not alter-egos of the subject akin to the personified faculties of a soul that battle in *psychomachia*-style dramas. The dialogue between Soul, Reason, and Love is not primarily a drama of triumph over sinful influences or a clash of forces acting on a soul and threatening its salvation. These other figures are instead what Soul becomes, the entities with which she merges. As the interplay of the dialogue allows Soul to inhabit their voices, she temporarily becomes the Other. And in the allegory, that Other is divine. In the case of Love, it is God himself; even in the brief merger with Reason, it is a gift or extension of the divine.³⁶⁹

Crucially, the voices overlap for brief moments in the text, not permanent situations: Love does not always speak for Soul, nor Soul for Love. Marguerite presents them as distinct personifications, and they even engage in debate. In this way, the union between the two parallels that between Soul and God, with Soul again negotiating a position between the union experienced in the sixth stage and a sense of still standing apart during mortal life – the highs and lows of her liminal state. Through the intermittent blending of her voice with other personifications, Soul inhabits a liminal position in the allegory, somewhere between “Soul” and “Love,” between “Soul” and “Reason,” between “Soul” and “God” just as she does in relation to God as an annihilated soul caught *in-between*, in the *process of becoming* fully united to the divine Other.

³⁶⁹ An intriguing reading of interpenetrating personae as a representation of trinitarian theology has been offered by Catharine Randall, “Person, Place, Perception: a Proposal for the Reading of Porete’s *Miroir des âmes simples et anéanties*,” *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 25 (1995), 229-244. Her essay came to my attention in the very final stages of this project, unfortunately too late to engage in depth. However, one important distinction between our views is that while my assessment of commingled voices reads Reason and Love as representations of the divine, I see the interactions between the three main personae as a representation of Soul’s temporary mystical union rather than an image of divine nature. I suggest it is the human soul’s experience, not God’s, that is being represented by the dialogue.

God's Words

While dialogic structure itself destabilizes authority, any mystical text claiming to relate “secret knowledge” of the divine makes the narrating voice uniquely vulnerable: the voices of mystic and God must blend if the mystic is to convey special insight into divine mystery.³⁷⁰ The mystic must adopt the divine voice, destabilizing her own – at best, layering it with her own. As Michel de Certeau writes, when the mystic speaks on behalf of God, the *I* that speaks actually “marks *in* the text the *empty* place...where the *other* speaks.”³⁷¹ For Certeau, this intersection is the very “locus” of mystic speech: if the origin of what is spoken or written by the mystic rests in God, mystic speech is in its basic function an engagement between speaker and God, and one type of union between human and divine can occur in and through language. As discussed in chapter one, we see the issue in Augustine. “You hear nothing true from my lips which you have not first told me,” he laments to God who is the origin of his words and knowledge.³⁷²

There are significant consequences: the mystic shifts to being narrator of another's utterance, “the effect” of another's speech, and the dynamic complicates her ontological status. She becomes like “the musician in Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*, who is caught in his harp...played by the song that sends him into ecstasy, insane from being imprisoned in his instrument, that is, in the body of the voice of the other.”³⁷³ Where does the song end and the musician's work begin? The line blurs between the harp and the musician it possesses as its own instrument.

³⁷⁰ Here again I refer to David Knowles' oft-cited definition of mysticism, drawing on Pseudo-Dionysius. *The English Mystical Tradition* (London: Burns and Oates, 1961), 2.

³⁷¹ Michel de Certeau, “Mystic Speech,” *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, trans. Brian Massumi (1986; reissued Minneapolis: University of Minnesota P, 2006), 94.

³⁷² Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998), 179.

³⁷³ Certeau, “Mystic Speech,” 96, 97.

The boundary between Soul and God similarly blurs in the *Mirror's* dialogue, a culmination of what Marguerite figures in the other blurred boundaries that she writes into the text: the linked names *Ame* and *Amour*, Soul's eventual namelessness, the melding of Soul's voice with the voices of other personifications. When Soul announces that she is only able to say anything about God by doing so through him, her words blend with divine words. Introducing her two petitions, Soul insists that she does not know how to make her request; neither, she insists, do the saints nor any orders of angels.³⁷⁴ But divine intervention makes her utterance possible:

Whanne noon of þe nyne ordris wote it not, what wite ȝe, lady soule? seiþ reason.
So doiþ God, seiþ loue, bi diuine nature, þe drawinges of his loue in her þat in hir
fourmeþ wiþouten witynge hir demaundes. And hir demaundes ben out of alle
creatures knowleche þere creatures mowe haue no knowyng of it.³⁷⁵

God commands Soul's psychic life: the petitions – the paradoxically known unknowable – are formed within her without her awareness, “in hir fourmeþ wiþouten witynge.”³⁷⁶ There is, to be sure, a theological point to be made here about how one can pray, but also an ontological and a narratological one, a reminder that we cannot entirely distinguish the voice that speaks. Soul stands again as liminal, “in-between,” “both/and” rather than “either/or,” and accepts this as her

³⁷⁴ The petitions are to see herself always as she was at creation and to see how she has wrongly exercised her free will. In comparison with series of petitions we find in other medieval women's mystical writings, even those that specifically seek knowledge of God or the self, the petitions in Marguerite's text are remarkable for their focus on metaphysical concerns. Julian of Norwich's petitions, with which she introduces and contextualizes her *Revelation of Love*, request knowledge of the passion, physical illness to purge her soul, and three “wounds” of contrition, compassion, and yearning for God. Catherine of Siena's *Dialogue* begins by recounting petitions for herself, the reformation of the Church, the health of the world, and God's providence to prevail wherever there is need. Marguerite's petitions, by contrast, highlight her profound concern with the ontology of the human soul.

³⁷⁵ *Mirror*, 330.29-33. The Middle English lacks two intervening lines found in Chantilly, and the attribution varies.

³⁷⁶ This sentiment seems to draw on Romans 8:26, although I have not yet encountered it glossed as such in modern editions.

normal state, no “meruaile.”³⁷⁷ It epitomizes the condition of the fifth stage in which “Now sche is al and sche is noon,” all and nothing, with God who is everything and yet still aware of herself. She still distinguishes herself from God, recognizing that *he* forms the petitions that *she* offers. This is not a continuous sixth stage in which the soul sees nothing except God, “ne seep but God himsilf.”³⁷⁸

Soul’s confusion about her own utterances reflects that this liminal position, here figured as the assimilation of one’s thoughts and voice with those of an Other, is anything but comfortable. When she exclaims, affirming the non-contradictory nature of the Incarnation, “O, I, me, seiþ þis soule, from whennes came me þis to seie?” she makes clear that this is not just a matter of God implanting an idea within her, but overtaking her. Thus the speaking Soul that Marguerite presents is one who is disoriented, unsure even of the origin of her own words. By way of response, “God þe Fadir” enters the dialogue to announce that he has shared secrets with her, and wills “þat sche wite þe secres of my Sone þoruþ þe loue of þe Hooli Goost.”³⁷⁹ This is not an answer to the doctrinal quandary about the Incarnation, but an examination of relationship: it is a discourse about who is speaking. The text does not offer a simple statement that Soul’s words come from God. Instead, Marguerite depicts the moment through a dramatic dialogue, a meta-narrative representing the very merger of words that is being discussed.

Although Marguerite portrays Soul caught in the words of the Other – even words that confuse her status – nothing in the text indicates decisively that the reader is supposed to interpret all of Soul’s words as words that occur only in a state of rapture, for instance when swept into the sixth stage. They may be the words of the fifth state. This distinction becomes

³⁷⁷ *Mirror*, 330.34.

³⁷⁸ *Ibid.* 342.13.

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.* 293.16-19.

clearer in comparison with the ecstatic utterances recorded in contemporaneous mystical texts, particularly mystical dialogues.

A notable example is Catherine of Siena's *Dialogue*. Translated into Middle English around 1420 under the title *The Orcherd of Syon*, the English version is another Continental import produced in a context in some ways similar to that of the English *Mirror*.³⁸⁰ As a dialogue between God and the soul, the text invites attention to how voices circulate. The *Orcherd* frames the text as Catherine's words dictated while in a state of mystical ecstasy: "when sche was in contemplacioun inrap of spirit, and sche heringe actueli and in þe same tyme tellinge tofore meny what oure Lord God spake in her."³⁸¹ This description stresses that the words have a divine source, and as a dialogue, much of the narration is not only Catherine's reflections, but instruction from the point of view of a divine figure who addresses her. Therefore, from the start Catherine's closeness to the divine is modeled by her channeling of God's comments, which she repeats, and by the state in which she speaks. Like Bosch's musician, Catherine at points seems to lose her voice, her words entirely assumed as God's. There are bizarre moments of narration, such as when Catherine says (*in persona Dei*):

Therefore I seye to þee, & longe tyme tofore þis I seyde to þee, if þou wilt
remembre þee, what tyme þou coueytist to do greet penaunce for me and seidist:

³⁸⁰ The *Orcherd* was produced for the sisters of Syon Abbey, a community with a well-attested close relationship to the Carthusian Charterhouse at Sheen, one of the houses that held a manuscript of the English *Mirror*. There are certainly some important differences between the *Orcherd* and the English *Mirror*, not the least of which is an apparent difference in English audience. It appears the *Mirror* was not produced and circulated "as a woman's book." See Nicholas Watson, "Melting into God the English Way: Deification in the Middle English Version of Marguerite Porete's *Mirouer des simples âmes anienties*." *Prophets Abroad: The Reception of Continental Holy Women in Late Medieval England*, ed. Rosalynn Voaden (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1996), 26 (italics Watson's) and Marleen Cré, "Women in the Charterhouse? Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love* and Marguerite Porete's *Mirror of Simple Souls* in British Library, MS Additional 37790," *Writing Religious Women: Female Spiritual and Textual Practices in Late Medieval England*, ed. Denis Renevey and Christiania Whitehead (Toronto: University of Toronto P, 2000) esp. 52-3.

³⁸¹ *The Orcherd of Syon*, ed. Phyllis Hodgson and Gabriel Liegey (London: Early English Text Society/Oxford UP, 1966), 18.

Lord what myȝte I do to suffre penaunce for þee? and þanne in þi soule and in þi mynde I answeride þee and seyde: I am he which delyte me in fewe wordis and in manye gode werkis.³⁸²

Here Catherine channels the words of God speaking about himself, conspicuously speaking in the present about what he has said to her in the past, and also quoting (still in his voice) how she responded in the past. It is God's voice (although speaking through Catherine) that recounts Catherine's past words. Certeau could hardly ask for a more striking example of the mystic's captured voice, locked into speaking God's speech.

Most significant for my consideration of the *Mirror* is that while passages such as this commingle the voices of God and Catherine, they indicate the union between them primarily by illustrating Catherine's *ability* to channel those words in rapture and operate in this complex system of narration, rather than by her words gradually mirroring or merging with those of the divine, or even by her use of metaphors and images. Soul's dialogue in the *Mirror*, by contrast, is a drama preoccupied with the line between God and the human soul. The narrating Soul in Marguerite's text alternates between her own contemplation (as we see in the reflexive dialogues), points at which she channels divine words, and points at which she speaks alongside and to God in a dialogue. In its narrative form, the *Mirror* plays out a drama of "farnessness": some of Soul's speaking positions represent union, while others show Soul standing apart from God.

M.N.'s gloss stresses that Soul's metaphors and meditations should be understood as a special language of love. He frequently attributes Soul's speech to moments of insight or a change in her state, for instance explaining after one exchange about descriptions of God that

³⁸² Ibid. 40.

“this is an vsage in loues daliaunce” by souls that have special understanding from “cleer sirt in diuine beholdynges.”³⁸³ Thus in some ways it appears that M.N. approaches the *Mirror* as words uttered in ecstasy, similar to Catherine’s text. But for M.N. the underlying problem is a linguistic obstacle: human language simply cannot keep up with what one wishes to say of God, and so according to M.N. we must read cautiously, noting these are the words of a soul swept into a vision of God and desperately trying to find expression. The *Mirror* portrays Soul engaged in a struggle to negotiate the boundary of language as well as ontological status, and M.N.’s reading of her words is both aware of, and sympathetic to, that struggle. Catherine is able to utter the divine word without such tensions, and her translator accepts this as simple fact.

Henry Suso’s *Horologium sapientiae* likewise depicts a dialogue between a particular soul, Suso’s semi-autobiographical “Disciple,” and the divine, with the latter appearing as an allegorical personification of Wisdom associated with Christ.³⁸⁴ Although too late to influence Marguerite directly, this Boethian-style dialogue warrants attention in any analysis about how religious writers utilize dialogue, being one of the most popular devotional texts of the late Middle Ages.³⁸⁵ While the text is at points full of the language of embrace and eroticism, often drawing imagery from the Song of Songs, it does not represent a fusion between the voices of the Disciple and Wisdom.³⁸⁶ Rather, the text emphasizes the distance and disjunction between their perspectives. As late as chapter four of Book I, Wisdom still laments the Disciple’s viewpoints

³⁸³ *Mirror*, 264.11-17. This clarification follows Soul’s speech regarding how she can say nothing of Love, with Love here again standing for God.

³⁸⁴ While the association is traditional, the text also stresses the connection. The clearest association occurs near the beginning of Book I with an explanation that “it is customary for the Father’s beloved Son to be understood by that appellation.” Henry Suso, *Wisdom’s Watch Upon the Hours*, ed. and trans. Edmund Colledge (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America P, 1994), 73.

³⁸⁵ Indicative of the text’s popularity, 233 surviving Latin copies and records indicating the existence of at least another 80 manuscripts have been located. For one discussion of circulation, see Colledge’s commentary, *ibid.* 15-17. A Middle English reframing of excerpts from the text was produced under the title *The Seven Points of True Love and Everlasting Wisdom*, and other late Middle English authors, including Hoccleve, also translated sections of the text.

³⁸⁶ For instance, see the portrayal of spiritual marriage. *Wisdom’s Watch*, 115-132.

and bemoans that he does not recognize her, is driven out of his mind with sorrow, and has “collapsed... ‘fallen down on the ground.’”³⁸⁷ As in Boethius’ *Consolation* (which this passage recalls), over the course of the text Wisdom’s dialogue with the Disciple aims to realign the Disciple’s perspective to accord with that of his allegorical guide. Wisdom therefore directs the Disciple’s outlook and speech, for instance advising him on the type of praise he should utter.³⁸⁸ But neither personification usurps the voice of the other.

Catherine, Suso, and Marguerite all portray experience of the unknowable and ineffable. Catherine offers herself up, letting the divine voice overtake her own. Suso apportions a divine voice to his allegorical personification of Wisdom, and does not endow the Disciple with the power of divine speech. I note these examples not in an attempt to trace or rule out influence, but to highlight Marguerite’s creativity and how she walks a much more complicated line in her use of allegorical personifications. Through the back and forth relational elements of dialogue – in Soul’s reflexive moments, in the melding of her voice with those of other figures, in her adoption of the divine voice, all of which are *temporary* – Marguerite represents the incomplete nature of Soul’s mystical union with God.

A final comparison, this time with the affective moves of other dialogic literature, further clarifies the *Mirror*’s distinctive use of dialogue. Devotional lyrics on the Passion are a decidedly different textual project than the *Mirror*, but are related in terms of structure and concerns with how mankind addresses God. To take one striking example, the popular Middle English devotional lyric “Stond wel, moder, under rode,” based on the Latin “Stabat juxta Christi crucem,” is written as a dialogue between Christ as he hangs on the cross and his mother Mary as

³⁸⁷ Ibid. 95.

³⁸⁸ Ibid. 293.

she watches below. For much of the poem, Christ and Mary alternately address one another, each speaking three lines at a turn, beginning with a discussion of Mary's sorrows:

‘Stond wel, moder, under rode,
Bihold thi child with glade mode,
Blythe moder might thou be.’

‘Sone, how may I blithe stonden?
I se thin feet, I se thin honden,
Nayled to the harde tre.’

‘Moder do wey thi wepinge;
I thole this deth for mannes thinge,
For owen gilte thole I non.’
‘Sone, I fele the dethe-stounde,
The swerd is at min herte-grounde,
That me by-highte Symeon.’³⁸⁹

But as the poem unfolds, Mary not only expresses grief at watching her son, but reflects back his precise sufferings; he in turn suffers at her experience. The following stanza continues,

‘Moder rew upon thy beren!
Thow washe away tho blodi teren,
It don me werse than mi det.’

³⁸⁹ “Stond wel, moder, under rode,” *Medieval English Lyrics: 1200-1400*, ed. Thomas Duncan (London: Penguin, 1995) 124.1-12. Exceptions to this alternating dialogue are the final two stanzas, a devotional address to Mary from the perspective of the author/reader. All lyric citations refer to page and line numbers in Duncan’s edition. Diacritic marks omitted.

