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EKPHRASTIC MEDIEVAL VISIONS:
A NEW DISCUSSION IN EKPHRASIS AND INTERARTS THEORY

A Dissertation

Submitted to the McAnulty College and
Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

Claire Barbetti

December 2009

EKPHRASTIC MEDIEVAL VISIONS:
A NEW DISCUSSION IN EKPHRASIS AND INTERARTS THEORY

By

Claire Barbetti

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ABSTRACT

EKPHRASTIC MEDIEVAL VISIONS:
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By

Claire Barbetti

December 2009

Dissertation supervised by Dr. Anne Brannen

“Ekphrastic Medieval Visions: A New Discussion in Ekphrasis and Interarts Theory” argues that the dream-vision and mystical-vision texts of the high and late Middle Ages are ekphrastic works. With their inclusion within the purview of criticism and theories of ekphrasis, new formal qualities of the ekphrastic mode come to the surface such as its dynamism and polytemporality, its reliance on the processes of memory, and diffuseness of narrative consciousness, rather than Murray Krieger’s “still moment” model that presupposes a sovereign subjectivity, an attempt to have the sign signify itself, or the *paragone* model espoused by W. J. T. Mitchell and James Heffernan that defines the ekphrastic parameters through a predetermined battle of binaries, visual and verbal, masculine and feminine.

Chapter One of the dissertation provides an overview of the history of the study of ekphrasis and critiques mainstream definitions of ekphrasis. Discussion in the second chapter uncovers the differences between ekphrastic renderings of a static art object as per the traditional conceptions of ekphrasis, and the spatiotemporal dynamism that characterizes the ekphrastic dream. Chapters Three and Four examine these characteristics through close readings of two medieval dream-vision texts: *Pearl* and *Piers Plowman* respectively. Chapter Five treats the ekphrastic nature of the medieval mystical visionary text, noting its relationship to memory and traditional characteristics of mystical visions, such as apophasis and synaesthesia; the subsequent two chapters respectively examine the ekphrasis of Hildegard of Bingen's *Scivias* and the space of revision between Julian of Norwich's *A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman* and *A Revelation of Love*.

The conclusion considers contemporary poetry by Barbara Guest, Kathleen Fraser, and Ciaran Carson in light of the new information that medieval texts bring to the understanding of the ekphrastic mode and discusses intersecting concerns of the medieval and contemporary periods about authorship and authority, interpretation, the time and space of the text, and the discernment or questioning of literary and aesthetic boundaries.

DEDICATION

To my husband Victor,
who seeks out, unafraid, the translation of memory into language,
one composition of our lives into another.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank my Dissertation Director, Anne Brannen, for her wise direction and generous support; she has been a Guide from the beginning of my studies at Duquesne. When she hinted that I should write about the N-Town Passion Play I in Medieval Drama, it was all over: I knew I wanted to teach, as she does, with one's whole being, and I knew I would be a medievalist in order to do so. I thank my Dissertation Readers, Linda Kinnahan and Bernard Beranek, whose discussions and comments helped strengthen my arguments and cheered me greatly during this process. In particular, I am grateful to Linda for setting me on the path of ekphrasis (and introducing me to Barbara Guest and Kathleen Fraser) in my last doctoral course, Twentieth Century American Poetry, and for her critical and aesthetic inspiration, from her critical work on the visual and poetic image to the atmosphere of her home and her painting and poetry. I thank Dr. Beranek for many adventurous conversations about spirituality, teaching, and visual aesthetics, both film and art, and especially for our long talks about Dante in various coffee shops in the South Hills. I also want to express my appreciation to the Duquesne English Department, a rare academic space that has fostered many graces—thinking, conversation, magnanimity, and friendship—in my life and work. In particular, I'd like to thank Magali Michael, Laura Callanan, Greg Barnhisel, and Fred Newberry, who have all in various ways shaped and polished my writing, teaching, and professional mien. I am grateful to my mother, Christine Cowan, for her loving support and her sharp editorial eye, and my father, Bainard Cowan, for his constant encouragement. I thank my dear friend, Michelle Gaffey, who listened for hours on end while I talked out ekphrastic ideas

and frustrations. Finally, I give my thanks and love to my husband, Victor, and my children, Anthony, Nina, and Dante, for their many kindnesses to me, their lack of complaint, their patient understanding, and most important, their fabulous senses of humor.

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Part One

1 An Introduction to the Field of Ekphrasis

That is no country for old men.
W.B. Yeats, "Sailing to Byzantium"

The art critic Roberta Smith discusses in an interview with Sarah Thornton the process of writing reviews of museum or gallery shows that are accessible to a large number of the public: "Art accumulates meaning through an extended collaborative act.... You put into words something that everyone has seen. That click from language back into the memory bank of experience is so exquisite. It is like having your vision sparked" (173). She describes the translation of the visual to the verbal and its subsequent "fit" with memory as "so exquisite" but gives no logical reason for why this is so. Her last statement, "it is like having your vision sparked," is vague to the point of the mystical. Yet I believe Smith's observation is an important one, if more intuited than explicated. It hints at not only the physical capacity of seeing, or the imaginative phantasm—the vividness of visuals inside our minds—but also the instant of understanding, the proverbial click and spark of sudden clarity. There is something in her statement that suggests the visual experience alone is not sufficient for the solidification of knowledge, or the communication of meaning, but that a verbal answer which in turn elicits the memory banks (which are a great deal visual in themselves) is the collaboration required for communicative meaning. In this model, art is understood not as isolated or singular entities but as an amalgamation of varied media created in response to one

another. For Smith, the descriptions and commentary of art criticism further the social contracts of meaning, of how a culture interprets both its visual experience and its visual signs.¹

But what about putting into words something that everyone has not seen, but whose constitutional elements have been seen? In other words, can verbally translating a composition of familiar elements that remains invisible to the public eye spark the same kind of “vision” over which Smith is so enthusiastic? Smith, in our contemporary art world, wouldn’t dare write a review of a dream or mystical vision as art, not unless a painting or installation piece was made to represent it. Even though much contemporary art pushes the boundaries of art and aesthetics, what remains invisible to the social eye cannot be conceived officially as a composition that deserves translation or interpretation, except perhaps in the realm of psychoanalysis, a discipline predicated on the individual and the private: witness the closed doors, case studies, and need for anonymity. And yet to the medieval mind such private images as dream and religious vision were considered valuable compositions in their own right and made active and available to the public. Dreams were widely catalogued and given categorical designations after Macrobius’s commentary in the *Somnium Scipionis* such as *visio*, *oraculum*, *somnium*, *insomnium*, and *visum*. The dreams of Gregory the Great, the visions of mystics such as Catherine of Sienna and Julian of Norwich, and the dream-visions, a highly stylized form of their own, by Boethius, Chaucer, de Lorris, Machaut, Langland, and the Pearl Poet were all part of the public sphere. Visions translated into writing offered opportunities to expound upon Scripture, to utilize, with authority, both the experience of people and cultural narrative and adjust it in subtle ways.

The name for this verbal translation of composition is ekphrasis, a word many people even in the academy have never heard. Ekphrasis is nonetheless an important concept to study, both in terms of ekphrastic works and in terms of the curious and contentious history surrounding ekphrasis theory. Wendy Steiner's precise observation that "the interartistic comparison inevitably reveals the aesthetic norms of the period during which the question is asked" (18) shows that the ekphrastic artifact can provide an ideological map of values given to the particular artistic media it employs in any given period. But more artists, critics, and theorists have begun to recognize that ekphrasis is also a tool wielding transformative power. This recognition comes on the tails of new understandings of ekphrasis that break away from a long tradition grounded in Renaissance humanism and seventeenth-century empiricism, defining the concept according to a contest between the verbal and visual arts. The definition of ekphrasis has been and continues to be a slippery creature; scholars still debate what exactly ekphrasis is and what kinds of texts can be included within its category. In the ancient Greek, ekphrasis could mean any detailed visual description; there was little to tell it apart from *enargeia*, the term for particularly vivid description. But since Leonardo da Vinci's *paragone* and Ephraim Gotthold von Lessing's *Laocoön*, scholars have engaged in theories considering the mechanics of ekphrasis to be the cultural dramatization of a contest for superiority between visual and verbal arts. Ekphrastic theory of the past thirty years generally follows this pattern of thought, though it is beginning to shift from an emphasis on the mode's ideological apparatus to an emphasis on its purpose, what it is used for. Barbara Fischer describes two dominant modes in the theories of ekphrasis that are interrelated in their approaches: the *paragone*, in the tradition of the rivalry of the

“sister arts,” officiated by da Vinci and continued in the aesthetic theories of Lessing and Edmund Burke; and Horace’s *ut pictura poesis*, wherein the sister arts are “reciprocally inspiring” according to the dimensional characteristics each possesses (2). There is embedded in these two approaches a historical relationship between text and image, a relationship that a number of noteworthy theorists, such as James Heffernan, W. J. T. Mitchell, and Murray Krieger have made the bedrock of their expositions on how ekphrasis functions. The acknowledgment of this binary relationship has also been crucial to many feminist cultural studies, newcomers in the arena of ekphrasis. At the heart of these studies, text and image, the verbal and visual, mind and body, artificial sign and natural sign are seen as historical categories positioned according to a binary framework (the categories on the right tend to be aligned, as do the categories on the left). In that framework, text has taken precedence over the image, so that whatever is not rendered into words is secondary to text and often relegated to those in Western society that are uneducated, powerless, or of a lesser social status (because of gender, race, ethnicity, age, ability). The representational image has generally been accorded to the “lower” ranks and typically has not taken part in discourses of power (unless appropriated by those discourses, as in the case of the great “masterworks” in the artistic canon).

Marsha Meskimmon clarifies the uneven relationship between text and image, here highlighting the dominance of text over the corporeality associated with the image:

. . . text has played [a primary role] in disguising the connection between thought and the body such that linear, progressive narratives of universal truth, unencumbered by their material origins and vested interests, could be seen as

stable and natural. The sacrifice of the flesh in favour of the word has a long history, connecting classical western philosophy with the Christian opposition between body and soul. In more recent history, words have been decorporealised through both processes of production and consumption—through technologies of print and practices of reading which evolved over a lengthy period to effect a “transparency” of the word. (151)

The “transparency” of language is a tool of power; it is employed relentlessly in political propaganda, in the media, in standards of living. It also plays a significant part in day-to-day usage. Meskimmon, exploring how the primacy of text has contributed to the diminishment of the body, the feminine, the image, and woman, is interested in artistic strategies that reveal this transparency and reestablish the constructed nature of text. Like the visual work of art, text is a *made* medium of representation and expression. W. J. T. Mitchell explains that “from the *semantic* point of view, from the standpoint of referring, expressing intentions and producing effects in a viewer/listener, there is no essential difference between texts and images and thus no gap between the media to be overcome by any special ekphrastic strategies” (160). Yet, ideologically, text and image are different, assigned different roles in the relation of Self and Other, dominant and inferior. Mitchell mentions that much of his work is concerned with the ambivalence at the crux of ekphrasis: an ideological tension between text and image.

Ekphrasis, from the Greek *ek* (“out”) and *phrasein* (“speak”), has, until the twentieth century, largely belonged to a male and masculine discourse, reaching its pinnacle in nineteenth-century Romanticism. To be able to comment and expand upon another work of art (most likely created by another male artist), one needed to speak from a position of

power, a critical position that required status and not only an education of historical people, place, and event but also an education in ideas, in how to conceive of the work of art itself. Such a program of learning would have relied heavily on Greek and Latin classical thinkers and Christian authors, from Aristotle's *Poetics* to Aquinas's *Summa*. What erupts from this diachronic line of aesthetic discourse is essentially a closed circuit in which the power of the gaze belongs to males and the masculine and in which woman, eternally object of the gaze, is unattainable, for once the gaze leaves her, she evaporates into idea.² It was easy, in other words, to retain the same values, desires—the same criteria—that deem a work of art important and excellent. Methodologies of ekphrastic representation, then, after the Middle Ages and before the twentieth century were limited to a narrow experience of high art and as Sara Lundquist notes in her essay on the ekphrastic works of Guest, “Reverence and Resistance: Barbara Guest, Ekphrasis, and the Female Gaze,” were not as concerned with the question of interpretation as much as they were concerned with competition for the moniker of sacerdotal wisdom.

Women's work in ekphrastic representation in the twentieth century has expanded the concept drastically, largely because of feminist concerns with semiotics and representation in the works of Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Monique Wittig, Nancy Chodorow, and Rita Felski, among others. Included within this theoretical work is a concern with the fixity of binary categories; Irigaray and Cixous in particular advanced notions of fluidity and movement in women's writing. The guiding metaphors became not the integer of phallus but the plurality of *écriture féminine* (Cixous) and the metonymic touch instead of objectifying gaze (Irigaray). Along with this sense of fluidity and multiplicity in representation came a new dynamism that focused on practice

rather than the fixed category of genre. Ekphrasis is not only a literary genre as it has been commonly understood but also a *practice* that engages the nuts and bolts of representation: what it means to translate an image—or more precisely, the experience of viewing an image—into words and text.

There are, however, dangers in assigning the relationship between text and image to the framework of a binary system. While on the one hand feminist work in the field of ekphrasis has made explicit the need for and use of ekphrasis to expose contradictions within dominant patriarchal masternarratives, on the other hand much of this work perpetuates binary thinking, continuing the binary categorization of media, modes, and practices (all in which ekphrasis participates and of which it is composed) that makes possible the oversimplification that is the *paragone*. Cultural binary oppositions are easily grasped and easily fitted; it is no wonder that so many thinkers shape their theories according to the struggle for dominance between two sides. Steiner concludes her first chapter of *The Colors of Rhetoric* with this thought: “The complexity in the interartistic theory that emerges—the confusion, many would say—is proportionate to the long history of unsatisfactory solutions that already exists. But it is a complexity that is illuminating about the nature of the two arts, their relations, and relationality itself” (32). Steiner’s insight about the relationship of the arts is important, but even more telling is her adjudication of “this long history” of theory and criticism as offering “unsatisfactory solutions.”

What has been left out of the long conversation surrounding ekphrasis, simply stated, is the notion that the strategic placement of the two arts together, more than “reciprocally inspiring,” works to further a process of meditation, introspection, and contemplation

about the ways that humans come to apprehend the world through both image and language.

Murray Krieger, another important voice in ekphrastic theory, defines ekphrasis as a dialectical movement between images and texts, each respectively presiding over the dimensions of space and time. Ekphrasis is to him “a narrativizing and temporalizing of visual stasis, and a stilling of verbal-temporal movement” (Fischer 2). Krieger’s theories of ekphrasis generously make space for “iconological” texts (texts that include visual art and “natural” signs), but also admit every poem that asserts its integrity as a poem. Although this self-reflexivity is an important feature of ekphrasis, it is not *the* defining condition. Ekphrasis would then, as Heffernan argues, become too broad and the category would collapse.

While Krieger’s theories are too inclusive, Heffernan’s definition only recognizes the axis of the *paragone*. His frequently cited official definition of ekphrasis is “the verbal representation of visual representation” (3). The most salient points pertaining to this definition are expanded in a brief paragraph in *Museum of Words*:

Ekphrasis, then, is a literary mode that turns on antagonism—the commonly gendered antagonism—between verbal and visual representation. Since this contest is fought on the field of language itself, it would be grossly unequal but for one thing: ekphrasis commonly reveals a profound ambivalence toward visual art, a fusion of iconophilia and iconophobia, of veneration and anxiety. To represent a painting or sculpted figure in words is to evoke its power—the power to fix, excite, amaze, entrance, disturb, or intimidate the viewer—even as language strives to keep that power under control. (7)

Such a definition ignores to a large extent the purpose of many (if not most) of ekphrastic works in favor of a deconstructive game of picking out the mechanics of ekphrasis seen through the lens of a long critical tradition that includes aesthetic theories of Plato, Simonides, Horace, da Vinci and is officiated with Lessing's *Laocoön*. Even Mitchell's more inclusive assessment of the paragonal relationship between the visual and verbal arts, a relationship that reveals itself in the ekphrastic mode in what Mitchell calls "figures of difference," leaves much to be desired: "These differences [...] are riddled with all the antithetical values the culture wants to embrace or repudiate: the *paragone* or debate of poetry and painting is never just a contest between two kinds of signs, but a struggle between body and soul, world and mind, nature and culture" (49).

Although I believe it does exist in various ekphrastic enterprises especially from the seventeenth century to the beginning of the twentieth, the wrestling match of the verbal/visual binary can cloud the broader on-going story of ekphrasis, especially that of the Western Middle Ages and even in contemporary poems and poetics. There is, concerning the general but more limited definition of ekphrasis as a verbal representation of a visual representation, hardly a lack of this kind of literature in the Western canon, nor is there lack of study concentrating on Western ekphrastic poetry. There are, however, comparatively fewer studies of ekphrastic works in Western medieval literature than any other period in Western literature. The fact may seem odd to some whose first inclinations upon hearing the words "The Middle Ages" are to remember the jewel tones of the Limbourg brothers' *Les Tres Riche Heures du Duc de Berry* or the stained glass of Saint-Chapelle or the embellished letters of medieval alphabets and scrollwork in manuscript margins or even, for those of us with more limited exposure of the Middle

Ages, the animated cut-out art gamboling in the chapter divisions of Monty Python's *Quest for the Holy Grail*, largely medieval in design and nature. In short, the Western medieval world was and is a distinctly visual world, immersed in and driven by image. Leonid Ouspensky, a notable scholar of icons, declares that "the image is necessarily inherent in the very essence of Christianity, from its inception, since Christianity is the revelation by God-Man not only of the word of God but also of the Image of God" (25). Certainly the theological and political furor surrounding the iconoclastic controversy of the eighth- and ninth-centuries points to the central position the image takes in the culture's understanding of representation, of art, of the divine and its relationship with human beings. Both the tracts of iconophiles such as John Damascene and the declaration from the Council of Nicaea in 787 ensure the continuation of the tradition of the iconic image as a reminder of Christ as not only Word of God but Image of God.³ That Christianity was the foundation of the Western medieval world is undeniable, and its consanguinity with the image in a culture whose laity were largely illiterate makes sense. St. Gregory the Great, for example, writes in the sixth century defending the uses of the image:

One thing is the adoration of an image, another thing is to learn what to adore from the story rendered by the image. For what the Scripture teaches who read, this same image shows to those who cannot read but see, because in it even the ignorant see whom they ought to follow, in the image those who do not know letters are able to read. (Ringbom 11)

Patrick Geary, in his book *Phantoms of Remembrance*, underscores the fact that though many people were unable to read, the medieval West was nevertheless a culture

organized around the book; it assumed literacy rather than orality as its center. The Western medieval world's reliance on visual image and visual memory is concomitant with the structure of reading and the book: both develop alongside each other and both acted as a means to gather, attain, remember and preserve knowledge, custom, and story. The visual and verbal do not replace each other, as Mary Carruthers explains in her recounting of the practices of monastic rhetoric:

The emphasis upon the need for human beings to “see” their thought in their minds as organized schemata of images, or “pictures,” and then to use these for further thinking, is a striking and continuous feature of medieval monastic rhetoric, with significant interest even for our own contemporary understanding of the role of images in thinking. And the monks’ “mixed” use of verbal and visual media, their often synaesthetic literature and architecture, is a quality of medieval aesthetic practice that was also given a major impetus by the tools of monastic memory work. (*Craft* 3)

In light of Carruthers's scholarship, namely her recognition of the connections among vision, text, image, memory, and rhetoric, the lack of studies of ekphrasis in the Middle Ages is disappointing. But it is not surprising, considering the tradition in academic scholarship that favored the “originality” of the Renaissance “masterwork” over the “conventionalism” of the often anonymous medieval image.

Jean Hagstrum's *The Sister Arts: the Tradition of Literary Pictorialism from Dryden to Gray* includes a chapter discussing medieval ekphrasis and the cultural assumptions that guide how medieval texts translate the visual into the verbal. Hagstrum, like every other critic before or since who has discussed ekphrasis in the Middle Ages, considers

only texts in which an art object appears: for instance, the didactic reliefs in Dante's *Purgatorio*, Chaucer's allegorical portraits in *House of Fame* or the *Knight's Tale*, and similar portraits in the *Roman de la Rose*. In typical medieval "literary pictorialism" (Hagstrum's term), the represented images are merely copied and tired conventions; according to Hagstrum, they are generally inferior to the originals found in Homer, Ovid, Virgil, and Statius (42). These disingenuous verbal images, he concludes, are included solely with the intent to co-opt the images of the classical world to feed a Christian one. In other words, he assumes little invention, imagination, or creativity in these ekphrastic renderings.

Hagstrum's portrait of pictorialism in the Middle Ages is a sorry picture of medieval ekphrasis as a low occasion in the history of visual imagination, an interruption between classical ekphrasis and the rampant and rich ekphrasis that begins in the Renaissance and increases geometrically in the twentieth-century. It is true that medieval literature typically does not describe concrete works of art. Most of the traditional ekphrasis that appears in medieval literature is what John Hollander terms "notional ekphrasis," the representation of an *imagined* work of art, including such famous passages as the raiments and shield of Gawain in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the mural of Venus in Marie de France's "Guigemar," the walls of the amphitheater in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*, and Dante's moving reliefs in the *Purgatorio*. These examples all act as didactic lessons, or reminders of virtues, morality, how one ought to behave, or how one can come into the fullness of being. Such ekphrastic moments in these texts are highly stylized; they are structured similarly in form and content, a structure not far off from the

mnemonic architectural structures of Paul, Augustine, Gregory, and Boethius, among others (Carruthers, *Craft*).

Despite its lack of physical, “real-time” description, the culture of the Middle Ages was thoroughly visual, though perhaps in a way different from our culture’s understandings of the visual arts and aesthetics. Aesthetic theory was by no means an institutionalized program of thought in the Middle Ages, certainly not in the sense that it was its own discipline or field. There are ways, however, that aesthetics was theoretically understood in the Middle Ages. Probably the most representative of medieval aesthetic thought was Aquinas’s injunction that “art imitates nature in its operation” (*Summa Theologica* 1.117.1). This assertion is significant to the shape that ekphrasis takes in the Middle Ages because it ushers art out of the realm of mimesis: art does not imitate nature; it imitates the way that nature works, in essence the processes of nature. Art is not about copying what is seen. Art exists first as form in the mind of the artist and as such is a process for working through questions of existence, which in the Middle Ages are not separate from spiritual questions. Carruthers, in *The Book of Memory*, attributes this faculty of the mind to the classical category of *memoria*. The memory, she argues, *is* the faculty of composition in the Middle Ages; composition exists in the mind before it is formed on canvas, carved in stone, or scripted with ink on vellum. “The questions raised about a work by mneme” she asserts, “are different from those raised by mimesis. They stress cognitive uses and the instrumentality of art over questions of its ‘realism.’ Mneme produces an art for ‘thinking about’ and for ‘meditating upon’ and for ‘gathering’” (*Craft* 3). Because art begins in the mind first and foremost, the physical manifestation of art—both visual and verbal—could in the Middle Ages be

used as a strategy for looking inward and for guiding readers toward how to interpret text (and the text of the world) in order to live justly. The nature of image, with its deep associations with Christ as Image and human beings made in the image of God, was revelatory, for image could open a window into the innermost qualities of being. The icon, with its “inverse perspective” is a good example of this cultural tendency. Ouspensky notes that the surface of the icon does not feign depth but remains realistically flattened so that the viewer does not go into the image: “the point of departure,” he claims, “... lies not in the depth of the image, but in front of the image, as it were in the spectator himself” (41). Such a paradigm helps explain why it is that ekphrasis in the Middle Ages is less concerned with representing physical manifestations of art than it is with exploring the *spaces* in which the human intellect and soul are formed and in turn inform each other, especially at the communal level.

There are many more ekphrastic works in the Middle Ages than what has been previously assumed. It is particularly important to read medieval visions, especially the dream vision and mystical vision texts, through an ekphrastic lens because this mode dictates its own parameters that are necessarily different from other recording forms or methods; the content of the ekphrastic vision therefore will be different from other forms, such as histories, encyclicals, letters, charters, or ledgers. Because ekphrasis entails a process of translating one composition into another, it has the distinct ability to revise; because it uses the visual faculties of the mind, it also affects how the ekphrastic object is remembered. Tamar Yacobi explains the “peculiar logic of recontextualizing” that is the domain of ekphrasis: “the visual artifact becomes in transfer an inset within a verbal frame. Thereby it comes to signify in a new way and to serve new purposes, as well as

unfold on new medial axes, all of them determined by the writer's frame of communication" (23).

If concrete compositions of art are not described in the ekphrasis of the Middle Ages, then it is necessary to explore what other forms ekphrasis might take. It appears overwhelmingly, as I mentioned above, in passages that incorporate notional ekphrasis, an ekphrasis of an image created in the mind rather than shaped or imprinted with any material medium. Taking this culturally pervasive representation of the immaterial, imagined artwork as a cue, I propose that the primary ekphrastic work of the Middle Ages was that of the ideologically valued form of art, art formed already in the mind as a distinct composition. There are two primary genres of medieval literary work that readily fit such an understanding of ekphrasis: the dream-vision text and the mystical visionary text.⁴

There are a number of elements that make the dream vision and mystical vision appropriate genres for ekphrastic analysis. The first-person narrative typical of both kinds of vision is an important aspect of ekphrasis, especially in terms of its personal, contemplative tendencies. But there are other considerations as well. Both dream vision and mystical vision are always framed as such; their interpretations depend absolutely upon a reference to themselves as compositions. In the case of the dream-vision text, there is always a signal of a break from material reality either through the falling asleep of the hero, as in the *Book of the Duchess*, *Pearl*, and *Piers Plowman*, or through an immediate metaphorical sign of a shift into another world (the *Inferno*'s "Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita/Mi ritrovai per una selva oscura"). The mystical vision authoritatively declares that it is set down at the behest or because of the greater

Authority; it announces itself as a work, as a created text. Krieger, in his *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign*, is one of the first critics to draw attention to self-reflexivity as a key characteristic of ekphrasis. Most important, however, is what both kinds of text are used for: they are contemplative texts, sometimes didactic, that instruct not only the hero of the text (whether this be the fictional character, the narrator, or the recipient of a vision) but also the reader. They finally are guides to interpretation, inviting questions, revising assumptions by rendering cultural signs more complex and layering their significations through the composition of multiple realities. Concerned with the gaze, albeit an inward one, they make us see ourselves again.

In the reappraisal of medieval work formerly not understood as ekphrastic and a consideration of contemporary ekphrastic work, what becomes clear is that Heffernan's frequently cited definition is not working. The gaping hole in this definition should be considered shocking, because it is not the visual work of art, the visual representation being represented; it is the perception of the visual representation that is interpreted and translated into a verbal form. Part of the problem is that in academic literary criticism, perception of experience—especially the experience of analyzing a text—has often been transparent (and thus the rise in reader-response theory). Carruthers further complains that “the main emphasis in literary studies for the past twenty-five years has been on [hermeneutical validity], while the basic craft involved in making thoughts, including thought about the significance of texts, has been treated as though it were in itself unproblematical, even straightforward. It is neither. In the idiom of monasticism, people do not ‘have’ ideas, they ‘make’ them” (*Craft* 4-5). The ekphrastic representation of a composition is filtered through a making in the mind. To include this contemplative

nature of ekphrasis, rather than focusing solely on the dialectical tradition of the *paragone*, I believe that the definition needs to take into account the modal agency of ekphrasis rather than just its product end and recognize the complex processes of perception, memory, translation, interpretation, and composition with which it engages. It is a composition translating another composition, often from one medium to another, *but not always*. This barest beginning of a definition, of course, broadens the field to a great extent but not necessarily to the point, as Krieger's definition does, of collapse, for its concentration is more on kind of agency rather than kind of medium. It does, however, begin on the other side to threaten aesthetic boundaries, and these are much larger boundaries: the question is no longer merely "what works are ekphrastic?" but becomes "what can be considered art?" and "What is an image and where can image manifest itself?" Assumptions about what art is and of what it is comprised are challenged by a definition of ekphrasis that takes into account a medieval understanding, however unsystematic, of the nature of art. This study will not attempt to answer those questions definitively; it will examine, however, ekphrasis as a mode in which a text or institution tests its own viability.

There are current studies in the field that acknowledge ways of understanding how ekphrasis works and what effects it has other than the *paragone* and the *ut pictura poesis* theoretical veins. Barbara Fischer presents ekphrasis as "a form of critical meditation": "The poet in the museum approaches the visual arts from an angle of displacement that invites a mix of commentary, homage, resistance, argument, and self criticism [...] poets use ekphrasis to allow for an interplay of complicity and provocation" (3). Cole Swenson, in her essay, "To Writewithize," notes that her interest in ekphrastic work extends to

those pieces that are “peripatetic” (150), that walk alongside other works: they are not simply mimetic or confrontational. Andrew Becker’s short analysis of Homer’s shield of Achilles earnestly protests that “the purpose of ekphrasis in juxtaposing verbal and visual art is surely not to decide which of the two is the superior medium.” But is, “rather, to enhance each medium’s communicative power by way of the other’s” (X). Becker is correct; the binary arts-vying-for-dominance model cannot fully conceive of or explain an art that helps humans contemplate complex and variegated chains of contextual meaning. Ekphrasis is not just a hot-spot for revealing binary conflicts in a culture, despite its use of two distinct media of art, though that is part of what humans can do by utilizing it. It is a tool of contemplation. This statement may not sound as theoretically sophisticated as the arguments of Mitchell and Heffernan, but it must be emphasized that ekphrasis is not the logical decalcomania that each critic attempts to affix to cultural desires and conflicts. Ekphrasis indulges not only in a moment of sheer impossibility but also in a space where designations refuse to solidify. While Mitchell touches on this with his concept of ekphrastic despair—the impossibility of the translation of the visual experience into verbal description—he at the same time implies that the translation of visual to verbal must still work inside the domain of logic, that the gaps in logic from one aesthetic designation to the other still point to how they *should* work. But because of the recent theoretical and critical work of Fischer and works from such poets as Guest, Kathleen Fraser, and Ciaran Carson, whose poetry emphasizes a *compositional* introspection and is courageous enough to step outside the realms of logic, it becomes possible finally to understand medieval mystical and dream compositions as ekphrastic.