‘Sone, how might I teres wernen?

I se tho blodi flodes ernen,

Out of thin herte to min fet.³⁹⁰

Christ is further hurt by the tears he implores his mother to “washe away.” For him, they inflict pain worse than that of his impending death. Mary in turn specifically details her son’s suffering, noting the streams of blood that flow from him. She goes on with further details, claims no pain except hell can be greater than her sorrow (thus linking her own pain with the journey to hell that Christ announces he must face), and her identification with her son’s suffering culminates with the assertion, “Sone, I wille with thee founden / I deye, y-wis, of thine wounden / So rewful deth was never non,” a claim that she herself will die as a result of his wounds.³⁹¹ As Suzanne Fein writes, capturing the relational element in this lyric, “the symbiosis of [Christ and Mary’s] suffering is thus constructed in palpable detail as well as in feeling. What he experiences as God she may experience even more feelingly as human mother.”³⁹² We could say that one speaks for the other, that Mary gives voice to Christ’s specific sufferings or that her announcement of her death really announces (occurring as the last piece of dialogue) Christ’s own death that he can no longer speak. The two are most deliberately linked by their shared suffering. The tradition of affective piety, which encouraged identification with the suffering of Christ and Mary, here finds emotive power in their exchange of words. It is by virtue of their shared experience of pain and common cry of lamentation that their voices mirror one another and meld.

³⁹⁰ Ibid. 124.13-18.

³⁹¹ Ibid. esp. 125.22-24, again noting Christ’s pierced body, 125.34-36 and 40-43 on the nature of Mary’s pain, and 126.52-54 on Mary’s claim that she will die with her son.

³⁹² Suzanne Fein, “The Lyrics of MS Harley 2253,” *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English*, ed. Peter Beidler, vol. 11 (New Haven: Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2005), 4193.

The Harley lyric “In a vaile of restles mynd” depicts a comparable situation. The poet persona, out wandering, finds a bloody man representing the crucified Christ. After the poet’s description of the encounter in the first two stanzas, the remainder of the lyric is narrated by Christ, who expresses love for his spiritual spouse (i.e., the soul) and bewails her abandonment of him. He begins, “I am trew love that fals was never. / My sister, mannes soule, I loved hir thus... She flytt, I followed; I loved her so / That I suffred thes paynes piteous.”³⁹³ The onlooking poet persona (and reader) are drawn to sorrow and pity as Christ details his torments, or as Ann Astell has proposed, drawn to identify with the loving bride Christ seeks “and then, through her, with Christ himself.”³⁹⁴ In the second phase of the poem, as Christ addresses the onlooker/reader/spiritual bride in the second-person, we find outbursts that focus attention on the gruesome details of the Passion, such as “Loke unto myn handes, man,” as Christ details his wounds.³⁹⁵ Most important for our purposes here is that the dialogue assumes and encourages the poet persona’s imaginative, affective participation in Christ’s described suffering. Like Marguerite’s *Mirror*, dialogues such as these suggest a reflective relationship between God and another speaking and desiring subject. But in the case of the lyrics, the primary bridge between the two is an affective connection through shared suffering, expressed through dialogue.

The *Mirror* relies almost exclusively on the blending of voices, without dictation from prolonged ecstasy and without affectivity, to bridge the gap between Soul and God and to model Soul’s ambiguous ontological status. Dialogue is one means of representing a status in-between, both united and distinct, neither wholly one nor the other, the soul in the process of becoming one with God. The *Mirror*’s drama plays this out with temporary movement in and out of the

³⁹³ *Lyrics*, 101.17-18, 22-23.

³⁹⁴ Ann W. Astell, *The Song of Songs in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1990), 147.

³⁹⁵ *Lyrics*, 101.41ff. There is also affectionate dialogue reminiscent of the Song of Songs that still invites the soul into Christ’s chamber and garden to “play.” See esp. 81-88 and 97-106.

speaking positions of God and his attributes, a symbolic movement in and out of the complete union with the divine that cannot yet be permanent. Commingled voices illustrate the fraught, inevitably divisive condition of yearning to abandon the self fully, to “melt” completely into God, to lose one’s name and status, and yet being unable to do so. Has Marguerite, then, found a resolution to the tension she herself establishes between the limitations of language and her wish to narrate, a way to represent union and its instability indirectly?

The Mirror’s Final Words

Early passages in the *Mirror* tend to stress Soul’s ambiguous ontological status, which is seemingly a result of her move toward the state of annihilation. For instance, early in the text, Love explains that the soul in the course of abandoning herself to God, undergoing the process of annihilation, “is so litel þat sche ne may hirsilf fynde,” and has so “þe wittes ylost in þis usage, that sche kan not seke God ne hir soule fynde ne hirsilf lede,” stressing not only Soul’s minimizing of individual will but the ambiguity of her status.³⁹⁶ Where is she? And next, what is she? The problem appears to culminate in chapter 109 with a seeming crisis of self-definition.³⁹⁷ It is here that Soul questions her state of being and its current shifts by exclaiming, “O God, O God...what am I now? Whanne I was nouzt er þan I owide enyþing, what am I now? Whanne I was noping er þan I owide to my God enyþing bi werk of propre wille,” and again in a plea to Truth a few lines later, “Ah troupe, seiþ þis soule, what am I? Seie me.”³⁹⁸

³⁹⁶ *Mirror*, 315.11-12 and 287.28-29. The Middle English text’s statement that the soul “kan not seke God ne hir soule fynde ne hirsilf lede” frames the problem to include a quest for the soul-self. It agrees with the Latin translation based on the French. However, Chantilly lacks emphasis on the difficulty of finding one’s soul, reading “elle ne scet querir Dieu ne trouver, ne elle mesmes conduire.” *Mirouer*, 128.10-11.

³⁹⁷ Here again I refer to chapter numbers from equivalent passages in Chantilly as a means to demonstrate the proximity of passages.

³⁹⁸ *Mirror*, 332.11-13, 19.

Conversely, in subsequent chapters Soul more boldly defines her status. As part of the song in chapter 120, Soul announces to Truth (to whom she earlier turned for an explanation of herself), “if it plesse you to wite at what I am, I schal seie it you bi pure curtesie.”³⁹⁹ By the conclusion of the text, Soul does not hesitate to provide firm and decisive answers. She announces, “I answeride anon, þis þat I am, I am pure nouȝt.”⁴⁰⁰ This self-definition, a claim that she is “nothing,” is in fact a full assumption of her annihilation. It is, arguably, a self-erasure. But it is also, finally, a firm and stable status. In Chantilly, it prepares for chapter 138, absent in the English text, which includes the most direct assertion of annihilation and (re)union with God:

Or est ceste Ame en l'estre de ce premier estre qui est son estre, et si a laissé trois, et a fait de deux ung. Mais quant est cest ung? Cest ung est, quant l'Ame est remise en celle simple Deité...sans sentement, dessus la pensee.⁴⁰¹

Now this Soul is in the state of her first being, which is her being, and so has left three and has made one out of two. But what constitutes this one? This one is when the Soul is melted in that simple Deity...without feeling, beyond thought.

Watson makes a related claim about Soul's progress, reading the English text alongside Rolle and other Insular writers concerned with “the *rhetoric* of ecstasy” and suggesting that souls depicted in these texts “melt into God not in the brief moments of ineffable silence...but in another way altogether: by talking about it.”⁴⁰² He also proposes, as I have similarly suggested with regard to Soul's self-descriptions in the text, that the evolving theological explanations over

³⁹⁹ Ibid. 343.30.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid. 351.21. Cf. Love's earlier claim: “Now haþ þis soule, seiþ loue, her riȝt name of nouȝt” (315.9). Soul now speaks for herself, but the echo also further cements the connection between the personifications of Love and Soul.

⁴⁰¹ *Mirouer*, 400.3-402.7

⁴⁰² Watson, “Melting,” 46-47 (italics Watson's).

the course of the *Mirror* imply that Marguerite herself moved closer to understanding as she wrote the book, and we fail to see the text in her terms if we do not allow for its “performative aspect as a book...which exists to convert even its own author to the life it imagines.”⁴⁰³ I have argued that the performative element of the *Mirror* occurs in the dialogue itself, in a narrative whose shape reveals Soul’s struggles and status. The figure of Soul talks through the mysteries of her experience and, at the conclusion, appears to better comprehend them and make sense of her own desperate metaphors. But also, she usurps voices to enact a drama evidencing her relationship with God, and Marguerite invents her own path, strikingly unique among the contemplative and literary traditions before and after her, by having Soul do so in a distinctly non-affective way.

In the Chantilly text, Marguerite seems to write her way, or Soul to speak her way, into her sought-after “freedom” and dissolution of a former identity. By the bold claim of union in chapter 138 referenced above, that “the Soul is melted in that simple Deity...without feeling, beyond thought,” the allegorical figures that gave structure to the dialogue fade away.⁴⁰⁴ The speaker may be Soul or Love; it is unclear, but the use of the third-person here in any case effaces the distinct *I* accorded to both figures elsewhere.⁴⁰⁵ We have instead a “one,” a glimpse at the point at which names are no longer an issue of debate. Finally naming, like the allegorical dialogue itself, is simply superfluous. In this depiction of a state beyond, Soul is no longer in flux; the text concludes with a vision across the borderline. Whereas earlier in the text allegorical dialogue gave shape to impermanent union and represented it through back and forth exchange, it is absent here in this final vision of permanent oneness with God. Ricoeur offers a

⁴⁰³ Ibid. 29-30.

⁴⁰⁴ *Mirouer*, 401-2.

⁴⁰⁵ Soul narrates a portion of chapter 136 that is found in the Latin but does not appear in Chantilly. Love is the most recently identified speaker in Chantilly, named at the start of chapter 134.

reminder that a subject can be most present and most necessary when drawing attention to another's words by attributing that speech.⁴⁰⁶ Such distinctions are erased as we near the end of what survives in Chantilly.

But the English *Mirror* concludes with text equivalent to chapter 136 in Chantilly, a reflection on God's love for the soul, followed by a lyrical "gloss" not found in Chantilly. In this final poem, Soul describes the different ways that God's "i3e biholdeþ" her, how his eye sees her, and she is still caught in a dance negotiating her relation to the divine and looking for specific labels that are appropriate in God's view: he beholds her in her "necessite," in her willing "noþing þat he ne willeþ," and as his beloved.⁴⁰⁷ In the English text, Soul never escapes her own speech, the cycle of shifting positions it narrates, or the struggle to name the self in flux. The text ends, therefore, with Soul's liminality, coupled with concerns about the central conflict with which I began chapter three: the drive to write an experience that is impossible to encapsulate in language.

We cannot be certain that Marguerite wrote the final poem that concludes the English text.⁴⁰⁸ I would suggest, however, that the lack of resolution in the English text is just as fitting for a conclusion as the glimpse of a soul's finally achieved freedom that we see in Chantilly. Indeed, it is more fitting, regardless of whether Marguerite, M.N., or someone else penned the final piece of the English text. I have argued that the dialogue is a partial way around the linguistic dilemma of describing mystical union and its instability, but it is a remarkably elaborate narrative strategy. The English *Mirror*'s final tone of exhaustion and anguish is thus

⁴⁰⁶ Paul Ricoeur, "Experience and Language in Religious Discourse," trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky and Thomas A. Carlson, *Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn": The French Debate*, Dominique Janicaud et al. (New York: Fordham UP, 2000), 141-142.

⁴⁰⁷ *Mirror*, 354.11-23.

⁴⁰⁸ Lerner likewise is careful to note this uncertainty amid his argument for the integrity of the Middle English text. See "New Light," 101.

appropriate to the work as a whole. In the end, we might place Marguerite's transcendent experience and her attempt to write it alongside that of Augustine, of whom Lyotard remarks, "on the point of resting his *stilus* after thirteen books of contrition and celebration of grace incarnate, [he] finds himself at the threshold of [God's] door, still stuck in the thick pall of affairs."⁴⁰⁹ This tension is valuable to us in itself, perhaps a medieval illustration of Ricoeur's claim that narrative identity emerges in the dialectic between our sameness and the self that is always stretching away from it.⁴¹⁰ It is, finally, a demonstration of narrative both enabling communication of the ineffable and entrapping the speaking subject in a never-ending utterance.

⁴⁰⁹ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Confession of Augustine*, trans. Richard Beardsworth (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000), 14.

⁴¹⁰ Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago P, 1992), esp. 140-168.

CHAPTER 5

“I SAW HIM AND SOUGHT HIM, AND I HAD HIM AND I WANTED HIM”:

JULIAN OF NORWICH’S NARRATIVE OF VISIONS

Julian’s Narrative of the Self

Julian of Norwich is now part of the mainstream. She is perhaps the only medieval mystic to have won the attention of a non-academic, twenty-first century readership, with editions of her texts now marketed for both popular and specialist audiences. Recent years have seen the publication of a multitude of daily devotionals that excerpt Julian’s writing, now usually available in commercial bookstores chains.⁴¹¹ Heroine to a number of modern interest-groups, she has been multiplied into what Christopher Abbott calls “mythic Julians.” Among them are “Julian the feminist, Julian the eco-theologian, Julian the New Age ‘oceanic’ mystic, Julian the proto-liberal Christian.”⁴¹² Even within Christian categorizations, she has been identified as a Universalist, also frequently appears in catalogs of Roman Catholic saints even though she has never been formally beatified, and is honored by the Anglican Communion. Julian is patroness of the mixed contemplative Order of Julian of Norwich (est. 1985), and ecumenical “Julian Groups,” which see her work as a guide to contemplative prayer, are flourishing at a dramatic rate.⁴¹³ Her shrine, established at the presumed location of her medieval anchorage at the Church

⁴¹¹ As a very brief illustration of the abundance and variety of popular Julian editions and devotionals, the list of recent titles includes: *All Will be Well: Thirty Days with a Great Spiritual Teacher*, ed. Richard Chilson (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria P, 1995, 2008); *Forty-Day Journey with Julian of Norwich*, ed. Lisa Dahill (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008); *Meditations with Julian of Norwich*, ed. Brendan Doyle and including a Forward by Matthew Fox addressing “Julian’s contribution to Spiritual Needs Today” (1983); the poetic rewriting of the text by Jabez Van Cleef, *The Song of the Showing of Love: A Poetic Interpretation of the Revelations of Julian of Norwich* (Madison, NJ: Spirit Song Texts, 2008), and Karen Manton’s illustrated edition and commentary, *The Gift of Julian of Norwich* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria P, 2005).

⁴¹² Christopher Abbott, *Julian of Norwich: Autobiography and Theology* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1999), 2.

⁴¹³ Particularly popular in the United Kingdom and Ireland, the ever-growing list of affiliated Julian groups can be viewed on the organization’s website, <http://www.julianmeetings.org>. Abbott likewise mentions these signs of popularity. The flourish, including in Julian groups, was noted by Nicholas Watson nearly two decades ago,

of St. Julian in Norwich, is a popular pilgrimage destination, home to the “Julian Centre,” and the site of an annual festival.

It is a popularity that she was never close to attaining in her own day, a modern renaissance initiated in part by Evelyn Underhill’s influential *Mysticism*, which appeared in 1911 and highlighted Julian as a key figure in the tradition. Julian, according to Underhill, “crowns the history of English mediaeval mysticism.”⁴¹⁴ By the late twentieth-century, Julian had drawn attention from diverse academic circles in the fields of theology, history, and literature, as she continues to do today. Despite their differently-motivated interests in her, commentators on Julian – scholarly, spiritual, environmental, and otherwise – share a tendency to be effusive in their praise. From a theological perspective, Rowan Williams proposes that Julian’s writing “may well be the most important work of Christian reflection in the English language.”⁴¹⁵ One recent text goes so far as to declare that Julian’s way of discussing God “has never been duplicated in the clarity and eloquence of its language.”⁴¹⁶ This is very high praise, and lavish for any Middle English prose text.

This ardent embrace of Julian’s text – almost a mystical ecstasy in itself – may have several causes. Aspects of her writing invite the attention of specific groups of readers. Her development of images of Jesus as mother, for example, offers material for Christian feminists seeking to critique masculine images of God. Her visions of the whole of creation held in the

demonstrating the staying power of Julian’s new popularity. See Watson, “The Composition of Julian of Norwich’s Revelation of Love,” *Speculum*, 68.3 (1993), 682.

⁴¹⁴ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (1911; reprint Oxford: One World, 2002), 467. “Lady Julian,” whose vision “transcending the limitations of human perception...saw the all-enfolding Divine Life, the mesh of reality” (ibid. 36) – a beautiful description of Julian’s liminality – has an early and prominent place in Underhill’s book (her emphasis). Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins, eds., *The Writings of Julian of Norwich: A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman and a Revelation of Love* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006), offer perhaps the most comprehensive discussion of the readership of Julian’s text from its beginnings through the early twenty-first century, including the influence of early twentieth-century comparativists such as Underhill and Julian’s current popularity. See their “Intro.,” esp. 10-24.

⁴¹⁵ Watson and Jenkins, *Writings*, quoted on backcover.

⁴¹⁶ Van Cleef, *Song of the Showing of Love*, backcover.

hand of the divine resonate with New Age spiritualists. For scholars, she has the intrigue of being one of the few identifiably female writers in medieval England, and one of rigorous intellect at that. And then there is the comfort of Julian's apparent serenity, along with her oft-noted tone of a friend who wishes to share her experience of God's love with her "even cristen."

Awe toward the subject, and the apparently mesmerizing effects of Julian's serenity, seem to blind many commentators to the underlying struggles that are an integral part of Julian's experience and her attempts to describe it. Julian's writing chronicles revelations she experienced during a period of illness in 1373, along with her subsequent rumination on them, which according to her continued for a minimum of twenty years. Her writing records a long term struggle to understand and redefine herself in relation to the God she experienced in the visions. Like the other mystics in this study, Julian struggles to understand how to live her ontological liminality. Her need to renegotiate the gap between self and divine other, after boundaries have been blurred by revelations from God, is the central dilemma in her writing; articulating her new relation to God is one of its main challenges. Thus her text poses a problem rather than a solution (a perfect contemplative path): she invites the reader to witness a disruption in her perceptions of her own ontology and her subsequent attempts to process this change.

In this chapter, I argue that as Julian negotiates her liminality, a new stance in relation to God, the style and structure of her narration parallels this process: the narration itself often resists a firm stance and eschews finality and conclusiveness. Just as Julian continuously renegotiates her perception of ontology after her encounter with God in a series of visions, the text similarly becomes a hall of mirrors – an unending series of reflections.

Julian's text presents one of the most interesting medieval cases of form becoming content, in large part precisely because it happens so subtly – even peacefully. Her embrace of the liminal is one of the aspects that makes her text distinctive. In some ways, Julian appears to be the most conventional and straightforward narrator in this study. Her work survives in two versions known as the Short Text and Long Text (hereafter ST and LT), both of which are clear first-person accounts.⁴¹⁷ They are the most explicitly first-person writing that I have discussed so far. The reader engages Julian's visions only through her own framing of the experience. This is true, as Abbott has put it, "whether the narrative invites us to observe Julian or to observe *with* her."⁴¹⁸ The narrative charts *her* process of bridging the gap between human and divine.

And indeed, Julian often seems to be working to explain her relationship to God to herself as much as to her audience. This is in notable contrast to many other medieval visionaries whose revelations are reportedly explained to them as they appear. Such is the case for Hildegard and Catherine of Siena, whose visions are narrated by God in a continuous voiceover, and the visions of Hadewijch and Margery Kempe, which are accompanied by instant interpretive clarity. Other writers' confidence in interpretation contrasts palpably with the meditative approach to which Julian herself attests. She explains that she spent twenty years rereading and considering her Parable of the Lord and the Servant; similarly, it is not until fifteen years after the visions (even more specifically, fifteen years of seeking their meaning) that she grasped the unity of the showings as a revelation of God's love.⁴¹⁹ We might compare this to Hadewijch's confidence in her own understanding, something she proclaims even when she asks

⁴¹⁷ It is generally agreed that ST was likely written shortly after Julian's 1373 visionary experience, and LT at least twenty years later. Below I discuss the dating of the texts, as relevant to my discussion, in greater depth.

⁴¹⁸ Abbott, *Autobiography and Theology*, 18.

⁴¹⁹ Julian of Norwich, *A Revelation of Love*, ed. Marion Glasscoe, rev. ed. (Exeter: University of Exeter P, 1993), 86.134-135. Unless otherwise noted, all citations from Julian's work refer to this edition of the Long Text based on the Sloane 1 manuscript. I cite chapter number followed by page numbers where appropriate. Because I am concerned in this chapter with Julian's long-term process, my primary focus will be the text in LT.

God for a better explanation: in her vision of the divine “abyss,” Hadewijch pauses to remark, “And although I asked to know this, I nevertheless perceived the essence of all the things I saw. For all that is seen in the spirit when one is ravished by Love is understood, tasted, seen, and heard through and through.”⁴²⁰ Julian receives some guidance in the form of “words formed in her understanding” as visions unfold before her, as well as the secondary revelations years later. But usually she lacks Hadewijch’s absolute certainty in the moment. The plot of Julian’s narrative is her process of understanding and assuming her relation to God.

While she writes of personal experience and offers glimpses into her life, Julian’s text is by no means a comprehensive life story. At the start of her account (the beginning of ST and the second chapter of LT), she relates her request for three graces from God: “mende of the passion,” a life-threatening illness at a young age, and three wounds of contrition, compassion, and longing for God.⁴²¹ Yet there are no details to indicate what circumstances inspired these desires. Julian relates rather bare personal details of her age, “thirty yers olde and halfe” when the showings occurred in May 1373, and the length and seriousness of the sickness that kept her bedridden and on the verge of death at that time. These are details directly related to her youthful petition for the three gifts. She mentions that she had previously forgotten her first two requests and remembered only the desire for three wounds, but does not explain why this was the case.⁴²²

Nor is her text a pure theological treatise: it is too much a personal exploration of her revelations and the development of a theology. Her texts appear to be the only work of speculative theology originally composed in English during her era, as Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins put it, “a prolonged investigation into the divine” aiming for “a new

⁴²⁰ Hadewijch, “Vision 11,” *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, ed. and trans. Columba Hart (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 22.

⁴²¹ Julian, *Revelation*, 2.2-3.

⁴²² *Ibid.*

understanding of human living in the world.”⁴²³ It is difficult even to trace her relationship to possible models of her time despite the fact that some modern scholars insist she had a vast and deep knowledge of medieval authors. One extreme branch of modern scholarship creates another “mythic Julian” in its own image: Julian the hyper-educated young theologian.

It is not impossible that Julian obtained, perhaps due to some benefactor or connections, a directed and comprehensive education in the liberal arts and “Latin and vernacular spiritual classics,” as Edmund Colledge and James Walsh theorize.⁴²⁴ Christine de Pisan was able to attain a similar quality of education from her father and the library to which they happened to have access. But it is unlikely. Julian refers to herself as a “simple creature that cowde no letter,” a remark usually taken to mean that she could not read and write Latin, for she almost certainly wrote and revised her English text.⁴²⁵ More to the point, as was the case for Elizabeth and Marguerite as well, there is little in Julian’s text that would require her to have it. Indeed, lack of a formal education may be the cause of some of the imprecise language that I will observe in her text. Nothing in her book could not have been arrived at through private contemplation (if not divine insight), the general theological and devotional currency of her cultural milieu, and/or

⁴²³ Watson and Jenkins, *Writings*, 3. Abbott, *Autobiography and Theology*, offers to my knowledge the most in-depth study to date of these twin aspects of Julian’s work.

⁴²⁴ This opinion is best captured in a statement from Edmund Colledge and James Walsh in their critical edition: “What is however beyond any doubt is that...young Julian had received an exceptionally good grounding in Latin, in Scripture, and in the liberal arts, and that thereafter she was able and permitted to read widely in Latin and vernacular spiritual classics...she shows knowledge of such great masters as Augustine and Gregory; and she seems to have become deeply influenced, as she composed the ‘second edition’ of the long text, by William of St. Thierry...when we add to this the evidence...that she was a highly accomplished rhetorician who could employ with ease the terms and concepts of the philosophers, only one deduction is possible: she must, in early life, have attracted the benevolent attention of some scholar or scholars who perceived her spiritual and intellectual gifts, and passed on to her the learning of the schools.” See Colledge and Walsh, “Intro.,” *A Book of Showings* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1978), 44-45.

⁴²⁵ Julian, *Revelation*, 2.2. Internal evidence points against the theory of advanced education. Julian’s insistence that she was “cowde no letter” could be a genuine expression of modesty, a humility topos, or a concern about claiming authority, but it is too extreme to point to an intensive education in Latin. As many readers point out, Julian makes a Latin grammatical error in her response when she replies “Benedicite Dominus” to her first vision in ST (corrected to “Benedicite Domine” in LT). As I discuss in the final section of this chapter, I agree with Benedicta Ward that it is almost certain that Julian did not grow up in a convent school or have an elaborate formal education there.

through the informal education she could have received through social interactions.⁴²⁶ There is a degree of presumption in assuming that this could not be the case. We do well to keep in mind that a remarkably broad, modern audience has embraced Julian's writing, including those without formal theological training and even non-Christian readers of the New Age movement. This should remind us that her revelations function with remarkable clarity and power even entirely outside of the context of the late medieval theological and contemplative tradition.⁴²⁷

Ultimately, Julian's writing defies categorization. Although her writing has affinities with other visionary texts and meditative writing, Julian does not merely take any one literary type as a model. The complexity is oft-noted. Frederick Bauerschmidt suggests that Julian's text exceeds modern distinctions (such as imagistic/Catholic versus personal/Protestant) but also "the interpretive categories available to her."⁴²⁸ Tarjei Park observes her duality as both visionary and "writer on contemplation."⁴²⁹ Her text is a sort of conglomerate: as Watson describes it, "a dialogic, imagistically spare, and theologically dense visionary argument which...is without structural precedent or parallel," although he suggests she could perhaps see herself as part of a female visionary tradition.⁴³⁰

My reading suggests that we have difficulty defining Julian precisely because the "story" here is about the new relation – Julian's liminality – that the revelations initiate, and negotiating

⁴²⁶ As Benedicta Ward points out, if Julian was married to a member of the relatively prosperous class of Norwich with trade contacts in the Low Countries, and if he was "even an averagely devout husband," this probably provided greater opportunities for "contact with the world of thought through discussion and table-talk" than would have been available to cloistered nuns. See "Julian the Solitary," (Oxford: Sisters of the Love of God P, 1988), 26. This could be one of the factors behind Julian's wide view of the world and her desire to extend the application of her revelations to all her "even cristen." Marion Glasscoe puts forward another argument for Julian's possible informal education through theological conversations. See her *Medieval English Mystics: Games of Faith* (London: Longman, 1993), 218-219.

⁴²⁷ The point warrants emphasis here at the outset because this chapter (which is in any case a literary reading) will not attempt the type of tracing of theological influences common to many works on Julian.

⁴²⁸ Frederick Bauerschmidt, "Seeing Jesus: Julian of Norwich and the Text of Christ's Body," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 27.2 (1997), 189.

⁴²⁹ Tarjei Park, *Selfhood and 'Gostly Menyng' in Some Middle English Mystics: Semiotic Approaches to Contemplative Theology* (Lewiston, NY; Lampeter, Wales: Mellen, 2002), 2.

⁴³⁰ Watson, "Composition," 650.

a gap that is, in the first place, only hazily understood by her. Unlike the texts of Elizabeth and Marguerite, there is no immediately obvious creativity in form – no dance, no allegorical debate. In Julian’s text, we must look closely at the overlap of epistemological, ontological, and linguistic problems that each contribute to her liminal position in order to understand how the shape of her narration mirrors that liminality of understanding, being, and language.

She is, in fact, the most explicitly liminal of the mystics in this study. Her epistemological concerns about the impossibility of knowing God lead to concern with whether one can know oneself if the soul is “knit” to an unknowable God. Ontologically, she struggles to understand the line between self and God (and how and whether death remakes it), to understand what she is in her “passand lif,” and what she will be later, all the while seeing the soul as already a part of God. Moreover, she receives her revelations while literally on the border of life and death during a period of severe illness. Having become an anchoress at some point in her adult life, she lived a symbolic death while still alive, visibly living in the liminal. And as she struggles to find language for all of these concerns and for her experience of God in the revelations, she negotiates thresholds of expression.

Julian’s Narrative of Knowing: The Epistemological Limen

The first challenge in Julian’s text is that of trying to write about things she cannot fully know, including both God and the self. Julian connects the entire purpose of the revelation and the writing of her text with a process of self-discovery in the sense of coming to better understand the nature of her self and her relationship to God. Her revelation asserts that God is love, but also calls into question how the human soul is to respond to the revelation of his love. Approaching the conclusion of LT, Julian writes,

It longith to us to have iii manner of knowyngs: the first is that we knowen our lord God; the ii that we knowen ourselfe, what we arn be him in kinde and grace; the iii that we knowen meekly what ourselves is anempts our synne and febilness. And for these iii was all the shewing made, as to my vnderstondyng.⁴³¹

The passage echoes Julian's earlier assertion with which I began chapter one, her claim that we ought to seek knowledge of ourself, and that knowledge is ultimately only found in God.⁴³²

Approaching her conclusion, she does not merely say that such self-knowledge is an important lesson, but goes further and says that it is the reason for the revelation: it is to explain this that "all the shewing [was] made." She holds up self-knowledge as an ultimate goal. It is the goal of what we must discover, and God's purpose in the showings was to help Julian grasp that this is our goal.

The obstacle is that those in mortal life cannot yet know God, and therefore we cannot know ourselves until after death. As Julian explains, "we may never full know ourselfe unto the laste poynte; in which poynte this passend life and manner of peyne and wo shall have an end."⁴³³ One cannot know oneself until one knows God. This is an old dilemma present in scripture. John declares that complete knowledge of the self is not possible until one beholds God, advising, "we are now the sons of God: and it hath not yet appeared what we shall be. We know, that when he shall appear, we shall be like to him: because we shall see him as he is."⁴³⁴ Julian echoes almost precisely these words in chapter 46 as she contrasts the knowledge possible during earthly life with future, complete knowledge: "But our passand lif that we have here in

⁴³¹ Julian, *Revelation*, 72.116.

⁴³² Ibid. 56.89-90: "We have of fulhede to desiren wisely and treuly to knowen our owne soule, wherby we are lernid to sekyn it wher it is, and that is in God."

⁴³³ Ibid. 46.64.

⁴³⁴ 1 John 3:2.

our sensualite knowith not what ourself is; than shal we verily and clerly sen and knowen our lord God in fulhede of ioy.”⁴³⁵

Not only is the process of moving toward knowledge of God and self inevitably incomplete, but longing for it increases over the course of life. As Julian continues her discussion of knowledge, she suggests that “therefore it behovyth neds to be that the nerer we be our bliss, the more we shall longen, and that both be kind and be grace.”⁴³⁶ Julian’s “even cristen” face the impossibility of knowing themselves in this life, and as they reach for that knowledge, will have an accompanying, ever-increasing desire for God that likewise cannot be fulfilled until after death. So what is to be done with a longing that continually swells until earthly life falls away?

Julian’s answer seems to be that the soul should dwell in longing – even embrace it. She continues with the instruction that “therefore it longyth properly to us, both be kynd and be grace, to longen and desiren with al our myghts to knowen ourselfe in fulhede of endles ioye.”⁴³⁷ It is in our nature to long, “be kynd” to be seeking self-knowledge, or eternal life and the self-knowledge that comes with it. And God provides the grace to help the soul long deeply. This longing parallels the desire for complete union with God. And while the soul in transitory life cannot yet be “onyd in bliss” with Christ, Julian emphasizes that “it befallyth us evermore to leven in swete prayor and in lovely longyng with our lord Iesus.”⁴³⁸

What she describes dwelling in, as she longs for knowledge, is a liminal state – a state of partial knowledge that coincides with the state of partial union possible during “passand lif.” The process of moving toward God and toward the self-knowledge that comes with union is an in-between existence. And thus when Julian embraces prayer and the desire for God, which she

⁴³⁵ Julian, *Revelation*, 46.64.

⁴³⁶ Ibid.

⁴³⁷ Ibid.