Fischer's work in particular is essential to reshaping the definition of ekphrasis and the ekphrastic canon. She resituates the framework of ekphrasis from the mimetic tradition and paragonal axis to the workings of a kind of exophora termed *deixis*. *Deixis* is a linguistic process wherein words rely completely upon context for their interpretation. In the case of ekphrasis, the significance of words depends upon both the reader's (on one level) and the text's knowledge that the ekphrastic text refers to another composition and to the speaker's apprehension of that composition. *Deixis*, Fischer asserts, operates along an I-you axis in ekphrastic poetry; it is personal, intimate in tone, sometimes autobiographical, concerned with unearthing or unlocking knowledge that lies beneath the seen. Many of the critical analyses done by the giants in ekphrastic theory, especially Heffernan and Mitchell, have been performed with a reading of these texts in a historical tense, a tense that excludes the personal and autobiographical (146). In other words, both Heffernan and Mitchell have read ekphrastic texts as objective, as summations of a subject's impersonal observation of the interrelation of "the sister arts."

This reading might be one mechanic of ekphrastic works, but it is certainly not their *raison d'être*. *Deixis* works better as an interpretive framework than the *paragone* if simply for the fact that the *paragone* enforces ideological struggles for dominance within texts; the *paragone* doesn't just uncover but perpetuates a cultural myth that does not explain why ekphrasis is so long-lived in Western literature. It does not explain what ekphrasis is for, or why authors use it as a literary strategy. Because of this oversight, the real backbone of medieval ekphrasis—the dream-vision text and the mystical visionary text—remains unstudied. But the use of the mode by certain authors whose interest in it is more about moving the reader through a process of apprehension makes possible a

reconsideration of key texts that have been neglected. Fischer notices in her examinations of ekphrastic poetry by contemporary authors that many foreground an “I” and feature it in relation to the ekphrastic object by way of emphasizing the interpretive process. Fraser’s “You can hear her breathing the photograph” in her collection *Discrete Categories Forced into Coupling* frames the ekphrastic description of a photograph of Bernini’s *Daphne and Apollo* with a personal contemplation of the domestic space and how, particularly in that space (which ideologically has been typed less important or secondary to public space), strict lines of category break down in favor of desires and contemplation, in favor of noticing the small—seemingly insignificant—details of life that are strategically over-wrought here: “The parquet geometry of the wooden floor expanding, as if giving-up an hour of footsteps randomly wandering backwards, forwards” (*Discrete* 47). Rather than emphasize an impersonal confrontation between visual and verbal arts, Fraser makes plain that the process under scrutiny is not the arts themselves but the interpretation and translation that is their condition: a fact pointed to by the frequent use of an “I” whose subjectivity shifts and the concentration on the gaze of the author, the gaze of the photographer, the gaze of Bernini, and finally the gaze of Apollo. While this use of the “I” as a signal to make interpretation opaque exists in such traditional medieval ekphrastic pieces as the *Knight’s Tale*, it is overwhelmingly used in the dream vision to uncover flaws in interpretation or what has been left out: the “I” in the *Book of the Duchesse* who misinterprets the words of the Black Knight; the “I” in the *Roman de la Rose* who foolishly justifies looking into the perilous mirror by asserting that he does not know the consequences (oh yes he does!); the “I” in *Pearl* who misinterprets his place in the “other” world by inviting himself to stay there without

asking leave of the “lord,” and so on. But medieval ekphrastic texts will also highlight an “I” that is diffuse rather than singular. As A. C. Spearing proposes in his *Textual Subjectivity*, the “I” of the Middle Ages is not the same narrative consciousness as the singular perception presented in the novel; it is a multiple consciousness that will complicate the framework of the “I” and certainly complicate the composition of its perceiving.

But there is another facet in the use of the “I” that involves not only processes of interpretation but also how humans construct through image an understanding of the world around them. Such a process is done largely through memory. Carson’s work in *Belfast Confetti* and *First Language* uses the “I” in connection with memory as a particularly visual composition: the “film of the mind’s eye” as he calls it in “Schoolboys and Idlers of Pompeii” (*Belfast* 54). Memory for Carson is connected to—or is part and parcel of—the making of pathways or maps, compositions that tell us how to go about living our lives personally and politically. How we remember, Carson clearly paints in such poems as “Second Language” (the memory of his childhood coming-to-speech) and “Brick” (memories of interrogation and childhood mud-battles), is a composition and is very visual. As Carson repeats again and again certain images in both *First Language* and *Belfast Confetti*, the reader comes to realize that humans build themselves through the sediment of images collected through experience, language, and the language of experience.

Memory is not only a fashionable preoccupation in contemporary theory and works of art; it was also considered the mind’s primary compositional faculty of the Middle Ages. The cultural priority the Middle Ages placed upon memory is surprising to the modern

mind when one considers how much the imagination has been canonized in Western literature since the end of the eighteenth century and in the New Critical theory and scholarship that helped build the English departments of the twentieth century. For the medieval mind, however, as Carruthers's perspicacious study asserts, "the act of making a text was thought to proceed in order to stress its origins in the activities of memory" (*Book of Memory* 194). Carruthers reminds the reader that memory is not merely a "rote" activity, a mindless "repeating-back," but operates as filter, sorter, and builder, cementing images it constructs from experience, whether the experience is physical or intellectual in nature. Memory is also the primary activity that bridges the personal and the public; it is the great contextualizer, for it recalls compositions enacted or encountered before and works them into its own design, thereby creating a platform or ground from which to approach new experiences, new texts, new ideas. Carruthers affirms repeatedly that memory is largely a visual or imaging faculty; it is this visual capacity that is of particular interest in my study of ekphrasis. The use and acknowledgement of memory in the mystical-visionary texts is not accidental, but intrinsic to their status as ekphrastic for they explicitly work with the memory of an imaginal composition; the one can hardly be extricated from the other. And because ekphrasis is so closely connected to memory and its processes of composing and interpreting, and thus is a living reaction to these processes, ekphrasis effects the closing of the "life versus art gap": it is the composition that tells us representation is part of the living of life, not at a remove from it.

There is another quality to the ekphrastic mode that bears upon its ability to link life with representation, and that is its power to draw together the past, present, and future. A matured recognition of this tendency in ekphrasis comes about in large part because of

the thought about art, its reproduceability, history, and time that is part of Walter Benjamin's oeuvre, thought that inspired the theoretical movement of historical materialism and continues to inspire critics now. In "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Benjamin memorably writes, "During long periods of history, the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity's entire mode of existence. The manner in which human sense perception is organized, the medium in which it is accomplished, is determined not only by nature but by historical circumstance as well" ("The Work of Art" 222). These words echo in contemporary criticism, for they state with utter clarity the condition of circumstance within which any text is created. A text is tied to circumstance thus in its inception and materiality, but not semantically. Semantically, it is subject to any historical circumstance and the meanings that arise from that culture's system of signification. Benjamin emphasizes, however, the danger threatening a semantic reading that does not take into account the material and historical situation out of which the text arises. Because ekphrasis is a revision and therefore very concerned with working through cultural values, theory that employs the historical materialist's methods is more apt to understand any given ekphrastic project. Sara Lundquist's readings of Barbara Guest's ekphrastic poems are a good example of how employing this strategy uncovers Guest's struggles with the gendered positions of women and their creating in such poems as "The Poetess" and "The Farewell Stairway."

Benjamin offers other interpretative gifts as well, gifts that empower the process of ekphrasis and reveal it as not a contest of authenticity but a conversation, a production of meaning. Benjamin makes opaque the illusion of artistic uniqueness, of the authoritative text.

One might subsume the eliminated element in the term “aura” and go on to say: that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. This is a symptomatic process whose significance points beyond the realm of art. One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. (“The Work of Art” 221)

Ekphrasis by its revisionary nature rails against “the unique and authentic text,” but again, this idea had not been developed in ekphrastic theory until Marxist-feminist critics schooled in the tradition of Benjamin began working with ekphrasis. And though the ekphrastic work of art may not be “mechanically” reproduced, it is not a distant cousin to such reproduction but rather shares in some aspects the detachment from tradition and the category-dissolving power of metonymic multiplicity. This kind of multiplicity comes to the fore with photography and reaches a new height with the advent of film.

Benjamin’s particular focus on film and its status as a new medium that can tell us new things about the nature of art must be appreciated. He discerns that certain artistic fashions of a particular time—seemingly decadent and therefore lacking vitalities—manifested the frustrations against the limits of an older form:

One of the foremost tasks of art has always been the creation of a demand which could be fully satisfied only later. The history of every art form shows critical epochs in which a certain art form aspires to effects which could be fully obtained only with a changed technical standard, that is to say, in a new art form. The extravagances and crudities of art which thus appear, particularly in so-called

decadent epochs, actually arise from the nucleus of its richest historical energies. In recent years, such barbarisms were abundant in Dadaism. It is only now that its impulse becomes discernible: Dadaism attempted to create by pictorial—and literary—means the effects which the public today seeks in the film. (“The Work of Art” 237)

To Benjamin’s eye, the cinematic film is the break-out of the frustrations of Dadaism; it is what makes sense of their non-sequitur exclamations. But also, and this must be considered, film contributes to the conversation of the relationship between the arts in such a way that it makes possible the discovery by the modern eye its dynamic character. Benjamin continues, “For the entire spectrum of the optical, and now also acoustical, perception the film has brought about a similar deepening of apperception” (235). Film’s potentially unlimited reproduction into new contexts, creating legions of new meanings and interpretations, provides the future for the criticism and theory of ekphrasis that, limited by the medial strictures of analysis, always has to catch up with the action of ekphrasis itself. The dynamism of ekphrasis has always existed, especially so in the medieval dream visions and mystical visions: works of art that move in the mind and that refuse to arrest either time or history.

And of course from his “Theses on a Philosophy of History,” Benjamin presents his own famous allegorical ekphrases, the Turkish automaton of the historical materialist project and the Angel of History (after a painting by Klee) whose “face is turned toward the past” and who is propelled “into the future” by the great storm “blowing through Paradise.” Benjamin’s work is all the more relevant to ekphrasis as he creates ekphrases specifically to illustrate more deeply his thought on time and history. I believe that this is

not coincidence but rather a recognition that the translation from one composition to another is itself the carrier and performance of the distinct relationship of representation to time. Benjamin's timely and untimely ekphrases make perceiving polytemporality as a distinct function of ekphrasis possible in current ekphrastic theory.

The foregrounding of the I-you axis of *deixis*, the emphasis on memory and envisioning as visual composition in the work of medieval writers and contemporary poets, and the status of ekphrasis as a polytemporal form that renews and revises cultural memories shifts the position of ekphrasis from a critical theory immersed in the deconstructive quibbling of how its linguistic mechanisms fit into power contests between binary categories of verbal and visual to a literary mode that works to help others refashion how humans understand separation, division, category, and unity. The difference between the two strains of criticism ultimately lies in an emphasis on mechanics versus purpose, or *doxa* versus *praxis*, a similar distinction to the one Carruthers makes in her study on *memoria*. Whether the ekphrastic work in question adumbrates spiritual progress or the silencing of women or the revaluing of memory and experience and/or the dis/re-placement of logical boundary, an emphasis on purpose acts as a reminder that ekphrasis involves human desires to teach and learn. In an engagement with it, the reader (or critic) comes to a place of constant rumination.

The general aims of this study are fourfold: to recognize and examine the medieval vision-text, the primary form of ekphrastic text in medieval literature; to ascertain why it is important to analyze these texts through the lens of ekphrasis; to consider how and why this latent ekphrastic form, the vision-text, can resurface now both in practice and in critical appraisal thanks largely to English and American postmodernist poetry and

theory; and to consider ways in which new understandings of ekphrasis gleaned from the structures of medieval ekphrastic texts can speak to and transform reading practices and interpretation of contemporary ekphrastic poetries. Examinations of medieval literature will mainly focus on English works, though a few continental texts will make appearances also, in particular Hildegard of Bingen's *Scivias*. Studies of contemporary poetry in the conclusion of the dissertation will be limited to work appearing in the last four decades, as it is principally during this time that poetry and poetics theory have become explicitly aware of ekphrasis as a strategy for revisioning.

The first three chapters concern the medieval dream-vision text. Discussion in the first chapter will outline the characteristics of the dream vision that correlate with ekphrastic elements. The chapter will also treat the difference between ekphrastic renderings of a static art object as per the traditional conceptions of ekphrasis and the dynamism that characterizes the medieval ekphrastic dream vision. As Krieger has somewhat authoritatively defined the effect of ekphrasis as the "still moment," this chapter considers what motion, an obvious mechanism of the dream-text, brings to the understanding of ekphrasis. The dynamism of medieval ekphrasis rides alongside a subjectivity every bit as kinetic, rather than one still or fixed. Through Spearing's new readings of medieval textual subjectivity, Elizabeth Bergman Loiseaux's analysis of ekphrastic characteristics, and deictical readings of dream moments in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* and Dante's *Purgatorio*, this introductory chapter will pave the way for closer discussions of the body, space, time, and ethical considerations in the subsequent chapters treating ekphrasis in *Pearl* and *Piers Plowman*.

The guiding question in the chapter on *Pearl* asks specifically how the literary/formal techniques of the dream vision as an ekphrastic work of art perform with and cultivate its goals of spiritual “sentence and solas.” A look at how the ekphrastic body relates to the confluences of bodies—the dead daughter, the speaker, the City, the pearl, the text—will also be an important conversation in terms of how composition in (and of) the ekphrastic moment calibrates and catalyzes “steps” in the experience of learning and the experience of grief. Via Joan Retallack’s poethics and Jane Bennett’s fractal poetics, this chapter positions the poem’s vibrant revisioning of biblical iconographies as an imagining otherwise that has material effects on the body in grief.

The chapter focused on *Piers Plowman* will first consider the differences in the ekphrastic natures of *Piers Plowman* and *Pearl*. These differences are important to ascertain, for the two poems are so unlike in style and form that such a discussion will be a way of introducing and detailing the varied continuum of medieval ekphrasis and the different styles it can employ and purposes for which it can be used. Whereas *Pearl* delivers even, incremental instruction for spiritual enrichment and solace in a state of grief, *Piers Plowman* utilizes its circuitous ekphrastic dreams to emphasize the importance of physical work’s connection with the divine inheritance of human beings. As Holi Chirche intones, “faith withouten feet is feblere than nought/And as deed as a dorenail but if the dedes folwe” (B.1.186-87), and *Piers Plowman* is an enactment of this injunction, not just in content, but in the constant revisioning within and of the text. Furthermore, the chapter claims that ekphrasis is a solid framework from which to approach the patchwork and “fragmented” construction of *Piers Plowman*. The text’s circularity, its anachronisms, and non-linear narrative structure are in part manifestations

of the polytemporal characteristics of ekphrasis. Some consideration will be given to the revisions between the B-text and C-text specifically because the C-text elides key boundaries between the two states of waking and dreaming, thereby questioning what constitutes reality and reversing the reader's perceptions and assumptions about distinctions between the physical and spiritual world. The calling into question of boundaries is a salient feature of ekphrasis; what is striking about *Piers Plowman* is that the text attempts even to erase those boundaries that set up the ekphrastic moment.

The subsequent three chapters will treat the ekphrastic nature of the medieval mystical visionary text. The issue of the immediacy of the vision as it is received versus the argument that all such visions are unavoidably mediated will be discussed. The immediacy/mediacy issue has been a barrier to both aesthetic and cultural studies of the mystical vision and this chapter discusses why the issue is in fact a smokescreen for more important issues at hand concerning the mystical vision text's tie to memory and cultural memory and its dramatic mechanics of apophrisis and cataphrasis. The chapter will employ especially the work on medieval memory by Carruthers as she insightfully connects issues of authority and interpretation with the composition of memory and the memorization of cultural texts.

Chapter Five details visionary segments from Hildegard's *Scivias*, while noting that her textual visions are built and scripted in the manner of the classical architecture of memories. Hildegard's chapter will focus especially on how ekphrasis lays bare concerns with authority and identity through the ways that cultural depictions of public and private space are visually interwoven. Chapter Six, following the close ties between ekphrasis and revision, discusses differences between the texts of Julian of Norwich: her first text,

A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman, and her revision twenty years later, *A Revelation of Love*. Similar to my questions involving the text of *Piers Plowman*, I ask here what can be discerned from the changes she makes to the revision and how ekphrasis functions within the deliberate revisioning. Chapter Six thus features close readings of Julian's lord and servant and motherhood of Christ chapters in *A Revelation of Love* and discusses how the polytemporal patterning of Julian's revising slips beyond solely human pattern and participates in a larger universal pattern, what Jeffrey Cohen has termed "inhuman art." The term has implications for the nature of ekphrasis and the nature of art.

The conclusion of this study is titled "The Gift of Medieval Ekphrasis: Contemporary Ekphrastic Poethics and the Question of Art." Using what I have discovered of medieval ekphrasis as a springboard, this last section divulges how certain contemporary works are similarly ekphrastic. A question inherent in this comparison is what contemporary poetics mean to this study, but I would be remiss if I did not at least proffer the question of what this study means to contemporary poetics and how the theories offered here, new additions to the on-going conversation about ekphrasis, may encourage change in the ways ekphrastic works being written now are read. Admittedly the concerns of contemporary works in the West differ from medieval thematics and topoi; for one, religion is not the driving force, nor is it the unifying cultural factor anymore, though spirituality is still in some areas a concern. Nevertheless, some implicit concerns of each time period intersect in terms of issues of authorship, authority, interpretation and revision, textual temporality, and the discernment or questioning of literary and artistic boundaries. In this last section I feature close readings of works by Guest, Carson, and Fraser, for each demonstrates a concern with the visual; but more than that, they focus

intently on that instant wherein one composition is translated and revised into another composition and question the cultural implications in the transaction of that translation. These works, despite their status as newcomers, are serious counterparts to the medieval works I study in this dissertation because they stress the translation of human experience into written story and all the faculties of memory and composition that the process entails.

2 The Ekphrastic Medieval Dream-Vision

It is important to differentiate at the outset the medieval dream-vision text from the literal dream; they are not one and the same, and methods of interpretation intended for the somatic dream limit greatly what can be discerned from both the workings and object of the textual dream. Stephen Kruger writes in *Dreaming in the Middle Ages*, “Ours is the century of the private dream” (1) and quickly outlines modern attitudes toward dreaming, from Freudian and post-Freudian interpretation of the workings of the unconscious mind to behaviorists’ dismissals of the dream as “leftovers” from daily routine or “as a kind of ‘reverse learning’” (1). The dream vision of the fourteenth-century has little to do with this understanding of dream; it is first and foremost a text whose object may or may not be a “real” dream at all but a fictionalized one.⁵ Thus, assumptions that psychoanalytical interpretation of a private mind might give insight into the inner workings of the text are of little use here as the medieval dream vision is a formal construct, not a private experience, not even the journaling of a private experience: it is not, as the stream-of-consciousness novels of the twentieth century represent, the psychology of a single subject. The dream-vision text is a text that contemplates composition, both the process of composing and that of apprehending a composition. It is about how we understand and interpret composition. Some may argue otherwise as popular interpretations suggest that the real heft of the dreams of Chaucer’s dreamer in *Book of the Duchesse* or of Will in Langland’s *Piers Plowman* concerns revealing, in between the lines, inside knowledge about character psychology: that the “I” of the text is a foolish narrator, his conclusions naïve and, more often than not,

flawed. But rather than positing that these texts are exercises in individual psychological character study, I think it is better to consider the “foolish narrator” a heuristic device, one among many, in a textual genre that is more concerned with the difficulties of representation, the beauties and precariousness of interpretation, and the representation of consciousness in and of a text. The dream-vision, as a structural form, is about the act of interpretation and as such it raises questions about how we code and decode text. How do we interpret text? What are our expectations—in sequence, logic, narrative form—for a given text?⁶

This is not to say that the dream-vision has nothing to do at all with psychology. The dream-vision is a subset in the genre of medieval romance and its development from the medieval romance is, to many critics, couched in the evolution of the individual and a proto-psychology. The early romance is characterized by an oftentimes rough, episodic structure: for instance, the sudden appearance of a giant in the eleventh-century *King Horn* (“Hit was at Cristemasse,/neiper more ne lasse./Pere cam in at none/A geaunt suþe sone...” 805-809). There are no indicators of a reflecting consciousness; action happens usually without explanation of motive. The resulting effect to modern readers, so used to the psychological underpinnings of novelistic narrative action, is undoubtedly jarring, if not just plain ridiculous. By the high Middle Ages, however, the romance had become lengthy in its telling; it had incorporated other genres, the *débat*, the lyric, the philosophical treatise, and others, into its structure, a structure that no longer read as bare, choppy action but contained much connective tissue (sometimes over-long to contemporary readers). Monika Fludernik traces this development:

The romance starts out with an episodic pattern but soon begins to string episodes together in order to create larger units which are less fast-paced and allow for a more detailed presentation of characters' psychology. Action sequences become less important, and characters' dialogue and psychological meditations are foregrounded. *Troilus* and Capgrave's *St. Katharine* have solved the problems of this process of condensation by evolving a macro-structural pattern in which larger scenes (consisting of dialogues or soliloquies) are strung together. The earlier romances are still battling with the exigencies of overcoming the episodic pattern. (120)

Fludernik also considers the move from the medium of oral storytelling to the written text the vehicle of change affecting the complexity of these texts. But what is most clear in this observation is the recognition of a movement from action to thought process, the first glimmerings in English literature of the so-called objective correlative. The difference between this medieval proto-psychology, however, and the psychology of the individual mind developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is one of focus and the means toward that focus. Psychology, as modern minds understand it, holds at its center the self: all currents of thought, conscious or unconscious, point to complex revelations of the individual in the psychological make-up of the psyche. It is crucial to understand that in the medieval mind, the inward gaze, introspection, seeing inside, is not about the self but about the universe, about the larger existence. It is an inversion of the microcosm into the macrocosm. The self is a means to transcendent forms, to Truth, to God, and not the other way around (for in psychoanalysis these become mythologies in psychological and social structures that always lead to the make-up of the individual). Kruger affirms

that in medieval epistemology, “Transcendent knowledge can be gained through the examination of the mundane, and, beginning with introspection, knowledge of the superhuman can be attained. In a waking vision, Julian of Norwich looks intently inward to find not just herself, but an ‘endlesse’ world of divinity” (139). The trivium had not quite yet made its foray into Renaissance humanism, and though the strings of romance invariably tug the human toward the center at its culmination, the dream vision, as a literary form, also resists this re-positioning of the human rather than the divine at the center of creation, partly because its roots reach further back than the inception of the romance.

According to J. Stephen Russell, the first concept that makes the development of the dream vision as a literary form possible is hermeneutics, put into practice in the West with Augustine’s idea of *uti versus frui*—use versus enjoyment. In this classification reading falls into two categories: intransitive reading, whose worth Russell explains lies in “the invisible inner worth of a soul moving imperceptibly to God” (87); and transitive reading, wherein the reader is caught up with the characters, empathizes, laughs, cries, enjoys—in essence, engages fantasy and loses him- or herself in the text. Intransitive reading, on the other hand, understands the text as part of the text of the world, of Scripture, God’s Grammar of the world. Augustine’s way of reading plants the seeds for a literary form that is dramatic or performative through his understanding of the reader’s relationship with the text, a relationship of appropriation rather than identification. It is a radical new idea of a text “that does not merely impart information but acts as a means for establishing a communion of spirits” (Russell 94).

Where the line between the somatic dream and the literary dream begins to become blurred is in the assumed use of dream theory, such as that of Macrobius and Calcidius, by authors of dream-vision texts. Blurred in the Middle Ages, that is; there were no hard and fast distinction between disciplines in the Middle Ages and certainly no institution of theory. It is necessary in this study to note where the experiential world and the theoretical world bleed into each other in the Middle Ages, because the two inform each other to a great extent. It is equally necessary, however, to insist on a separation between the literary dream-text and the experiential dream *as we understand it* in the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries, because applying this theory to the medieval dream text—as if it were experiential dream—would iron over the subtleties created by the formal elements of the dream-vision text. Some of those subtleties are inextricably joined with a morality concerning proper reception and interpretation of a text. Medieval dream theory is linked to Augustine’s distinctions of *uti* and *frui*, especially in the sense that in the medieval dream catalogue some dreams are considered valid and even prophetic, while others have the ability to lead the dreamer astray and are best ignored.

The first official dream vision in the West is Cicero’s *Somnium Scipionis*, which is preserved in Macrobius’s *Commentary* on it. The *Commentary on the Somnium Scipionis* was written in the fifth century and was popular in the Middle Ages for Macrobius’s classification of kinds of dreams: veracious dreams, of which the *visio* is the highest, then the *oraculum*, and the *somnium*; and false dreams, the *insomnium* and the *visum*.⁷ Additionally, both Calcidius, in his translation and annotation of Plato’s *Timaeus*, and Augustine classify dreams and dream hierarchies. What is notable about this kind of classification in late antiquity is that it serves to multiply the meanings and possibilities

of the dream in reality and later, in fiction. Kruger asserts that though Macrobius's and Calcidius's theories of dream seem derivative of the ideas of philosophers before them, they are not. Their theories are far from timid and are less rigid than those of Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Lucretius, Synesius of Cyrene, all of whose theories tended to place the dream at either end of a spectrum from divinely gifted to entirely mundane. "The project of these Neoplatonic writers," Kruger writes, "was less passive than their reliance on earlier work might imply":

The inclusiveness of their treatment of dreams does not finally reflect an inability to make the kind of distinctions that 'more daring minds' do. Rather, these writers consciously refused to depict the dream experience as unvarious. Calcidius strongly emphasizes the diversity of dreams . . . and firmly rejected Aristotle's unitary approach as overly simple. (20)

This acknowledgment of variety makes overt the requirement called forth by the dream encounter for one to be on one's toes in matters of interpretation.

But these hierarchies and classifications do more than elicit the careful interpretive response, as important as that is. They also catalyze what Kruger sees as the double character in the medieval understanding of dreams and the dream vision.

The simultaneously dual and hierarchical structure central to the classification of dreams in both Macrobius and Calcidius characterizes Neoplatonic treatments of a wide range of phenomena, not just dreams. Built into the Neoplatonic universe is a pattern of opposition and mediation. . . . intermediate terms allow a universe radically divided to be at the same time a unified whole. . . . The meditative

processes that work to unify the Neoplatonic universe also operate, on a smaller scale, within the individual human being. (32-33)

Just as self-introspection yields itself to uncovering the truth of Essences, the design of the Universe reflects the soul of the human being: the medieval universe is one of analogue, reflection, and inversion. Dreams to the medieval mind, Kruger explains, are relegated to the workings of the soul, that which draws together the physical or mundane components of existence with the ethereal and divine realities of existence. Because of this position assigned to them by the Neoplatonists, “dreams, like soul, are able to navigate that middle realm where connections between the corporeal and incorporeal are forged, where the relationship between the ideal and the physical is defined” (34). This is also the nebulous realm where category is made and unmade, its dividing lines less than solid. Questions of reality, perception, and interpretation move to the forefront when the defining boundaries of category are questioned as they are by structural agencies in the dream vision and as they are in the ekphrastic work. The medieval dream-vision text in fact is a highly sophisticated and stylized form of ekphrasis.

I have traced the etiology of the dream vision with the intent to show what it has in common with purposes of ekphrasis. What follows is a point by point comparison and analysis of qualities, structures, and practices that both share. Many of the defining characteristics of the dream-vision text align themselves with those of the ekphrastic text, most especially those which make the dream-vision a self-reflexive text, conscious of itself as a poem. A. C. Spearing, defining the dream-vision, asserts that it “has more fully realized its own existence as a poem”:

Compared with other poems, it makes us more conscious that it has a beginning and an end (marked by the falling asleep and awakening of the narrator) . . . that its status is that of an imaginative fiction (whether this is conceived as a matter of inspiration, or of mere fantasy, or somewhere between the two); in short that it is not a work of nature but a work of art. It is a poem which does not take for granted its own existence and of the need, therefore, to justify that existence. (4-5)

As a text, it speaks of itself as a constructed thing: it is artifice; it is made. According to Krieger, this characteristic of self-reflexivity is enough to categorize the dream vision as ekphrastic. Krieger speaks of a movement in the principle of ekphrasis from ekphrasis of a literal object to ekphrasis of the imagined object, what he calls a movement from ekphrasis to emblem: “Literal ekphrasis has moved, via the power of words, to an illusion of ekphrasis. The ekphrastic principle has learned to do without the simple ekphrasis in order to explore more freely the illusionary powers of language” (18-19). Krieger continues, “the poem as emblem, in effect supplanting its visual accompaniment, becomes the ultimate projection of the ekphrastic principle by representing a fixed object which is itself” (22).⁸ According to Krieger’s definition, the dream vision already participates in the ekphrastic principle on account of its consciousness of itself as a poem. But there is more to its ekphrastic status than self-reflexivity, which to my mind is a characteristic of ekphrasis but not its defining quality.