⁴³⁸ Ibid. 40.55

calls “swete” and “lovely,” she embraces the liminal. Prayer is part of the process of drawing closer to union and the knowledge it allows, and when Julian writes that “prayer is a rythwis vnderstandyng of that fullhede of ioye that is for to come, with wel longyng and sekir troste,” she seems to celebrate the path to the joy that is yet to come.⁴³⁹

It is essentially a celebration of the path to annihilation: the death of one self and the recovery of a true self. In this case, there will also be a birth of accurate self-knowledge. Through continual prayer, Julian proclaims, “we shal dey in longyng for love. And then shal we all come into our lord, ourselfe clerely knowand and God fulsomely havyng.”⁴⁴⁰ The liminal is still not comfortable; it is not a state of fulfillment. But whereas Marguerite seems to resent mere promises, regretting that Love/God keeps the seventh stage of glorification “within herself” and inaccessible, Julian seems to delight in the promise of eventual fulfillment.⁴⁴¹

While like Marguerite she asserts that complete union cannot be obtained in “passand lif,” Julian’s sense of liminality does not derive only from mystical union: she understands it as inherent to the make-up of the soul. This may seem an opposition to Marguerite’s concern with how one can regain the soul’s “first being,” the union of her virtual existence. Really the difference is one of angle and emphasis in approaching the same problem. We might say, in other words, that Julian places emphasis on the form of union that already transcends the boundary between life and death, rather than how the soul can temporarily cross that boundary. Of the three, Julian’s understanding of the soul’s ontology best fits the implied claim of

⁴³⁹ Ibid. 4.60. Writing in a broader context than analysis of liminality, William Ralph Inge goes so far as to refer to Julian, appropriately, as “one of the *happy* saints.” See his *Studies of English Mystics: St. Margaret’s Lectures 1905* (London: J. Murray, 1906), 61. Zina Petersen’s Lacanian reading attributes Julian’s serenity to a trust in ritual that allows a sort of transcendence of psychoanalytic struggle. See her ‘Every Manner of Thing Shall Be Well’: Mirroring Serenity in the *Shewings* of Julian of Norwich,” *Mystics Quarterly* 22.3 (1996), esp. 95.

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid. 43.61-62.

⁴⁴¹ “*The Mirror of Simple Souls: a Middle English Translation*,” ed. Marilyn Doiron, *Archivio italiano per la storia della pietà* 5 (Rome 1968), 342.31-2.

Augustine, “what I am not yet, I am.”⁴⁴² It is always already partly achieved, making her the mystic for whom the boundary between soul and God seems least clear-cut.

Julian’s Narrative of Being: The Ontological Limen I

When Julian writes of the soul’s union, she speaks not only of what is possible through rapture or mystical ascent, but also of a shared substance between God and souls: a union with God inherent to the soul’s ontology. She develops a theology of in-dwelling, particularly in LT chapter 68 (ST 22) and first in chapter 54, where she announces,

And hey vnderstondyng it is inwardly to sen and to knowen that God which is our maker wonyth in our soule. And an heyer vnderstondyng it is inwardly to sen and to knowen oure soule, that is made, wonyth in Gods substance; of which substance, God, we arn that we arn. And I saw no difference atwix God and our substance, but as it were al God.⁴⁴³

The “wonyng” that Julian imagines here arguably suggests desire to recover man’s being as an object made in the divine image, or to recover one’s virtual existence.⁴⁴⁴ Her statement could suggest there is an uncreated part of the soul that is “all God.” The vocabulary is slippery here, with “wonyth” probably a form of “wonen,” to live or dwell within, and so Julian suggests that

⁴⁴² Lyotard, *Confession*, 57.

⁴⁴³ Julian, *Revelation*, 54.87. Carmel Bendon Davis offers a detailed analysis of in-dwelling in Julian’s text as it relates to issues of space and enclosure. See her *Mysticism and Space* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America P, 2008).

⁴⁴⁴ The theology of man as imago Dei stems from Genesis, but as Denise Nowakowski Baker notes even in her lengthy attempt to trace influences on Julian’s theology, the concept was “so ubiquitous” by Julian’s time that we cannot single out one specific source for Julian’s use of it. See her *Julian of Norwich’s Showings: From Vision to Book* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994), 110-111. Janet Martin Soskice offers one argument for a particular relationship between Julian’s theology of man as God’s image and Augustine’s analysis in *De Trinitate*. See *The Kindness of God* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007), 125-156.

the soul lives in God and God in the soul.⁴⁴⁵ But Julian's claim that she saw no difference suggests a union of indistinction. She speaks of a present situation in which there is no difference in substance between mankind and God, and that the soul is of one material with God. On the one hand, her reference to knowing "oure soule," suggests that the soul must be distinct from God because it can be known separately. In fact, as I noted in analyzing epistemological problems in Julian's text, she claims that it is easier to know the unknowable God than the soul that is one with him, asserting, "it is ridier to us to cum to the knowyng of God than to knowen our owne soule; for our soule is so deepe groundid in God...we may not cum to the knowing therof till we have first knowing of God, which is the maker to whom it is onyd."⁴⁴⁶

Julian is on dangerous ground here, edging toward the language of deification and slipping toward a claim that the soul, regardless of its own sin and will, is God. She stays just barely shy of this, adding to the passage about seeing "no difference atwix God and our substance" a crucial clarification: "and yet myn vnderstondyng toke that our substance is in God: that is to sey, that God is God, and our substance is a creture in God."⁴⁴⁷ The soul may take its substance from God, "the maker to whom it is onyd," but it is characterized by its createdness; it stands apart as a separate "creture" or individual. It is a rhetorically careful if only academic distinction, a distinction that comes as close as possible to suggesting a union of indistinction in mortal life without actually crossing the line.⁴⁴⁸ And modern theologians generally come to her defense. One of the defenders of Julian's orthodoxy on this point has been Ritamary Bradley, who argues that Julian's discrete identity is never at stake in her recognition of this union in substance, writing that "this fastening does not, however, indicate identity. When Julian is so

⁴⁴⁵ *Middle English Dictionary Online*, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/>, s.v. "wonen" (v1).

⁴⁴⁶ Julian, *Revelation*, 56.89-90.

⁴⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 54.87.

⁴⁴⁸ This is an oft-remarked upon point. For instance, see Watson and Jenkins, *Writings*, 8; Abbott, *Autobiography and Theology*, 115; Park, *Selfhood*, 218.

united to God in mutual joy that she could not distinguish her substance from God's, she still knows they are different," and cites Julian's statement about the "creature" status as evidence.⁴⁴⁹

But there is, at best, ambiguity as to where the self begins and ends: is the self God (through whom the soul comes to know itself, as we have seen), or is it distinct from God? And what does this union indicate if not identity? Julian appears conscious of the soul's createdness, demonstrating what Otto calls "creature consciousness" at the same time that she identifies with what is not created, an identification of the "personal self with the transcendent Reality."⁴⁵⁰ She seems to perceive an amalgamate soul, an identity that results from recognition of being both one's self and one's self in conjunction with an Other. It is another case of "both/and" rather than "either/or," and perhaps the most concrete example in this study.

To view this in terms of linguistic structure, Julian seems to transcend the syntagmatic chain that produces meaning by order, arrangement, and a system of absences: she transcends the chain in which one is what one is because of what one is not. As discussed in chapter one, in the Lacanian schema of identity formation, "to be 'me' I have to not be other things, I have to not be, at the same time, 'you'."⁴⁵¹ Julian isn't choosing one or the other, self or God, and seems to transcend all of this.

To illustrate this, she chooses another image: that of the soul "knit to God." She explains that "man soule [is] made for God and in the same points knitt to God."⁴⁵² The image suggests an interlacing of two things that are united yet disparate. It is less daring than Marguerite's bold

⁴⁴⁹ Ritamary Bradley, "Two Excerpts from Julian's Way," *Mystics Quarterly* 18, no. 3 (1991), 76. Also see Watson and Jenkins, *Writings*, 296, n. 13. Petersen's Lacanian reading, although about the struggle for oneness, also holds back from saying Julian ever achieves a loss of "identity" in union, an "infantile" *jouissance*, despite Julian's seeming serenity. See Petersen, "Mirroring Serenity," 99.

⁴⁵⁰ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (1923; reprint Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977), 10, 22. This is the type of identification that Otto places at the heart of mysticism.

⁴⁵¹ L.O. Aranye Fradenburg, *Sacrifice Your Love: Psychoanalysis, Historicism, Chaucer* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota P, 2002), 6.

⁴⁵² Julian, *Revelation*, 53.85

metaphors of commingled liquids, consuming fire, or inebriation. But what Julian describes is more explicitly liminal because it is more explicitly a combination of two entities that join and yet remain distinct. While God wills that souls, after passing from mortal life, will “be knitt and onyd to him that therin were kept a substance which myte never, ne shuld be, partid from him,” in Julian’s schema souls are already knit to God, and just in the process of being *more* intimately connected with God, moving toward an even greater union after death.⁴⁵³ Julian looks forward to a new, future ontology that completely melds God and the soul, but that combination already exists in a liminal “now.” She makes the claim even stronger a few chapters later, saying that in creation God “made us all at onys; and in our making he knit us and onyd us to hymselfe.”⁴⁵⁴

In chapter two I noted the apparent ease with which Phillip accepts Christ becoming visible in Elizabeth’s body (a new Veronica), Elizabeth’s ease is impersonating the male Christ, and how one way to read this fluidity is in light of Bynum’s work on medieval ideas of the female body’s openness to fusion with the sacred.⁴⁵⁵ Julian has also been read as having a similar understanding of openness, as Bauerschmidt says, “a view of bodies as malleable, transformable realities, a view that blurs the line between soul and body.” He observes that all three of her youthful petitions (understanding of the Passion, bodily illness, and “wounds” of contrition, compassion, and longing) have a “startling physicality.”⁴⁵⁶ Even her request for sickness involves God’s intervention in the physical body.

And for understanding amalgamate bodies in a medieval context, we might find further contemporary context in Jeffrey Cohen’s examination of medieval “identity units,” identities

⁴⁵³ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid. 58.93.

⁴⁵⁵ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone, 2002), esp. 108-115, 186-222. Also see Elliot Visconsi, “She Represents the Person of Our Lord: The Performance of Mysticism in the *Vita* of Elisabeth of Spalbeek and *The Book of Margery Kempe*,” *Comitatus* 28.1 (1997): 76-89

⁴⁵⁶ Bauerschmidt, “Seeing Jesus,” 191.

formed by a conjunction of the self and some other signifier, which he suggests were an integral element of medieval understandings of the self.⁴⁵⁷ Cohen argues for a medieval process of identity formation through relationships with others and in the context of ongoing multiplicity (a sense of a self in process and always changing), that allows for a physical connection with the Other: a hybrid being that literally encompasses the physical body of the Other.

In his most concrete example, Cohen argues that to the medieval mind, a “knight” consisted of a human knight, a horse, and their accoutrements together as a whole. But he has also demonstrated a similar understanding at work for the religious subject. He suggests that Margery Kempe’s union with God seems to exceed what her body can contain, and so to gush forth in her weeping and wailing.⁴⁵⁸ His reading of the *vita* of the eighth-century solitary Guthlac sees the saint’s body as open to being “the site of a fierce psychomachia waged for its ownership” as Guthlac negotiates being drawn to identify alternatively with angels and demons who visit his wilderness home, a supernatural “crushing press of undifferentiated bodies” that he is enticed to join.⁴⁵⁹

Yet when Julian writes of having a substance in God, she is not thinking in material terms. Her assemblage is more abstract than what Cohen and Bynum address. She opposes “substance” to “sensuality,” as several theologians have remarked, associating the former with our “heyer parte,” the other with a “lower party that may willen no good.”⁴⁶⁰ God’s presence in the soul may not be what we consider “substance” or even a reflection of the *imago Dei* at all, but the part of the soul that is in union with God’s will, perhaps drawing on the theological

⁴⁵⁷ Jeffrey J. Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota P, 2003).

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid. 178.

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid. 124, 133.

⁴⁶⁰ Julian explores this most directly in 58.93-95.

concept of the *scintilla rationis*. This is the part “in us which continually enjoys union with God, whether or not ‘we’ are conscious of it.”⁴⁶¹ And Julian appears very conscious of it.

As Julian discusses how the soul is “knit” to God, she shakes up her characteristics of the soul again, now emphasizing that the soul is not made of anything: “And thus I vnderstond that mannys soule is made of nought, that is to sey, it is made, but of nought that is made,” again leaving room for the soul to be created, but still not a part of anything other than God, who is not created.⁴⁶² As she continues, “thus is the kynd made rytefully onyd to the maker, which is substantial kynd onmade; that is God. And therefore it is that ther may, ne shall, be ryte nowte atwix God and mannys soule.”⁴⁶³ It is a self-consciousness even in an assertion of her nullity, recalling Otto’s characterization of mysticism as “a valuation of the transcendent object... so that the finite self contrasted with it becomes conscious even in its nullity that “I am naught, Thou art all.”⁴⁶⁴

Yet here again Julian slips into a statement about the soul’s *future* state, the point at which the soul “shall be” inseparable from God. The soul is “life,” the part capable of eternal life, “a lif, which lif, of his goodness and his grace, shall lestin in hevyn without end.”⁴⁶⁵ But the soul cannot be “onyd in bliss” during mortal life, cannot yet “fulsomely” have God, cannot yet “endlessly ben al had in God.”⁴⁶⁶ This is why the soul lives “in lovely longing.”⁴⁶⁷

How do we reconcile Julian’s description of current union in nature with her insistence that complete (re)union has not yet occurred? She appears to be struggling to negotiate this

⁴⁶¹ Simon Tugwell, *Ways of Imperfection* (London: DLT, 1984) 205, n. 62. Also noted in Park, *Selfhood*, 203-204. Or as Park phrases it, the soul’s “substance is the unchanging presence of God within us,” whereas “sensuality is the soul’s individuality in bodily creaturehood” (204).

⁴⁶² Julian, *Revelation*, 53.85.

⁴⁶³ Ibid. 53.85-86.

⁴⁶⁴ Otto, *Idea of the Holy*, 21.

⁴⁶⁵ Julian, *Revelation*, 53.86.

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid. 53.86, 43.61-62.

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid. 40.55.

herself. One possible interpretation is that we reach a point after death when “createdness is no longer a barrier” to complete union with God.⁴⁶⁸ However, her statement that ultimately there will be “right nowte that is made betwixt my God and me” suggests createdness is not only no longer a barrier, but somehow abolished.⁴⁶⁹ She may be moving to either of these theoretical stances. Along the way, her insights about the soul’s substance are markedly circular. To review: she stresses the impossibility of complete union in chapter 40; nonetheless, she stresses the soul’s shared substance with God in chapter 43; she does this only to then assert, again, the impossibility of complete union; she returns to epistemological problems in chapter 46 when she asserts that we cannot even know our “substance” until after death; and finally in the same chapter she returns to her claim that the soul is so “fulsomely onyd to God” that there is nothing between them.

The revelation involves a growing recognition of just how obscure the situation is, and how permeable the boundaries are between self and God. And Julian’s writing, which itself wavers and evades a firm stand, begins to reflect it. She is both recognizing in herself, and further inscribing, a liminal ontology.

Julian’s Narrative of Seeing: The Ontological Limen II

However, before turning attention more directly to the structure of Julian’s text, there is more of her liminal condition to examine. Julian’s text is a text about visionary experience of the divine, an account of revelations “shewed” to her. It is primarily through vision that she assumes a “stand in relation,” enters into a relationship with the divine Other that defines who she is.⁴⁷⁰

⁴⁶⁸ Park, *Selfhood*, 177.

⁴⁶⁹ Julian, *Revelation*, 6.7 Also cf., in the same chapter, “no soule is rested till it is nowted of all things that is made.”

⁴⁷⁰ I draw this phrase from the context of Martin Buber’s *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (1958; reprint, New York: Scribner, 2000), 24.

Vision becomes a sort of language in which she begins to blend the *I* and the *thou*, the internal and the external, what constitutes herself and what constitutes the Other who is both outside and within. The eye – physical and figurative (as in her “gostly sight”) – becomes a means of communication with God about who and what she is.

God’s visual accessibility offers the opportunity for Julian to better understand relation to him, to recognize her imperfect union and desire to see him “more blissfully.”⁴⁷¹ Moreover, Julian portrays this as part of a divine strategy: God has planned for the soul to behold him and consequently realize that its humble existence, its ontological status, is bound up in him at the same time that it makes clear the soul’s distance from him. She explains that God “wille that we levyn that we se him continually,” in all the ways he makes himself accessible, for “he will be sene and he wil be sowte.”⁴⁷² It is through vision that Julian takes her liminal stand in relation.

Her “showings” unfold through three types of vision. Julian pauses to try to explain the three forms, saying, “all this was shewid by thre: that is to sey, be bodily sight and by word formyd in my understanding and be gostly sight.” The first two forms of sight seem straightforward to Julian, suggesting we should interpret them as literally as possible: she sees with her physical eye, and words (sometimes accompanying what she sees) are formed in her thinking or are brought into her consciousness. But “gostly sight” is inexpressible: of this form of seeing she explains, “I cannot ne may not shew it as hopinly ne as fully as I wolde,” and prays that God will help the reader to grasp how she experienced these visions.⁴⁷³

Julian’s triad may draw on Augustine’s highly influential division of types of vision into the corporeal, the spiritual, and the intellectual, a schema he lays out in *The Literal Meaning of*

⁴⁷¹ Julian, *Revelation*, 10.15.

⁴⁷² Ibid.

⁴⁷³ Ibid. 9.14

Genesis and that became the standard explanation of how visionary experience occurs.

Numerous scholars have tried to link the two.⁴⁷⁴ For Augustine, there is a hierarchy that equates with the three heavens: the lowest level of visionary experience is to see corporeal things, the next to see spiritually, and finally to have “intellectual” vision, to grasp things with the mind.⁴⁷⁵ Like Julian, Augustine struggles to explain spiritual sight, visions of immaterial things that look material and “the images of bodies even in their absence.”⁴⁷⁶

This may be one place where Julian betrays a lack of formal theological training. Her awkward description suggests that she is not intimately familiar with the specifics of Augustine’s triad, although she may well be integrating Augustine second-hand by responding to what was by her time the prevalent cultural understanding of categories of visionary experience.

Julian’s categories blend. While she distinguishes “bodily sight” from “gostly sight,” in practice the two are at least closely linked and often overlap. She sees Mary “gostly in bodily likeness,” somehow seeing the representation of a physical body with her spiritual eye. The two forms of seeing similarly blend in the hazelnut vision of chapter five, which is described as a “gostly sight.” Julian writes that God “shewid a littil thing, the quantitye of an hesil nut in the palme of my hand...I lokid thereupon with eye of my understondyng,” explaining this “gostly sight” as a gaze into the palm of her physical hand.⁴⁷⁷ When writing of “gostly sight,” she employs the language of physical sight to describe objects and situations that she claims to observe in her own soul. For example, she observes, “our lord opened my gostly eye and shewid

⁴⁷⁴ For a review of this branch of Julian criticism, see Park, *Selfhood*, 223, n. 8. Frank Tobin offers a summary of Augustine’s formula and its dramatic influence on medieval mysticism in “Medieval Thought on Visions and its Resonance in Mechthild von Magdeburg’s *Flowing Light of the Godhead*,” *Vox Mystica*, ed. Anne Clark Bartlett (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1995), 41-53, although he does not address Julian specifically.

⁴⁷⁵ Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, trans. John Hammond Taylor (New York: Newman, 1982), 186-7.

⁴⁷⁶ *Ibid.* esp. 187-190

⁴⁷⁷ Julian, *Revelation*, 5.7

me my soule in midds of my herte.”⁴⁷⁸ Julian refers to a type of “eye,” to being “shewid” the soul with a spiritual eye that actively receives images set before it, although those things may themselves be immaterial. Her blending of “bodily sight” and “gostly sight” makes Julian’s approach to visionary experience distinctive among her contemporary English mystics; she fails to maintain, as Park observes, “the neat delineation between flesh and spirit so typical of both Walter Hilton and the *Cloud* Author.”⁴⁷⁹

It is possible, however, that the ambiguity of her forms of seeing indicates a problem less with understanding than with a lack of language to convey her experience. It is perhaps another sign of the ineffability of what she strives to describe in addition to her outright claim that she “cannot ne may not shew it.”

A bodily sight initiates the revelations. The opening “shewing” begins as Julian gazes on a crucifix, which she watches as all goes dark and the figure of Christ on the cross begins to bleed.⁴⁸⁰ She defines the vision as having been initially bodily but eventually hybrid when she mentions that later “the bodily sight stinted” while the “gostly sight” remained in her understanding.⁴⁸¹ The beginning of the visions depends on an active gaze focused on a material thing. Julian’s curate directs her to look at the crucifix, whereas she was previously gazing into space, “uprightward into hevyn where [she] trusted to come be the mercy of God.”⁴⁸²

For Julian, the eye is an essential means of communication; it is the sensory point of contact she wished for when, in her youth, she sought a better understanding of the suffering of

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid. 67.109. This also reveals a disjunction between the experiencing self and the self that is seen, an internal division I will address below.

⁴⁷⁹ Park, *Selfhood*, 275. Also see Glasscoe, *Games of Faith*, 223, which offers another discussion of the inconsistency of Julian’s divisions.

⁴⁸⁰ Julian, *Revelation*, 3.4-5, 4.5.

⁴⁸¹ Ibid. 8.12

⁴⁸² Ibid. 3.4

the Passion.⁴⁸³ To understand the effects of seeing the Passion, it is important to recognize first that the three gifts Julian requested (understanding of the Passion, bodily sickness, and wounds of contrition, compassion, and longing) are related to the goals of affective devotion. The first petition in particular focuses on a shared experience of Christ's suffering and the sorrow of his first followers. Julian relates,

I had some feleing in the passion of Christe, but yet I desired more be the grace of God. Methought I would have beene that time with Mary Magdalen and with other that were Crists lovers, and therefore I desired a bodily sight wherein I might have more knowledge of the bodily peynes of our saviour, and of the compassion of our lady and of all his trew lovers that seene that time his peynes, for I would be one of them and suffer with him.⁴⁸⁴

Julian frames her request as a desire for deeper, or more perfected, feeling and identification. She specifically wants to suffer in conjunction with Christ and the "trew lovers." And she wants to achieve these insights through "bodily sight." For Julian, bodily sight allows for a "participative knowledge" in Christ's sufferings.⁴⁸⁵

She shares an affective and Christocentric devotion with Elizabeth of Spalbeek, one that is markedly absent in Marguerite's *Mirror*. In chapter two I discussed the twelfth-century shift in devotional models of *imitatio Christi* from a focus on imitating Christ's divinity to engaging with his human suffering. This transition was reaching its peak in England during the late fourteenth-century, having been spread largely by the Franciscans. It is during the time of Julian's showings that artistic depictions of the crucifixion and of Christ's Five Wounds (the

⁴⁸³ Bauerschmidt offers an alternative reading, suggesting that Julian's "bodily sight" refers to visible physical objects and not necessarily to sensory perception. See "Seeing Jesus," 196-197.

⁴⁸⁴ Julian, *Revelation*, 2.2-3.

⁴⁸⁵ Bauerschmidt, "Seeing Jesus," 197.

arma Christi) were at their most graphic and bloody, emphasizing the gruesome nature of the Passion.⁴⁸⁶

Connection to Christ through shared pain is the central feature of chapter eighteen. Julian explains that Christ's "disciples and al his trew lovers" who witnessed the Passion shared in his suffering, indeed experienced worse suffering than he endured because they loved him more than he loved himself. Thus they "suffrid panys more than ther owne bodyly deying." Here Julian has a revelation of union through pain, announcing, "Here I saw a gret onyng betwyx Christe and us, to myn understongyng; for whan he was in payne, we were in payne," and she continues to assert that all of creation shared in this pain.⁴⁸⁷ These are the "trew lovers" whose experience Julian prayed to share. For her, moving toward knowledge of God involves sharing in his experience, and the primary way to do that is through vision, observation of the scene of the Passion in a manner that recalls the advice of the *Meditationes vitae Christi*. So it is *seeing* the crucified Christ that initiates Julian's deepening sense of union with him.

There are several moments that join Julian's body to the suffering body of Christ, in Bauerschmidt's terms, moments that imply "a resonance between Julian's body and the body of Christ on the cross, communicated through the medium of sight."⁴⁸⁸ One of the most striking occurs as Julian watches Christ's body drying out on the cross after profuse bleeding. Of this experience she writes,

The which shewing of Cristes peynys fillid me ful of payne, for I wiste wele he suffryd but onys, but, as he wold shewen it me and fillen me with mynde as I had afron desyryd. And in al this tyme of Cristes paynye I felte no payn but for

⁴⁸⁶ On the late fourteenth-century devotional focus on the mutilated body of Christ, see Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, esp. 271ff., and Giles Constable, "The Ideal of the Imitation of Christ," *Three Studies in Medieval Religion and Social Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), esp. 218-232.

⁴⁸⁷ Julian, *Revelation*, 18.27.

⁴⁸⁸ Bauerschmidt, "Seeing Jesus," 197.

Cristes paynys. Than thowte me ‘I knew but litil what payne it was that I askyd,’ and as a wretch repentid me, thynkand if I had wiste what it had be, lothe me had be to have praydd it; for methowte it passid bodily dethe, my paynes.⁴⁸⁹

The sight of Christ’s dehydrating body and his final pain on the cross is an answer to her youthful petition for better understanding of the Passion, but the intensity of the vision makes her regret her request. It becomes a direct *experience* of his suffering: through his pain, she is filled with pain, and has “no payn but for Cristes paynys.” Shared pain unites Julian with Christ ontologically, as the lived and felt experience of her body merges with Christ’s. The great pain also brings her to the threshold of death and passing over into God; it is pain, it seems to her, that is beyond “bodily dethe.”

Then the reverse: she is united to Christ through a vision of his joy. Still watching Christ on the cross and expecting to see the final point of death, Julian explains, “sodenly, I beholdyng in the same cross, he chongyd his blissfull chere. The chongyng of his blissful chere chongyd myn, and I was as glad and mery as it was possible.”⁴⁹⁰ She sees Christ’s expression change from one of pain to one of joy and peace, and she shares in that change as her own countenance and bodily experience change in accord with his.

As Julian’s body does what Christ’s does, she becomes a part of him and he of her; the visionary experience becomes an intersection between two bodies and two entities. Julian enters a liminal state during the experience, becoming both distinct as a viewing subject (she is still aware that she is “beholdyng in the same cross”) and sharing in the feelings and experience of the viewed object.

⁴⁸⁹ Julian, *Revelation*, 17.26.

⁴⁹⁰ *Ibid.* 21.31.

This is not simply a “reciprocity” or a “breach” of the line between viewer and object.⁴⁹¹ Similar to Lacan’s subject looking at himself in the mirror stage (and moments in which it is relived), Julian’s subjectivity – if we try to locate it – is formed through the interaction between her act of seeing and what she sees, as she strives thereafter to *become* the viewed object. Bridging the two, she is neither entirely observer nor object; and in the process we begin to lose a distinct “Julian.”⁴⁹²

There are occasional moments of passing over into a mystical union of identity, notably in the first showing. As Julian watches blood trickle down Christ’s face, she is overwhelmed by a sense of union with the Trinity that allows her a taste of heaven. She writes, “And in the same sheweing sodenly the Trinitie fulfilled the herte most of ioy. And so I understood it shall be in hevyn without end to all that shall come there.”⁴⁹³ By experiencing for a moment the joy of heaven, Julian crosses the boundary between life and death, between incomplete union and complete union. She is not simply aware that a part of the soul always shares its substance with God, but is aware of herself being filled, temporarily, with the joy of the Trinity.⁴⁹⁴ And this transitory moment of union, this temporary crossing of the threshold between human and divine and into identification with the Trinity, occurs by means of Julian seeing Christ.

⁴⁹¹ Abbott views this as a “breach” and sees chapter 21 as a changing point that initiates reciprocity between Julian and what she sees; he notes that it also initiates a “dynamic personal relationship” and a dialogue in which Julian starts to respond verbally to the words she receives. See his *Autobiography and Theology*, 70-71. In fact, as I discuss below, Julian’s sharing in the experience of the image before her begins much earlier, even in the first vision. But the issue of why Julian’s verbal response begins here deserves further study. Carmel Bendon Davis reads these exchanges in terms of “an obliteration of metaphorical space between Christ and humanity.” See her *Mysticism and Space*, 239. I would go further and stress that we are losing not just distance but nearly losing Julian as an entity apart from Christ, pushing toward a union of indistinction.

⁴⁹² Useful here may be Antony Easthope’s framing of the Lacanian subject looking in a mirror who is neither reflection nor observer’s eye, but exists as the “movement” of looking. See Easthope, *Poetry as Discourse* (London: Methuen, 1983), 39-40.

⁴⁹³ Julian, *Revelation*, 4.5-6.

⁴⁹⁴ The passage recalls Marguerite’s discussion of the soul swimming in the sea of joy flowing from God as an image of union: “Sche felip no ioie, for sche hirsilf is ioie... So is ioie in hir, þat sche hirsilf is ioie, bi þe uertu of ioie þat hap hir meued in him.” *Mirror*, 278.29-32.

Julian pauses to reflect on how seeing God actually draws the soul into union with him, blurring boundaries between the two. The first step is that vision inspires longing to be one with God. As she explains,

And wel I wote the mor the soule seeth of God, the more it desyrith hym be his grace...and than we can do no more but behold hym, enioyeng, with an hey migty desire to be al onyd into hym, centered to his wonyng, and enioy in hys loving and deliten in his godeness.⁴⁹⁵

Once the soul sees God, it can do nothing but gaze upon him, contemplate him, rejoice in him, and desire a more complete and permanent union with him.

It is perhaps at this point that Julian is most like the Lacanian subject of the mirror stage who sees an “ideal-I,” an ideal version of what it can be, and seeks to become it. While her seeing and seeking to become God invites a psychoanalytic reading, Julian’s dynamic is also a textbook example of what some scholars of mysticism would call an impersonal unitive vision. In this sub-category of mystical union, the mystic reports “a vivid vision that commences with the mystic beholding both him/herself and God as discrete personal beings. As the vision proceeds, however, the two figures merge into one.”⁴⁹⁶

In this aspect of Julian’s text and experience, speculative theology overlaps with concepts in her general cultural milieu, and she may be drawing her ideas from multiple sources. In her psychoanalytic reading, Aranye Fradenburg has noted similar dynamics in Chaucerian writing. She has persuasively argued that the act of gazing on a desired object is essential to the viewer’s identity formation in the prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*, which depicts a narrator so

⁴⁹⁵ Julian, *Revelation*, 43.61.

⁴⁹⁶ Daniel Merkur, “Unitive Experience and the State of Trance,” *Mystical Union in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, ed. Moshe Idel and Bernard McGinn (New York: Continuum, 1999), 144.

enthralled by daisies that he continually rushes out to watch their morning bloom.⁴⁹⁷ The narrator's daisy, and generally the courtly object of adoration (which the daisy will become as Queen Alceste) are, like Julian's God, necessary to look upon and salvific. Fradenburg explains, "This narrator whose sorrow is softened by following the daisy's every movement, by gazing at it and at its own ocular receptivity, locates salvific power in visibility itself."⁴⁹⁸ The daisy is always available, fulfilling the narrator's "fantasy... of its perfect accessibility."⁴⁹⁹ Similarly, analyzing the *Knight's Tale*, H. Marshall Leicester Jr. has suggested that gazing, and specifically gazing upon a desired woman, is something the Knight recognizes as central to the development of chivalric perspective. A key element of Palamon and Arcite's activity is gazing upon Emelye; she spurs their desire, their jealousy, their battle, and their "chivalric eros."⁵⁰⁰

Julian is remade by her vision. Seeing God in her soul, she asserts, "and the soule that thus beholdyth it makith it like to him that is beholdyn, and onyth it in rest and peas be his grace."⁵⁰¹ The soul becomes like God by visually experiencing the divine Other, and so becomes united to the divine. It is a process of viewing and then assuming an image. There is an additional suggestion that the soul is *created* to gaze and to revel in the visual accessibility of God, and in doing so to find its nature in God.⁵⁰²

⁴⁹⁷ Fradenburg, *Sacrifice*, 189-190.

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid. 190.

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁰ For Leicester, recognition of this system is part of the Knight's disenchantment with chivalric culture. *The Disenchanted Self: Representing the Subject in the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley: University of California P, 1990), 270; also see esp. 269-272.

⁵⁰¹ Julian, *Revelation*, 68.111. Julian's vision of Christ in her soul is described as a "gostly sight," seen with her "gostly eye." But again, the language she uses is that of physical sight, calling the vision "a delectable syte and a restfull shewyng" (ibid. 68.110). Notably, modern psychological experiments of how perceptions of ontological union might be induced have also assigned unitive properties to vision. Subjects in Albert Deikman's 1960s experiments reported perceptions of "merging" and loss of individual cognition after extended concentration on a vase in their visual field. For one discussion of the implications of these experiments, see Merkur, "Unitive Experience," 146-148.

⁵⁰² The point regarding the soul's purpose to behold God is made again in the heading of chapter 44. Although it is unclear whether Julian wrote this caption (which appears in Sloane 1, but not in all manuscripts), it does justice to her thought as it offers a summary statement that "mannys soule, a creature, hath the same properties [as the

Julian's Middle English word "behold," a key term throughout her text, has a variety of potential meanings. Among them, it can refer to turning one's mental attention to an object (in essence, to think about or to contemplate), or more commonly, to see, look, gaze, or observe.⁵⁰³ At points, she uses the term separately from the verb "to see," but often employs it in place of "to see," and generally uses it in connection with visual experience. It may be that Julian appreciated the term for precisely these layers of meaning: when one sees God, one also understands, contemplates, and comes to know God in the same instant.