Nevertheless, this self-reflexivity is essential to the dream vision’s mechanics, and many critics have distinguished the dream vision as a complex genre rather than a simple literary frame because of the questions the text poses about itself as a composed text. Russell describes how the dream vision is much more than a set of literary conventions:

. . . the dream vision in late medieval English literature is more than a conventional frame or an obsolescent authenticating device. In the hands of Chaucer and Langland and the Pearl Poet, the dream vision genre with its accompanying rhetorical effects is essential to the themes and contents of the poems and is not simply a convenient fiction. In adopting the special problematic discourse created by Cicero, and explained by Macrobius, the discourse bounded and defined by Boethius and Dante, Guillaume de Lorris, Chaucer and the others wrote poems *ipso facto* about reference, authority, earthly knowledge, contents enhanced and actually enabled by the dream vision form. (2)

The definitions given by Kruger and Russell help to solidify the dream vision as genre: they are works with a fairly fixed form and structure decked with a set of recognized conventions that house a respective thematic content and reside upon their own eschatological lot. The dream vision's lot is the compositional field of ekphrasis.

It may be helpful to leave the dream vision proper for a moment and consider also medieval texts that present the ekphrastic dream vision in miniature in the course of their narratives. This critical move, drawing back from complicated and large texts to examine not unrelated ekphrastic dream-vision moments in other texts, brings into greater focus my inspection of ekphrastic function and purpose in the dream vision and crystallizes how moments of described visuality in medieval works have less to do with concrete specifications of artworks than with the intricate and allusion-filled compositions of the mind. Looking at Criseyde's dream in which her heart is exchanged painlessly with an eagle's and Troilus's dream of Criseyde and the boar, for example, throws into relief these private visual moments as signposts, highly tensed occurrences in the poem that

announce to the reader much more is going on beneath the surface of the plot action. Such moments leap into the agenda of the dream vision, and even if they do not enact its structure blow-by-blow because of tight textual condensation, these small dream moments are nevertheless weighted dynamically in the text. They are ekphrastic: they do not merely translate a visual representation but also hearken to the bloodlines of composition. These verbal translations of created dream images elicit interpretation according to the textual experience and world of the characters but also to the worlds of the narrator(s) and author. Thus, as the characters work to interpret the pictures of their dreaming, the reader is asked to hold in suspension her interpretations along with the narratives of other narratorial interpreters and that of the text as it is received as a whole. Not only is the mythology of the Olympian Greeks considered in the imagery of the boar and eagle, but it is specifically considered through the lenses of a mind that knows the schemas of Christianity and, especially in Chaucer's case, of Boethius and his treatises on fortune, free will, and the Great Chain of Being that moves from mineral to plant to animal to human. With such a panoply of references, a constellation of meanings, the pagan allusions counter the Christian with distinct tensions. The exchange with the heart of the eagle recalls Zeus's wooings, and the image of the boar provides an allusion to a hunt of Meleagros, whose life will then be cut short by the Fates, and these things happen in the story: well, kind of. Criseyde will be wooed but not with success on Troilus's part; Troilus will not defeat the boar, nor will he offer its pelt to his Atalanta. Each dream represents how the characters will not act in accordance with the mythological narratives. Each dream also represents moments wherein the characters are not fully as they should be: they have let themselves be led, by Pandarus, to be sure, but also by "false wordes,"

their own ideas about what love and romance are supposed to be, and therefore their inner worlds lie lower on the Boethian chain of being.

Such tiny literary affairs—these little textual dreams—have much to do with the dream-vision genre's connection to ekphrasis: they each represent a flat image that is also a composition including much more signification beyond what the pictorial words sign. Another example of medieval ekphrasis, though not a dream-vision text or moment, is an ever so brief image of an imagined mirror in *Troilus*. As Troilus first sees Criseyde, he makes the image of a mirror in his mind, an image that traces her figure, and this offers a glimpse of an ekphrastic moment whose signification is likewise fundamentally concentrated. The image of the mirror, to the European medieval world-view, was a device for in-text and outer-text reflection: reflection by and of all levels of text and readership. In this way, the medieval image of the mirror's qualities of visibility and introspection is also connected to the mechanics of dream vision. At his first sight of Criseyde, Troilus does what all good (Pagan? Christian?) courtly lovers do: he makes a mirror of his mind to discern his purpose, his feeling, his fate and subsequent action. But the mirror shows the reader that he also does not see all or completely:

Thus gan he make a mirror of his minde,
In which he saw all wholly her figure
And that he well could in his herte finde.
It was to him a right good aventure
To love such one, and, if he did his cure
To serven her, yet might he fall in grace
Or elles for one of her servants pace,

Imagining that travayle nor grame
Ne mighte for so goodly one be lorn
As she, ne him for his desire ne shame,
All were it wist, but in price and up-born
Of alle lovers well more than biforn;
This argumented he in his ginninge,
Full unavised of his woe cominge. (1. Stanzas 53-54)

That Criseyde's figure is duplicated in Troilus's mirror-mind hints to the reader that his apprehension of her is more of himself than of who she is as a human being. In the mirror of his mind, we as readers are with Troilus and his perception of Criseyde as the Courtly Queen and his understanding of how to love, which in this case falls under the courtly conventions demanding the glorified servitude of the lover for a beloved he will never attain. Only the last two lines, the narratorial gloss, can snap the reader out of the fantasy, lines that move the reader from the composition of the image of Criseyde in Troilus's mind to the larger picture of story as a whole. Kruger relates the similarities and connections between the dream vision and the mirror in medieval narrative, clarifying the self-reflexive nature of both:

While the strong connection between dreams and mirrors thus strengthens our view of the dream poem as self-reflexive, it also helps qualify that view, allowing us to define with greater precision *how* exactly the dream vision's self-reflexivity operates. For the Middle Ages, mirrors were not solely agents of self-examination, and medieval dream poetry, even at its most self-conscious, is not narrowly self-concerned or solipsistic. The goal of looking into a mirror *is* in part

self-knowledge, and the dream poem does mirror itself, examining its own constructs and movement. Medieval mirrors, however, serve not only to reflect the self, but also to reveal information about the world beyond the self. Similarly, the self-conscious dream poem is not independent of external reality or truth that it attempts to represent. In its self-reflexive moments, dream vision raises not only self-contained formal questions, but also questions about how literature grasps and represents real and true entities existing outside the strictly poetic realm. The dream poem's self reflexivity, in other words, often leads it into questions of epistemology. (136-137)

Highlighted in the mirror passage of *Troilus* is the hint of how much he does not know, how much the mirror of the mind, while reflecting the conventions of courtly love and how the world has told him to love, is ignorant of what love will really mean for Troilus. In the passage above, Kruger has most likely in mind the paramount example in medieval dream-vision poetry of mirror imagery: the dreamer gazing into the mirror in the Garden of Love in Guillaume de Lorris's *Roman de la Rose*. The dreamer sees not only himself, as Narcissus does, but also the garden behind him, and the "perfect" rose that captures all his desire. It is the moment when the dreamer allows himself to be fooled utterly; it is also the moment, via a narrator's commentary or clues, that the reader sees the folly of both the world and the dreamer's delusion. Much the same happens in these few lines by Chaucer in *Troilus*, for though *Troilus* is not a dream vision, it has small key moments that recall the dream vision and effect what the dream vision accomplishes through ekphrasis: the questioning, as Kruger puts it, of "how literature grasps and represents real and true entities existing outside the strictly poetic realm."

Through their heightened awareness of composition, both the dream vision and ekphrasis inherently ask what the put-togetherness of literature has to do with life and how representation both reveals and conceals aspects of lived experience. Troilus's laughter in his death vision at the world, the end of "false wordes," and the final realization that through leaving the world *and the text* "thus began his loving of Criseyde" speak to the limits of a composition that by virtue of its participation in the realm of word and image are constricted. Love of real human beings is not in the romantic love of letters or the love of literary convention; love works in the ends of these things and, for Chaucer the poet, in the hard look at the limits of poetry.

I have discussed the dream vision's quality of self-reflexivity. Another characteristic of the genre is a splitting of the poet into the writer of the poem and the dreamer—a splitting that makes clear the poem is more than the report of the dream. There exist in the dream vision multiple layers of consciousness or perspective, and these layers are simultaneously veiled and revealed by the structure that "inevitably brings the poet into his poem, not merely as a reteller of a story which has its origin elsewhere, but as the person who experiences the whole substance of the poem" (Spearing, *Medieval Dream* 5). Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux suggests that the ekphrastic poem is "all about . . . otherness, and about how one engages it" (10), that it "stages an engagement with the foreign" (11), and her summation unquestioningly applies to the medieval dream vision. The splitting of the poet into the writer and the dreamer facilitates the dream vision's kind of engagement with the other and foreign: because the dream vision's "I" is a varied and unclear identity, the encounter with and description of the dream, the other, is not so clearly separate and delineated as the modern understanding of self/other (calibrated in

current ekphrastic theory to the categorical delineation between poem/painting). One has only to think of Chaucer's *Parlement of Fowles* or *Book of the Duchesse*, two of the more concise and regulated dream visions of the fourteenth century, to realize that though the waking selves of the poem don't seem to understand the gist of their dreams, the dreams are not entirely separate from them either; they are both, subject(s) and object, part of the same composition. There is no easy category in the dream vision.

In order to understand more fully how the medieval dream vision works as an ekphrastic work of art, it is necessary to call to examination and even dispel some of the modern and contemporary definitions and assumptions given to ekphrasis. Loizeaux's sketch of the understanding of ekphrasis, an understanding that she acknowledges comes down to us from the nineteenth-century romantics, is particularly concise and useful to me in comparison with medieval practices of ekphrasis. She defines "six tropes or practices" through which she discusses modernist and contemporary ekphrastic poetry: eternal stillness, into history, in the museum, narrative, the tutelary function, and talking pictures (or *prosopopoeia*) (19-23).⁹ I have no argument with ekphrasis defined through the practice of the tutelary function, as narrative, or even its characteristic as talking picture. These standards Loizeaux crystallizes are active in the medieval ekphrastic enterprise. My ears (and eyes) are vexed, however, at those definitions that tend toward regarding ekphrasis as an attempt to stabilize both the sign and subjectivity, namely those categories of eternal stillness, into history, and in the museum. Loizeaux, of course, has carefully contextualized her study of ekphrasis historically: she looks specifically at modernism and an aesthetic tradition coming out of nineteenth-century European romanticism. I wish, however, to bring the difference of medieval ekphrasis into the

general academic conversation to highlight the variance of ekphrastic play and to remedy oversights in critical classifications of ekphrasis that have favored understanding of art and representation belonging to the traditions of romanticism and modernism. Reframing the medieval dream vision as ekphrastic works to change drastically conceptions at the heart of theories of ekphrasis. As I mentioned earlier, except for a few canonical and generally agreed upon examples, medieval ekphrasis is largely unstudied because its main modes of operation—visual compositions made in the mind—have gone undetected. Not only is aesthetic composition understood differently in the Middle Ages but, as Spearing argues in his book *Textual Subjectivity*, conceptions of subjectivity and the speaking “I” of the text are quite different from those encoded in modernity. Because subjectivity is a focus in current theories of ekphrasis, strange or alternate versions of textual subjectivity necessarily obscure the ekphrastic modalities through which it is represented. To understand the medieval dream-vision text as an ekphrastic text requires reading ekphrasis differently, reading without the assumption of a divisive binary split between visual and verbal arts, and without the assumption of a single subjective narrator.

The dividing line between visual and verbal arts carries some historical ideological baggage. The theoretical tradition that has come down to current theory through the works of Lessing and Burke equates verbal arts with temporality and visual arts with spatiality. In other words, the two arts are divided by the dimensions through which they are experienced, and ekphrasis is the aesthetic principle that attempts to bridge the two dimensions. One of the first “defining” characteristics to melt away if the medieval vision-text is to be welcomed into the ekphrastic fold is the idea of the ekphrastic “eternal

stillness,” or “still moment.” Two strains of thought concerning this proposed ekphrastic troped deserve discussion here: the theory of Krieger and Loizeaux’s treatment of stillness in terms of the metabletics behind modernist and contemporary ekphrases. Krieger participates in this conversation by affirming that the inner mechanics of ekphrasis attempts to put into stasis the art that is temporal; this is the ekphrastic ambition, he claims, the urgency to make compatible and collapsible the two dimensions through which each art seemingly works.¹⁰ In fact, Krieger’s inscription of the “still moment” has been accepted almost unquestioningly by numerous literary readers and scholars who often take the term to mean literally a moment of stillness, in essence equating it with the moment of reflection or contemplative space that ekphrastic works inhabit (or perhaps cause the reader to inhabit). But this is not what he means by the “still moment.” Krieger claims rather dogmatically “that the ekphrastic dimension of literature reveals itself wherever the poem takes on the ‘still’ elements of plastic form which we normally attribute to the spatial arts.” As a result he explains, “the poem proclaims as its own poetic its formal necessity, thus making more than just loosely metaphorical the use of spatial language to describe—and thus to arrest—its movements” (266). What he means by “still,” rather than a characteristic of contemplative space, is more aligned with linguistic concept: the stillness he describes is that which he attributes to the natural sign, the object as sign that signals itself, not the sign that stands in for something else. The ekphrastic principle, he explains, “include[s] every attempt, within an art of words, to work toward the illusion that it is performing a task we usually associate with an art of natural signs” (9). Krieger believes that ekphrasis is an outcropping of a desperate desire in humans to sidestep the signifier, to arrive at the *objet petit a* (the Lacanian term for

what one desires), to force meaning and metaphor to rest at reality with a capital R. Krieger continues, “What is at stake in all these diverse attempts at ekphrasis is the semiotic status of both space and the visual in the representational attempt by the verbal art—an ultimately vain attempt—to capture these within its temporal sequence, which would form itself into its own poetic object” (9).

“Vain” and “illusory” are weighted words in these musings and place a certain judgment on the ekphrastic endeavor. Ultimately, Krieger’s line of thought derives not only from the intellectual estate of Lessing and Burke but also from the *ut pictura poesis* model inherited from Horace. The primary mechanism and purpose of *ut pictura poesis* is mimesis, to mime or mirror reality through verbal representation. But it is necessary to note that ekphrastic work doesn’t always pose as the ekphrastic object, and it is a great mistake to say that its *raison d’être* is at foundation an attempt to mimic the ekphrastic object (though some pieces admittedly do attempt a straightforward emulation). There is something else going on here, not just an attempt to “emulate the spatial character of the painting or sculpture” (9). And Krieger, of course, does not consider closely the ekphrastic work of the Middle Ages.

Krieger sees ekphrasis constructing a rigid body, or trying to do so at any rate. I would argue that the objective of the ekphrastic principle is rather to create relationships, connections. The ekphrastic body expands; its contemplative functioning is a mode of becoming rather than attempting to fix. It re-sees, re-perceives compositions; it assimilates, restructures, and makes something new, something that shares some of the skins and curves of its “object” (for lack of a better word) but has stretched them into new shapes and dimensions. It is too facile to say that the verbal sign occupies the

dimension of time or even that it occupies the temporal dimension (and not the spatial one) ideologically in our Western historical and cultural understandings of it. Some lines of criticism create this dual categorization, and these theories themselves become objects of ekphrastic and interarts theory and debate. But in considering actual ekphrastic practice, the experience of the relationship between the verbal and visual arts is much more complex than a binary categorization such as told by Lessing, Burke, Mitchell, Heffernan, and others, could allow and has been since the Middle Ages, if not before.

Loizeaux, on the other hand, while clarifying tendencies of “transcendence” and the perceived “timelessness of the work of art” (20) in romanticism’s use of ekphrasis, also admits the trope of stillness to be of the moment, a designation given to ekphrastic work by the era in which it is produced. According to Loizeaux, one of the exciting realizations brought about by contemporary revisionist feminist ekphrastic poetry is that “the work of art may prove not still” (20). This assertion is all the more vital to a theoretical concern with gender dynamics as the “still” work of art has historically been equated with the feminine. Such poets as Adrienne Rich, Fraser, Rita Dove, and Lyn Hejinian, among others, undermine the idea of art as “still”; in fact, a number of these poets treat as art certain visual compositions such as housework, memory, and dreams, which according to traditional aesthetics wouldn’t typically be considered art at all. It is important to add here that though the ekphrastic interaction between word and image in the Middle Ages confronts what is foreign, otherworldly, other, one does not attempt domination of the other, as critics such as Mitchell and Heffernan argue. Loizeaux admits that “it has been difficult to move beyond the appealing drama of *paragone*, with its plot of conflict and uncertain victory.” But she notes, under the lens of *paragone*

“every ekphrastic relationship looks like linguistic appropriation, every gesture of friendship like co-option, every expression of admiration a declaration of envy by the word for the unobtainable power of the image” (15). Much of ekphrasis isn’t merely description, isn’t merely mimetic in contest with the visual over which can be the most “real” or “beautiful”; in fact, much of it is reflective, conversational, inquisitive, and even at times accusatory or critical. The medieval practice of ekphrasis already knows this, which is one reason why it is important to go back and reclaim, rediscover the varieties of textual representation done through the ekphrastic mode.

The ekphrastic principle as it is employed in the medieval dream-vision is about the impossibility of arriving at Reality through art and language. If it cloaks itself in an illusion of being the thing it claims to be, it necessarily undoes that illusion in an almost didactic process of showing the reader how to understand the difference between fantasy and reality, or game and earnest. Its characteristics are thus the opposite of what Krieger claims them to be; the ekphrastic dream vision of the Middle Ages is not still or frozen but dynamic through and through, both in the sense of its signifying—it does not attempt to be a natural sign—and in the sense that its form and content work to move rather than be still. Russell describes how particular readings of *Pearl* understand that there is “a dynamic sense of the progress of the poem, a sense of movement from the personal, local, phenomenal, or sensory to the communal, universal, supernal, or spiritual . . . moving simultaneously outward and upward, away from the self and the world and mutability and the senses and toward ‘unknowing’” (161). Not only is medieval ekphrasis active and reaching, but it is also vivacious and familiar. Carruthers adds:

By contrast [with Stevens's jar or Keats's urn], art objects in medieval ekphrases tend to be loquacious, even garrulous. The ubiquitous *tituli* in paintings, mosaics, tapestries, and sculpture give even these material objects speech: they make them orators in conversation with an audience on a particular social occasion. Though the artifacts of medieval ekphrases are marvelous, like the jeweled Heavenly City or the obscure wonders in Countess Adela's bedroom, they are not alien, they are familiar, home. Nor are words the only elements that give "speech" to the medieval artifact. A painting such as the "Heavenly City" of the Beatus cycle is also an ekphrasis, an artifact which engages socially in a meditative dialogue with its viewers through the colors and forms of all its images. (*Craft* 223)

These images are meant to move with their audiences, jostle their memories, coerce them into participating with a great catalogue of social recollection. Medieval ekphrasis asks its reader to bring along the past, the colors and fanfare of biblical stories and Greco-Roman mythologies, but it inevitably draws its audience toward something else, toward a future, a becoming.

Nearly any example from the dream visions or mystical visions would suffice to showcase the inherent dynamism—a world of becoming—rather than Krieger's posited fixity of the ekphrastic moment. All the visions are in motion, and they are all compositions; one could compare them to cinematic motion with similar and kaleidoscopic points of view. Dante's Purgatorial friezes, however, may serve as the best example for ekphrastic motion and becoming, for not only are they included under the banner of a larger dream vision, the *Commedia* in its entirety, but they are also

representations of stone sculpture, ordinarily still, that in this case are infused with the ability to move:

Do not fix your mind on one place alone, said
my sweet master, who had me on the side where
people have their hearts.

Therefore I turned my eyes, and I saw behind
Mary, on the side where he was who was
prompting me,

another story carved into the rock; therefore I
crossed beyond Virgil and drew near it, so that it
would be wholly before my eyes.

There in the very marble was carved the wagon
and the oxen drawing the holy Ark, because of
which people fear offices not appointed.

Before it appeared people; and all of them,
divided into seven choruses, made one of my two
senses say “No,” the other “Yes, they are singing.”

Just so the smoke of the incense imaged there
made eyes and nose discordant as to yes and no. (10.46-63)

This passage is striking not only for its description of moving stone images but also for Dante the Pilgrim’s reaction to them. Unlike typical ekphrastic renderings, this ekphrasis engages more than the sense of sight; the ears and nose are brought into the mix of experiencing and translating a composition. Here we have the first hints that ekphrasis

may not be confined to the visual alone but may incorporate the workings of synaesthesia. The passage also highlights the moment of disbelief and belief—“discordant as to yes and no”—a tension that produces wonder. The moment is dynamic, so much so that the description requires more of the experiencing body than typical textual *enargeia*, which usually engages only the sense of sight. Rather than attempting to make “still” the frieze Dante witnesses, to bring the temporal verbal medium into a spatial visual one, to force the sign to represent and mean itself, the text does something far more interesting. Its ekphrasis has the symbol make present that which it signifies, *in the text*. This is very different from having the sign signify itself, as Krieger believes the ekphrastic text purports to do. The symbol, the figures of the frieze, makes present the action (humility) its action (singing) symbolizes. But the symbol is much more layered here, of course, and the frieze as a text is symbolic also, symbolic of textual representation’s action as method for learning. It makes present not only Dante’s process of learning but the text of the *Commedia* as a method or rubric of learning for the reader. Again, the symbols of the *Commedia* are even more layered than what I present here, their signifiers working metonymically rather than merely metaphorically. The allegories they create are multiple and, more often than not, incarnational and soteriological.

Because of its frequent investment in incarnation (whether textual or spiritual) and/or salvation, the ekphrasis of medieval dream-vision is not necessarily harnessed by a desire to move into the nostalgic past. The dream-vision, though containing myriad references to both biblical and Roman history and allegorical figures, is almost always staged in a kind of hazy narrative present, as it is with *Book of the Duchesse* and *Roman de la Rose*, and sometimes what turns out to be an eternal present, as with the *Consolation*, *Piers*

Plowman, and *Pearl*. The ekphrastic dream vision engages in a sense of time that is polytemporal. The ekphrastic “object” in these cases is mythological, archetypal, spiritual, and if rooted to any time and place, it is only ideologically rooted to the present of the medieval world, rather than to a physical painting or sculpture in a church or gallery. Rather than a modern nostalgia for some better idealized past, medieval dream-vision ekphrases concern the workings of *memoria* and operate where the lines between art and poetry, visual and verbal, and even thought and manifested action are not so fixed. The medieval conception of memory, *memoria*, is more concerned with the ordering and the composition of experience: *memoria* is the activity that allows human beings to make sense of existence and extrapolate meaning from it. (I will continue to discuss *memoria*, especially as Carruthers considers it, in subsequent chapters.) Unlike typical depictions of ekphrasis and its objects, the ekphrastic dream vision is not a “poem on an artifact”; it is not nostalgic and does not focus its revisions or desires for change in a single symbolic form. Loizeaux insightfully asserts as much about modern ekphrases’s practice of divining the construction of history. Funny things happen in the dream vision to both time and experience, to tangible reality and the reality of the mind: in the reading of the dream-vision report, there is simultaneously a presentation of the experience as it is happening and the representation of the memory of the experience.

This conflation of memory and experience is exemplified in Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*, one of the most influential texts of the Middle Ages. It is a composition at whose heart lies the medieval conception of reality, and time, and eternity, coalesced in the eternal present that solves the dilemma of divine foreknowledge and human free will. The vehicle for this preeminent philosophical solution, however, is not a straightforward

thesis but the convolution of dream, reality, image, and text. It is rather a form that employs multiple perspectives through the use of memory and *enargeia*. At the beginning of the *Consolation* where Lady Philosophy's arraignment is detailed minutely as she draws close to the dreamer and places herself at the foot of his bed, she says to the dreamer, "I do not need your library with its glass walls and ivory decoration, *but I do need my place in your mind*. For there I have placed not books but that which gives value to books, the ideas which are found in my writings" (16, emphasis mine). Although there is a more tactile ekphrasis of her dress, it is made clear to the reader and the dreamer that the mind—and this dream image of the mind—is the more weighted ekphrastic object. But interestingly enough the mind is not only object but also subject in the ekphrastic composition, however diffuse. There is a sense in medieval ekphrasis wherein the subject/object divide is made decisively unclear by an insistence on a reality more real than the tangible. The final capitulation in Boethius's dream composition to the vision of God is neither historical nor ahistorical but a vision in which each moment in time is happening each moment in time. Unlike the modernist project, the medieval ekphrasis takes the reader not merely into one or a few histories but into all history.

Loizeaux, after Fischer's study in *Museum Mediations*, asserts that a large number of modern ekphrases exhibit a "high degree of awareness, even anxiety, about the place of viewing, and ambivalence about the very foundations of public museums" (21). The museum, which comes into its own as a public institution in the nineteenth century, becomes the place of viewing the work of art, the place that legitimizes the work of art. It is also the space that pits subject against object, gazer against the gazed-upon, ranged against the walls or roped off in the middle of a room for every angle to be inspected.

Many modern and contemporary ekphrases are constructed in response to the anxiety about the museum space and the alienation of art. The place of tension in medieval ekphrasis, alternatively, teeters on the enterprise of the book itself: as the ekphrastic object is located in a narrative mind rather than in an institutional physical space specially ordained for it, confrontation with it also happens in the textual mind; they are both located in the same spaces and translated to the space of the page together. There is no real separation between the ekphrastic object—the dream—and the description of it. In the ekphrastic enterprise, whether modern or medieval, however, separations are numerous: between the verbal representation and the visual representation, between ekphrastic object and the viewer on the level of narrative, between ekphrastic object and viewer and the level of the text, and between ekphrasis and reader. The layering in the separation of the ekphrastic dream vision, however, is different from that of modern ekphrases, underscoring the inherent anxiety in medieval texts, one that does not surround the same binary, oppositional structures of the modern world. Art and word are both composition in the medieval world; apprehension of composition can take place either in the function of memory or on the page. The difficulties and vagaries of interpretation, however, multiply as composition moves to the page, and this tension is prominent in the dream visions *Pearl*, *Roman de la Rose*, the *Commedia*, and especially so in Chaucer's *Book of the Duchesse* and *Parlement of Fowles* and Langland's *Piers Plowman*.

There is one last thing to consider that may complicate the understanding of ekphrasis even further. I have discussed above guiding tropes, conditions, and practices—stillness, history, museum—attributed to modern ekphrases that either do not exist or work

differently in medieval ekphrases. One of the reasons behind these differences between medieval and modern conceptions of ekphrasis is connected to other ways of conceiving and encoding narrative subjectivity in medieval dream visions. The dream vision, though about representation and interpretation, does not always assume a central narrator, a central developed consciousness or self. One problem in modern theories of ekphrasis is that we assume the description comes from only one narrator, a developed character as it were. That assumption has led to the continuance of the *paragone* model of ekphrasis, a far too simplified model, in that the solidified subjective “I” posits itself over and against the other (in ekphrasis, the ekphratic description over the art object). But it is not necessarily the case that ekphrasis present the workings of one narratorial consciousness alone. Spearing, in his *Textual Subjectivity*, carefully deconstructs modern assumptions of the single narrator and argues that no such formula exists with any certainty or clarity in the Middle Ages, though much literature has mistakenly been read and interpreted according to this narratorial model in the last century. He explains:

Kittredge offered this idea [of the subjective narrator, whose interpretations are flawed] as a general truth about the *Canterbury Tales* in an age when the dramatic monologue was recently established as a prestigious poetic form and the questionable narrator was coming to be regarded as a crucial element in sophisticated prose fiction—a cultural moment, that is, that regarded individual human consciousness as prior to, and in a fundamental way more interesting than, stories. (104-5)

George Kittredge’s assertion has generally set the mold for scholarly interpretation ever after. Chaucer’s narrators, from the Nun’s Priest and the Wife of Bath to the dreamers in

Book of the Duchesse and *Parlement of Fowles*, Pearl's dreamer, Will in *Piers Plowman*: each of these "narrators" has been psychologically picked apart by critics and his or her words judged heavily against the characters' textual description, actions, and the action of the text. Because of the assumption of a narratorial consciousness, there is a tendency, Spearing surmises, for such characters to be interpreted unkindly, for the reader to hold herself superior to and more intelligent than the bumbling fool of a narrator. Spearing speculates that this might not be the best reading practice for medieval texts that were not necessarily composed with the interest of making the reader feel good and warm about her- or himself. He therefore insists that the assumption of the flawed narrator be questioned.

This questioning of the umbrella assumption of the narratorial consciousness ultimately changes how we construe the mechanics of ekphrastic theory; it changes ekphrastic theory. Spearing notices that all texts, from nineteenth-century novels to medieval narrative poems to contemporary films, are now interpreted according to a central consciousness after the textual models presented and expounded upon by Mikhail Bakhtin and Roland Barthes: in essence, there can be no narrative without a narrator. So pervasive is the consciousness of the novel, its Narrator has come to rule the roost. Thus, the popularity and long-standing influence of Kittredge's readings of Chaucer. The hermeneutical analyses of ekphrastic texts have followed the same model assuming a totalized narrator. Because of this assumption, the end and purpose of ekphrasis according to those who have graduated from the da Vinci/Lessing/Burke model (*paragone*) have been relegated to exploring the consciousness of a singular Self as it is determined by ideology. The *paragone* model in the relationship between the visual and

verbal arts erects a monumental face-off between the arts, a who-is-better-than-whom scenario. Definition, identification, delineation are the modes of action of this model; these seek to fix impermeable boundaries between the two arts and their content, their forms, what they accomplish, and how they work. Not only that, but the authors subscribing to this hermeneutical method are interested finally in asserting an opinion as a standard (which-is-better-than-which): yet another attempt at fixity. As Spearing asserts, the goal of the novel, the cohesion of a fully realized individual self, has bled over into interpretations of everything else, including texts written centuries before the birth of the novel.