The vision of God is so necessary to the unitive experience Julian wants to maintain that even amid rejoicing that God has revealed himself to her and given her knowledge that "it was hymself," one of Julian's feelings is intense fear. She is in "drede" because, as she writes, "it semyd to me in al that tyme that that syte shuld fayle and I ben left to myselfe."⁵⁰⁴ What she would be "left" with is what she elsewhere calls the "contrarioust" self, that is her self distinct from God. This is what the soul falls to when it fails to see God, as Julian describes:

We failen oftentymes of the syte of hym, and anon we fallen into ourself, and than fynde we no felyng of ryth – nowte but contrarioust that is in ourselfe, and that of the elder rote of our first synne with all that followyth of our contrivans, and in this we arn traveylid and tempestid with felyng of synnys and of peynes in many dyvers manner, gostly and bodily, as it [is] knowen to us in this lif.⁵⁰⁵

We realize our contrariness; we realize our distinction from the divine. The soul sees again its createdness and all that goes with it, including sin. Literally, we "fall" from union with God

Trinity], doying that that it was mede for, seyng, beholding, and marvelyng his God" (Julian, *Revelation*, 44.62). The heading stresses the importance of vision and then goes further to suggest that gazing upon God is a divinely-ordained necessity: it is the activity for which the soul was created.

⁵⁰³ Both uses span from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries. *Middle English Dictionary Online*, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/>, s.v. "beholden."

⁵⁰⁴ Julian, *Revelation*, 47.66-67.

⁵⁰⁵ *Ibid.* 47.67.

back into ourselves, aware of the distance between the soul and God. Julian's description recalls Marguerite's fifth stage of annihilation – a fall from the sixth stage of seeing nothing but herself in God and God in herself, back into a stage in which the self cannot be annihilated and melt into God.⁵⁰⁶

By contrast, while beholding God, the contrary self can be annihilated; for Julian, while beholding God the self is nothing and can be let go. When the soul sees God, "his maker, so hey, so gret and so good in reward of hym that is made, that onethys the creature semyth owte to the self."⁵⁰⁷ The mystic realizes that alone she is in fact "owte," "nothing," and lets go of this self.

This can occur in the visionary moment, but not in a sustained way. When Julian mentions her "drede," her fear is not exactly that God will abandon her, but more specifically that he will leave her field of vision. She recognizes that her unitive vision, seeing God so fully and making herself like what she beholds, cannot be continuous. This she laments, although noting that it is ultimately for God's worship and the soul's eventual, unending joy to come.⁵⁰⁸

Such alternating between stages is another element of Julian's liminality. Her fear of losing sight of God is one place where some discomfort with the liminal comes through in her writing. Julian is in fact going back and forth between discussing two forms of union with God, one complete but temporary, and another, like Marguerite's fifth stage, that can be sustained and that allows some recognition of partial union with God. Although thrown back to awareness of the self after a unitive vision, there is still the daily recognition that one shares substance with God.

Despite her "drede" and desire, Julian still feels pleasure in the visionary experience, an ever-increasing "lovely longing," just as does Chaucer's narrator focused on his daisy, the knight

⁵⁰⁶ *Mirror*, 342.14.

⁵⁰⁷ Julian, *Revelation*, 44.62.

⁵⁰⁸ *Ibid.* 47.67.

gazing on a lady, or more broadly, the psychoanalytic subject locating the potential for wholeness, the ability to redress lack, in the desired Other. Just as Julian advocates prayer as a means of moving toward union, celebrating the “sweetness” of prayer as a taste of the union and true self-knowledge to come, she seems to relish seeking a vision of God, the quest itself. As Julian writes in chapter 10, the most developed discussion of seeking and seeing the divine, “we ought se of him graciously, than arn we sterid by the same grace to sekyn with gret desire to se him more blissfully; and thus I saw him and sowte him, and I had him and I wantid him.”⁵⁰⁹

Even more, some of the visions she most relishes are images of her liminal condition of being both part and apart from God. An illustrative example is the vision of Christ in her soul, which precedes her celebration of how a soul can make itself like the one “beholdyn.” Julian writes,

our lord opened my gostly eye and shewid me my soule in midds of my herte...in the midds of that syte sitts our lord Iesus... The place that Iesus takith in our soule, he shal never removen it without end as to my syte; for in us is his homliest home and his endles wonyng.⁵¹⁰

Here she stands apart from herself to look at her own soul (an action that itself creates an internal division), but has a vision of in-dwelling, of Christ as an inherent presence within her.

The moment recalls Augustine’s realization and confession to God, “You were within, and I was in the external world and sought you there,” and carries the same potential to shatter self concept.⁵¹¹ The conditions are right again for the narrating *I* to “explode.”⁵¹² We expect Julian to call out, like Marguerite’s figure of Soul, “Who am I?” And we might expect Julian as

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid. 10.15.

⁵¹⁰ Ibid. 67.109-110.

⁵¹¹ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998), 201.

⁵¹² Cf. Lyotard, *Confession*, 36.

narrator to lose her own voice, to be caught in the Other's voice, another voice "parasiting [her] own voices."⁵¹³

She does not.

Instead, Julian calls the vision "a delectable syte and a restfull shewyng."⁵¹⁴ She almost seems to savor dwelling in the gap between being a distinct self and a self joined to God. She describes it with more tranquility than do the other mystics, a seeming contentment if not complete delight. It is an equanimity that masks underlying conflicts of what constitutes the self. But as in her attempt to reason through the question of the soul having its substance in God, in Julian's alternating descriptions of types of union and their consequences, a narrative structure emerges that mirrors the very experience she is trying to explain: a narrative process that mirrors a self in process. And just as much as the other mystics, Julian struggles with the inexpressibility of her experience.

Julian's Narrative of Speaking: The Linguistic Limen

We meet Julian on her deathbed. This is the first portrait she offers of herself. She is on the verge of death and so between two worlds and two types of ontological status. But as she lies on her deathbed, Julian is also unable to speak to those around her. She describes the silence in which her curate finds her when he arrives to administer last rites, explaining, "by than he cam I had sett my eyen and might not speke."⁵¹⁵ Both her eyes and lips are immovable. She will cry

⁵¹³ Ibid. 13.

⁵¹⁴ Julian, *Revelation*, 68.154.

⁵¹⁵ Ibid. 3.4.

out during the vision of the bleeding Christ, but at the start we find her, in Zina Petersen's Lacanian terms, "on the edge of speech as well as death."⁵¹⁶

Julian's claim that she cannot speak may refer to her weakened physical state, parched and exhausted. But the problem of communication haunts the text from this early point onward. Even after twenty years of writing, it is a theme in LT just as it is in the tradition of mystical literature. She shares in Christ's pain, and indeed asserts that she feels it acutely, "that Cristes peynys fillid [her] ful of payne" and she "felte no payn but for Cristes paynys."⁵¹⁷ But she claims that she cannot describe it adequately, and adds a disclaimer: "for which peynes I saw that all is to litil that I can sey, for it may not be told."⁵¹⁸

Elsewhere she stretches for metaphors and comparisons to make her visions concrete and to help others see them. She turns to the everyday physical world: the drops of blood falling from Christ's forehead are shaped like herring scales; his blood gushes like heavy rainwater from the eaves of a house; the symbol of creation in her hand is like a hazelnut.⁵¹⁹ These moments reflect her Christocentric, incarnational theology, to be sure, but they also reveal a struggle to express herself and a tendency toward the cataphatic solution, toward verbose attempts at description rather than avoidance. Julian does not abandon language despite its inadequacies.

Perhaps the clearest instance of the inexpressibility dilemma in her text is Julian's description of the three categories of her visionary experience mentioned above: "bodily sight,"

⁵¹⁶ Petersen, "Mirroring Serenity," 96. Petersen also interestingly links the later loss of vision with problems of language. See *ibid.* 97. Davis compares Julian's bed to Foucault's "contested space," and aptly refers to her as "liminally poised." See her *Mysticism and Space*, 215.

⁵¹⁷ Julian, *Revelation*, 17.26.

⁵¹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵¹⁹ *Ibid.* 7.11; 2.7.

“word formyd in [her] understanding,” and “gostly sight.”⁵²⁰ It is the third that is problematic to explain. She writes,

But the gostly sight I cannot ne may not shew it as hopinly ne as fuly as I wolde.
But I truste in our lord God almightie that he shal of his godenes, and for yowr
love, make yow to take it more gostly and more sweetly than I can or may telle
it.⁵²¹

Julian’s admission betrays the slipperiness of describing revelatory experience itself, the nature of an encounter with the divine, even before having to put into words the nature of God or of the self in union with God.

Her response to the problem is to ask God (the original speaker) to assist readers in understanding what it is beyond her ability to convey, beyond what she can “telle” directly. She does not opt for negation in the tradition of Pseudo-Dionysius’ *Mystical Theology*, for example by trying to describe her spiritual sight as being “without corporeal limits.” She does not attempt a succinct explanation, a quick definition of what she cannot say. But much like Marguerite, she nonetheless places her “stakes in language.”⁵²² She simply continues her narration, trusting that what she needs to express will somehow, eventually, be clear to her audience.⁵²³

She makes a similar move when she declares that she “cannot tellyn” all the joy she had in the visions and insights she received. Again she turns the situation over to providence and continues,

⁵²⁰ Ibid. 9.14.

⁵²¹ Ibid.

⁵²² Cf. Certeau, “Mystic Speech,” 92.

⁵²³ Language is also, interestingly, part of her defense against temptation. When assailed by the devil, she responds by setting her eyes on the cross, her heart on God, and notably her “tonge with spech of Cristis passion and rehersing the feith of holy church” (ibid. 69.112). This may refer to prayer for assistance in withstanding temptation or to “onyth” her to God, as she says prayer can do. But her description most recalls a vocal profession of faith.

The nombre of the words passyth my witte and al my vnderstandyng and al my mights, and it arn the heyest, as to my syte; for therin is comprehended – I cannot tellyn; but the joy that I saw in the shewyng of them passyth al that herte may willen and soule may desire; and therefore the words be not declaryd here but every man after the grace of God gevyth him in vnderstandyng and lovyng receive hem in our lords menyng.⁵²⁴

Analyzing this quotation, we can see that Julian essentially removes herself from a narrator's responsibility of clear communication. Julian is certainly not unique in the mystical tradition when she continues her narrative even while announcing its limits. But she is distinctive in her absolute, and surprisingly serene, confidence.

Julian's Narrative of Process: Figuring the Limen

Julian maintains her confidence in communication even when she is articulating circumstances of liminality. Her description of what the human soul is in its essential link to God and what she becomes in her experience of unitive vision can be circular and recursive, but it is never hesitant. On the contrary, Julian is bold in revealing the messiness of her contemplative process, and it is by examining her willingness to illustrate this process of thinking that we can see how the shape of her narrative mirrors her experience of liminality. While Julian's text at first seems to lack creativity in its form, her experiment is in leaving behind the traces not only of her speculative theology, but of the journey to get there: her narration leaves traces of being caught in a process of contemplation that parallels the way she is caught in a liminal status.

⁵²⁴ Julian, *Revelation*, 26.37.

These traces, what Lyotard might call the “wounds” or “scars” that mark the text, reveal the impact of the soul’s encounter with the divine.⁵²⁵

In this way her text is closer to circularity than are Elizabeth’s cyclical performance and Marguerite’s reflexive dialogue, a process that revisits, and revisits, and revisits, each time adding a new insight, but without a final conclusion. She shares with Augustine not merely exclamations of confusion, Marguerite’s “Who am I now then?”, but combing through what has already been explored, revisitations of what is difficult to grasp. In fact, although Julian is generally recognized for being deeply Augustinian in her theology and themes, for instance that of the soul’s restlessness apart from God, this similarity in the shape of her text is to my knowledge less frequently noticed.⁵²⁶

The composition process of LT testifies to a long period of contemplation and revisiting. As I have mentioned, it is generally accepted that Julian probably composed ST shortly after her 1373 illness and revelations, and LT at least twenty years after the initial showings. While ST devotes most of its attention to a record of the showings themselves, LT is approximately six times the length of ST and integrates significantly more interpretation and speculative theology, suggesting a lengthy process of thinking and revising. By Julian’s own report, it took her more than fifteen years to grasp the unified meaning of her visionary experience as a revelation of God’s love, an answer only granted to her after what she describes as an extended period of longing and prayer to understand the revelation.⁵²⁷ She mentions that it took her twenty years to understand the parable of the Lord and the Servant that she omits in ST but includes in LT.⁵²⁸

⁵²⁵ Lyotard, *Confession*, 7.

⁵²⁶ A notable exception is Soskice, *Kindness of God*, 125-156, which relates Julian’s theology and recursivity to Augustine’s *De Trinitate*.

⁵²⁷ Julian, *Revelation*, 86.134-135.

⁵²⁸ *Ibid.* 51.74.

This makes 1393, following two decades of contemplation, the earliest possible date for LT, although some scholars have argued for an even later date of composition.⁵²⁹

Even if we lacked Julian's admission of the passing years, her description of the visions is so inextricably connected to her interpretation of them that it would be evident from the text alone that LT must be the product of a long period of thought. She describes three layers to the process of understanding each part of the revelation, which she says that she can no longer distinguish at the time of composing LT:

The frest is the begynnyng of techyng that I understod therein in the same tyme; the ii is the inward lernyng that I have vnderstodyn therein sithen; the iii al the hole revelation from the begynnyng to the end, that is to sey, of this boke, which our lord God of his goodness bryngeth oftentimes frely to the syte of myn vnderstondyng. And these iii arn so onyd, as to my vnderstondyng, that I cannot, ner may, depart them.⁵³⁰

Following her categories, then, united together are Julian's first reaction, her contemplation since the initial showings, and her sense of the revelation's meaning as a whole, by which she seems to mean the 1393 revelation that love was the "meaning." According to Julian, she can no longer look back and consider the visions outside of, for instance, the larger frame of God's love.

⁵²⁹ The most comprehensive objection to the dominant theory of the texts' dating comes from Nicholas Watson, who argues that the date of ST should be pushed back about ten to fifteen years, perhaps even later, and LT possibly into the fifteenth century. See "Composition," 637-683. I find Watson's attempt to situate ST within Lollard image debates (see esp. 660ff.) thought-provoking but difficult to accept entirely: while Julian is intent to convey her visions in a way that allows the reader to imagine them, I do not read in ST a vehement orthodox exposition on the usefulness of images. She may indeed have been trying to do the opposite and suggest that one should not *need* a vision in order to believe (a view we might compare with Marguerite's pronouncement on the strength of faith without witnesses). Very suggestive, however, is Watson's argument that the 1388 revelation that "love" was the meaning of the showings seems most logical if Julian had been in the process of contemplating not only the visions themselves but the inadequacy of what she had recently been able to understand and write about sin in ST. See esp. "Composition," 669.

⁵³⁰ Julian, *Revelation*, 51.74.

A. C. Spearing suggests that this may account for the numerous tense shifts in Julian's writing, particularly noticeable in the parable of the Lord and the Servant: they perhaps reflect that her interpretation evolved over several points in time.⁵³¹ Julian's discussion of the parable is indeed an excellent illustration of the layered interpretative process and feedback loop that she describes. By her own report, she receives the message of the revelation's unified meaning, the meaning of "al the hole revelation from the begynnyng to the end," five years prior to coming to understand the meaning of the parable as an exemplum of sin and salvation, thus having to return to the continuous process of "inward lernyng" even after the secondary revelation that "love" was God's meaning.

Also from a theological angle, Julian repeatedly transcends or at least "loops" linear time through what Park calls an "eschatological perspective mixed with her paradigm crucifixion theodicy."⁵³² This phenomenon is most visible when she chooses "Jesus" as her "heaven" although seeing him on the cross "only in payne at that tyme." It is a point she insists upon, refusing to move her gaze from Jesus on the cross up "to heyn to his Fader"; as she explains, "me lekyd no other hevyn than Iesus, which shal be my blisse whan I come there."⁵³³ Marion Glasscoe also offers an insightful reading of the coexistence of time and eternity, pain and salvation, in Julian's theology, perhaps most poignantly revealed in the vision of the blood of the Passion flowing into heaven.⁵³⁴ A similar approach surfaces again in a theology that proposes that, although we must always reject sin, God's love and our future union will trump it so that the "wounds" of sin can become "worships" in heaven.⁵³⁵

⁵³¹A. C. Spearing, ed. and Elizabeth Spearing, trans., *Revelations of Divine Love* (London: Penguin, 1998) 185, n. 39.

⁵³² Park, *Selfhood*, 194.

⁵³³ Julian, *Revelation*, 19.28. A key example also noted by Park, *Selfhood*, 187-188.

⁵³⁴ Glasscoe, *Games of Faith*, 215-264. For her discussion of this vision (from 12.19-20), see 231.

⁵³⁵ Park, *Selfhood*, 194.

Conveying these layers in language is no easy task. Both Julian's thinking process and her theology are beyond time; if they are in time at all, they are recursive. Julian returns to elements and events in order to move forward. Whether it is a return to the crucifixion in order to be in heaven, or the initial understanding of suffering in the Passion in order to understand the meaning of love, she requires a recursive narrative.

In a close study of the structure of LT, Baker convincingly argues that the text is a careful and deliberate interlacing of critical themes that proceeds in a predictable way. She suggests that Julian begins discussion of each of sixteen showings by establishing how an element of her vision or a divine locution "sets a theme for that showing that is reiterated and developed throughout that division." Each time that Julian reiterates or cross-references a theme, she elaborates again. Thus the text is a narrative that is both "cumulative" and similar to the "ruminative process of meditation."⁵³⁶

Baker's analysis at points seems to overestimate the crafting of LT, for instance when she proposes that Julian designed the text's structure as a series of "embedded boxes."⁵³⁷ But it is very clear that Julian's interlacing of themes is deliberate and calculated. Not only does LT add, as Baker also notes, a table of contents and an initial summary of all the showings under the banner of their unified meaning, "a revelation of love," but Julian is keenly aware of the overall structure of her discussion as she makes her cross-references.⁵³⁸

As an example, we might take Julian's reference to visions of the Passion in chapter 33. This is part of the discussion of showing thirteen. Julian situates her exposition of how some souls can be damned in relation to what was revealed in earlier visions, explaining: "I had syte of

⁵³⁶ Baker, *Showings*, 140. Baker's book is, to my knowledge, the most comprehensive study of the structure of LT to date, including Julian's inclination to recursivity in her writing.

⁵³⁷ *Ibid.* 155.

⁵³⁸ It is possible that Julian composed neither the table of contents nor the initial summary, although her style and tone are noticeable in the latter.

the passion of Criste in dyvers shewyngs – in the first, in the iid, in the v, and in the viii – as is seid afor.⁵³⁹ Julian goes on to relate these visions to what she wants to say in chapter 33 about the possibility that some can be damned, contrasting what she saw with her understanding of the faith as taught by the Church and considering it in her current thinking about who can be damned. She continues, “Wheras I had in party a felyng of the sorrow of our lady and of his trew frends that sen hym in peyne, but I saw not so properly specyfied the Iewes that deden hym to ded; notwithstondyn, I knew in my feith that thei wer accursid and dampnyd without end, savyng those that converten be grace.”⁵⁴⁰ Here Julian is aware of exactly how many times the Passion was revealed to her, of exactly where she previously discussed it in her text, and of what details were included. It is a pattern of cross-referencing that Julian repeats several times. As Baker observes, “Just as a medieval theologian cites scriptural verses to prove assertions or to resolve apparent contradictions, so Julian refers to her own revelations both to support and to explain her retrospective interpretations of her visionary experience.”⁵⁴¹

I want to draw attention to the “story” produced by this interlaced set of references. The text is not merely a mix of visions with long-considered commentary. It is a narrative that is not only *about* theological content, but one that creates an image of a soul responding to an encounter with God. First, much like Elizabeth’s performance, which involves a simultaneous adoption of personas from past and present and embodies the Passion in her own thirteenth-century, Julian’s narrative places her in the liminal position of being both situated in time and partially sharing God’s view of an eternal present. Through the simultaneity of past and present as Julian returns to reconsider earlier visions or different layers of the unfolding revelation (from

⁵³⁹ Julian, *Revelation*, 33.46.

⁵⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴¹ Baker, *Showings*, 159. See Baker for an in-depth assessment of several of these instances, including how chapter 31’s discussion of the saved humanity recalls three earlier visions, and the discussion of damnation in chapter 33, to which Julian returns again in chapter 37.

initial vision to later contemplation) the narrative not only refers to theological events that transcend time but reflects the perspective of the mystic who stands outside of time; it is perhaps another gesture, like Elizabeth's, toward an image of God's view of time.

Even more, in the recursivity of Julian's text we see an image of her caught in a continuous process of responding to mystical union and its effects on the self. At various points when Julian returns to her previous images of the Passion, as in chapter 33, and indeed seems unable to escape layering previous visions with later ones in her ongoing effort at understanding, she demonstrates the compelling power of moments of union. As I have already shown, in the visions of Christ on the cross Julian is united to him in his pain, for his "peynes fillid [her] ful of payne," as well as in his joy, being swept into the union she will experience in heaven.⁵⁴²

Therefore to relive the vision is to re-engage the liminality that the vision allows. In a parallel to how she doesn't want her visions of God to end (and to be thrown back to her "owte" self), she doesn't allow her retelling to end. She cannot stop reliving the moment of unitive vision. Her narration demonstrates dwelling in that vision.

The text also suspends final resolution. It resists moving toward resolution not only through the narrative's recursivity, but also through Julian's delay in delivering the entire revelation's unifying message of love. She very briefly cites this grand purpose at the start of LT (she likely had not received the secondary revelation at the time she composed ST), noting that all the showings she will summarize are part of "a revelation of love."⁵⁴³ But it is not until the text's final chapter that she describes how God answered her yearning for the meaning of the revelation. She at last relates that she was told in her "gostly vnderstanding" that "love was his

⁵⁴² Julian, *Revelation*, 17.26; 4.5-6.

⁵⁴³ *Ibid.* 1.1.

mening,” and offers her final interpretation: “And I saw full sekirly in this and in all, that ere God made us he lovid us; which love was never slakid, no never shall.”⁵⁴⁴

Announcing the unified meaning of the revelation, Julian appears to have come to a conclusion, something that Elizabeth’s narrative and at least the English version of Marguerite’s *Mirror* both resist, ending with representations of liminality. But this is deceptive. Julian’s final chapter also includes the enigmatic statement that “this boke is begunne be Gods gift and his grace, but it is not yet performid, as to my syte,” a statement open to various interpretations.⁵⁴⁵ It could mean that a further revision of the book is planned. It could mean that Julian is going to move on to do the work of God in some other way, perhaps becoming enclosed as an anchoress. It could mean that her process of contemplating God, the process she has represented in the text, is not done, not yet perfected. After numerous twists and turns, contemplations and revisiting, we do not actually reach an end or even a clear next direction.

It is perhaps in the final chapters, where Julian seems to be moving toward her conclusion about God’s love, that her narration creates the clearest illustrations of a liminal subject. In chapters 69 and following, Julian has completed her basic description of all the showings, all sixteen promised in the opening summary, and focuses on her evolving interpretations. The short narrative of chapter 83 is a striking example of Julian caught looking both backward and forward: back toward her showings and forward toward how to incorporate her insights into a philosophy that looks toward future union. While the chapter *describes* being caught simultaneously in past visions, present existence, and yearning for the future, it also creates a snapshot of this situation by actually looking backward and forward in time.

Chapter 83 begins:

⁵⁴⁴ Ibid. 86.135.

⁵⁴⁵ Ibid. 86.134.

I had in parte touching, sight and feling in iii properetes of God, in which the strength and effect of all the revelation stondith; and thei were seene in every shewing, and most propirly in the xii, wher it seith oftentimes ‘I it am.’

Julian accomplishes three things with this opening. She points toward the unity of the showings, noting that they share effects. She again attempts to describe something of her manner of perception. Most importantly, she looks back to the twelfth revelation in particular, the showing of God in his glory, that she discussed in chapter 26, which is itself a crux of her main concerns. Therefore she demonstrates revisiting her revelations and layering them together. By returning to the twelfth revelation, she calls to mind the key problems that she previously laid out; this was the moment in which she grasped that the soul cannot have rest until it knows God as “fulhede of ioy, homely and curtesly blisful and very life,” and thus she gestures toward the epistemological problems of her text and the soul’s desire to know God fully. The twelfth revelation is also a moment in which she confronts inexpressibility, declaring that she “cannot tellyn” the joy of the revelation, of the moment of seeing God in his glory, which is an experience of the union to come after death.⁵⁴⁶

Having gathered these key issues again, she continues chapter 83 by enumerating the properties of God – life, love, and light – that have emerged in each of the showings, but stresses their connection in the “on goodness” of God, pointing toward the unity of the revelation. She reflects further,

into which goodness my reason wold ben onyd and cleve to with all the myte. I beheld with reverent drede, and heyly mervelyng in the syte and in the feling of

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid. 26.37.

the swete accord that our reason is in God, vnderstandyng that it is the heyest gifte that we have receivid, and it is groundid in kinde.

Julian now meditates on the union between God and man's capacity for reason that is created in God's image, the capacity for reason being one way in which the soul shares in divine nature. Julian has taken her readers from focus on the unity of the visions to the unity of God and man's soul; narratologically, we watch her take these steps.

Her next lines break into an ecstatic riff that recalls Marguerite's Soul alternating between chant lines, for here a number of past themes and concerns are given voice all at once in a sort of polyphony of theological problems:

Our feith is a light, kindly command of our endles day, that is our fader, God; in which light our moder, Criste, and our good lord the Holy Gost ledith us in this passand life...The light is cause of our life, the night is cause of our peyne and of al our wo, in which we deserven mede and thanks of God;

While the main point here is the interconnection between life, love, and light, the passage also evokes numerous themes from the showings, including the Godhead as father and Christ as Mother (elaborated in chapters 58-61), and the transitory nature of the "passand lif," a concept that appears throughout the text but that is particularly developed in chapter 46's discussion of self-knowledge. Julian then describes how she believes souls ought to go through that transitory life, "wisely and mytyly," seemingly with a bold faith and confidence in the reward, or "mede," to come.

Finally, closing chapter 83, she writes,

And at the end of wo, sodenly our eye shall ben openyd, and in clerte of light our sight shall be full; which light is God our maker and Holy Gost in Christ Ihesus

our savior. Thus I saw and vnderstode that our faith is our light in our night;
which light is God our endless day.⁵⁴⁷

The last lines of the chapter look to the future, to the “end of wo” and the complete knowledge of God (and therefore of self) that will be possible after death.⁵⁴⁸ She ends with a statement about being left in-between and in desire, regardless of all the new insights that she has just enumerated.

She has been stuck, in her narration during this chapter, in the details of past revelations – of the glory of God in the twelfth revelation, of Jesus’ maternal love, of man’s inability to know himself. Julian writes about the liminal state in which the soul is both with and without God, in the dark yet in the light of faith that is a link to God. But the path to this statement has been circular and therefore liminal in itself, for it is unbound by time and linear order, more a gathering of past moments. The conclusion here parallels the closing chapter 86, in which Julian describes her secondary revelation that love was the meaning of the showings but still does not announce the book’s completion. Instead, she announces that the book is not yet “performid.”

Thus Julian’s structure does more than draw the reader in, more than what Soskice calls “recruit[ing] the reader as a fellow traveler into the mystery of the love of God” by virtue of the text’s recursivity: her narration creates a simultaneous image of the liminality that so dominates her experience of knowing, being, and speaking of God.⁵⁴⁹ The text itself becomes a sign, like Elizabeth’s performance that creates a physical image of union with God. It is a sign like

⁵⁴⁷ Ibid. 83.132. All citations from chapter 83 appear on page 132. For an alternative reading of the significance of “light” in this chapter, see Inge, *English Mystics*, 68-69.

⁵⁴⁸ Knowledge is again described in terms of vision. Julian’s statement here reflects, in even more specific terms than she used earlier, Paul’s assertion of clear sight of God after death (1 Cor 13:12) and John’s assertion that at Christ’s reappearance “we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2).

⁵⁴⁹ Soskice, *Kindness of God*, 131.

Marguerite's text, in which the book is the princess's "image" of her absent king, and the allegory a verbal portrait of the soul's mystical union with God.

Julian's text is not only an introduction to the mystery of the love of God, but the experience of recognizing and negotiating the boundary between the self and God as one yearns for complete and lasting union. Writing on authority in Julian's text, Watson has noted that "the circumlocutions and repetitions which result from her difficulties are the most effective possible image of the distance between God and her own human understanding."⁵⁵⁰ The text actually does this and much more: it is an image of the distance between God and the human soul, always overlapping but not yet one. And it is an image, also, of the distance between Julian's human language and the divine language that "speaks" to her through a combination of physical visions, other images seen inwardly, and words, a multimodal language that Julian's text cannot perfectly replicate, but dimly reflects through its structure.

Julian's Narrative of the Liminal II

In closing, I want to return to Julian's embrace of liminality. As is the case for all the mystics I have discussed, the liminal state is a disruption. For Julian, the varieties of liminality she describes have at least two effects that complicate her perception of ontological status: awareness of the soul's substance in God means the impossibility of fully knowing one's self in mortal life, and Julian also experiences brief unitive visions only to be returned to her "contrary" self after the vision ends. But for Julian, the disruption is a welcome one that stirs the soul and draws it closer to the divine. This is her assessment as well of how an illness that brings her to the threshold between worlds can actually be part of a bridge across it. She reveals pleasure in

⁵⁵⁰ Nicholas Watson, *Richard Rolle and the Invention of Authority* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991), 4.

the process of coming to know God, and in the process of yearning for complete union, what she calls “lovely longing.” There is pleasure in God’s visual availability, and the soul desires to see him more fully and “more blissfully” after each glimpse.

Julian does not seek death either in her initial petition for a bodily illness or during her period of illness, even though she stresses that permanent union occurs only after the “last poynte.” Instead, she seeks to teeter on the verge of death in order to grow closer to God. She explains that she prayed for “all manier peynes bodily and ghostly that I should have if I should dye, with all the dredes and tempests of the fends, except the outpassing of the soule...and after liven more to the worshippe of God because of that sekenesse.”⁵⁵¹ What Julian seeks is the bodily and spiritual experience of being as liminal as possible, getting as close as she can to God without quite passing over into death. When in what she believes to be her final hours, she acquiesces to her impending death but claims to regret not having more time to love God better, and so a part of her still hesitates at death. Yet she embraces the condition of being on the threshold. She says that she hopes the near-death experience will be “for the more speede in my deth, for I desired to be soone with my God,” a preparation for the death to which the young Julian apparently looks forward.⁵⁵²

This liminality parallels Julian’s love of process in her narration, her indulgence in thinking through and her twenty-year-long work of writing her response to the visions and her attempt to “take a stand in relation.” Julian both has her union with God and does not yet have it. She is in-between having it and not having it. As she writes in one of her most poignant framings of the paradox, “thus I saw him and sowte him, and I had him and I wanted him.”⁵⁵³

⁵⁵¹ Julian, *Revelation*, 2.3

⁵⁵² Ibid.

⁵⁵³ Ibid. 10.15.

Similarly, her narration asserts understanding only to have to contradict itself, to return to earlier moments for clarification, to have to look back again. It gives a shape to what it means to both have and not have understanding.

Perhaps it is ultimately this that so draws the post-modern reader to Julian's text: perhaps not so much her serenity itself, but her ability to cope with unsettledness – with knowledge, with ontology, with whether and what language can represent. She is at peace in the uncomfortable liminal just as she is at peace in the troubled world (medieval England during a period of civic and religious upheaval and following multiple waves of the plague), trusting that “all will be well.” Julian has no need to cry out like Margery, to exceed the boundaries of her body like Elizabeth, or to stage debates and existential crises like Marguerite. For Julian it is enough to leave questions, and her text, unsettled, non-linear, circular, and inconclusive. This is the reality of the “*passend lif*”: to see and still seek, and to have and still desire.

Epilogue: Julian's Life on the Threshold

In addition to her remarkable faith, Julian's life and social context might also help us to account for both her heightened awareness of forms of liminality and how she coped with it so naturally and with such remarkable composure. We have scant facts about her life, and almost nothing conclusive. But what we do have suggests a woman who may have experienced numerous dramatic transitions in her life, and eventually lived a life that was in many ways liminal.