Ekphrasis, too, existed long before the form of the novel and was employed not just as a carrier of a central and singular consciousness but as a formal method of rhetoric, as a heuristic device. As Spearing suggests in his reading of *Pearl*, this rejection of a “unitary narratorial consciousness” (158) seems “counter-intuitive” in works that compose themselves according to pictures in the mind of one person. Through a singular consciousness, of course, is how we understand vision as modern readers who look at texts often through the lens of personal psychology.

I am particularly drawn to Spearing’s recalibration of “individual human consciousness” and stories, for I think that understanding the dream vision according to conceptions that hold story as prior to and more important than the “individual human consciousness” is key to its special ekphrastic activity. One of the methods, noted by both Spearing and Fischer, through which the singleness or diffuseness of narratorial consciousness can be determined is by analyzing the deictical markers within the text. Deictical markers, words such as *this* and *that*, *here* and *there*, *now* and *then*, and so on,

are either proximal or distal. They refer to position, near or far, in either time or space. Verb tense and pronouns can also act deictically. *Deixis* helps orient a reader in a text: who is acting, from where and what time, relative to prior deictical markers. The storying helped along by *deixis* not only moves a plot along, introduces points of view, and orients a listener/reader but also traces the limits of a consciousness within a text. Spearing hints that such storying is what makes possible the development of the listener/reader's consciousness of self in relation to the surrounding world. We already have had hints of diffuse subjectivity according to the defining characteristic of "the splitting of the poet and narrator" that I discussed above and that has been a generally agreed upon requirement in the dream-vision genre. What the consideration of *deixis* in the dream vision makes clear is that this split is not so patent, but neither is there an absence of separation.

At this point I think it appropriate to consider a passage from a work whose interpretation some would unquestioningly assume is dependent on the recognition of a subjective consciousness, a discrete "I" going through the motions of making mistakes, learning, and coming to knowledge. Although it sounds like the stuff of a *bildungsroman*, it isn't. I quote from the dream during which Dante is taken up to Mount Purgatory by Lucia in *Purgatorio*:

In the hour near morning when the swallow
begins her sad lays, perhaps in memory of her first
woes,
and when our mind, journeying further from
the flesh and less taken by its cares, is almost a

diviner in its visions,

in dream I seemed to see an eagle hovering in
the sky, with golden feathers and open wings,
intent to stoop,

and I seemed to be where people were
abandoned by Ganymede, when he was carried off
to the highest consistory.

I was thinking to myself: "Perhaps by custom
the eagle strikes only here, and perhaps it disdains
to carry prey off in its claws from elsewhere."

Then it seemed to me that, having wheeled a
little, it descended terrible as lightning, and carried
me off, up as far as the fire.

There it seemed that it and I burned, and the
imagined fire as so hot that my sleep had to
break.

Not otherwise did Achilles shake himself,
turning his awakened eyes about in a circle, not
knowing where he was,

when his mother fled with him sleeping in her
arms from Chiron to Skyros, whence the Greeks
later took him away,

than I shook myself, as soon as sleep fled from

my face, and turned pale, as one who freezes
in terror. (9.13-42)

The passage begins “in the hour near morning” (“Ne l’ora...presso la mattina”), identifying when Dante the Pilgrim’s dream is occurring. But the next stanza complicates that placement with the deictical markers “when” and “our”: “and when our mind, journeying further...” (“e che la mente nostra, peregrina più...”). “When” (“che”) taken together with “our” (“nostra”) references common experience among human beings. Nor does that commonality distinguish between Pilgrim or Poet; the lack of specific deictical relation draws both together. As the dream-within-a-dream imagery begins, “in dream” (“in sogno”) and “I seemed” (“mi pareva”) dictate the entrance into the action; “in” and “I” each tell the reader that the poem has moved into private space, though that space and the perception of it is indistinct, as indicated by “dream” and “seemed.” There is next a view, fairly close, of an eagle and its golden feathers, ready to strike. And then suddenly the subject of this dream seems to be on earth where the community to which Ganymede belongs resides. The repeated “I seemed to be where” (“ed esser mi pareva là dove”) effects further confusion: is this merely a reference to Greek mythology? Or is the dreamer really there? Are we in the historical past or the present/past-tense of the meta-narrative? Placement and perception here are unclear. Separations and inversions also give and confuse position inside (and without) the text; that the image of Achilles introduced by “Not otherwise” is placed before “than I shook myself” gives the reader pause: who is speaking here? Is it the pilgrim or the poet, or both? Why do we go backwards in time to move forward in the action? Interestingly, both the action of Achilles and Dante the Pilgrim are tensed the same, as if acting at the

same time; they are conflated in relation to the dream. Furthermore, the “not otherwise”—which could have just as easily been a positive “as”—places two possible pathways within the framework of this scene: Dante—the poet? the pilgrim? the dreamer?—could have chosen to shake fearfully in a manner other than Achilles had, as a coward rather than a hero. The “not otherwise” plots the positioning of his fear as a heroic one, not a fear that will shirk and flee. The priority given to Achilles in textual order also recreates the image more strongly for the reader; his image, the bewildered son, loses for a moment its accord as vehicle. It seems to stand alone, this miniature and complete composition. Then the “than I shook myself” (“che me scoss’io”) jars the reader back and rearranges the Achilles composition in light of Dante’s fear at awaking to find an entirely new environs. But again, it is difficult to separate the pilgrim and poet, even though it has been generally agreed upon that such moments capitulate to the hindsight and oversight of the poet rather than the pilgrim. The narratorial voice here is so clear-cut. What Dante time and again gives to his reader is a composition, by virtue of its visual arrangement as a dream vision, whose contents are not always positioned where we think they are (think especially of the upside-downness of Hell), a composition in which subjective perspective shifts, whose histories are of the moment, and whose ekphrastic object is not the separate objectified other but more like the sea surrounding the swimmer. The translated symbols of the ekphrastic dream vision make that translation present by way of a diffuse subjectivity, not an airtight textual self, thus allowing for a multiplication of perspective and interpretation, catalyzing more and more conversation between and among the arts and minds.

I embark upon the following analyses of *Pearl* in chapter two and *Piers Plowman* in chapter three heartened at the thought that even if the dream-vision form has been largely lost, dreams have retained their special status as tension-laden moments, structured according to lines demarcating the visual, the illusory, and reality in literary texts. Representations of dreams make their appearances over the centuries, sometimes prominently and sometimes not. Certainly the dreamscape is currently noteworthy and flourishing in cinematic film. And it is beginning to be developed more fully again in the lyric cosmos, especially with the work of Fraser, Hejinian, Carson, Galway Kinnell, among many others. Dreams inhabit the work of novelists Italo Calvino, Stephen Millhauser, and Roberto Bolaño. Bolaño's are especially interesting, as the reader is not sure or forgets that the text is at that moment representing dream-reality instead of waking reality. Therein also lies one of the final and not dismissable powers of the medieval ekphrastic dream vision: often it textually channels Lethe and induces forgetfulness in the reader that she is reading the representation of a dream. She forgets temporarily that she is encountering a composition within a composition and often does not wake from this sleep until the dreamer awakes and comments upon the fact that he was dreaming. Sometimes the ekphrastic enterprise is working out in words what it has learned from image: the verbal and visual aren't always in contest in ekphrasis (nor does ekphrasis always solely concern the visual). As an ekphrastic work, the dream vision acts as a body that is attempting to learn both more about itself and more than itself. Its initial categories, therefore, are not permanent but fade, and the experience of the subject(s) becomes progressively more complex and more lucid through the text. I call this the movement of the ekphrastic body, a textual body whose demarcating lines are continually

in adjustment and relayed with the movement of the vision, the body that with its verbal voice is seeking to find the limits of a relationship (of representation, with the world and with others) that human senses inhabit, define, and confuse.

3 Poethics and the Ekphrastic Body in *Pearl*

The visual beauty of Pearl is immediate:

Dubbed wern alle þo downez sydez
With crystal klyffez so cler of kynde.
Holtewodez bryȝt aboute hem bydez
Of bollez as blew as ble of Ynde;
As bornyst syluer þe lef on slydez,
Þat thike con trylle on vch a tynde;
Quen glem of glodez agaynz hem glydez,
With schymeryng schene ful schrylle þay schynde.
Þe grauayl þat on grounde con grynde
Wern precious perlez of oryente;
Þe sunne bemez bot blo and blynde
In respect of þat adubement. (73-84)

[Ranged along the hillsides were the clearest of crystal cliffs. The woods bide bright upon them, their trunks dark indigo; burnished silver their leaves that trill musically in wind gliding as a gleam of gold against them, the light of their shimmering singing. Precious pearls of the orient were the gravel ground underfoot. In comparison with this wonder, sunbeams are but blind and dark.]¹¹

There is no question that the scenes described throughout—the grave/spot, the wood and river of the otherworld, the city of heaven—are all tangibly, scintillatingly visual, rife with haptic and auditory detail that uses the exotic to its advantage, binding that which is

gleaming and fragrant, the Orient Pearl and indigo, to what is nearest to the human heart: the body of a child. Through the fact of death, this exotic texture is also bound to the divine. Such visual detail, or *enargeia*, punctuates the loss experienced by the dreamer who has fallen in grief upon the grave of his two-year-old daughter and is subsequently transported in dream to the afterworld, seeing her as a queen of heaven. The specific details draw together the physical experience of grief with the spiritual, the personal experience of grief with apocalyptic history. These are images well traveled whose stories and associations go deep in the culture of the medieval West. Ruth Webb, discussing the rhetorical tactics of *enargeia*, points out that its success with an audience involves to a great extent participation in a culture's image stores: "The production of *enargeia* involved a competence which was more than simply lexical; rather it was a cultural competence, a familiarity with the key values of a culture and the images attached to them" (125). She continues, "the audience's own cultural competence was, and still is, a crucial factor in the reception of *enargeia* and means that we, as modern readers with our own array of potent images, will not always find ancient examples as vivid and compelling as the original audience might have done, possessing as we do a different visual vocabulary with different associations" (125).

The visuality of the passage quoted above is relatively easy for contemporary readers to appreciate. It is in fact one of the most popularly quoted passages in criticism and analysis of the poem for that reason alone.¹² But other passages of the poem remain just as strikingly visual, though perhaps not as much to a contemporary eye, through their reference to biblical history and icon, images around which much of medieval culture

established itself. For example, the vision of the heavenly city as alluded to by the apostle John toward the end of the poem contains just as much visual imagery:

As John þe apostel hit sy3 with sy3t,
I sy3e þat city of gret renoun,
Jerusalem so new and ryally dy3t,
As hit watz ly3t fro þe heuen adoun.
þe bor3 watz al of brende golde bry3t,
As glemande glas burnist broun,
With gentyl gemmez anvnder py3t,
With batelez twelue on basing boun,
þe foundementez twelue of riche tenoun;
Vch tabelment watz a serlypez ston,
As derely deuysez þis ilk toun

In Apocalyppez þe apostel John. (985-996)

[As John the apostle saw it with sight, I saw that city of great renown, Jerusalem so new and royally adorned, as it alighted down from heaven. This city was burnished gold as glazier's glass glows amber, with refined gems affixed beneath, with twelve steps well-built upon twelve foundations of the best materials, each tier a different stone. As closely devised was this same city as that in the apocalypse of the apostle John.]

I juxtapose the two passages here to highlight the kinds of ekphrasis that the poem adopts: sensual and conceptual. *Enargeia*, of course, employs sensory detail and is rich in nouns and adjectives describing space, shape, texture, pattern, measurement, color, and light. The second kind of ekphrasis—perhaps I should say the other mechanic of

ekphrasis—relies on the iconicity of a cultural concept. In other words, ekphrasis can also do its work through employing certain markers that recall a culture’s visual troves, the cultural memory bank of images. Such iconographic images in the Western Middle Ages include the repeating motifs recalling images from the book of Revelation: sun and moon, St. John, the number twelve applied to architecture and its allusion to the twelve apostles, the New Jerusalem, all of which are pictured again and again in lyric and narrative poetry as well as in religious tract. This second kind of ekphrasis is of great import to my analysis, which will consider the function of the dream in a text—a framework that in the high Middle Ages arguably becomes textually iconic—as an ekphrastic enterprise. A further example of how this mechanic of ekphrasis works with cultural image is Sarah Stanbury’s explanation about the conflation of body and city in *Pearl*: “Although the representation of the heavenly city of *Pearl* is remarkable in Middle English poetry in its hallucinatory attention to highly visualized graphic detail, it belongs in fact to a complex tradition in which the city is aligned metonymically with the human body” (“City” 38).¹³ Through engaging with this complex tradition of imaging the city from the structure of the human body, the text of *Pearl* explores limits of the body, those demarcations that define an entity, whether it is the human body, a city, a poem, or a pearl.

The conflation of bodies is no new subject in literary analyses of *Pearl*; it is in fact one of the most studied aspects of the poem. The body of the dead daughter/grave, the glorified body of the daughter, the dream body, the body of the heavenly city, the body of the bleeding lamb, the body of the dreamer, and finally the body of the poem: each of these limits or defines the others or shares limits in some way. All are encapsulated within the poem’s body and limned by the metaphor of the pearl. Numbers of critics

have treated this idea of the conflated body through a critical framework of psychoanalysis to explore its commentary on grief and the individual and, perhaps most popularly in recent years, on cultural gender issues in courtly love. I am less interested in a deconstructive reading of gender mechanics in the poem, however, than in an examination of how *body* becomes, through the text's ekphrasis, an active vehicle or agent as well as the governing trope for the poem's instruction and consolation, its "sentence" and "solas," its gift of pleasure and wonder in the face of an overwhelming grief.

In her essay outlining a medievalist perspective on body, Caroline Walker Bynum somewhat mischievously asserts: "In a sense, of course, the body is the wrong topic. It is no topic or, perhaps, almost all topics" ("Fuss" 2). She alludes here to the difficulty in ascertaining what critics and scholars apprehend by the term *body*. Body, to be sure, has been a hot topic for well over two decades; embodiment, flesh, senses, especially as they are depicted in the writings of authors from more marginal groups in American and post-colonial literatures (Linda Hogan, Gloria Naylor, Theresa Cha, Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o, to name a few) are especially visible and salient within present academic discourse. Bynum explains, however, that *body* has no one meaning in academic discourses but refers to a plethora of concepts from actual flesh to representation.¹⁴ Furthermore, she insists, the body as it was understood by culture in the Western Middle Ages was more varied and complex than is generally thought, and this complexity mirrors the variety of modern perceptions of the body. She gives a laundry list of the polyvalent understandings of body in the Western Middle Ages:

Medieval people (as vague a notion, by the way, as “modern people”) did not have “a” concept of “the body” any more than we do; nor did they “despise” it (although there is reason to think that they feared childbirth, or having their teeth pulled, or the amputation of limbs without anaesthesia). Like the modern world, the Middle Ages was characterized by a cacophony of discourses. Doctors took a completely different view of sexuality from theologians, sometimes prescribing extramarital sex as a cure for disease. Secular love poets and ascetic devotional writers meant something radically different by passion. Pissing and farting did not have the same valence in the grim monastic preaching of the years around 1100 and in the cheerfully scatological, although still misogynistic, fabliaux of two centuries later. Alchemists studied properties of minerals and gems in an effort to precipitate chemical change and prolong life, whereas students of the Bible saw in these same objects lessons about fortitude and truth. Even within what we would call discourse communities, ideas about matter, body, and person could conflict and contradict. (“Fuss” 7)

Body is clearly not a simple term; concepts of it in the Middle Ages resist rigid gendering, resist easy binaries, resist circumscription. This is as it should be. But some of the difficulties I face in exploring the ekphrastic dream body and its kind of movement, its delineations and shapes lie in the fuzziness and kinesis of the term. From whence does it originate and to what does it refer? What, in the use of the term *body*, is at stake in the aesthetics of ekphrasis? What is at stake in applying an as-yet-undetermined methodological reading via “ekphrastic body” to the bodies that conflate in *Pearl*? What are the limits of the ekphrastic body? What does it do? What is its

relationship to other bodies (the reader, other texts)? How does the ekphrastic body instruct, point, make visible? In some ways, embarking upon this analysis is much like crossing a bridge that crumbles behind one's footsteps, for bodies undo themselves as soon as they are made. They are finite and always in flux, making this ekphrastic body is tenuous terrain. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Gail Weiss describe body limit, the traditional theoretical limning of ekphrasis as a visual representation made by the individual and subjective consciousness of a visual representation may in fact be the moment in the text that signals a reversal:

Rather than continuing to view limit as merely something that operates externally, dividing one body from another, we must also recognize that limits are chiasmatic, sites of reversibility in which, like the Mobius strip, inside becomes outside and vice versa (Grosz 1994). The body is, in other words, a crossroads, a space of limit as *possibility*. (4)

This chapter attempts to map the ekphrastic body of possibility in the dream vision *Pearl*. I can from the outset state what *body* is *not* in this study. The term *body* does not refer solely to the individual subject. It is important to restate at this point that the medieval ekphrastic text opens up more pathways for ekphrasis than just a snapshot of the individual consciousness. As I related in the previous chapter, Spearing's reconsideration of textual subjectivity in the medieval text clarifies how crucial it is to read the dream vision (and, as I argue, by extension ekphrasis) as an instance of narratorial diffuseness. Such thought runs counter to many psychologically based analyses of *Pearl*, readings that substantially rely on an assumption that the speaking voice—the narrative and experiential voices—of the text embodies a single subjective

perception (*Textual*). The assumption is all too common, and it unfortunately does wrong to the text in that it misplaces the focus. David Aers's essay "The Self Mourning: Reflections on *Pearl*," for example, reads *Pearl* as solely a portrait of the individual in grief: "despite the closing reference to the Eucharist, to priest, and to our potential participation in the communion of saints, the poet's preoccupations have been thoroughly individualistic, and his invocation of Corpus Christi extraneous to his shaping concerns—psychological, spiritual, and theological. So it is in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*" (73).¹⁵ Aers fails to read the layer of narrative erected by the presence of dream vision; it is not at all the poet's concerns that are individualistic, but the dreamer's.¹⁶ The individual in grief is the condition of the poem, not its focus; this fact does not take away from the profundity of that grief but deepens it.

By no means is this reading a new or unique failure of criticism where either the medieval dream vision or ekphrasis are concerned. I will take a moment here to explore a possible cause of this failure of ekphrastic theory and criticism that will in the end not be tangential but will connect back to the importance of understanding ekphrasis through the metaphor of body, specifically a body tied to a cultural history. As a body of communication, ekphrasis can in fact involve much more than a triangulated inscription between self/author, text, and other/object. One of the problems with W. J. T. Mitchell's and James Heffernan's readings is that they work through a paradigm created by the institution of the museum—a paradigm in which the work of art becomes the objectified other; the museum space is a direct descendant of the *paragone*. André Malraux's analysis of the modern space of art helps to demystify the sacerdotal air of the museum:

[Art museums] were so important to the artistic life of the nineteenth century and are so much a part of our lives today that we forget they have imposed on the spectator a wholly new attitude toward the work of art. They have tended to estrange the works they bring together from their original functions and to transform even portraits into “pictures” [...] The effect of the museum is to suppress the model in almost every portrait (even that of a dream figure) and to divest works of art of their functions. It does away with the significance of the Palladium, of saint and Savior; rules out associations of sanctity, qualities of adornment and possession, of likeness or imagination; and presents the viewer with images of things, differing from the things themselves, and drawing their *raison d’être* from this very difference. It is a confrontation of metamorphoses.

(9-10)

Malraux claims that the spiritual and religious qualities of the work of art are irrevocably changed in the space assigned to them by the museum. Yet the museum comes to take the place of religion in that the work of art is mounted on its own altar, unquestioned and unchangeable in its placement as (high) art. The metamorphosis lies in a translation of art from the concrete (the work of the icon) to the more rarified and abstract, art for the sake of status. And as aesthetic theories and ejaculations about art develop in the nineteenth century, the space of the museum ensures that art cannot be for its own sake but must be for social stratification. Interestingly enough, James Elkins attributes to this kind of metamorphosis that which in the eighteenth century became the opposite of what makes up the body:

The opposite of all this empathy, proprioception, sensation, violence, and even pain is not pleasure but *thought*...Even the grossest suffering can be rationalized. The torturer may be involved in a sadomasochistic relation to the person he torments, but he must also be removed—that is, he must also refuse to experience the body in pain. A masterpiece of this mentality is Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*....Ovid describes the most extreme transformations—a woman’s fingers tighten into twigs, people harden into pebbles, a skinny boy melts into a salamander—all without a trace of pain. (140)

Elkins concludes that the “idea of metamorphosis itself” is “a way of coming to terms with extreme suffering by fantasizing a world where everyone, to put it in current terms, is a metamorph” (141-42). Utter change without pain can be useful, Elkins continues, because sometimes decisions require us to step aside from the body in pain and not empathize. Such change can however also be a gesture of cruelty, one that forgets a body’s origins, its history, its social realities, its soul. This mindset, as Elkins describes it, erases not only the human body but other bodies, and Malraux implies that the structure of the museum has set into motion a metamorphosis of art from bodies connected to a space and time into disembodied figures that acquire their meaning through being collected and showcased as such.

Again, ekphrasis within the configuration set up both by the paradigm of the contest between the arts and by the peculiar space of the museum produces a more sterilized interaction, one in which boundaries between gazed and gazed upon, poem and audience are much sharper in contrast. It is a configuration that understands Other only as reified other. This is the structure and environment of the modern and postmodern theoretical

ekphrastic body.¹⁷ The dream vision, however, is itself both ekphrastic subject and object, observer/chronicler and other. Its body of communication figures much differently from what has been supposed about the workings of ekphrasis in general. In the case of *Pearl*, the ekphrastic body, while engaging fervently in intellectual, theological debate, is also given substance through the body that makes meaning through the contact of its interactive limits, a body that grieves and dies, as well as a body that presents culturally familiar visions of the New Jerusalem. In other words, the ekphrastic body of *Pearl* does good in the world as a body that connects with other bodies, resonating through its textual (and represented) body that changes continually but also maintains an elemental residuum of its original self, so that it takes pleasure in the new because what it has lost can return to it through an always open possibility. This is the very condition of becoming. Cohen writes in his essay “The Inhuman Circuit”:

Medieval bodies were caught between gravitational forces that pulled them at once toward a fantasy of impossible completeness (for medieval Christians, the sacred body that existed beyond the limits of life and death) and at the same time confronted them with a daily spectacle of the flesh dissolving into pieces, of bodies composed of metamorphic humoral fluids, of the corporeal as the scene for the staging of magic, holiness, perversity, wonder. Bodies were, quite simply, caught in a process of eruptive becoming. (167)

I use the term *body* because it complicates matters: it alludes to the singularity of an individual—a concept with which perhaps *Pearl* struggles—but it also includes the conceptual body whose integument stretches both to contain and to allow for much more than the complete-unto-itself self. I use the term *body* because of the physical body’s

propensity for pain and pleasure, both strikingly contrasted physical/emotional fields in *Pearl*. I use the term *body* because it is, after all, appropriate to *Pearl*, whose eschatology is lushly embodied. The poem's beginning and ending lie in bodies that finally cannot be separated from one another. *Pearl* is not about an individualized body; its ekphrasis, the representation of the dream—as refined as it becomes in the high Middle Ages, so refined it functions iconically—is a way of moving into the most intimate of spaces, the fact of the dream, to regard and explore socially, publicly shared truths.

That a number of readers and critics do not recognize *Pearl* as socially concerned is troubling, but not surprising. Or if they concede that it is concerned with the social rather than solely the individual emotive and spiritual life, such concerns they insist are only implicit, conditional, and ideological, certainly not any kind of commentary on social response or behavior. But what is more social than grief at a beloved's death? It is something nearly all human beings will undergo. Until quite recently in the Western world human beings did not suffer grief alone but were supported by both community and social structures: mores, traditions, rituals, etiquette, literature, and religion. Furthermore, if we remember the time and place in which this poem was likely written, not only a high child mortality rate but also the virulence of the plagues that took young and old alike surface as a terrible reality. Grief, then, in *Pearl*—and how one approaches, experiences, and comes to terms with it—is a daily and acutely visible endeavor. (Only in our modern Western world of the hidden mortuary and air-conditioned funeral home could we assume that grief is solely a private affair assigned to the individual.)

The ethical import of this poem therefore resides in its ability to bring pleasure in the midst of the most egregious loss and painful sorrow. It is in the escape to dream, which

is actually a call to the otherworld or heavenly city, that pleasure can be imagined at all again. The ekphrasis of the visual dream composition brings pleasure through its gorgeous visual detail and its hearkening to cultural imagery that signifies salvation and hope: what greater gift in the face of loss and grief? This representation and translation are kindnesses, constituting an imagining otherwise, rather than merely a reification of other compositional entities some theorists of ekphrasis would have the scholarly community believe. In her post “Some More Thoughts on Pleasure, Even More on Wonder, and Also, Some Regrets: Could Our Medieval Studies, the One We Want, Also Be a Pleasure Garden?” Eileen Joy, quoting Jane Bennett, puts into an interpersonal and material context the ethical potentiality of the arts, what ekphrastic texts can accomplish. It is nothing less than the kindness of enchantment:

Further, ethical rules, by themselves, are not sufficient to the task of nurturing “the spirit of generosity that must suffuse ethical codes if they are to be responsive to the surprises that regularly punctuate life.” It is Bennett’s argument that the contemporary world does, indeed, “retain the power to enchant humans and that humans can cultivate themselves so as to experience more of that effect.” Further, her “wager” is that, “to some small but irreducible extent, one must be enamored with existence and occasionally even enchanted in the face of it in order to be capable of donating some of one’s scarce moral resources to the service of others” [*The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics*].

The great pleasure the mode of ekphrasis gives—beautiful description not just through *enargeia* but also and especially through the iconicity of cultural concept—brings about

the ethical move toward consolation. *Pearl's* ekphrastic dream vision becomes a body that embraces, transports, teaches, consoles, and transforms both dreamer and reader. Its representation of cultural icon—the picture of *débat*, the maiden, the architecture of the heavenly city, the body of the Lamb—is key, and through this it accomplishes an ethical poetics, or *poethics*, as Joan Retallack has termed it: here the poethical gesture is of apocalyptic literature moving not toward judgment and damnation but instead toward conversation, clarity, and consolation.

Body Extended Through Ekphrasis: Link Words and Visualized Composition

It is easy to misconstrue the dream vision of *Pearl* as concerned with one man alone: his grief, his private vision, and subsequent reawakening, especially in the context of other medieval poems. David Aers has remarked that the poem seems focused on the individual rather than social concerns at large, as *Piers Plowman* so explicitly is (71). Indeed, its scope at first seems quite up-front and narrow in comparison with the action and allegory of *Piers Plowman*: a human being grieving on the grave of his daughter, his lost pearl, and falling asleep in the weariness of that sorrow:

I felle vpon þat floury fla3te,
Suche odour to my hernez schot;
I slode vpon a slepyng sla3te,
On þat precios perle with-outen spot. (57-60)

[I fell upon the flowering turf, such fragrance overwhelmed my brains. I slid into sudden sleep above that precious pearl without a spot.]

What broadens the scope of the poem, interestingly enough, is the careful and precise lacing of its language that begins to take on more and more meaning through the ekphrastic moment, the dream vision. The first link word, “spot,” which gives the poem its initial momentum, both provides the ground from which the action moves into dream vision and, with its subsequent repetition, lulls the reader into the dream. The repetition of link words works as an enchantment in the same sense that Joy refers to in her citation of Bennett: it is an enchantment with and through the kaleidoscopic character of existence that makes possible the ethical movement beyond the self. Bennett says of such enchantment: “Sensuous experience is central to enchantment, but, of course, not all sensuous experience enchants. Enchantment seems to require, among other things, the presence of a pattern or recognizable ensembling of sounds, smells, tastes, forms, colors, textures. One could say, then, that enchantment functions by means of a kind of repetition” (36). In the narrative of *Pearl*, the repetition of link words is not merely an intellectual exercise recalling scriptural passage and iconology; it is of utmost importance that it also work somatically, so the reader finds herself as enchanted as the dreamer’s body so heavy at the grave and, in dream, so light at the gates of the heavenly city. The somatic effect of this pattern-making and/or pattern-recognition opens a way from grief to joy; it elicits, as Bennett argues, “the joyful human mood that results from a special way of engaging [the] world” (37).¹⁸

But it takes intricate work to create an entity that so smoothly flows from the darkest grief to wonderment and desire. In the universe of this poem, then, it is hardly surprising that it begins meticulously with the smallest component of abstract thought and physical

composition, the spot, in order to extrapolate from it a design that includes all time and space:

Fro spot my spyrt þer sprang in space,
My body on balke þer bod. In sweuen,
My goste is gon in Godez grace,
In aenture þer meruaylez meuen. (61-64)

[From this spot my spirit sprang into space; my body dwelt on the grave. In dream, my ghost goes to God's grace, in *aventure* there marvels moved.]

The movement is immediate from spot to space, its transition perhaps oiled by the alliterative effect. "Spot" has also changed here from stain to place, but it retains both meanings and is the condition upon which both the daughter and the dreamer are able to witness the heavenly city, the otherworld. The text moves through dream from spot—fairly stationary at the beginning—to *aventure*, where marvels move. Part of the dynamism of the marvels comes from the multiplication of meaning and the surprise that accompanies structures in the otherworld that defeat logic. And thereby operates the ekphrastic body of the dream vision: it is both retainer and innovator. The meanings of "spot" multiply through the dream: it is sin and blemish and grave and place. It is the ground upon which the dreamer grieves, the condition of mortality, but also the ground from which the reader first receives the starting points and limits of body in the poem. Spearing says of this metonymic usage:

But for the poet, it would seem, the vernacular language itself embodies divine meaning in its apparently random intersections and coincidences of earthly meaning, and he makes these apparent in the repetitions of individual words that

link his stanzas together through rhyme and concatenation. For example, in Middle English as in Modern English the word *spot* means both a place and a blemish. In the opening group of stanzas the phrase, ‘perle wythouten spotte’ (spotless pearl) is repeated at the close of each stanza, but the first line of the next stanza in each case uses the phrase, ‘þat spot’ (that place) to refer to the garden or graveyard where the earthly pearl is buried, thus implying that the earthly place, for all its beauty, is itself an imperfection. (*Medieval Dream* 84)

The reading of “spot” and pearl becomes even more complex than Spearing outlines here, though his acknowledgment of “random intersections and coincidences of earthly meaning” is an apt description of part of the poem’s particular generation of meaning. At some point, one also has to acknowledge the possible transposition of spot and pearl, which adumbrates further the relationship between the transient and the ineffable, mortal and divine. With as much conflation as the poem effects, signifiers and significations are bound to become increasingly destabilized, thus calling into question the very physical certainties that the dreamer as well as the reader takes for granted. Stanbury has this to say about such rampant conflation:

Pearl repeatedly transposes substances metonymically, so that the lost body of the dreamer’s daughter is figured from the outset as the substance of the heavenly city. The poem explicitly begins with a lost girl; and even though the daughter from the beginning is named and described as a pearl, as that which she is not, the process of abstraction actually reinforces her materiality. (“Body” 38)

Somehow, the bodies at stake, that of the daughter, the dreamer, and the Lamb (and the reader), become even more real as the poem progresses to the point where at the end,

though the Maiden and Lamb are not visible anymore (were they physically visible in the first place?), they remain the ultimate reality for the dreamer. That he still grieves after the dream, that he is dismayed, does not mean that the dream has failed to be beneficial or to give solace to the dreamer. (And, in fact, it would be a rather stupid and shallow poem if the dreamer ended up completely happy at the end. That's more a narrative told by current media advertisements selling anti-depressants, the kind of narrative that sharper comedy shows like *Kids in the Hall* or *Arrested Development* satirize.) The progressive conflation, rather than rarifying the players and circumstance of the poem, adds heft and weight to each figure/composition: less/loss becomes more and this is a source of both grief and joy.

Without the description of the dream vision, there would not be any interaction between the waking world and the dreamt otherworld as a composed body. There would not be the marvelous conflation crafted by the iconographic allusions, *enargeia*, and link words of the poem. Such descriptors as "spot" and "maskelles" and the complex matrix of "more and more," "neuer the less," "date," "gret innoghe," and "paye" would fail to take on the resonance and tension between a material/debt economy and the free gift of grace that the representation of the visual composition of the dreamer's dream gives it. It is of course hard to imagine what the poem would be if it weren't for the report of the dream vision: how would the dreamer recount what he had experienced or learned? The terrain of the dream is such that it is able to hold multiple and seemingly opposing things together in tension at once. The somatic dream gives us a mental landscape in which anything is possible; logic is not the cohesive agent of dream. The literary dream vision, however, has its own rules that set up a framework for specifically impossible things to

happen or be true. It sets itself up as art, as visual description, and thus as a piece of reality that shuns the apodeictic and reminds readers/viewers that not all reality makes easy sense. The Maiden's explanation of happiness and honor multiplied in heaven provides a good example:

Lasse of blysse may non vus bring
þat beren þys perle vpon oure bereste,
For þay of mote coupe neuer mynge
Of spotlez perlez þat beren þe creste.
Alþa3 oure corses in clottez clynge,
And 3e remen for rauþe wythouten reste,
We þur3outly hauen cnawyng;
Of on deþe ful oure hope is drest.
The Lombe vus gladez, oure care is kest;
He myrþez vus alle at vch a mes.
Vchonez blysse is breme and beste,
And neuer onez honour ghet neuer þe les. (853-864)

[Less of bliss may none of us bring that bear this pearl upon our breast, for those of spot and stain could never admonish the spotless pearls that bear this crest. Although clots of earth cling to our corpses and you cry for pity without rest, we have complete knowing; our hope drapes fully upon the fact of death. The Lamb makes us glad, our pains are kissed; at each mass he makes us merry. Each one's bliss is brightest and best and never can another's honor be the less.]

Perhaps the convention of the never-ending bounty of spiritual riches (as opposed to the limited resources of material riches) is a bit overstated and easy to fall back on, but *Pearl* freshens it with the figure of the all-knowing Maiden whose “on deþ ful oure hope is drest,” a striking statement in the face of the terrible grief (“And 3e remen for rauþe wythouten reste”) that the dreamer and others who have lost beloveds have experienced. Some critics have complained that the Maiden’s words are overly heuristic, apodeictic, and little concerned with the pain of her earthly father. It is important to keep in mind that this dream employs the *débat* structure, a structure stemming historically from scholastic methods of argument whose purpose is not to lessen the hurt to someone’s feelings, not to coddle, but to teach and help (and heal) through a concomitant coming to knowledge. The way that this poem uses the *débat* structure, however, does not assign one meaning to one term alone. It does not stiffly categorize; it does not ossify meaning. The gesture of the passage above, for instance, is *esemplastic* in nature: filled with contrary states and terms that juxtapose sin and purity, death and life, grief and joy—“perle” and “mote,” “spotlez perlez” and “corses in clottez clynge,” “3e remen for rauþe” and “vus gladez, oure care is kest”—that all begin to coalesce under the Maiden’s announcement that her hope exists only in and through death. Category and ranking likewise diminish, or perhaps *dehisce*, with the further acknowledgment that all pearl maidens are equal in their brightness and in this place each has no less worth than another. That the pearl city bears no evidence of political or religious hierarchical architectural structures also speaks to this cleft in category.

What I mean to describe by *cleft in category* is that space of reversibility where the rational requirements for categorical logic cease to work because some other

truth/possibility not considered—whether sociocultural restrictions, logical restrictions, mortal restrictions—underlies the separation. In the clefts of the human categorical imperative lie the link words of *Pearl*, which accentuate, after all, the separation between stanza and theme in the poem. But the link words also draw these together to make the poem cohere as whole. The link words move as a wave gathering more energy throughout the poem to create the visualized conception of the heavenly city, until they break at the dreamer's return to the garden with the word "paye." Where the dreamer (and perhaps even the empathic reader, feeling the grief and desire that the dreamer feels) wishes to draw lines, these words work somatically and visually on a cultural iconic scale to correct human logic that would limit the body to simplistic designations of more and less; in short, the body would stay in the grave of the ephemeral. At the end, the dreamer attempts to cross the barrier into the heavenly city and finds himself yanked back to the waking world:

For ryȝt as I sparred vnto þe bonc,
þat brathþe out of my drem me brayde.
þen wakned I in þat erber wlonk;
My hed vpon þat hylle watz layde
þeras my pearl to grounde strayd.
I raxled, and fel in gret affray,
And, sykyng, to myself I sayd:

"Now al be to þat Pryncez paye." (1169-76)

[For right as I sprang onto the bank, that wrath wrenched me out of my dream. Then I awoke in that lush arbor, my head upon that hill was laid where my pearl to the ground

had strayed. I stretched, and fell into great dismay and, sighing to myself I said, “Now all be in service to the Prince.”]

The ekphrasis is ended; the dream is over. “Paye” signals that we have moved out of the space of pleasure, of reversibility, to a reality that incurs debt or in which we have incurred debt.

But it is not cruelty, nor is it a trick, that allows the dreamer briefly to visit this pleasure garden and holy city only to snatch him back from it. One way to understand the barrier is as a metaphorical signal of the line between representation and reality that resists being crossed. Looking at the separation through the lens of psychoanalysis and gender studies, Sarah Stanbury argues that this metaphorical signal ultimately reveals a kind of developmental/psychological weakness in the dreamer: “The ending of *Pearl* [...] gives us not a simple resolution of a threatening feminine, but a conflicted recognition, through the elegiac work of mourning, of a complex and recapitulating series of severances. The narrator’s claim that he finds consolation at the ritual table of Communion is even hauntingly apt; severed from the feminine body, a condition not only of a particular and singular death but of his gender, he still seeks sustenance in a material ritual of nurturance” (“Dead Girl” 110). Stanbury seems here to come down on the side of separation and lack; her tone is almost superior to this person who “still” seeks comfort through the communion ritual. I don’t think that the poem lends itself so easily to that reading. The dream lingers, as does the ekphrasis: the pleasure of such created order does not fade immediately, and these last lines must be read against the whole dream vision. The last stanza thus complicates debt and separation with the presentation of

sacrament and friendship and the echo of the dream's landscape, so that *pay* (payment) stretches its signification to *payes* (Anglo-Norman for land, or homeland):

For I haf founden Hym, bothe day and naght,

A God, a Lorde, a frende ful fyin....

That in the forme of bred and wyn

The preste vus schewez vch a daye.

He gef vus to be His homly hyne

Ande precious perlez vnto his pay. (1203-12)

[For I have found him both day and night a God, a Lord, a beautiful friend....that in the form of bread and wine the priest shows us each day. He gave us to be His household servants, to be precious pearls as his payment/of his homeland.]

That we are so ready to read the first meaning, payment, perhaps tells us something about our own mortal and socioeconomic existence. What is most interesting to me, however, is that the poem adopts this terminology of pecuniary exchange and debt and upholds it at the same time that it asks us to see something more in the interaction between the human world and the divine world. Nothing is denigrated, not the concept of payment and not homeland, for they are, the poem hints, found in each other. After all, within a pearl there are no real barriers, and it is not a coincidence that the gates of the New Jerusalem are each composed improbably of a single pearl. Through the body that sorrows, grieves, and dies moves the body in pleasure. They are not separate.

Body Alterations: Fractal Poetics and Ekphrasis

As I stated earlier, the ekphrastic body is simultaneously capable of preservation and innovation. It both standardizes and creates a point from which to extrapolate and deviate. To use a metaphor for this phenomenon, it works much like what the mass creation of monographs by the printing press did for the English language, which had in the few centuries before undergone a tremendous and rapid amount of change. The printing press was both a conservative invention, in that it standardized spelling and syntax, thus arresting the pace of language change, and a radical invention in that it increased the availability of different vocabularies to readers. It fixed a skeleton and musculature (to complicate the metaphor further) but allowed for new kinds of movement (that in turn affect and change the skeleton and musculature) in language patterns. The body of ekphrasis works similarly.

For there is in ekphrasis a preservation of particular forms: a cohesive integument encompassing a visual composition made up of images from a culture's iconography. But certain alterations necessarily creep in through translation. And these translations and their alterations would have been encouraged by the Middle Ages, for which the structure and order of things were subject to plenitude, the multiplicity of concrete creation (and intellectual understanding) such that there are no gaps in creation—a veritable infinite set of alterations. If we return to my simple metaphor of printed book and language, one could think of the differences in book editions: some are slight and nearly unnoticeable, slipping in under the sweeping vigilance of the editors, and some are conscious and substantial decisions to print entirely new words, sentences, paragraphs, or endings. Both kinds of alterations have consequences affecting textual and semantic significances that vary in degree. But even small changes have made historians, theorists, cultural and

literary critics, artists, and writers alike question the form, composition, and content of “the book.” Ekphrasis has done the same for the verbal and visual arts, as well as altering the values associated with the cultural iconography it employs. That is just the barest bones of an example for this kind of activity in the ekphrastic phenomenon, an activity that Bennett labels *fractal*. Retallack follows her lead to describe how poetics participates in this pattern of movement, ideas I’ll return to in a moment.

It may be better first to examine the specificity of a text that uses ekphrasis to both preserve and innovate particular texts and traditions. The ekphrasis of *Pearl*’s dream vision utilizes mainly images from Revelation, a text popular in the Middle Ages not only because of its intense visual and allegorical imagery but also because of its attention to the end of days and last things, subjects of great interest to the Western medieval world that had been suffering through financial (with the collapse of the Italian banks), agricultural (with the “mini-Ice Age” and failure of crops), and disease crises. Images from Revelation appeared in churches, sermons, mystery plays, visionaries’ tracts, everyday conversation, letters, and literature. *Pearl* as a piece of literature does something very interesting with this popular imagery: it affirms the integrity of the original biblical text while incorporating alterations that have particular effects on a target audience, thereby introducing new ways to think about the idea of salvation and the order of creation. It keeps the concepts of salvation and the order of creation but encourages readers and listeners to understand these abstractions in terms of very real, concrete, and personal grief.

The first alteration I’d like to examine is the move to feature a beautiful young woman/deceased two-year-old girl as the mouthpiece of the New Jerusalem. The text is

aware of the alteration as much as it is aware that the dreamer's difficulty in understanding the new space, the otherworld, stems from his assumptions about who this maiden is and what place she might take in this other world. Aers relates as much:

...the courtly discourse of love in Pearl [...] served as one of the markers required in the cultivation of masculine identity in the dominant social classes. It is now in terms of just this discourse, and the relations of power it carried, that the dreamer seeks to shape the dialogue with the maiden. This design turns out to present him with considerable difficulty. First he must address the strangeness of the situation and what he registers as her new and very superior social status. In accord with her royal dress (191), he finds her manner appropriate to duke or earl, everything about her indicating a member of the court's own elite. (61)

Not surprising, the dreamer finds it difficult to adjust to the strangeness of seeing one's infant child full-grown and then to take direction from her and be corrected. The figure of the maiden is cut very differently than depictions of women in Revelation, who have no real voice of wisdom or authority. This figuration of the Pearl Maiden may not seem so new to the Middle Ages in terms of the courtly adoration of the lady and Marian devotion in lyric poetry. But no other figures possess quite the voice that this Maiden possesses, except perhaps Beatrice from Dante's *Commedia*. And like Beatrice, she is unstinting in her direction, dedicated to moving the dreamer toward the right way of loving, even in the midst of his pain.

Her instruction is both hard and kind. What is emphasized by the maiden is the structure of the city, not the death and destruction of the end of the world that takes up most of the text of Revelation. In some ways this devastation is beside the point, and in

other ways it is possible to see how the dreamer's own world in his heart, has been wracked into ruin. This city does not follow ordinary conceptions and activities of city life that demand it be structured according to business transaction and the accumulation of wealth though these concepts lace her speech. Spearing muses on what the poet tells us: "Imagine heaven as a city, he tells us, but do not suppose that it has the features that characterize the city you imagine" (86). This is a city whose structures are built solely from love and the gift. As Heather Maning writes in her essay on the gift and gift-exchange in *Pearl*, there are two ways to perceive the pearl, as representative of earthly riches or of spiritual riches. The dreamer has to discover the correct way to understand his pearl. She writes, "Thus, one sees the Dreamer follow a chain of 'pearls,' from least true [...] to most, from a figure of speech signifying his daughter to the spotless Lamb. The other choice, to follow baser desires, drags the Dreamer down the chain, into the terrestrial sphere. This sort of desire is possessive, an attempt to hoard and keep someone or something for oneself" (10).

The dreamer is still anchored in the physical world of politics and hierarchy when he asks her why she doesn't have a house. As a queen, he argues, she should have a stately palace, so he wants to know where it is. The maiden answers this question by turning this assumption, cut from the cloth of the *éstats*, on its head also. She explains,

Of motez two to carpe clene,
 And Jerusalem hyȝt bothe nawþeles—
 þat nys to yow no more to mene
 Bot "ceté of God" other "syȝt of pes"—
 In þat on oure pes watz mad at ene;

With payne to suffer þe Lombe hit chese;
In þat other is noȝt bot pes to glene
þat ay schal laste withouten rele.
þat is the borȝ þat we to pres
Fro þat oure flesh be layd to rote,
þer glory and blysse schal euer encre
To the meyny þat is withouten mote. (949-60)

[Of two spots, to tell honestly, and both are named Jerusalem—that made simple to you mean no more than “City of God” and “site/sight of peace”—in that our peace was made at once. The City of God chose the Lamb to suffer with pain; in that other is nothing but peace to glean that I shall last without release. That is the city to which we make haste as our flesh is laid to rot, for there glory and bliss shall ever increase to the many without spot.]

She doesn't live in a great castle; rather she is an inhabitant of this city that shares a name with a city that the dreamer already knows. Both are called Jerusalem, and the earthly version exists through the beneficence of the heavenly Jerusalem. She refers to both as “motez,” or “spot,” which is interesting on its own terms, but the most striking sentence here spoken by the maiden is, “in that other [spot] is nothing but peace to glean that I shall last without release.” The concept “without release” is usually associated with being interred, incarcerated, a condition that affects the physical body and thus is typically associated with the human and mortal world. But “without release” is here applied to the paradisaical body, the eternal and divine nature of existence. It is important to remember here the conflation of body in the poem. Stanbury reminds us that there is a

“sea change of the daughter’s body into both the structure and citizenry of the city, an extraordinary metonymy and *sparagmos* in which the city seems uncannily composed of her very substance (pearl) even as it contains her, multiplied into 144,000 identically dressed women: the girl—as pearl—as New Jerusalem” (“Body” 39). What the Pearl Maiden relates to the dreamer reverses his assumptions about the nature of containment in eternity: no castle or house can contain her because the condition of her existence is such that her body and the city are not separate.

I have largely examined space in this poem as it is used in ekphrasis, but the concept of time remains just as important for the seeming barriers set up for the mortal dreamer: it is not space that separates him from paradise but time. One of the terrible limits for the dreamer is the moiety of his life that must still be lived out, the horizon of time that signals both his end and beginning. The poem does not take away this anxiety for him, but it does offer a possible alternative to the linear strictures of time, as many medieval poems are wont to do. Time has been shown to be working differently from how humans assume it to be or are used to experiencing it in the poem, the dreamer’s daughter reappearing to him as grown woman, for instance. Time is not clockwork here. Thus concerning the conceptual body, an examination not only of space but also of occupied time is relevant; this much, interestingly enough, is true in the long history of theory on ekphrasis also. In traditional Western theories of ekphrasis, time has been thought of as linear, a concept belonging in many ways to the lines of a page.

A revisiting of Lessing’s and Burke’s equation of the spatial dimension with the painting and the temporal dimension with poetry/verbal arts, ideas I outlined earlier, is pertinent here. One of the problems in the assignments they make is that neither thinker

clearly delineates in what aspect these arts occupy these dimensions: in the experience of the viewer/reader? Through the disparate arts' own existence or through the imaginary worlds they create? The concepts of space and time they use suffer from a paucity of engagement with each other and a testing of their conceptual boundaries, and it is not until Bakhtin's chronotope that the assumption about such a divisive separation begins to be amended—but only in the theory of the novel, not in the theoretical relationship between the arts. Retallack relates the traditional Western philosophical conception of the existence of a body aligned with a linear notion of the movement from birth through death; it is punctuated, limited by the line that time draws. This “horizon of time,” she argues, is part of a construct that prevents a recognition of art as experience itself, as a vital player and occupier of space-time, rather than solely a mimetic endeavor:

The “horizon of time” is an example of a class of heavily freighted metaphors (emanating out of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century—chiefly German—poetries and philosophies) whose incompletely examined historical implications exert a gravitational force that warps the edge of the contemporary as it emerges into critical view. Imagining a cultural coastline (complex, dynamic) rather than time's horizon (dare I say it?—linear, static) thrusts the thought experiment into the distinctly contemporary moment of a fractal poetics. If art can be conceived as having a fractal relation to life, then I think the infamous art vs. life gap is closed because it's no longer needed to account for mirror-image representational symmetries. (15)

To Retallack, the linear understanding of history is connected to a loss in the conversation between masculine and feminine forms of reason. Her new interpretive models are based on “feminine dyslogic,” a framework far more flexible because it

“operate[s] outside official logics,” the systematically patriarchal tradition that ignores the discursive, the personal, the “pliant, forgiving, polylogical” possibilities of intellectual conversation about history, representation, and human relationship (94). In the absence of new language for forms and structures in the humanities and poetics, Retallack turns to the experimental margins of the sciences (marginal in the scientific community but becoming fast friends with the mainstream, as catchwords of chaos theory click into the popular imagination). She alights on resonances between the depictions of the fractal nature of historical and biological realities and feminine experimental poetics: “Another possibility?—the experimental feminine shaping history conceived not as fateful adumbration, but as dynamic coastline where past and present meet in the transformative rim of our recombinatory poesis” (96). The critical and creative modes of the experimental feminine can act as a balm to the loss in Western culture of “the energy of a productively conversational M[asculine]-F[eminine]” (96).

It is precisely that conversation that Retallack wants to recover and implement in the fields of conceptual thought. Her strategies do not adamantly dismiss “masculine logic” but ask that its parameters be opened to include other ways of seeing—ways that the feminine dyslogic can provide—in order to create the conversation that combines both. What is needed is “the swerve that brings on possibility [...the] hermaphrodite, androgyne, mongrel, cyborg, queer, lovely, freak, the unintelligibility that reveals life continuing as a continuing surprise” (97). What is surprising is that those terms of the margins of “world reason” (96) apply to the textual strategies of *Pearl*: a maiden both child and mother, both female and in the position of authority, a father in the position of schoolchild, and the continuing surprise of the dyslogics of paradise that eventually

assuage, but also allow to exist, the grief of both speaker and reader of the poem. *Pearl*, ekphrastic dream vision, is mongrel and androgyne, a composition of cultural compositions, revised from the formal and impersonal to incorporate the deeply personal and private into the public sector of the history of salvation.

Retallack's conception of a "fractal relation to life" is thus precisely what the ekphrasis of the dream vision in *Pearl* purports to be. I purposely say "be" instead of "enact" or "represent"—though it does these things too—because I want to emphasize the text's powerful poetic and ethical response to human grief: it not only represents human grief but interacts with it and responds to it. In this way, as Retallack proffers, the "art vs. life gap is closed." Fractal poetics comprises what Retallack terms *poethics*, which is a move to incorporate tiny adjustments in narratives to respond to historical moment and necessity. *Pearl's* fractal patterning lies in the reference and reinscription of John the Apostle's New Jerusalem; it effects an ekphrasis of an ekphrasis within an ekphrasis of an ekphrasis.

Let me clarify this statement. The city to the medieval mind is the premier example of art, of mathematical, measured, responsive and aesthetic composition. To describe it literarily is an ekphrasis, and it is no coincidence that descriptions of the city appear more in Western medieval literature than in the traditional visual arts. In fact, it appears as often as the dream and the vision—and often within the dream or the vision.¹⁹ The image of the city in Western medieval literature is rich and vast: Dante's cities, the description of Thebes in the *Knight's Tale*, the city of Troy in *Troilus and Criseyde*, in *Tristan and Iseult*, the deserted city in *Perceval*, the descriptions of cities from Carthage to Rome in countless histories, and the New Jerusalem in Hildegard's *Scivias*, among many other

examples. Furthermore, to describe a *vision* in which a city appears becomes a double ekphrasis, as the written vision is a verbal representation of an apprehended visual composition. *Pearl's* complex, quadrupled ekphrasis does not mirror Revelation but engages it so completely *within the moment that it is socially read and interpreted* that its materials reappear again familiar but different; the story lays itself down in a line that swerves, curls, a clinamen in the great scope of things that behaves as it should, which is to say, with deviance (Deleuze and Guattari).

Pearl's city thus represents another alteration in cultural conceptualizations of both physical and spiritual cities. Its heavenly city at first glance seems to duplicate the heavenly city of Revelation:

As John deuysed 3et sa3 I þare:

Þise twelue degrés wern brode and stayre;

Þe cyté stod abof ful sware,

As longe as brode as hy3e ful fayre. (1021-24)

[As John discerned, yet saw I there these twelve levels were wide and steep; above stood the city full square, in perfection, as long and high as it was broad.]

Certainly all measurements and proportions are the same. The materials of the city are the same also: the precious stones of jasper, carnelian, chalcedony, emerald, and sapphire, the city of gold transparent as glass, the absence of moon and sun because of the presence of the light from the Lamb are all found in the original apocalyptic text. But differences of another sort have crept into this representation in terms of emphasis, foreground and background, inclusion and exclusion. The apocalyptic imagery surrounding the final things of *Pearl* is all softened in comparison to Revelation. After all, the vision is framed

by the grief over the death of a little girl and not by the end of the world. Instead of the terrible notes of the horn at the end of days, the dreamer hears the song of the virgins in part XV. Rather than devoting its space to the devastation and destruction of the world as Revelation does, the poem emphasizes the completeness of the City of God and its ties to the material world. The human body, instead of fraught with pestilence, becomes the glorious city in a way not explored by Revelation, through the text's intertwining of a scripture from I Corinthians:

‘Of courtaysye, as saytz Saynt Poule,
Al arn we membrez of Jesu Kryst:
As heued and arme and legg and naule
Temen to hys body ful trwe and tryste,
Ry3t so is vech a Krysten sawle
A longande lym to þe Mayster of myste. (457-62)

[Through courtesy, as St. Paul says, are we all members of Jesus Christ: as head and arm and leg and navel join truly, secretly to body, even so is each Christian soul a fitting part of the Master of mystery.]

The concept of the mystical body is foregrounded in *Pearl* in this speech by the Pearl Maiden. The passage is also a précis of what *Pearl* itself is: a body of members, a composition of elements that have received their own bodies from historically passed-down bodies of cultural significance: image, narrative, and even what Maning has explored as ritual performance.²⁰

Throughout this chapter I have defined ekphrasis in a number of new ways according to how I see it working in *Pearl*. I have represented it as a body with limits that are

dynamic, “sites of reversibility” in Weiss and Cohen’s terms, that turn to offer, in the case of *Pearl*, new possibilities in the experience of grief and the soteriological. I also see its movement and being as a body, as fractal, as incorporating slight shifts in the cultural elements-at-hand of its composition. This fractal quality is essential to its ethical movement of kindness toward both dreamer and reader. For *Pearl* offers pleasure, strength, and other possibilities to one potentially in grief, and it does this through its visual composition, its reframing and revision of traditional apocalyptic vision. In other poems, the ekphrastic body will move to open up other possibilities: *Piers Plowman*’s ekphrasis, for instance, is concerned largely with epistemology, how it is that we come to know; but it, too, will explore the revisioning of cultural icon. Revision, in fact, is the operative word for that text as not only do dream visions recontextualize traditional depictions of Christian parable, allegory, and history, but the process of writing and publishing the texts is also rife with a history of revision: Langland could not leave his manuscripts alone, and there are many extant versions whose alterations change the nature of the narrative’s ekphrastic limits. But the ekphrastic body of *Pearl*, while no less concerned with the social than *Piers Plowman*, extends its body in a gesture of grace, the curve of its fractal movement matching the lovely embrace of its perfect alliterative language. *Pearl*’s ekphrastic dream vision is the body in wonder, the body in pleasure.

4 Ekphrasis and the Polytemporal in *Piers Plowman*

Piers Plowman is probably one of the most abstruse poems in our language. Its structure has been regarded as unwieldy, disjointed, confusing; readers have lamented how little they feel the text hangs together. The poem's structure, far from a linear narrative, has been the subject of much critical surmising and debate. William Elford Rogers in fact contends that "It might be possible to write the history of criticism of *Piers Plowman* as a narrative of the quest for structure" (4). The poem, excellent hybrid that it is, consists of the combination of many different literary genres, from the *débat* to beast fable to allegory to the dream vision. It employs the dream vision genre as its overarching framework, but it is a dream vision whose form has been pushed to its limits, for there is not only one sleep/awakening cycle but multiple cycles that progress to the point, most especially in the C-version of the text, where the reader can no longer tell the difference between reality and dream, nor can she ascertain the time sequence or duration of the poem's action and event.

One recent attempt to explain the strange structure of *Piers Plowman*, as proposed by Michael Klein, latches on to the postmodern concept and technique of fragmentation. Interestingly enough, this is how I first read *Piers Plowman*'s twists and turns through biblical allegory, analogy and dream world; fragmentation seems to provide a concise explanation for the kind of rampant confusion the text can cause a reader. Klein's book-length study proposes that fragmentation is the result of the apocalyptic consciousness; the author's fear and distress in the face of physical, political and economic collapse contributes to a narrative that "expresses contradictions in the author's mind and in the

culture: contradictions in the author's and reader's historical situation" (17). Klein defines fragmentation as "certain stylistic traits: paratactic shifts of time, place, action, attitude; abrupt changes of point of view; sudden changes in genre, or of tone" (17). *Piers Plowman* clearly exhibits these traits and Klein's study, because it locates a place and reason for such devices, seems to make sense of a poem whose disjunctions have confused readers for centuries. What Klein forgets to consider is that fragmentation, as a postmodern concept and technique, is employed as a subversive strategy against a dominant form, typically a narrative constructed according to rules of rationality, linearity, and causality. Fragmentation is the textual counterpart to the aesthetic tenets of neoclassicism and empiricism, the Enlightenment text. There is no such institution in the Middle Ages, and techniques that appear disruptive or rife with tension to our eyes, such as conflation of time and place (or "paratactic shifts of time, place, action"), for example, are common in medieval drama and narrative and express an order conceivable beyond human fleshly experience rather than dislocation and dis-ease.

The model of fragmentation Klein proposes, a model that he claims reflects the profound psychological disillusionment with societal order in fourteenth-century England and is linked to a similar disillusionment found in 1960s America and France, isn't good enough. Fragmentation as a textual strategy presupposes a dominant text that has left out what the fragmented text supplies and extrapolates from; in other words, the kind of fragmentation Klein invokes is historically situated as a response to hegemonical constructions of history and value-scales. Undoubtedly, *Piers Plowman* is a response to the abuse of power by the clerical *estat* and the general chaotic upheaval of the time. Nevertheless, it is much more useful to read the dream sequences of *Piers Plowman*, in

which different textual and iconological genres fade in and out, according to tensions in the learning process enacted through the translation of a visual composition into the verbal composition, the interplay between text and image. The more time one spends with the text, the more one realizes that it is hardly fragmented, but rather carefully woven together in a pattern that circles, comes back to the same ideas and principles over and over again, in new contexts and under different aspects. Rather than accepting “fragmentation” as the ordering principle of the poem, I would offer a methodology that employs an ekphrastic reading—a reading predicated on the visual patterning of composition and how such composition is culturally fabricated—which is more equipped to tackle these tensions.