While the scribe of ST describes Julian as an anchoress, it is unclear exactly when Julian entered the anchorhold and what her previous life entailed, something we will probably never know for certain. One theory which has long dominated Julian studies asserts that Julian was

initially a nun, probably at the Norwich priory of Carrow, and then sought a more austere life as an anchoress, possibly following her visions of 1373. There are several problems with this thesis, as has been best highlighted by Benedicta Ward. Her nearly-conclusive refutation has still not received the recognition it deserves, and a short summary is in order here. Among the problems is a striking absence in the Carrow records that Julian, or any young nun later enclosed at St. Julian's, had any connection with the priory whatsoever.⁵⁵⁴ Julian's petition for the three graces (the third of which "dwelled with [her] continually") and her report that during the revelations Christ thanked her for her service in her youth have been taken to suggest a young life lived under religious vows. But there is no reason to assume that either of these statements refer to actions in religious life: they reflect precisely the type of piety encouraged for all devout laity. The fact of the desires passing from Julian's mind suggests she was not a lifelong religious who in theory would have devoted her life to meditating on such concerns; rather, as Ward notes, "whereas a nunnery would have been a place where [such desires] were remembered, marriage, especially a happy marriage, with the responsibility of a household, might well cause anyone to forget such ideas until the coincidence of illness at a significant age...reminded her of them."⁵⁵⁵ The description of Julian's deathbed scene also suggests a household rather than a convent.⁵⁵⁶

⁵⁵⁴ See Benedicta Ward, "Julian the Solitary," *Julian Reconsidered*, Kenneth Leech and Benedicta Ward (Oxford: Sisters of the Love of God, 1988), 21, 26. Among several other strong arguments, Ward also observes that Carrow was from its founding a very small priory, better known for small crafts than intense devotion and theology, never took in children, and after losing nearly one quarter of its sisters in the Black Death, would hardly be in a position to support the enclosure of one of the remaining vibrant young nuns. Also notable among arguments that Julian was a lay woman is Tugwell's commentary, *Ways of Imperfection*, 187 and 201-201, n. 4.

⁵⁵⁵ Ward, "Julian the Solitary," 22-23.

⁵⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 23. The crucial points (already noted by Ward and several others) are as follows: the cleric who is sent for to attend Julian's dying is described as a "curate," a title most appropriate for a local parson or a personal, household chaplain (Julian, *Revelation*, 3.4). There is also the rest of the group at Julian's beside. Her description includes no mention of sisters or an infirmarian, but does mention the presence of her mother and a vague group of intimates never specifically described as sisters or even women. While there is no mention of continued prayers from those gathered around her, there is mention of several instances of laughter. Also see Ward, 23.

Moreover, it is well-attested that during the rise in anchoritic life in late fourteenth-century England most candidates seeking enclosure were laity. This was particularly true in the case of women. While some anchoresses were initially nuns, the great majority were not; and while most were virgins, some were widows and a few were wives who entered anchoritic life with a husband's consent.⁵⁵⁷

The reason it is so important to keep this ambiguity in mind is that Julian's precise status in 1373 is rich in potential implications. If Julian wrote either ST or LT shortly after being enclosed, then that text reveals a subject at a point of transition between social identities while also contemplating the ontological status of the soul. And if she entered anchoritic life directly from her household rather than from a cloister, we can assume the transition to have been all the more dramatic. If she wrote either text while in the anchorhold, she wrote while not only contemplating the threshold of union with God after death, but living out a daily liminal existence.

Medieval anchorites lived on the threshold between life and death, still in the mortal world, but understood to be, and living as though, already having passed on to the next. Ann K. Warren has described their status as a "permanent liminality" that resonates with Turner's theory of the liminal as a state of simultaneous "lowliness and sacredness."⁵⁵⁸ Those who chose the anchoritic life abandoned all previous markers of social status, including being among the living. Rituals for anchoritic enclosure symbolized death to the mortal world. Although particular elements varied, common features of the rites included administration of last rites to the anchorite-to-be, chanting of the Office of the Dead, and in the later Middle Ages, sometimes

⁵⁵⁷ Ann K. Warren, *Anchorites and Their Patrons in Medieval England* (Berkeley: University of California P, 1985), 22-27. On lay solitaries, also see Ward, "Julian the Solitary," 14-17.

⁵⁵⁸ Warren, *Anchorites*, 96, 99.

even a requiem mass for the “deceased” anchorite. All would have included a symbolic sealing of the entrance to the anchorhold.⁵⁵⁹

The anchorite therefore became a “nonperson,” someone whose “whole life was to be a transitional stage, its realization only in the next world.”⁵⁶⁰ It is against this backdrop, a literal life of the liminal, that Julian may have engaged in her meditations about the soul’s inherent ontological union with God, and struggled to understand her experience of mystical union in which she crossed the threshold to blend, momentarily, into the Jesus she saw before her.

The view of the anchorite as a “nonperson” was, however, probably more often an ideal than a complete reality. Attempting an anchoritic lifestyle, particularly connected to a street in the middle of the bustling town of Norwich, could not have meant total detachment from the world. And in Julian’s case, we have evidence that she, like many anchorites, continued to engage with the world as a spiritual advisor. Margery Kempe had a three-day visit to Julian’s cell, and also testifies to Julian’s local fame. The surviving Norwich wills that bequeath money to Julian suggest this as well, particularly the 1415 will of John Plumpton, who left not only forty pence to Julian, but also twelve pence each to her current and former serving maids, and knew the latter’s name to be Alice, suggesting a long-term pattern of visits to the anchorhold.⁵⁶¹

William Inge even proposes that town children may have been among Julian’s regular visitors.⁵⁶²

As an anchoress in medieval Norwich, Julian would have been theoretically isolated yet personally connected to the community that surrounded her, both part and apart.

⁵⁵⁹ Warren provides a discussion of enclosure rites beginning with the earliest extant service, which dates from the twelfth-century. *Ibid.* 97-99.

⁵⁶⁰ *Ibid.* 96.

⁵⁶¹ Watson and Jenkins, “Bequests to Julian of Norwich,” *Writings*, 433. Ward also suggests Plumpton’s special relationship with Julian. See “Julian the Solitary,” 19. It is noteworthy, however, that Plumpton bequeathed money to a great number of people he likely did not know personally, including each sister at St. Paul’s hospital, each sister and each sick person at the hospital of St. Giles, and prisoners in the castle at Norwich, among others.

⁵⁶² Inge, *English Mystics*, 76. I am inclined to agree with Inge that this would suit Julian’s temperament, and it would also seem to suit the objectives of her ministry to all her fellow Christians.

Such a situation in her Norwich cell parallels, as Watson and Jenkins observe, a shift that many readers observe in the course of Julian's text: her narrative moves from focus on her personal visionary experience to its application to all her "even cristen." She is both a visionary and lover of God, and also the conduit and interpreter of her revelations for others, a "double role" that "bridge[s] the gulf...between cell and world."⁵⁶³ An attempt to balance her contemplative life and separation from the world against significant worldly duties and interaction (even if for spiritual purposes) seems likely to have reminded her of just how liminal she was in her daily experience. This is the backdrop against which she may have undertaken her extended consideration of the soul's ontological liminality and its inherent and potential forms of union with God.

We likewise know unfortunately little about the daily lives of Elizabeth and Marguerite. Both may or may not have been beguines. Ambiguity haunts all their life stories. But it is perhaps fitting that scholars cannot pin down the precise lived experience of any of these mystics, which might tempt us to try to ground in specific circumstances and materiality these mystics who saw the self as ever-changing, and the soul that comprised it as always in a process of becoming other.

⁵⁶³ Watson and Jenkins, *Writings*, 5-6, 9.

CONCLUSION

I have argued that the narrative structures and positioning in the texts analyzed here – Elizabeth’s performance, Marguerite’s dialogue, and Julian’s revisiting of her visionary experience – are informed by and reflect the sense of liminality that was central to these women’s spiritual lives and experiences of God. To bring this element of the texts to light, I have approached them not only as theology or contemplation, but as literary products, and have taken a broad view of what constitutes a “text” and a “narrative,” including, for instance, Elizabeth’s dance. In other words, I have not confined the texts to traditional categories that would limit interpretation by dictating what we should find. I have approached the texts as inherently multi-faceted and best studied through the multiple critical perspectives of speculative theology, narratology, literary history, psychoanalysis, anthropology, performance theory, and the history of religious devotion.

Much recent work on medieval women mystics has tended to group the texts as distinctly “women’s mysticism” and move away from studying the mystics’ depiction of spiritual experience in the context of their medieval Christian understanding of ontology. Undoubtedly, such work has made valuable contributions to our understanding of the culture in which the women mystics lived and the faith practices available to them, and the texts can no doubt be illuminated by understandings of women’s devotional practices, as my reading of Elizabeth addresses. But the current study aims for a broader view, acknowledging that to narrow the scope of analysis to what is distinct about mystical experiences as exclusively *women’s* experiences (or as products of women’s fraught relationship to male ecclesiastical authority) can also risk distracting us from how sophisticated they are in manipulating the conventions of genre and linear narrative and in creating narratives that represent ontological status. It would be

particularly problematic to approach the grouping of Elizabeth, Marguerite, and Julian's narratives through a distinct category of women's mysticism because surviving evidence suggests that in these cases their medieval readers (particularly in England) paid little heed to the sex of the authors.

Notably M.N., the Middle English translator of Marguerite's *Mirror* and one of the few medieval readers whose direct impressions of the text survive, simply assumes the writer to be a man, repeatedly referring to her as "him." The scribe who copied Richard Methley's translation of the English version into Latin saw no conflict in his mistaken understanding that the author was Ruysbroeck, and presumably neither did his readers.⁵⁶⁴ This calls into question how many of the text's supposedly feminine elements and challenges to a specifically male ecclesiastical establishment are read into the *Mirror* by modern readers and may not have occurred to a medieval audience. Moreover, the *Mirror*'s almost total detachment from Christological theology and the place of the body in devotional practice make Marguerite, as Kocher writes, "a difficult figure to recuperate for women's history [because] her text also constitutes an exception to some of the most important findings that have come out of that historiographical movement."⁵⁶⁵

Similarly, it is almost only by coincidence that we know the author of the *Revelation of Love* was a woman. Julian mentions this only in the Short Text, which survives only in one extant copy. And while the Short Text scribe also makes note of it, scribes of the Long Text copies evidence no concern with the author's name or sex, even despite her extended meditations on the maternal aspects of God and of "Jesus as Mother."

⁵⁶⁴ For one discussion of the scribe's confusion, see Michael G. Sargent, "'Le mirour des simples âmes' and the English Mystical Tradition," *Abendlandische Mystik im Mittelalter: Symposion Kloster Engelberg 1984*, ed. Kurt Ruh (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1986), 461-462.

⁵⁶⁵ Suzanne Kocher, *Allegories of Love in Marguerite Porete's Mirror of Simple Souls* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008), 179.

Probably the dominant assessment of Elizabeth has been that she usurps a priestly role by embodying Christ for an audience, and therefore challenges Church authority. As I noted in chapter two, Rodgers and Ziegler suggest that in her enactment of Christ's redemptive actions, Elizabeth "negat[es] church hierarchy," asserting a right to make him visible in an "assumption of the bodily presence of Christ, entire."⁵⁶⁶ However, her actions actually display a reverence for the priest's position and also an awareness that Christ is present in the Eucharistic host in a way that he is not present in her. She relinquishes her cross position prior to receiving, and accepts the host with tears and devout sighs. She does not displace either the necessity of the Sacrament or the priest's actions; indeed, she relies on them and acts in response. Overall, there is little to support a view of Elizabeth intentionally challenging the ecclesiastical establishment, or even to support the idea that she would have felt a need to do so.

Yet while my analysis returns to considering these mystical texts in terms of what they say about the *human* soul and its potential for (re)union with God, and so has some affinities with the broad comparative work on mysticism conducted in the first half of the twentieth-century, it is a return with critical tools of the last several decades in hand: psychoanalysis' theories of the divided subject, further split by his own speech; phenomenology's rethinking of the centrality of the body, narratology's evolving question of what constitutes narrative, and the concept of the liminal as it has now entered several strands of critical discourse from its origins in anthropology and performance theory. And mine is also a reading that allows the texts to be literary as well as theological products.

Ultimately we come to the question of what kind of medieval narrative the texts show us. Given their concern with liminality, one would expect them to tend toward division, toward

⁵⁶⁶ Susan Rodgers and Joanna Ziegler. "Elisabeth of Spalbeek's Trance Dance of Faith: A Performance Theory Interpretation from Anthropological and Art Historical Perspectives," *Performance and Transformation: New Approaches to Late Medieval Spirituality* (New York: St. Martin's, 1999), 318, 321.

crisis, to reflect souls questioning what they are. And they do: each text shows us a destabilized narrator and a text that resists linearity. But they also all seem to assert that these conflicts of the self can be worked through by narrative means. Reflecting the power of language to explore relationship to God, which I examined in chapter one's discussion of the text as a forum for divine encounter, the mystics make use of their texts to address and express, although perhaps not resolve, internal conflict.

In this way, the texts actually affirm some of recent scholarship's models of medieval narrative, a finding that is somewhat surprising given these texts of such varied form. On the one hand, their keen awareness of consciousness and its divisions, and their creative depictions of it, seem to resist models such as Spearing's that would push such developments toward a later date.⁵⁶⁷ But they quite remarkably fulfill Vitz's theory of the way medieval narration tends toward synthesis. In Vitz's most developed example of the *Romance of the Rose*, the poet manages "a multiplicity of *I*'s" (dreamer, hero-dreamer, real-life hero, and narrator), and the temporal instability of a story "dreamed...in symbolic form and actualized only later," but the work sustains a remarkable sense of unity.⁵⁶⁸ A reader hardly registers these distinctions without close analysis.

A "synthesis" of narrative selves in the mystical texts, of the multiple *I*'s that result when the soul alternates between states of being, is perhaps best illustrated by just how in-control of textual structure the mystics seem to be despite the divisions to which they testify. A crucial distinction is that their texts seem crafted to expose that division. Narratologically, they look toward the Middle English dream vision tradition much more than secular Continental literature,

⁵⁶⁷ A.C. Spearing, *Textual Subjectivity: The Encoding of Subjectivity in Medieval Narratives and Lyrics* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005).

⁵⁶⁸ Evelyn Birge Vitz, *Medieval Narrative and Modern Narratology* (New York: New York UP, 1989), 40, 60. See esp. chapter two.

the medieval English tradition being more directly concerned with dramatizing internal division. Here we might note in particular *The Book of the Duchess*, *Piers Plowman*, and (although not a dream vision) Hoccleve's *My Compleinte* and *Dialogue with a Friend*, texts in which narrative and discussion are means of both self-reflection and resolution of internal conflict. Re-reading those texts in light of what the mystics reveal about representations of selfhood and consciousness and its divisions may enrich our understanding of their conventions and experiments with form, and trace how literary influences may have overlapped the religious and secular realms or have circulated in late medieval England in unexpected (even indirect) ways.

We could also look back and attempt to trace the influence on the mystics not only in religious writing but literary ideas of narrative that precede the Middle Ages, the gesture that McMahon makes when he briefly parallels the union of form and content in what he sees as Augustine's narrative of meditative ascent in his *Confessions* with a union of *logos* and *ergon*, pointing to work on Plato.⁵⁶⁹ This is a move that is more logical for his writers such as Augustine, closer in time to the ancient world and also well-versed in Platonic philosophical perspectives, than the medieval women I have profiled here. And as I explain in the introduction, I have not made significant attempts to trace direct lines of influence on the mystical texts because my concern has been with the representation of personal spiritual experiences involving liminality. On this point, I concur with Rudolf Otto that we will not reveal the "essential nature" of mysticism through a search for its beginnings and recycled forms and images.⁵⁷⁰ But although it has not been my path, certainly one route for future readings to take, as a bridge of work on narratology and mysticism hopefully continues to develop, is to further explore parallels with classical understandings of textuality and its categories.

⁵⁶⁹ Robert McMahon, *Understanding the Medieval Meditative Ascent* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America P, 2006), 95.

⁵⁷⁰ Cf. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (1923; reprint Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977), 21-22.

The most productive future investigations, however, may be those that look neither forward nor backward but across: across culture, religion, and era, the field of broadly comparative mysticism and interdisciplinary study of mysticism that is now growing.⁵⁷¹ It must consider not only the shared nature of human experience, but also shared forms of expression. One shared element across the texts analyzed here (also present in the late medieval English texts mentioned above) is that, while focused on the spiritual experiences of the self, the texts engage an audience. They are inherently dialogic, engaging in a conversation. They invite readers into their world, as M.N. says, to “entriþ and walkiþ in þe wey of illuminacion.”⁵⁷² But that “audience” may be divine or human, real or imagined, one’s own consciousness or another’s.

⁵⁷¹ Although I have not agreed with all of their conclusions, I wish to stress here that Rodgers and Ziegler’s broadly interdisciplinary study of Elizabeth has been a great contribution to this type of thinking, and an inspiration for new work in the field.

⁵⁷² “*The Mirror of Simple Souls: a Middle English Translation*,” ed. Marilyn Doiron, *Archivio italiano per la storia della pietà* 5 (Rome 1968), 248.13-14.

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