Before I commence with an ekphrastic reading of *Piers Plowman* and the close reading and analysis that it requires, there is another problematic assumption that needs to be addressed upfront. The assumption concerns the medieval understanding of imagination as opposed to our modern understanding of it and must be treated directly, especially since the allegorical figure of Ymaginatif is central to my exploration of the poem’s implications about interpretation. Ralph Hanna, though he cites the work on medieval *memoria* and its powers of composition done by Mary Carruthers, doesn’t seem to understand the medieval conception of memory/*vis imaginativa* and penalizes Langland’s figure Ymaginatif for not performing according the modern standards of imagination: “Ymaginatif, more strenuously than any other figure in the poem, rejects Wille Langland’s entire poetic project. . . .Langland’s Ymaginatif presents repetition, even rote repetition, of a text one did not make as more efficacious than the imaginative act of constructing a new one” (82). Hanna assumes that the modern and romantic values

of imagination as “original” are transcendentally better than what *memoria* does, what repetition—with difference, as *Piers Plowman* shows time and time again to both advantage and disadvantage—can do for learning, interpretation, identifying self and identity in history, and participation in history. Hanna continues his complaint:

Rather than Ymaginatif’s actual image-making power, the root of our modern sense and thoroughly absent from Langland’s character, we are presented with a personification predicated upon a separation from Clergy and from Reason. Thus Ymaginatif properly appears in Langland’s argument at precisely the point when Reason proves intractable and unattainable, and that point at which this personification last appears in the poem. The remainder of *Piers Plowman* is written from a position of retrenchment, a withdrawal from efforts at higher speculation. (91)

Hanna here paints the simultaneous disappearance of Reason and the appearance of Ymaginatif as a negative in the poem. To the medieval mind, this is not necessarily the case: remember that the disappearance of Virgil in *Purgatorio* signals not an end of reason but only that reason *alone* can go so far. The “image-making” power is more attributed to the memory—specifically *memoria*—in the Middle Ages. The power to invent and classify was a task allocated to the faculty of memory. “Rote” learning was not considered beneath originality, for memorization had the distinct ability to plant more firmly a composition or idea in the mind for further use and manipulation by the intellect.²¹ Nicolette Zeeman explains that “the “imaginative power” (*vis imaginativa*) is part of most schemas of the “inner senses,” the semi-rational and hypothetical powers that mediate between sensory and intellectual understanding and do preliminary

comparative and combinative mental work. These powers receive and use data from all the senses, but the inner “images” they use and produce tend to be described in visual terms.” (43) In the Middle Ages, the imagination resides in *memoria*, which is itself firmly rooted in composition. As Zeeman suggests, the composition of *memoria* tends “to be described in visual terms”—and one can certainly apprehend this when encountering the representation of the temple of memory in Frances Yates’s volume *The Art of Memory*—but it isn’t always, and sometimes the imaginal composition renders visuality in different ways than we, from an image-saturated culture, might assume.

Because of our assumptions about what makes compositions “visual,” not many would admit that *Piers Plowman* is an ekphrastic poem. Ekphrasis has commonly been understood as descriptive and highly visual, incorporating nouns and adjectives of color, shape, expression, texture, and intent or motion. Plentiful instances of *enargeia* in a text seem often to be a deciding factor for whether a composition is ekphrastic or not. According to many critics, *Piers Plowman* is not a “visual” poem, nor does it seem to engage in specific descriptions of art. Jeremy Lowe in “The Multiple Modes in *The Parlement of Thre Ages* and *Piers Plowman*” insists upon the dearth of the visual in *Piers* as a strategy that furthers the spiritual progression in the poem: “The lack of concrete images is a direct consequence of Will’s abstract search, and necessarily contributes to the slipperiness of the dream narrative, in which dreams begin to succeed one another as the dreamer continues to fall further and further from any concrete frame of reference” (112). Admittedly, *Piers* becomes increasingly difficult for the modern reader as she approaches the end of the poem, for Langland’s progression seems to rely less and less upon sensory description and more upon (unfixed) allegorical figures and dialectical

inquiry and debate. But other critics claim a particular kind of relationship with the visual for the poem. C. David Benson, in his excellent and limpid study *Public Piers Plowman*, draws many stylistic parallels between the poem and public religious murals, insisting upon the importance of exploring the cultural background in which Langland writes his work and the iconography he employs. Elizabeth Salter, though acknowledging that the poem's visual nature is "economical enough," notes that critics nonetheless deliberately reach into the visual arts to shed light upon the diffuse poem. "Clearly," she iterates, "there is some kind of dilemma here" (12).

That dilemma lies in the relationship between text and image in a poem that employs dream as its transporting vehicle. If the verbal tags of the "visual"—*enargeia*—have evaporated in the process of Will's coming to know, the fact of the dream, itself an image and a locale, albeit in the mind, remains. Salter recognizes the dream-vision's status as mind-image: "The 'broken terrain' of Langland's composition, we might say, is that of the mind; the locus of action is as changeable, as unlimited as the growing capacity of the dreamer's vision to 'wander through eternity', or to interpret images in the troubled 'mirror of middle-earth'" (14). Salter takes the image-making faculty even further here: if the dreamer makes image, that image is also an interpretation. These dreams are not the dreams themselves, but inscriptions of them, the text only a vague copy of the reality of the dream, the dream itself a vague translation of a reality that rationality cannot entirely elucidate. What compounds the difficulty in perceiving the divisions and connections between word, image, and reality is that the poem's final concern is not material but spiritual reality—essentially what neither image nor word can represent.

Because the poem is an ekphrastic undertaking, a literary inscription of a dream-image, tensions provided by perception (multiple perceptions in this case) will not be resolved but only adumbrated through its simultaneous provenance in and separation from worldly reality, the functions of Ymaginatif, and the poem's historical and eschatological but not absolute ending in which a final disclosure is not made available. One of the problems with our modern understanding of story is that we assume it must follow chronological lines, or at least acknowledge chronological lines moving from past to present to future even if the story presents these out of order. Even our recent popular narratives that seem to play outrageously with time—such as *Back to the Future*, *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure*, *The Butterfly Effect*, and more daringly, *Irreversible*, *Pulp Fiction*, *The White Hotel*, *Memento*—still cater to the concept of linear time because they presuppose a linear order of event. *Piers Plowman* does not. It insists, in fact, that human concepts of truth and goodness—interpreting experience correctly—cannot in fact follow this narrow concept of time but must be conscious of the participation in multiple times by any one experience or thing. Bruno Latour writes in his *We Have Never Been Modern*, “Time is not a general framework but a provisional result of the connection among entities. . . . It is a means of connecting entities and filing them away. If we change the classification principle, we get a different temporality on the basis of the same events” (74-75).²² The poem's enactment (or perhaps even enforcement) of the interpretive process is very much tied to a particular mechanism in ekphrasis that is polychronic (occupies more than one chronological date at once) and multi-temporal (draws together various milieux at once).²³ Latour also links his concept of the temporal toward ethical action: “We have always actively sorted out elements belonging to

different times. We can still sort. *It is the sorting that makes the times, not the times that make the sorting*” (76). It is no accident that coming to know the good, “kynde knowing,” in *Piers Plowman* requires learning how to interpret, how to sort the multiplicity of time presented to us. Through examining both the content of *Piers* as a dream vision, especially the figure of Ymaginatif and the Tree of Charity passus, and considering the multiple variations of the text through the metaphor of the palimpsest (what J.G. Harris uses to discuss the multi-temporality of material texts), this chapter will inquire into the kind of time that *Piers Plowman* makes and how its notion and display of interpretation renders the conception of time more accurate for the human mind and human narrative. The poem’s sense of itself as participating in multiple times while both recounting, moving through, and creating history is perhaps one of the most important features of *Piers Plowman*, especially in that its sweep and scope are created through the dream.

In my discussion of the dynamism of ekphrasis in the previous two chapters. I argued that rather than the semiotics of ekphrasis operating according to Murray Krieger’s “still moment,” ekphrasis in fact does not freeze time by attempting to signify itself but invigorates experiential time and, in fact, occupies multiple moments at once. Dante’s friezes in *Purgatorio* exemplified the kind of motion of which ekphrasis is capable. *Piers Plowman* is just as mobile, perhaps even more so, as it travels, through reference, allusion, flashback, prolepsis, and allegory, among biblical time and spiritual history, human history and historical moment (the present instance of disaster and plague), narrative time and experiential individual time. Steiner explains some of the real

circumstances surrounding the inception of the poem that contribute to its kaleidoscopic sense of time:

Langland's historiography is headier, more ambitious, and more diffuse, first because it is his style to exploit the ideological assumptions of any literary form, and second, because he is writing deep inside a historiographical project that began with the publication of Higden's Latin text in the 1350s and ended, for the time being, with Trevisa's English translation in the late 1380s. To translate the *Polychronicon* into English is already to think outside of it. So whereas Trevisa's *Dialogue* coolly reflects upon a project already complete, Langland enacts the project at the moment of its conception, when it is still operating at the level of discourse, rather than as a unified or even identifiable text. (192)²⁴

Langland's style seems as if it might lend itself to creating a terribly abstract and ethereal narrative (and at times it seems that *Piers Plowman's* allegory threatens to become entirely ungrounded), but because of the historiographical nature of his project that follows closely along the project of another text, the *Polychronicon*, Langland's apocalyptic poem never leaves its materiality behind. Nor is time depicted linearly, as one might expect from a poem that is deeply concerned with the material world. It is of utmost importance in this poem that the material world be depicted as inhabiting the polytemporal, and thus the poem suggests that matter itself does not inhabit a mere singular moment. In fact, the text implies that to trap matter in a singular moment, as Will does continuously with his misunderstandings and desires to oversimplify qualities such as Reason, is concomitant with misinterpretation of things, language, and experience.

Such a misinterpretation of time and history is, furthermore, as the parade of seven deadly sins intimates, the impetus in the occasion to sin. Each of the personified sins not only clearly thinks only of itself and its own desires but is also, in comparison with Repentance and other figures that symbolize goodness in its various forms, frozen in a single moment: they make no allusions, they speak none of the learned Latin that is held in such high regard throughout, and their verb tense remains consistently monotonous throughout their descriptions, until each repents honestly. A deictical reading of the sins' portraiture in Passus 5 helps determine the difference between untimely understanding and cataloguing experience according to linear time. Envy, for example, enumerates his faults to Repentance:

And whan I come to kirk and sholde knele to the Roode

And preye for the peple as the preest techeth—

For pilgrymes and for palmers, for al the peple after—

Thanne I crye on my knees that Crist yyve hem sorwe

That baren away my bolle and my broke shete.

Awey fro the auter thane I turne myne eighen

And biholde how Eleyne hath a new cote;

I wisshe thane it were myn, and all the web after. (B.5.103-110).

It is a laundry list, as confessions often are. Deictically, Envy uses a when/then formula: when I should be doing such and such, then I do the opposite. Such a structure implies continual refusal of the present circumstance and what it may have to offer, a state of constant dissatisfaction. "I wisshe thane it were myn" carries with it only the desire for possession, a possession that will never come to be as desire continues to reach after an

ever receding future, until it wishes for all the cloth in the world: “and all the web after.” Time remains, in this structure, trapped along one line, the when/then order of events, and all other movement of which the past, present, and future are capable is held in abeyance.

I won't examine each portrait in great detail, but I'd like to give another example to further accentuate the deictical difference between the sins' utterances and the way other allegorical figures occupy time. Sloth confesses:

I have maad avowes fourty, and foryete hem on morwe;

I parfourned nevere penaunce as the preest me highte,

Ne right sory for my synnes was I nevere.

And if I bidde and bedes, but if it be in wrathe,

That I telle with my tonge is two myle fro myn herte.

I am occupied ech a day, halyday and oother,

With ydel tales at the ale and outhurwhile in chirches;

Goddes peyne and his passion, (pure) selde thenke I thereon. (B.5.398-405)

“Nevere,” “ech a day,” “selde”: again, the temporal positioning in Sloth's speech renders time flatly, along a continuum determined only by absolutes, “never” and the implied “always.” There is no subtlety of instance, no refined connections with history or memory, no leaning toward futures influenced by other desires. Here, in the world of the sins, there is only Self and only the poorest concept of temporal motion. It is, in the scope of the world that the poem presents as a whole with its event and language, a grave misinterpretation of the brilliant variance of the good.

In contrast, the depictions of Dowel, Dobet, Dobest are filled with and surrounded by allusion and biblical narrative, Latin tags that always lead the reader to further

interpretation by not presenting the whole, and a much more diverse syntax and *Deixis*. In the dream of the allegorical dinner and conversation shared by Pacience, Clergie, Scripture, and Conscience (Passus 13), for example, Will is further schooled in interpretations of the figures Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest by Conscience:

For oon Piers Plowman hath impugned us alle,

And set alle sciences at a sop save love one;

And no text ne taketh to mayntene his cause

But *Dilige Deum* and *Dominine quis habitabit*...

And seith that Dowel and Dobet arn two infinites,

Whiche infinites with a faith fynden out Dobest,

Which shal save mannes soule—thus seith Piers the Plowman. (B.13.124-130)

The attention to “infinites”—infinities—is a crucial first step in the gradual divulgence of who the Do-brothers are and what they signify. As infinities, their action, done under the auspices of faith, allows one to arrive at the highest good. As “infinites,” the implication is that they demand unceasing action toward the good, living, as the Latin tag suggests, in the Lord (“*Dominine quis habitabit*”), not in time that itemizes event, or limits it to what Harris calls the “national sovereignty model of temporality,” a model that fixes both matter and event into a single moment, restrained by its own rules of sequence (2). The ring of “Living in the Lord” might sound precisely like a “national sovereignty model of temporality” to modernized and more secular ears, but to a medieval mind whose conception of “the Lord” is both connected to the flesh of the world and unbounded by linear time, this kind of living finds its good in the responsibility for all time(s).

The Latin tags, though not particularly visual in the sense of *enargeia*, are in fact essential elements in the ekphrastic composition as iconographical concepts, as I discussed in the previous chapter. As iconographic concept, they perform an astounding amount of work concerning the poem's particular occupation and understanding of time. "*Pacientes vincunt...*" ["The patient overcome"] is repeated a number of times in Passus 13 and again later. Most would generally agree that on the whole not only is the text about the virtue of patience, but it also performs a lesson in patience. One might wonder how the prolonged waiting of patience differs from Envy's continual desire for possession in terms of the kind of time each occupies. It might seem that both lie on an axis that projects only on one continuum, toward the future. Patience, however, as it is enacted and learned in this text is never simply linear, its goals lying along such varied axes of meaning that it is often referred to as pilgrimage. Again, the metaphor of pilgrimage may likewise seem like another linear comparison, but in *Piers Plowman*, the name of the game is subtle distinction, a facet Will himself finally understands with his meeting of Anima in Passus 15: "Til I seigh, as sorcerie it were, a sotil thing withalle/Oon withouten tonge and teeth, told me whider I sholde/And wherof I cam and of what kynde" (B.15.12-14). Subtlety of distinction is required as Will learns the characteristics of the virtues, the qualities attributed to each and the pathways in which each works and to what ends. The virtues change ever so subtly as new contexts are introduced: Conscience, for example, deepens into Anima, which also goes by the names of "*Mens*," "*Memoria*," "*Racio*," and "*Sensus*" according to corresponding circumstances. There is likewise nothing linear in the concept of pilgrimage, especially if one considers that this text enacts the spiritual pilgrimage, which is not a motion from point A to point B, but

revisiting idea, story, history, and theme over and over again, becoming ever more capable of the growing complexities of elements as meeting with them is repeated. Patience thus is the quality that makes possible such repetition, makes possible a participation in a polytemporal order of things.

As I have hinted a few times earlier in this chapter, there is an undeniable connection between the polytemporal and material groundedness of *Piers Plowman*. What the reader finds, as she moves ever further into the narrative, as she moves closer to the good and to the true identity of Piers Plowman, is not motion toward the transcendent and ethereal, not roses and mirrors of light circling in the empyrean, but a firm stance on earth and the injunction to work. The material world and work are the ground from which all other knowledge comes to human beings. At one level the Plowman is a metaphor alluding to the parable of the sower of seeds, but the allegorical figure is not only a metaphor referring to some figure from the past: clearly Piers is living among us, both Will and the reader, as an active force and player. The overarching question of *Piers Plowman* concerns the salvation of the individual soul: what kind of work must be done to act righteously, in accordance with the will of God? The underlying counterpart to this question is whether the poem itself can do active *spiritual* work in the world, whether it can do good. The prevalent classifications of human experience in the poem are delineated between the spiritual and physical, but Langland avows that there necessarily must be much crossover between the two. One of the first lessons to be learned concerns the idea of faith without works; Holi Chirche tells Will that “faith withouten feet is [feblere] than nought,/And as deed as a dorenail but if dedes folwe” (B.1.186-87). Work, physical and material work for others, is a requirement for spiritual salvation. And so

Piers Plowman begins at square one in the *world*. But there are problems with the material world that hinder the progress toward the other side, toward the spiritual. The reader is introduced to Will by means of a worldly depiction—worldly both in content and form. The poem’s formal beginning employs the structures and motifs of the pastoral and the Breton lai, popular genres, but tweaks them just enough to signal to the reader that the use of this form aligns itself with a spiritually bereft state:

In somer seson, whan softe was the sonne,
I shoop me into shroudes as I a sheep were,
In habite as an herimite unholy of werkes,
Wente wide in this world wonders to here.
Ac on a May morwenyng on Malverne Hilles
Me bifel a ferly, of Fairye me thoghte. (B. Prologue 1-6)

It is clear that Will is very much “in this world” and not focused upon the next. If he is likened to a sheep, with all the Christian symbolism that this particular simile arouses, he is the proverbial sheep gone astray, and “unholy of werkes.” He comes upon a marvel but believes it is from the world of fairy, and though the fairy realm in the Breton lai is a topos of alternate reality, a reality beyond the human material world, Will’s assumptions as they are rendered here betoken a critique of literary preoccupation with the magical and marvelous. His immediate assumption, then, reveals his (and popular literature’s) seduction by the world.

Yet the world is what the author and Will have to work with. Will lapses into dream, and it is this dream in the Prologue that is the most disjointed and confusing of the poem in its narrative shifts from dramatic banns to romance to beast fable and *débat*. It is at the

same time more concrete than many of the visions Will subsequently has (with the possible exception of the description of the Sins in Passus 5). Not only is the reader treated to a vast illustration of all (English) peoples as they proceed according to their varied professions and work and the levels of hierarchy from lowest to highest (from a “lunatik” to a “Kyng” to the angel who speaks to him and then back down the chain of being to rats), but also and already the vision becomes concerned with modes of rhetoric and issues of the accessibility and interpretation of language. The difference between “low” and “high” language plays out effectively in a few short lines:

Thanne loked up a lunatik, a leene thyng withalle,
And knelyng to the Kyng clerghially he seide,
‘Christ kepe thee, sire Kyng, and thi kyngryche,
and lene thee lede thi londe so leaute thee lovye,
And for thi rightful rulyng be rewarded in hevne!
And sithen in the eyr on heigh an aungel of hevne

Lowed to speke in latyn—for lewed me ne koude.... (B.Prologue 123-129)

It is interesting that the adjective “clergially” is applied to the lunatic’s utterance. While on one level the appearance of the lunatic could be taken as a declaration of everyone hierarchically granted his or her own place in creation, “clergially” also admits a critique of the abuse of rhetoric on the part of the clergy. The critique, however, is veiled allegorically and iconologically, and this textual strategy speaks to the sheer multiplicity of available interpretations as one crosses the gap between the narrative’s visual dream representation and the text’s linguistic depiction. The passage thus comes across as

esoteric and mysterious and this effect influences the private nature of the Angel's message, entirely in Latin, to the king.

As the angel proceeds to speak the comparatively lengthy Latin passage solely to the king, it becomes apparent that such language is meant for a select few, hierarchically worthy to receive such instruction—certainly not the “clergial lunatik”! Within this scene lies a tension between literariness and the non-literate and the knowledges available to either. This tension is brought into full light in the next Passus when Holi Chirche chastises Will for “To litel Latyn thou lernedest, leode, in thi youthe: *Heu michi quod sterilem duxi vitam iuvenilem!*” (B.1.141-42). He—and many like him— thus cannot access the greater knowledges that learning and the Church have to offer. The numerous Latin tags, sometimes explicated, sometimes not (but almost always presented as small pieces from a larger context) attest to this awareness on the part of the author that the text is not accessible to all, that meaning will inevitably escape a good number of its readers. But Langland argues that there are drawbacks to such learning in his critique of Kynde Wit and cleverness. He will not abandon the use of Latin quotations in the poem, however, and the jump back and forth from native English to the learned Latin will further emphasize the gap between and the difficulties of translating meaning and context played out even at the formal level of the dream-vision. Another point should be mentioned: the tendency even now in criticism to collapse Langland and the hero Will should be offset by the fact that Will is not schooled in Latin and Langland unequivocally was, for the biblical and philosophical quotations he implants throughout the poem are carefully chosen according to their original context and how their abbreviated inclusions

move the poem and the process of spiritual education for Will, despite his misinterpretations or, perhaps, *because of them*.

It is because of Will's inevitable misinterpretations that the poem works toward its impossible goal, the ekphrastic ambition that the historical human text could clearly explicate and present the sacred ordinance. Yet because the poem's chosen method of relating experience is ekphrasis, which works in that realm of impossible translation and probable misinterpretation, any progress made toward the Absolute lacks perfection. The text of the poem is profoundly aware of itself as a thing of the world; its only didactic professions of complete knowledge are time and again undercut by other allegorical figures that appear in the ongoing *débat*. Nevertheless, in this awareness the gap between reality and the literary begins to close; in that closure the textual anxiety that the thing, the human, the literary thing, the text itself cannot attain perfection becomes catalyst to a further search that becomes increasingly circular.

The entirety of the poem encapsulates a movement from a tired worldliness to a weariness of the world, from being thoroughly "in this world" in the Prologue to being divested, "Wolleward and weetshoed," and "wery of the world" (B.18.1, 4) in Passus 18, again a subtle distinction. But what the reader never escapes is the experience of reading a text, a text that always operates within the terms of materiality. The gap between experience/existence, and representation fuses closed in the course of the poem's built-in presuppositions of interpretive indeterminacy, from the glossed Latin quotations to the underminings of various allegorical authorities. Reason purports, however, to divide, classify, and distinguish things that Piers Plowman's presence refuses to limit. Human rational knowledge cannot at this point act as mediator, and that problem, as Ralph Hanna

noted, is precisely where the figure Ymaginatif takes the stage. Ymaginatif does not undo the poetic project, as Hanna argues; rather he points toward ever more complex compositions and interpretations.

In Will's encounter with Ymaginatif in passi 11, 12 and 13, the reader experiences in action the lacunae of interpretation between what is heard and what one remembers, between the image of the dream and what is lost in waking reality. Ymaginatif, though certainly not the same force as the creative spirit of the romantics, is nevertheless a dynamic faculty of composition in the mind and soul. He says to Will upon meeting him: "ydel was I nevere" (B.12.1), "And manye tymes have meved thee to [m]yn[n]e on thyn ende" (B.12.4). He appears as Will has discounted Reson, acting in that tendency that many have to dismiss a thing once it becomes apparent that that thing or quality is imperfect and has some serious drawbacks. Ymaginatif reminds Will that Reson is necessary to determine the honesty and validity of human speech, "that wise wordes wolde shewe and werche the contrarie: / *Sunt hominines nequam bene de virtute loquentes*" (B.12.50-51). Furthermore he illustrates how easily language is manipulated for the agendas of those in power:

And riche renkes right so gaderen and sparen

And tho men that thei moost haten mynistren it at the laste;

And for thei suffren and see so manye redy folks

And love hem noght as Our Lord bit, lessen hir soules:

Date et dabitur vobis.

So catel and kynde wit acombred ful manye. (B.12.52-55)

So riches and cleverness obstruct many from the good and this infraction affects humans at both the spiritual and the material level of existence. Ymaginatif, as David G. Allen's "The Premature Hermeneutics of *Piers Plowman B*" amply illustrates in its explication of Ymaginatif's rendering of the scriptural passage of the woman taken in adultery, is connected to the processes of interpretation and hermeneutics. As he tells Will to weigh carefully the words of others, he, at the same time, employs rhetorical turns and distortions of Scripture to shape meaning toward his own ends. Yet Ymaginatif is not the disreputable character that Allen's summation would in the end have one believe. Even if Ymaginatif's distortions of Scripture to manipulate meaning are similar in operation to the distortions of the "riche renkes," this ability is nevertheless a necessary one and can work toward the good; it is the ability that admits Christ's rewriting the old law with his new "caractes" (B.12.78). It is also this same quality—a pattern of fractal poetics that I discussed in the last chapter—that allows *Pearl* to repeat material, changing it slightly through the repetition, toward an ethical end.

Ymaginatif leaves Will at the end of Passus 12 with the words "*Salvabitur vix iustus in die iudicii; Ergo—salvabitur!*" (B.12.288-89) and concludes with an anecdote on the pagan Troianus who is spiritually saved despite his ignorance of the Christian faith. Is the reader to take this anecdote with a grain of salt, considering that Ymaginatif's instruction has had everything to do with the usage of language and interpretation, as well as rhetoric's power to convince others of truth? The fact that Ymaginatif uses the word "mede" twice in four lines may point to that assertion (for the allegorical Mede has already been shown for what she is early on in the poem). Perhaps Ymaginatif's illustrative expansion of the Latin from the first letter of Peter is doctrinally faulty, but

what subsequently happens as Will awakens in the next passus is even more precise in its lesson. For as he awakens from this dream, he is disconsolate and near mad: “And I awaked therwith, witlees nerhande,/And as a freke that fey were forth gan I walke/in manere of a mendynaunt many yer after” (B.13.1-3). Will reflects on his bad fortune, the pains of his old age, the failures of the world, the abuses of clerks, friars, and priests—all those entrusted with the care of others. Brooding in the center of his reflection is his memory of Ymaginatif’s words, but the words are reordered and truncated: Will thinks on “how Ymaginatif seid, ‘*Vix iustus salvibitur,*’ /And whan he hadde seid so, how sodeynliche he passed” (B.13.19-20). Not only does Will leave out the anecdote of Troianus, but he also forgets the rest of Ymaginatif’s quotation: “*Ergo—salvabitur!*”—the most important, shocking, and hopeful part of it! The heavy state of melancholy that infects Will has much to do with tainting the mind and preventing it from clear interpretation. Will chooses here to wallow instead of act, thereby using the very powers of revision Ymaginatif has shown him to their sterile end rather than recursively, recombinaively.

The formal separation of the dreaming and waking state by the ending and beginning of the passus is here especially relevant, for it is through that artificial marker that the reader again can consciously realize that what has preceded before was a dream—and a textual depiction of a dream. And immediately the reader is subjected to a further gloss: Will’s rather emotional interpretation in which, to the reader’s frustration, he seems not to have learned anything at all. Will’s failure at the beginning of Passus 13 emphasizes again the ekphrastic tension of the poem and the connection of its mechanism intrinsically and especially to the figure of Will and those faculties the human will

employs. If, beyond ideology (is that possible down here?), there is no difference between the text and Creation, it is, nevertheless, the existence of Will wherein human text and action can refuse the One, can divorce itself from God. How delicate an operation then, to create a text in accordance with the divine creation!

But that is precisely the underlying fear throughout the poem. Langland is more than aware that doing well, doing better, and doing best rely upon that slippery activity of the fallible mind, human translation and interpretation. Ymaginatif loses his personified priority later in the poem when the proper name becomes a common word: “ymaginacion” (as Lady Mede later loses that emphasis and becomes simply “mede”). Rogers declares that:

just as the rule or function [for the Fibonacci sequence] is “Add the two preceding terms,” the rule or function for *Piers Plowman* is “Treat the earlier discourses as texts to be interpreted.” . . . That is why reading *Piers Plowman* often produces a dizzying sensation similar to that of exploring a self-similar fractal surface—the same pattern seems to repeat itself again and again, but each time on a different scale or with a different orientation. (25)

It is easy to assume that these terms, “mede” and “imaginacion,” have completely lost their allegorical significance in the course of efficient usage or because of the polysemic qualities of words, but the fact that the terms appear rather singularly and sparsely after their allegorical depictions should caution the reader not to forget their dramatic appearances before. Rogers’s interest in the poem has to do with the motion of it as hermeneutic circle, that “what the poem *does* is to cause its reader to reflect on the activity of interpretation itself” (6). But he is also careful about acknowledging this

textual performativity, because in his recognition of episodic structure, he also is aware that characters and consciousness are not constructed according to modern standards:

Again and again, we find that we can tell some sort of argument is going on, but we cannot get straight what it is at issue. The drama produces not a standoff or the momentary crystallized paradox, but a sense of constant meltdown, the fluidity of evolutionary change. In short, the concept of drama does not necessarily entail the concept of well-defined entities in opposition. . . . Instead, the drama is a drama of relations that place entities involved in those relations in flux. (24).

I noted already the allegorical figures of this poem are often not fixed, but fluid. What changes are their qualities according to their contexts. Passus 20 tells the reader that “Wenyng is no wisdom, ne wys ymaginacion” (B.20.33), and Schmidt’s gloss translates “ymaginacion” as “opinion” (347). That may be too simple a translation of the word; certainly in our contemporary understanding, opinion is regarded casually. The operations of ymaginacion are more akin to the intellectual mechanism of *memoria*, that mental operation that is responsible in the Middle Ages for processes of interpretation and classification. What this particular passage in Passus 20 shows the reader in the face of the former depiction of Ymaginatif is that this human faculty as an activity of the mind and of the soul is highly susceptible to influence and is fraught on all sides with danger.

Danger never leaves Will; he is surrounded by it from the beginning with physical threats of plague and storm related in the Prologue to the spiritual dangers in the apocalyptic end where Sloth threatens to destroy all. There are, however, tools offered to him in his deepest dreaming to combat the spiritual dangers. The effectiveness of those

tools reaches Will and the reader not only through *what* the tools are but also through *how* they are meted out. These particular tools, the Tree of Charity in Passus 16 and the illustration of its action in the life of Christ, answer to the problematic divisions between the private mind/soul and public activity, and between human history and divine time, seeking to complicate the borders containing them. For the utmost Reality occurs within the most obscure, secret, private, and human experience, doubly locked away from the public, from the *Place*: the dream within the dream. In the narrative, it is this dream-within-a dream, this double ekphrasis, that turns time around, “allow[ing],” as Harris says, “the old to do work alongside the new” (17).

Harris asserts one of the points of polytemporal analysis through wrapping it up with Nietzsche’s notion of *unzeitgemässe*, the untimely. The functioning of its temporality is something in which ekphrasis already participates: “Nietzsche’s untimely is not just a descriptive theory of how to rework temporality, of how we might use the past to imagine alternatives to the present and to chronology itself. Untimely matter likewise suggests the simultaneous agency of past matter and present subject in reworking our conceptions of temporality” (13). One of the revolutionary strengths of ekphrasis is its ability to revise its object (past matter) in new portrayals (present subject) that recombine the levels of its components and their social values. This revision, in turn, not only renders the original object accessible to a contemporary audience, taking into account current concerns, but also defamiliarizes, makes fresh, what had become rote and taken for granted in the public’s eyes. Past and present merge on many levels through the ekphrastic act.

Will is already dreaming when he swoons at Anima's mention of Piers the Plowman into a "love-dreem" (B.16.20), a rather iconographical image linked to the dream-vision of medieval romance. This dream, an inset dream (or dream-within-a-dream), is appropriately titled, though the signifier used for it typically indicates the kind of lover's daydream found in the romance genre. Again, Langland's choice of nomenclature in this re-rendering of the dream does double-duty, for even the title of this dream works to call literary making, revising it to its full potential, into the polytemporal realm of the Divine writ. The semantic choice of "love-dreem" draws along with Will's private undertaking an entire social dimension occupying Western Europe from over 300 years—the romance and the audience who is familiar with its structure—and places it afresh into what for the medieval mind was the ultimate Reality, the spiritual history of not only human salvation, but also human Being. The implication is that literary past-time is not just for of-the-moment pleasure but for learning (recalling Augustine's distinction between *frui* and *uti*, pleasure and use); the "love-dreem" has at its center not an elusive beloved but the deepest self and the life of Christ.

Will's love-dreem also contains the allegory of the Garden. The reference is not only to Eden, but also to the popular garden of the romance (*Roman de la Rose*). The deeper Will moves into the dream, the more familiar to the popular imagination the references and motifs become. But they are also strange, for they are recontextualized. It is not Eve plucking an apple, but Piers; the apples bring not shame but virginity. Deeper into this dream world the patterns coalesce, divisions are murky. One second the reader is with Will asking Piers for a taste of the fruits of the tree of Charity, Piers shaking them down to the ground, and the devil making away with them; the next second Gabriel speaks

“Spiritus Sanctus” to a “maide that highte Marie” (B.16.90-91), and the reader is thrown into a recapitulation of the life of Christ. There is no stated change of scenery. The text does not pace along a clear, chronological line; it is moving, as Latour illustrates, in spirals and along spokes. The garden allegory of tree and fruit conflates into the spiritual history of God and Son; the motifs of fruit, ripeness, the womb, the fullness of time echo from the allegory to the history—they are parts of the same story. Piers is really Christ; the division between flesh and divine is not really a division. The living tree and dead cross are the same and at the end of the “love-dream” Christ “deide, and deeth fordide, and day of nyght made” (B.16.166), a further biblical allusion but also another suggestion of instantaneous conversion of time.

The difference between text and experience is subsumed within the fact of Will’s double-dreaming, within the deeper recesses of his mind/soul/self. And the formal level of the narrative of dream-within-dream is matched by the content of his dream which begins with the gestation of Christ and his vestiture in the flesh of Piers Plowman, who perceives that his time has come: “And Piers the Plowman perceyved plener tyme” (B.16.103). It is not God or the Holy Spirit, or even Christ, but Piers who sees that it is necessary now to perform his work in the flesh, in material reality. The passage immediately after Piers’s perceiving relates, surprisingly, not a generic recapitulation of the biblical birth-story or a list of the spiritual reasons for Christ’s coming, but a profound concern with the human body:

And lered him lechecraft, his lif for to save,
That though he were wounded with his enemy, to warisshen hymselfe;
And dide him assaie his surgerie on hem that sike were,

Til he was parfit praktisour, if any peril fille;
And sougte out the sike and synfulle bothe,
And salvede sike and synfulle, both blynde and crokede,
And commune women convertede and to goode turnede... (B.16.104-110)

The language here is that of the physic—"lechecraft," "assaie his surgerie," "praktisour"—and the terms are not simply metaphors for spiritual conditions. The terminology moves decidedly from physical ailment to spiritual disease, brought together finally by "sike and synfulle." But each is granted its own substance and reality, without devaluing either, without forcing the physical to signify the spiritual. Piers, the figure of salvation, is after all the flesh of the Divine, the divine "transposed into man himself." And so the dream-within-a-dream begins with a salvo of human bodily experience, since humans read and are taught to read, and work and are taught to work, beginning with the senses, with the body.

How interesting that while, with the transcription of the double-dream, translation becomes further removed from experience and more complicated, at the same time Will and the reader move deeper into experience, so that seemingly the line between the two melts away. But the moment is perhaps more like Faulkner's stereoscopic vantage in "The Bear" wherein after hearing Cass read lines from Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (one of the most well known and popular of ekphrastic poems), Ike sees simultaneously, as through a stereopticon, the historical reality of the South and the inner workings of the ideological reality that dictates it. They are two different views that cannot be collapsed into one, yet they are held jointly in one gaze, as the experience of personal time collapses with spatial history in *Piers Plowman*. What is frustrating to the reader of *Piers*

Plowman is that Will, upon awakening, “after Piers the Plowman pried and stared,/Estward and westward I waited after faste” (B.16.168-69). He returns yet again to the literal gaze, the literal reality, and cannot see that Piers does not just belong distantly to some other past—he was here, but now he is not—but is indeed present, always, in the flesh.

Will’s daftness is so obvious (at least it should be) to readers, that it becomes a topos of the ignorant human, the fool, and as such should itself be a guide to the reader toward revelation just within grasp. His inability to form connections belabors the point that the reader should already be a step or two ahead of him. At the same time, the ekphrastic principle that so saturates this poem takes the long route in translating and explicating the simple and obvious, for it contains within it many of the objections, justifications, inferiorities and weaknesses of socio-historical desires, motivated by power and fear, to divide.

After all, the text of *Piers Plowman* is about something the reader already knows; it presents itself as such with its numerous Latin biblical tags and its well-worn topos of a novitiate coming to learn the truth. Its representations are of social representations of history and the self: in some ways, the question in *Piers Plowman* becomes which one—the text or the history—is the allegory? Langland takes the ekphrastic mode a step further than most authors by breaking down all lines of division. Not only do we start to become confused about what exactly the ekphrastic object is, but we also, especially in the C-text revision where Langland takes out the prompts that tell us where the dreams begin and end, cannot tell where representation and experience are separate. The effect finally of the ekphrastic dream is to give the reader a sense of a double self, one that

knows a truth and just needs to be reminded of it and one that is utterly perplexed. *Piers Plowman* creates a self through the vehicle of a (W)ill confident in its (his) knowledge, and a self, through the text's revisions of familiar social contexts and histories, absolutely adrift in the world of human interpretation. Ekphrasis, because it both presents and performs the experiential motions of perception, translation, and apprehension, has a particularly revelatory quality for the self: the dynamics of the self's relationship with identity, society, culture, and history become visible. But as I have argued in the previous chapter, this self is not immovable, impermeable, discrete; it is a self in constant change through its interfacing with the world. The ekphrastic "I," as it joins the "I" of the reader, is the learning self.

Langland was a learning self, too, and the continuing revisions of the text of *Piers Plowman* he undertook throughout his life speak to the tenacity of the ekphrastic process, a process always concerned with composition, never to remain at rest and never to obey what Harris calls the "national sovereignty model of temporality." Although classifying the collection of revisions as ekphrastic may stretch the category to breaking, I'd be remiss if I didn't treat the fact of revision for this particular text because the very project of revision is in fact similar to ekphrasis in its workings: revision of a composition. The act of revision is part of a similar project undertaken by ekphrasis and analysis of the revised text under the same crest of the multitemporal. It is also important to consider that the revisions of this text—a life's work not only for Langland but also scores of editors—are highly visible, contentious, and abundant in numbers of extant copies. I will consider very briefly the import of the number of revisions and versions of the text to the idea of

polychronic matter and the text's status as multitemporal, because while not ekphrastic in the usual sense of representing a visual composition, Langland's revisions nevertheless presuppose both an original template/*imaginal composition* and a new template/*imaginal composition* created with their introduction into the text. In some ways, the sweeping textual revisions, errors, and anomalies are perhaps not so different from the Latin tags Langland truncates, recontextualizes, and glosses in order to urge the readers to ponder the histories of their meanings and semantics.

This is not to say that with revision the original(s) becomes obsolete. Memory and imagination, so vital to the ekphrastic process, are similarly key players in the revision process. Schmidt explains that because memory is a cornerstone of textual revision—memorial traces are the power that allows revision to happen—the revised texts that come into existence cannot supplant the texts before them:

For Langland (as for us) these two mental powers, memory and imagination, are of course intimately related, like the retrospective and prospective faces of a bust of Janus. This is because what has been and what might be have more in common with each other than either has with what is. And if "reality" is thought of as the widest conceptual category that encompasses all three, the past, the possible, and the actual, then each Langlandian "revision" (if we are still at ease with that name) may be understood less as a deletion of its predecessors than as an ordering of them into a relationship finally dependent not on the author but on the audience. (14)

Erasure and replacement are not valid operations here. I like Schmidt's emphasis on the ordering of revisions tied to a relationship dependent upon audience, which accords an

ever-changing relationship in the production of text. Thinking about revision this way, rather than as the role call of single, authenticated works inhabiting single measures of time, prompts a serious recalibration of the model of textual production and ideas about literary accomplishment and care. It also calls to mind the palimpsest, with its material traces punctuating “present” text. The palimpsest is a particularly adroit metaphor for the polytemporal as its visible physicality, according to Harris, “illuminates the untimeliness of matter.”²⁵ He continues, “[The palimpsest] is equally one of untimely irruption. I call this the temporality of explosion: the apparition of the ‘old’ text shatters the integrity of the ‘new’ by introducing into it a radical alterity that punctures the illusion of its wholeness or finality” (15). The palimpsest becomes an equally good metaphor for ekphrasis in that ekphrasis is also a heightened representation of the “play of multiple temporal traces” (8).

The South African artist William Kentridge creates animated films using stop-motion filming of a single page of paper upon which he draws and erases, his precise and fuzzy images moving with each mark and erasure of graphite. “Erase” is a bit of a misnomer for the process, as the previous image or line or shape never disappears completely but leaves faint traces of itself so that the next image incorporates a ghostly history of its coming-into-being. Kentridge, of course, intends for this “erasure” to be visible as a statement about memory, remembrance, and trauma in a country and people tortured by apartheid and its vestiges.²⁶ Langland perhaps does not intend the obvious or explicit showcase of “evolutionary” traces as Kentridge does, but whether he intended vestigial preservation or not of the development of his texts and their representations and meanings, the fact of multiple versions, sometimes quite contradictory in places because

of scribal error or choice (the incendiary tearing of the pardon in Passus 7 present in B-text, but absent in C-text, for example), nevertheless speaks to a relationship of acknowledgement and dependency between one text and another, thus effectually gathering the time in which each appears as a drawstring gathers folds of cloth by tension through its sleeve. To extend the metaphor, the fact of revisions makes a garment with its collocated pleats or folds of cloth rather than discrete ciphers to be analyzed in a comparative vacuum. In other words, *Piers Plowman* is not a singular, finalized masterwork; there are few texts that can claim such a story. At the material level of its existence, *Piers* is polychronic; at its semantic and thematic levels it is multitemporal. Like Kentridge's work, it demands utter attention; it is arduous and exhausting in its claims to and action in the polytemporal.

Piers Plowman is one of the last dream-vision texts that employ the official framework. Dreams of course appear again in literature—even some allegorical dreams, though they tend toward the psychological from this point on—but they no longer present the same refined elements or order of the form (*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* comes very close with both its framing and its paratactical sequencing). It is almost as if the dream-vision text is at last exhausted with the myriad dream cycles and revisions of *Piers Plowman*. In early modernity, ekphrasis begins largely to occupy itself with new subjects—and perhaps much simpler and seemingly stable subjects—to translate, namely physical works of art rather than the compositions of *memoria*, or the *ingenium*, or *vis imaginativa*. But I turn now not to early modernity, but backwards in time to peer more intimately into the medieval uses of *memoria*, especially as they pertain to ekphrastic representation. The mystical vision will be my vehicle.

Part Two

5 The Ekphrastic Mystical Vision Text and the Rhetoric of Memoria

It is my contention that medieval culture was fundamentally memorial, to the same profound degree that modern culture in the West is profoundly documentary.

—Mary Carruthers, *The Craft of Memory*

*Every creature in the world
Is like a book, and a picture,
And a mirror for us
Of our lives, of our death,
Of our condition, of our kind,
A faithful reflection.*

—Alain de Lille, *Rhythmus Alter*

*...for when our intellect draws near its goal
and fathoms to the depths of its desire,
the memory is powerless to follow;
but still, as much of Heaven's holy realm
as I could store and treasure in my mind
shall now become the subject of my song.*

—Dante, the *Paradiso*

The mystical vision text is a special ekphrastic creature. She is wilier than her cousin the dream vision; she often hides behind great slabs of Spiritual Truth so that her diaphanous layers are neither disturbed nor divulged. Her claim to verity in representation, after all, lies often in the denial that representation is possible. This denial, however, goes hand-in-hand with a glorious effusion of represented event, sensory and structural detail, and explanation of meaning. Both denial and description follow well-trod conventions in the long line of mystical vision texts: inexpressibility topos, affective modesty, allusion and manipulation of Scripture and icon, courtly love dialogue between lover and beloved, and so on. The mystical vision text is clearly a genre possessing its own history and rules of composition but she also seems to represent an experience by the mystic of a mystical

event, an immediate consciousness of Other, union with the Divine. Is she one or the other? Is she a representation of a mediated visual representation/composition—and therefore ekphrastic—or is she the words as they are immediately given to the mystic author? Where does she come from? She is not an easy lady, nor does she deign to be poked about by the hardscrabble postmodern theorists of aesthetics. And they have largely ignored her.

As I probed the dream vision for its salient connections to ekphrastic theory and discussed the singular powers granted to the form through its ekphrastic function, so I aim to uncover the particular qualities of ekphrasis that inhabit and give birth to the mystical vision text and perhaps take some part in the dilemma surrounding the originary categorization of the genre. A thorough ekphrastic evaluation of such texts may, in other words, reveal what is missing in the disconnect of equally valid claims to immediacy and mediacy. But the mystical vision text must be coaxed gently to reveal her secrets, for not only does she impart spiritual wisdom, but she also historically gave authority to certain marginal groups during a period when they had none either socially, politically, or both. There is something both terribly delicate and immensely powerful about the mystical vision texts; so much depended on them and their truth claims to immediacy. But in some ways, the mediacy/immediacy dilemma is the wrong focus for uncovering the power behind these texts.

I touched upon the role of memory in ekphrastic representation during discussions of the dream vision, but it is in looking closely at the mystical vision text that functions of the medieval understanding of memory, *memoria*, come to the fore. My examinations of the dream vision dealt with dispelling the idea of the “still moment” in favor of the clear

dynamism that the verbal translation of visual composition was meant to produce. I also discussed the diffuse rather than rigid subjectivity of the ekphrastic dream vision, as well as the polymorphous body and polytemporality of the dream vision once it is read through the ekphrastic lens. The mystical vision text incorporates all of these functions and elements as well; they are all within the purview of its status as an ekphrastic work of art. As I analyzed the elements of ekphrasis that are revealed by the dream vision, so too do I treat here the respective elements of the ekphrastic mode not exclusive to, but certainly indicative of, the mystical vision text. These include the rhetorical devices of apophrisis, cataphrasis, and synaesthesia, as well as a focused ideological subtext narrating gender dynamics and tensions between private and public modes of expression. At the heart of them all lie the special compositional functions of the medieval understanding of *memoria*, which will connect rhetoric and purpose, performance and theme through its thorough manipulation of cultural and social memory preserves. *Memoria* is so solid as to be a thing; it is a living allegory, the picture house wherein, as Alain de Lille intimates with his reflective, booklike creatures, all experiences reside as symbol in their appointed chambers. It is considered by such prominent theorists as Mary Carruthers the compositional agent of the Middle Ages, and when a text elicits its undeniably visual troves and processes of categorization and organization to the extent that the mystical vision text does, that text invariably is working through the ekphrastic mode of representation.

Before going into further depth with *memoria*, I must first look to the problem of mediacy and immediacy, or the transcendence/immanence dilemma as it is also known, in the context of mystical-vision texts. Because it concerns questions of spiritual faith on

the one hand and ideological value and practice on the other, as well as employing a number of poetic and rhetorical devices, the mystical experience continues to elude definition by the academy. This multifold nature of the mystical vision is perhaps responsible for the dearth of critical literary and interarts studies on mystical texts—especially those by women—from medieval Europe. But at the same time, the academy is more to blame, for there has been a tendency to mark the medieval Christian vision as over-determined, posing arguments to the effect that any claims to transcendent truth are merely assumptions made by individuals and collectives that are intrinsic to the sociopolitical system in which they lived and therefore remained unquestioned. The visions then make for good academic case-studies, but few take seriously *both* their ideological and their spiritual significances, as if one precludes the other. That is one way that Christian mystical visions are regarded and, unfortunately, neglected. Medieval women's visions, of course, were neglected in literary studies long before postmodern theory for a variety of reasons: they were written by women, their structures are often unwieldy and nonlinear, some have been lost for centuries, and they are religious, not secular. This last reason remains the sticking point and prompts the ultimate, loaded question of the debate about mystical experiences and visions: Is the mystical vision an unmediated experience or is it a representation?

Evelyn Underhill's early twentieth-century study provided the ground upon which other analyses of the mystical vision approach the validity, psychology, and ontological suppositions of the texts. Underhill is the first to articulate clearly problems in the cultural reception of mystical texts rather than dismissing them out of hand or accepting them wholeheartedly as True, if unverifiable, catalogues of union with the divine,

problems such as the reach for the real in their languaging or their reliance on something other than logic for meaning. It is upon these bases that theorists continue their debates about the dilemma of mediacy/immediacy, transcendence/immanence.²⁷

But not many have taken Underhill's lead in examining and interpreting these texts as compositions in their own right. Veins of political theology and cultural studies seem to have no fear in approaching medieval mysticism, but that is because they treat the texts largely as cultural artifacts. Often there is a dismissal of the text's claim to contain religio-spiritual knowledge; such aspects are neatly packaged and placed aside while the text in question is held gingerly between thumb and forefinger and scientifically scrutinized for its cultural/historical studies potential. The mystical vision text is certainly valuable as a cultural artifact, and it can tell scholars worlds about ideological tensions and structures, as well as practices, conventions, and habits of the place and time. But because I am interested in applying a methodology that recognizes the mystical vision text's polytemporality and aesthetic contribution, cultural studies can only take interpretation so far and draws with it the danger of rooting texts firmly to the past. There are exceptions: the works of scholars like Jonathan Gil Harris, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, Eileen Joy, and Carolyn Dinshaw, while examining texts according to a cultural studies model, also begin to look at these texts as offering their own brand of literary and artistic knowledge apart from cultural fact. Many of these works have also turned a critical eye upon the discipline itself, holding up for analysis certain precepts that have operated in medieval studies without question, assumptions that have blinded scholars to valuable subtleties in knowledge and information. As such, the works of these critics have provided models for medievalists to approach texts poetically, leaving open and

available the possibility for the text to speak to them. The results have been creative and intellectually vigorous. Books like Dinshaw's *Getting Medieval*, Biddick's *The Shock of Medievalism*, and Cohen's *The Postcolonial Middle Ages* have opened such possibilities for interpretation and understanding as paradigmatic the self-consciousness of the discipline; the focus on the interdisciplinary and interarts models of interpretation; fluid bodies and gender dynamics; and polytemporality. All of this is with the notion in mind that the text is not merely passive but latently possesses power to perform an ethical good in daily and experiential life.

Solid theory and criticism on women's mystical writing continues to develop from the last few decades, especially with the work of Barbara Newman, Caroline Walker Bynum, and Grace Jantzen. Postmodern and feminist theory in many ways has made this "renaissance" possible, particularly through work done by such theorists as Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Judith Butler, and Elizabeth Grosz on cultural constructions of gender and a re-valuation of those spheres of experience traditionally attributed to the feminine half of the gender binary. Nonetheless, critical theory on the work of female mystics remains somewhat sparse; that amorphous subject, spirituality, so resistant to definition, prompts many to shy away from academic analysis. For it is decidedly difficult to analyze that which claims itself to be unmediated communication from God without sidestepping the "God-issue" altogether and performing a purely anthropological analysis. Bruce Holsinger notes in his study of Hildegard of Bingen's music: "The origins and inspirations of Hildegard's compositions thus raise the ideological problem of belief. One of the most daunting quandaries facing scholars of premodern religiosities is the historical challenge of analyzing works that are asserted by

their authors to be divinely inspired” (91). This difficulty speaks to an interesting tension in the values of the contemporary Western academy, between a lukewarm wish not to discredit the beliefs of “divinely inspired” authors and a snobbery concerning “illogical” beliefs that underlies a drive to catalogue them as mere “artifact.” The machinery of this tension includes an assumption that assigns value according to an unmediated/mediated binary: whatever claims to be unmediated cannot be taken seriously by the academy and should be relegated to “theological studies”; likewise, there exists the assumption that the mediated text cannot be sacred, and thus cultural determination precludes the free will of the human.

But what about the vision itself before it is translated into writing? Claiming that a mystical vision is mediated is tantamount to discrediting its divine origin, according to our cultural binary which equates divine perception with purity/singularity and human perception with imperfection. I don’t think that this problem can be completely erased; I do not aim to do so. But I do aim to complicate it by approaching it from another direction and laying bare some further ideas and practices that may contribute to a breaking point in the cultural assumptions of divine and human perception. At this point it is necessary to explain some of the terminology and distinctions surrounding the mystical vision, especially the conflict surrounding the term *experience* as it is typically made to designate the moment of mystical union. A number of scholars of mystical texts decry the term *experience* as the catch-all for the moment of mystical union. Frank Tobin complains in his introduction to Mechthild of Magdeburg’s *Flowing Light of the Godhead*, “If one thinks as I do, that a most unfortunate aspect of many studies on mysticism has been the focus on it as *experience*, and if one then chooses, with Bernard

McGinn, the working definition of mysticism as a *direct or immediate consciousness or awareness of the presence of God*, then the term mystical seems apt to describe the whole [Flowing Light]" (12). The term *experience* has been a problem in a number of ways, the first pertaining to which texts are considered mystical by theologians and whether such texts will receive the same kind of authoritative status and recognition of truth claims by theologians and religious scholars. The second problem that many have with the term is that it assumes *a priori* a separation between a self and an Other, in that it posits a subjective, experiencing self. In mystical union there is no separation; the vision therefore cannot be an "experience." Scholars have dealt with the problem in various ways; Michael Sells, for example, chooses to refer to the union as the "meaning event" rather than "experience." More than a few settle for an in-between designation, a "mediated immediacy" that tends to slide over the weightier issues on the table. I'll wager that part of this embroilment with experience and consciousness is a problem of vocabulary, that we simply have not developed the kind of vocabulary necessary for the teeming layers of preconsciousness, consciousness, experience, interface of self and other, and composition that thinking about mysticism—the mystic event and the transcription of it—requires. Such a vocabulary would demand great expansions in current theological and academic circles, from literature to psychology to physics and mathematics, and better communication among them. The medieval mystical vision texts play, if not indiscriminately, then with abandon among the structures and codes that each discipline has claimed for its own, in part because they were written before such specialization took place and in part because their ekphrastic initiative called for diverse metaphor and synaesthetic description. But for now, the vocabulary remains slim and the

concepts “experience,” “consciousness,” “representation,” “memory,” “composition” are still tenuous and explorable.

The idea that consciousness is only possible through representation, as post-structuralist and cultural materialist theorists pose, certainly throws a wrench into how the mystical vision and mystical vision text are treated by scholars. It may be that the primary vision itself is unmediated, but to make it understandable to the conscious mind it must undergo a comparison/contrast/categorization process fulfilled by representing the vision in the conscious mind with other comparable perceptions of time. Mary Carruthers elegantly, succinctly explains it:

In rhetoric, memory craft is a stage in composing work; presupposed is the axiom that recollection is an act of investigation and recreation in the service of conscious artifice. Its practitioners would not have been surprised to learn what was to them already obvious: that recollection is a kind of composition, and by its very nature is selective and formal. (*Book x*)

The vision may happen to a person, but to perceive and then conceive of it, it must be in facets represented, mediated, by previous experience, by what already exists in the memory troves. After all, the vision itself cannot be recorded, but the experience of perceiving and interpreting the vision is—a necessary intermediate step between the object and public representation of it. Filtering the vision into memory, sorting it with previous sensory recall, being able to summon the memory, and then translating it into language: all of these qualify as experience and are the motion and processes of memory that allow me to consider and contemplate the works concerning mystical vision as ekphrastic: in its general terms, a verbal representation of a visual representation.

Memory is a composition; it is an experiential representation of event. My interest is less in defining what “mystical” or “mystical union” is than in explaining why the mystical vision text—very different from the mystical event—is an important part of the conversation about ekphrasis and how art and memory interrelate. That said, I have no wish to deny or discredit the claims to union with the Absolute, not that they are irrelevant to creation of meaning or human morality, but that they have little operative effect on the process of ekphrasis in terms of the pure mechanics of its translation of one composition into verbal composition. In other words, affirming or denying the truth and validity of mystical event may be a judgment on spiritual and/or religious authority but not on the aesthetic ekphrastic status of the work.

I cannot emphasize enough how much of an issue the mediacy/immediacy-transcendence/immanence question has been for scholars of the mystical vision text; the dilemma has shaped, if not stunted, much of the scholarship surrounding the genre. Instead of wrangling over the authenticity of the vision (did it really happen? was it an immediate experience of the divine?), critics need to discuss more fully the vision text’s portrayal of the different terrains/dimensions in which human morality is perceived and conceived and how human perception of time and space shines a light on our abilities to work, to reach out to others, to understand (or not) and experiment with language, and to comprehend the self. Critical theory on the mystical vision text has begun to treat and interpret gender dynamics and roles, textual authority, class, race, and nationality distinctions, and other sociopolitical referents in the texts; it is a start. Michael Sells, Margaret Cotter-Lynch, Bradley Herzog, Grace Jantzen, among others, have begun this work. Much more needs to be done.

As a case in point, in his book about apophasis in the mystical vision, Sells analyzes the rhetorical tool of apophasis in his introduction merely to ameliorate the dilemma of mediacy/immediacy. He avers, “The meaning event is the semantic analogue to the experience of mystical union,” noting that it “does not describe or refer to mystical union but effects a semantic union that re-creates or imitates the mystical union” (9). He continues:

...[apophatic] language displaces the grammatical object, affirms a moment of immediacy, and affirms a moment of ontological pre-construction—as in the paradoxical refrain that in mystical union the soul reverts “to where it was before it was.” The meaning event is transreferential. Rather than pointing to an object, apophatic language attempts to evoke for the reader an event that is—in its movement beyond structures of self and other, subject and object—structurally analogous to the event of mystical union. (10)

But even as “structurally analogous,” the apophatic language of the text works in the realm of representation. I would not say that apophasis is the key to affirming a moment of immediacy, *except* as an ekphrastic tool in closing what Retallack calls the gap between life versus art. In other words, the immediacy claimed by ekphrastic apophasis is not of the mystical “meaning event” but of the sensual and intimate relationship of reader with text. The apophatic analogy upon which Sells settles the mediacy/immediacy dilemma in his argument actually does not signal that once one begins to turn the mystical vision into narrative, it does not go through steps of mediation—comparing, contrasting, sorting, connecting to/with cultural narratives, meaning, convention, and symbol. These statements in Sells’s introduction come across as strange and somewhat

disjunctive because he later positions the term as a key to decoding gender and social dynamics without any link back to its properties of affirming immediacy. It is almost as if the issue arrests the momentum of the analysis; there is no connection between what apophysis discloses about the immediacy of the “meaning event” and how it participates in and reveals sociopolitical dynamics. The meaning event, as Sells calls it, though perhaps not mediated at its outset, begins the process of mediation as it becomes experience, and it is this power of mediation that provides change, fluctuation, and expansion in limit, a process, to reference Cohen again, of “eruptive becoming.”

In this call for an ekphrastic methodology of interpreting mystical vision texts, I am arguing against the black-and-white distinction of mediacy and immediacy and instead focusing on the fact that the two are not so indivisibly separate. I am not saying that there is no such thing as immediacy; what I do acknowledge, however, is that the “before” of the text, the steps prior to making the physical compositional mark, are memorative in nature and therefore already in the process of composing. It is in, as Marguerite Porete acknowledges, the conscious turn towards language, and even the preconscious memorative movement toward constructing composition, that one summarily loses the immediacy of mystical union:

Now I understand, on account of your peace and on account of truth, that [this book] is of the lower life. Cowardice has guided [this book], which has given its perception over to Reason through the answers of Love to Reason’s petitions. And so [this book] has been created by human knowledge and the human senses; and the human reason and the human senses know nothing about inner love, inner love from divine knowledge. (194)

Porete claims that she has gone backwards in the process of annihilation in the activity of putting into language her “mirror.” Although the book may guide souls toward the annihilated life, the book and *the process of making it* are mediated. Carruthers acknowledges that “the act of making a text was thought to proceed in order to stress its origins in the activities of memory” (*Book* 194). The move from vision to text is complicated and layered, and while the mystical vision text calls attention to the immediacy of the mystical event, it also is a translation of compositional material out of the individual and cultural memory-narrative. Sells himself cannot help but admit, “the apophatic displacement of the grammatical object [is] a key moment in a distinctive literary mode with its own rules, conventions, and fields of meaning” (10). Apophasis doesn’t work as a purely structural analogy; it draws along with it a history of uses, and when it is featured in a text, its past discourses, structures, meanings are echoed there. Clearly with this statement Sells is wrestling with the transcendence/immanence issue on the same dusty plane, despite the intriguing opportunities offered by the analysis of apophatic discourse, without recourse to surmounting it with new critical paradigms.

Rosemary Hale, in her essay “‘Taste and see, for God is sweet’: Sensory Perception and Memory in Medieval Christian Mystical Experience,” declares, “Any recognition of meaning or experience is an event of language” (14). It is also an event of the memory. As an event of language, recognition calls to its arena both the language ready-at-hand and that which lies in wait expecting situational usage. In the Middle Ages, this would have taken the metaphorical form of chambers into which experience and language alike were sorted. The event of language is as good a starting point as any for the mystical vision text. The shape the representation of recognition, of the event of language, takes

will determine the kind of rhetorical devices that will be put to use to communicate it. In the case of ekphrasis, *enargeia* is most often heavily employed. In the case of the ekphrastic dream vision, the frame of the dream, along with visual or iconographic representation, is used. In the ekphrastic mystical vision text, a tense combination of apophasis and cataphasis, as well as a high concentration of synaesthesia, appears.

As I mentioned in the introductory paragraphs, the ways that different genres use the ekphrastic mode will emerge definitively in the structure and devices of the works. There are distinct differences between the dream-vision and mystical-vision texts as ekphrastic. The focus of ekphrastic treatments, elements, and processes in the mystical vision differ from those connected to the dream vision specifically in terms of purpose and degree. Like the dream vision, the mystical vision text is ekphrastically dynamic, it possesses a subjectivity that is nebulous and shifting, and it employs deictical markers that lend it a polytemporality. But its purpose, to relate a transcendent truth and event for the benefit of others, has more personal urgency than the dream vision and relies greatly upon a platform of authority that often elides the steps in between the event and the written representation of it. So too does the mystical-vision text differ from the dream vision in the degree to which it employs such rhetorical devices as apophasis and synaesthesia.

Apophasis, a rhetorical device I introduced with my citation of Michael Sells's study, is a language structure that asserts something by negating it. It runs stridently and unapologetically²⁸ through the texts of mystical visions, for their authority is in part generated by an acknowledgment that the vision event is unrepresentable, inexpressible. Apophasis includes such utterances as these, taken from Marguerite Porete's *Mirror of Simple Souls*, describing the Annihilated Soul, the one that has achieved perfection:

And this Soul, who has become nothing, thus possesses everything, and so possesses nothing; she wills everything and she wills nothing; she knows all and she knows nothing. (85)

This Soul no longer has any sentiment of grace, nor desire of spirit, since she has taken leave of the Virtues who offer the manner of living well to every good soul, and without these Virtues none can be saved nor come to perfection of life; and whoever possesses them cannot be deceived. Nevertheless, this Soul takes leave of them. (85)

And from Mechthild of Magdeburg:

The great tongue of the Godhead has spoken many a mighty word to me. I took them in with the feeble ears of my lowliness; and the brightest of lights opened up to the eyes of my soul. In it I saw the indescribable order and recognized the inexpressible glory, the incomprehensible marvel, the special intimacy with separation, complete fulfillment, the greatest concentration in knowledge, bliss with interruption in proportion to the capacities of the faculties, unadulterated joy in the common union, and the ever vibrant life in eternity as it is now and ever shall be. (70-71)

While apophasis certainly exists in the dream vision, and Dante's final lines of the *Paradiso* serve as a most memorable example,²⁹ as a device it has much more performative intensity, as Michael Sells terms it,³⁰ in the mystical vision text. Porete's text is especially rife with apophatic structures; hers exhibits a high performative intensity in that nearly every sentence displays some undoing of a previous positive assertion. She also dares to undo the value culturally associated with virtue, an audacious

move considering that virtue is sanctioned, upheld, and in fact made to dominate most contemporary cultural governing structures and is certainly doled out according to the hierarchies of class distinctions. The necessity granted by the *Mirror* to shedding virtue in the process of becoming perfect, therefore, is utterly shocking and works to irrevocably shift previously assumed categories of holiness, good, and evil.³¹ On the level of readership, Beverly Lanzetta asserts that apophasis not only works to shift cultural assumptions but performs in language the startling transformation brought about by the mystical event; apophasis “reflects the transformation of a person’s core identity, performing in language the task that the mystic performs in the dark night or great death experience” (15).

Mechthild’s visionary works are far more cataphastic, using apophasis comparatively sparingly and more briefly, buried within visual accounts. Her apophasic units—“indescribable order,” “inexpressible glory,” “incomprehensible marvel,” and “intimacy with separation”—are more abstract than Marguerite’s and, as a rule, more conventional and less open to questioning. They are, nevertheless, effective in setting up the accuracy and detail of her visions, for they operate to soften the impact of the visual detail so that it slips comfortably under the threshold of logical and dogmatic scrutiny. The more abstract and conventional the apophasis, the easier it is for a society to digest. To the degree that it is employed, then, it is an agent for social commentary. Lanzetta adds that apophasis “functions as a disruptive element in the spiritual life, designed to break down its linguistic coherence and structural logic, and thereby to shock the person outside conventional notions of reality into another plane of existence” (15). As specifically employed through ekphrasis, however, apophasis functions also as a compositional unit

much in the way that a background frames and orders its composite units in gestalt theory, but it is a background without either the conventional limits of three-dimensional space or a predetermined historical past. Apophasis thus becomes a strategy to prevent “the hardening” of meaning, the fixing of meaning through naming.

Apophasis thus is not a one-horse sleigh but always arrives tethered with cataphasis, or description, which may take the form of *enargeia*, synaesthesia, rhetorical embellishment, or a combination of all of the above. Linguistically, cataphasis is the positive approach to representation, whereas apophasis is the negative, respectively, *via positiva* and *via negativa*, as originally categorized by Dionysus the Areopagite in the early fifth century, who classified these two methods in the disclosure of mystical event. According to him, both are needed in the spiritual journey: one is comparable to filling the soul utterly full and the other to emptying the self utterly. The apophatic topos of inexpressibility found in medieval ekphrasis is not ekphrastic despair, as W. J. T. Mitchell blithely calls it in modern ekphrases, but is in counterplay with what is expressed so that being and non-being playfully flit and turn their faces to and from us in language. In other words, the sheer multiplicity of descriptors in cataphastic passages and their tendency toward synaesthesia in medieval mystical outpourings depends on the fact of inexpressibility conveyed through the *via negativa*. Ray Petry refers to the pendulum tendency of cataphastic and apophastic expression:

The myriad degrees of reference incident to considering the Universal Cause in all its ramifying effects conduces to endlessly diversified inadequacies of imagination, denomination, and description. The opposite approach through negation or *apophase* involves a contrasting brevity. Here, the divine essence gets

its only definition in terms of the ruthlessly constricting denial of all names, however remote or intimate, usually held applicable to God. (34)

Apophasis is relatively brief; cataphasis, on the other hand, varies in length as much as it varies in its kind and character of telling. Furthermore, cataphastic modes of expression are given their expressive weight and force in the mystical vision text by the presence of apophasis. According to David Thomson, “Negation is not only the renunciation of our idealized, idolized belief in presence, it provides a context for the infinite number of negotiations between the signs of absences, a dynamic which itself maintains the possibility of meaning” (56). In the mystical vision text (as well as the dream vision), it is this context created by the apophatic expression that provides some of the most startling and sensory details of the ekphrastic catalogue.

I cite a few examples of cataphastic expression in the medieval mystical vision text in order to look at the relationship such expressions create between apophatic expression and thematic and haptic richness. There is hardly a shortage; cataphastic expression is, so to speak, the life-blood of the visions. Nevertheless I focus on just a few standout passages, the first of which is from Porete’s *Mirror*:

When she saw this faraway love, who was so close within her, was so far outside her, she thought to herself that she would comfort her melancholy by imagining some figure of her love, by whom she was continually wounded in heart. And so she had an image painted which would represent the semblance of the king she loved, an image as close as possible to that which presented itself to her in her love for him and in the affection of the love which captured her. And by means of this image with her other habits she dreamed of the king. (80)

This is the beginning of Porete's journey, and it bears little difference from the kind of desire human beings feel in their infatuations and love-throes. The *Mirror* even starts with the courtly give-and-take of lover and beloved. Nevertheless, even this start to love, the courtly game, has within it something inexpressible. The first sentence of the quotation is undoubtedly apophatic; it deictically negates both farness and nearness with the opposing prepositions. Is this love far or near or both or neither? Apophasis would have the reader believe in both nothing and everything: both-and and neither-nor. Or as William of Ockham would have had it, for that matter, as one state of being passing into another. But Porete's apophasis also sets the stage for the cataphastic images to come: first, that the king is intimate, beloved, and loving and second, that the annihilated soul can even be posited.

The cataphasis of Mechthild of Magdeburg's description about the burial and corpse of St. John the Evangelist, to the contrary, is particularly strong without the pull of any apophatic urge. She *actually* sees his body and provides a detailed account:

I actually saw the body of St. John the Evangelist with the eyes of my unworthy soul. He lies unburied in great bliss above all corruptible things beneath the creation of the eternal kingdom. His body has now taken on so much of divine eternity that it glows like a fiery crystal. He lies there so lovely in his human form, as though his spirit had fallen asleep in the midst of a heavenly rapture. His eyebrows are still brown; his eyes are closed and he is lying on his back. Beneath, above, and all around him everything is bright, and every seven hours the holy angels come to his body with a song of praise that goes like this: "Holy, pure, simple, wise, and dear to God's heart." The song has a sweeter melody than the

sound of a thousand strings or harps. Between his body and the creation of the kingdom of heaven exists only a thin wall, like the membrane of an egg, and yet it is forever tough, so that no body is able to pass through it until the last day. (167-68)

The sea-change of Mechthild's narrative into something rich and strange, the retelling of a transformative moment, relies not so much on the unsaying of apophysis—she has done that in her frequent bids for affective modesty and in her versified negations—but on the cataphastic telling that begins to stretch itself into various realms of human sensory experience of the space-time continuum. With the impossibilities related here, the fullness of telling, from the crystalline appearance of the corpse to the song of the angels to the felt semblance of the egg membrane, Mechthild designs a composition that demands more than just visual recall. Even though its elements seem of a piece, clear and separate nouns and commonplace rhetorical units—the body, the angles, the wall, “a thousand strings or harps,” “in great bliss above all corruptible things”—they work most subtly together through the cooperation of the senses. Mechthild knows both the translucent delicacy and toughness of an egg membrane, which is not something one can surmise from sight alone. The metaphor is successful, for the physical experience of the egg membrane is always ephemeral and brief and always of its tearing in birth; here, she uses it to describe the moment of final birth in eternal history. Hymns from the chorus of angels are heard within a particular passage of time, again, not a feature of sight. This “vision” incorporates the whole body.

In the ekphrastic translation of a mystical-vision text that employs both apophysis and cataphasis, synaesthesia also becomes a prominent constituent. Because cataphastic

saying is inextricably connected to a mode that insists upon the inexpressibility of the object at hand, the descriptors of other senses will be called upon to fill in where the descriptors of one sense fail to represent the sensed object appropriately. Such descriptors have already been filed into culturally constructed chambers of the memory banks; the synaesthetic move of cataphasis—especially as it responds to apophatic functioning—therefore calls upon *memoria* to dictate how best to relate the unrelatable. Synaesthetic statements use the language belonging to the field of one sense for the experience of another sense. That seems straightforward enough, for all us have used or heard simple synaesthetic terms, such as a “cold gaze” or “foul treatment” or “bright touch.”³² But the appearance of synaesthesia is often far subtler and so slight that all but the most careful reader tend to miss it. Synaesthesia can also include substituting sense for seemingly non-sensual processes or the mixing of different aspects of one sense, for example, the substitution of light for shape. The synaesthesia of medieval mystics—like the ekphrasis of the Middle Ages—takes a different shape than we might expect; it is not necessarily as finely detailed as the synaesthetic literature of the *Metaphysics* or nineteenth-century American novelists, for example. Often in medieval mystical texts one finds a fairly abstract or spare representation of the vision or mystical event. Descriptors tend to be of the transcendent and/or rarified rather than a fine catalogue of sensory detail. This sparseness is in keeping with literary standards and conventions of the time, and despite the dearth of sensual descriptors, the synaesthetic aesthetic is at work in the Christological stairway that Catherine of Siena witnesses, the “hazelnut” universe Julian sees, the Ravishing Farnearness of Marguerite’s *Mirror*, the building of blinding light and

cubits of stone that Hildegard understands as a spiritual structure of the soul and of history.

“Spiritual sense” often ends up as the tag for the variegated experience of different senses at once. Spiritual sense will often be elicited in opposition to bodily sense, as it is in Julian’s *Showings*, but its representation will often mix signifiers of the sensorium or different aspects of one sense, light and shape, for instance. Catherine’s spiritual vision of the stair and the body of Christ, actually the crucified body as stair, mixes metaphor and sense in rich and strange ways:

My Son’s nailed feet are a stair by which you can climb to his side, where you will see revealed his inmost heart. (64)

Here she relates the difference between bodily and spiritual sensitivity relating to the sacrament, as God speaks to her:

You saw a ray of light coming from my breast, like the ray that comes forth from the sun’s circle yet never leaves it. Within this light came a dove, and dove and light were as one and hovered over the host by the power of the words of consecration the celebrant was saying. Your bodily eyes could not endure the light, and only your spiritual vision remained, but there you saw and tasted the depths of the Trinity, wholly God, wholly human, hidden and veiled under the whiteness. (210)

Within the pronouncement of this vision (for in this composition the voice of God explains, recounts the vision to her, so that the text, the remembered and transcribed vision, is also layered with narrative representation), there is a blending of touch/movement/sense of placement with sight. The synaesthetic move here is not

baroque, nor does it perform with rococo flourish; it is simple and given away only by the hints of “taste,” “depths,” “hidden,” and, in the vision of the stair, such sensory markers as “nailed feet,” “climb,” and “inmost.” Such subtlety speaks for the grace of this ekphrasis. Its bareness is a refusal of the easy escape and any glamoring of the florid and is most successful at circumventing logic and relating the whole purpose of creation, the contrary volumelessness, voluminousness of love.

Hildegard’s synaesthetic representations, in contrast, while not baroque, certainly contain more sensory and narrative detail than do the mystical vision texts of most other mystics, to the point that her “visions” are understood as different from those of other medieval mystical writers, specifically as *not* representations of an immediate consciousness of the divine or meaning event. Yet as I have intimated in my discussions of the mediacy/immediacy dilemma, in an examination of the ekphrastic mechanics of a vision text these concerns are not the pressing point: whether “visionary” or prophetic, Hildegard’s representations are nonetheless compositional translations of distinct compositions. Her synaesthesia is furthermore similar in its kind and degree to that in the works of other mystical writers. An excerpt from Vision Two of Book One serves as a quick example:

Then I saw as it were a great multitude of very bright living lamps, which received fiery brilliance and acquired an unclouded splendor. And behold! A pit of great breadth and depth appeared, with a mouth like the mouth of a well, emitting fiery smoke with great stench, from which a loathsome cloud spread out and touched a deceitful, vein-shaped form. (I.ii.73)

Hildegard's description is synaesthetic purely by the frame that signals it is composition, an image that draws together *enargeia* with the sense impressions of scent, "great stench"; of touch and proprioception, "great breadth and depth"; and of emotive assessment, "loathsome" and "deceitful." Vision itself cannot acquire, assemble, and construe the elements of this composition or the conglomerate of their positioning.

If ekphrasis participates in the cataphatic/apophatic dialectic, is it itself a form of logical problem? To posit that question leads straight back to the parameters of the *paragone* legacy as adopted by Lessing, Mitchell, and Heffernan. The synaesthesia in the mystical vision text removes it from that legacy, as does the various other mixings that ekphrasis accomplishes: the mixture and multiplicity of the self, of time and history, of bodies. So if ekphrasis is not merely an exercise in ideological logistics as some theorists would more cleanly have it, then I posit that a certain kind of play takes the field in the ekphrases of the mystical vision text: play with the translation of the event and experience that circumambulates its object and invites, even encourages, similar ludic interaction from the reader. *Memoria*'s contribution makes possible that kind of play—it is the original building block, Lego, Tinker Toy.

Not enough attention has been paid to the medieval memorative arts and their cultural organizing capabilities. *Memoria* to the medievals is the center of intelligence and identity; it is the famous classical metaphor, derived from Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, among others, of the wax upon which an imprint is made, an image within the mind to help remember what has passed.³³ But it is also the center of creation, of shaping and reshaping. "*Memoria*," according to Carruthers, "also signifies the process by which a work of literature becomes institutionalized—internalized within the language and

pedagogy of a group” (*Book 11*). Remembering what has gone on before, both in an individual’s past and in a social past, has the power to reorganize, revision, and reshape idea, custom, and history. Patrick Geary judges in his *Phantoms of Remembrance* that the eleventh century’s concern with rethinking the past “is particularly worth investigating because the end product of the forgetting, remembering, and reorganizing of the past would be the origins for high medieval society on which subsequent generations of historians, even into our century, would build” (8-9). The concept of *memoria*, then, also has consequences for how medievalism has developed as a discipline and how it is that we conceive of the medieval. The study of the medieval kind of remembering, essentially a spatial function, bears much relevance to how composition was understood in the broad sense of it: composition not only of a singular piece of art but of cities, entire narratives, icons, and the associations drawn along with them. The image as it was deposited in memory didn’t remain alone and untainted; it was tucked into allocated spaces—rooms, columns, planes—with other images, associations, words, histories, previous experiences. The cogs and wheels of a culture’s way of putting-together, of composition, reveal more than composition as a work of a singular mind, and it is the metaphors for memory that shape the catalogue of experience. Understanding the root of composition in the Middle Ages, *memoria*, thus leads to insights about social organization, convention, and practice, from the political to the aesthetic.

The catalogue of experience as it is represented by the ekphrastic mystical writers of the Middle Ages is refined indeed. Monica Furlong emphasizes that the frequency and number of mystical writings of the high Middle Ages are concomitant with a “flowering of high civilization” in which rhetorical convention has reached a cultural pinnacle and

its elements have become over-determined and accessible to all (3). The refined art of ekphrasis, a highly sophisticated awareness, recognition, and restructuring of compositional order, is an accomplishment recognized especially through an analysis that takes into account the aesthetic nature of the vision, its representational as well as its compositional mechanics. The verbal translation of a vision is not merely a mimetic activity; it uses those tools of the memory arts to configure meaning, to place elements in such a way as to engender a culturally agreed-upon meaning. Carruthers's observation about the work of memory arts rings true as well for the kind of work ekphrasis does: "The questions raised about a work by mneme are different from those raised by mimesis. They stress cognitive uses and the instrumentality of art over questions of its 'realism.' Mneme produces an art for 'thinking about' and for 'meditating upon' and for 'gathering'" (*Craft* 3). Opening up analysis to consider the vision as composition and to examine how it utilizes memory, social narrative, icon (image laden with culturally appointed meaning) catalyzes questions about compositional inclusion and exclusion, in essence, social delineations of category. Transcribed, the ekphrastic mystical vision can "work through" ambivalences between what is valued as reality and what is not, what is private and what belongs to the public domain. Ekphrasis can, as Tamar Yacobi asserts, "serve to thicken or pinpoint meanings, to shape response, and to bring home a latent ideology" (33). The practice of ekphrasis is itself about the working through of its current cultural categories or limits and creating new limits.³⁴

Memory thus does not belong only to the individual; it is not purely a private matter. It is essentially social and a matrix for sharing, a space for social interaction. Carruthers

writes that *memoria* uses those materials that “are common to all”—rhetoric and image—and therefore constructs itself as a platform for the interfacing of sociohistorical action:

At the same time, because most of its building materials are common to all—are in fact common places—memory work is also fully social and political, a truly civic activity. The constant balance of individual and communal, *ethos* and *pathos*, is adjusted and engineered with the tools of rhetoric: images and figures, topics and schemes. Essential among these tools are the memorial *res*, the building blocks of new composition. (*Craft* 21)

The terms she uses to describe memory work recall those used in the architectural lexicon. Popular tropes in the Middle Ages for the work of memory, the force behind composing and composition, link it to building. Images such as a house with chambers or an amphitheater with sections and rows appear; language like “foundation,” “windows,” “rooms,” “cornerstone,” “level,” and any number of terms for spatial measurement and position (especially vertical position as it pertains to hierarchy) appear in the descriptions of memory and of compositions keyed upon memory from Augustine’s musings on memory in the *Confessions* to Gregory to Hildegard to Theresa of Avila. These writers do not create the architecture paradigm out of thin air; it comes to them from both classical and New Testament traditions and sources. Again, Carruthers offers a sophisticated standard of the memory-making of composition:

The shape or foundation of a composition must be thought of as a place-where-one-invents. Everything is fitted onto it. And as the composer, acting like a master builder or *architectus*, fits his tropes into the foundation stones of a text, he must smooth, scrape, chip off, and in other ways adapt and “translate” the *dicta et*

facta memorabilia he is using as his materials. So the edifice of one's life (so to speak), although created from stories available to all citizens, is also a fully personal creation, an expression (and creation) of one's character. This is plain in St. Paul's injunction to be like a wise master-builder: the fire will try the quality of your work. (*Craft* 21)

What comes readily to mind is the comparison of Theseus to the master architect by the Knight in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*, which begins allegorically to take on even more weight if we consider how ubiquitous was the association of master builder with *memoria*. As tempting as it is to leap into a memory-composition-focused analysis of Chaucer, however, the mystical vision must remain the prominent subject here, offering more than enough riches in its play among memory, image, and composition. One of the things on which Carruthers begins to focus in the passage above is the decidedly personal nature of the composition. I have concentrated thus far on the social aspect of memory work, but lest I wrest memory entirely away from the provenance of the individual, let me return to the more personal: the mystic's vision and its origins in memory and the creation of composition as an individual expression. In the case of the mystical vision text, that expression will emanate from a tension between cataphasis and apophasis, a desire to tell and not tell, the very tension that on one level drives the ekphrastic endeavor.

A prerequisite of the mystical union/event is the renunciation of the self—"regularized renunciation" (19) is how Ray Petry designates mysticism itself—and the communication of the experience demands likewise a reconfiguration of the representation self. Both motions are of great interest in linking the mystical vision text

with ekphrasis. I carefully used the term *experience* above rather than *event*: at the point that event enters into and is filtered by memory, it is experience by a self. My previous discussion of diffuse textual subjectivity in the medieval ekphrastic text is relevant to the conversation, as the apophatic renunciation of self is tied to the collapse of solid, singular textual subjectivity (a collapse that occurs perhaps before it even solidifies completely). The diffuse subjectivity of ekphrastic mystical vision text emulates the moment of self-renunciation, as the self cannot reformulate completely in the face of the event but continually loses itself in the memorative compartments built to contain the event as experience for itself. In other words, not only apophasis wields the power to represent the unrepresentable, but also the very fact of memory modulation and construction both deconstructs and reconfigures the self; thus the mystical vision text presents “interior” castles, “ways,” “ladders,” “steps,” and other memorative building structures in which the self is both reformulated and renounced as it goes deeper into the structure. The dynamics of fractal poetics and polytemporality play alongside memory work, and it is in the composition of *memoria*—in which apophatic statements can be included as rhetorical convention—that event and experience are knit together, the art-and-life gap closed.

There is one more issue to treat in this chapter pertaining to the conjunction of *memoria* and ekphrasis, and that is their participation in the visual and the question of whether the kind of composition created by ekphrasis relegates itself solely to the lexicon and operation of the visual sense. Historically, the answer is a resounding “yes”: ekphrasis has been understood almost naturally as an activity distinctly attached to the visual realm, and certainly the memorative arts tend to rely upon the primary position

given to vision as the sensual expostulator of experience. But if ekphrasis truly can be understood as a principle of composition rather than merely a materialized instance of ideological tension between the visual and verbal arts, and certainly I begin here to consider its more versatile compositional power with the synaesthesia of the mystical vision text, then an acknowledgment and questioning of the vision bias in medieval ekphrasis will be helpful to my further examination of Hildegard's and Julian's texts. The question to answer is whether the visual is the limit of ekphrasis.

Material culture studies have recently shed light upon the favor conferred on the sense of vision in the language arts of Western culture, from the ancient Greeks to contemporary language use across disciplines and sociopolitical sectors. There are consequences to this bias in the sensorium that affect even the mystical vision, its textual representations, and how they are interpreted. Rosemary Hale notes that "the picture or sign theory of language identifies the basic function of language as that of creating or evoking images in the mind of the receiver which correspond to those of the sender, a theory which falls squarely into the visually-biased preference of our own culturally determined sensorium" (13). The emphasis upon image as the mental medium of communication exchange prevails in all discussions of *memoria*; again, the mind is like wax that takes the imprint of experience. It is image receiver, maker, and organizer. Carruthers describes in *The Book of Memory* the pervasiveness of the sense of sight as the sense that governs storage in the memory:

As [the medievals] understood the process [of memory storage], whatever enters the mind changes into a "see-able" form for storing in memory. Jerome describes it well and typically in his commentary on Ezekiel 40:4 ("And the man said unto

me, Son of man, behold with thine eyes, and hear with thine ears, and set thine heart upon all that I shall shew thee; for to the intent that I might shew them unto thee art thou brought hither”). “Nothing,” Jerome writes, “that you have seen or heard is useful however, unless you deposit what you should see and hear in the treasury of your memory. When indeed he says, *all that I shall shew thee*, he makes his listener attentive, and also makes matters prepared for the eyes of his heart, so that he may hold in memory those things shown to him, *for to the intent that I might shew unto them unto thee art thou brought hither.*” (20)

Both biblical and classical tropes turned most frequently to the visual, and Jerome’s “eyes of the heart” and “shewing” are common tropes related to spiritual knowledge—ironically, knowledge that can’t be physically seen—that extend throughout the Middle Ages and, in fact, to this day. But Hale’s complaint, of course, is that the mystical event is much more than visual, despite the language overwhelmingly used to depict it. “Vision” and “visionary” do not begin to relate the variegated impressions of the experience: “For the modern West the emphasis is decidedly visual, hence we ‘see’ the mystics as ‘visionaries,’ perhaps a greater misnomer than the term ‘mystic’ itself” (14). Chris Pinney also laments succinctly that the field of visual culture “needs to be superseded by an engagement with embodied culture...that recognizes the unified nature of the human sensorium” (84-85).³⁵

Although memory in the Middle Ages and even now is conceived of as preeminently visual, there are, nonetheless, hints that its powers of composition cannot be fully circumscribed by the linguistic signifiers or operative functions assigned to the visual field. *Memoria* and its specifically ekphrastic work begin to ooze between the slats in the

fence of the visual. Even Carruthers, recognizing the essential role images play in the act of memorative composition, also notes that there is a mixture both of media (image and word, for example) and of the sensory language used to impart the composition:

The emphasis upon the need for human beings to “see” their thoughts in their minds as organized schemata of images, or “pictures,” and then to use these for further thinking, is a striking and continuous feature of medieval monastic rhetoric, with significant interest even for our own contemporary understanding of the role of images in thinking. And the monks’ “mixed” use of verbal and visual media, their often synaesthetic literature and architecture, is a quality of medieval aesthetic practice that was also given a major impetus by the tools of monastic memory work. (*Craft* 3)

The mystical vision text, as well as the experience that precedes it, is not necessarily limited to image or the visual, though that is overwhelmingly what is emphasized and remembered. On a very basic level, Elizabeth Petroff acknowledges that “mystical experiences may be primarily visual or auditory, or they may be so abstract as to elude any verbal formulation” (5). The medievals lived, thought, remembered, spoke, and wrote within a culture that equated the world with text; it was unquestionably a reading culture, a culture visually biased. The iconoclastic controversy itself provides proof for the fixation on image, text, and meaning in the medieval West. There are times, however, when thought and writing break out of the visual field in surprising ways, i.e., in ways that are not simply descriptive but also affect the systemic network of understanding composition. Often enough sounds and smells and textures are described in poetry, memoirs, histories, and vision texts. That in itself does not change the cultural pattern

giving preference to vision. But the synaesthetic language of mystics is one of these times that ripples through and disrupts habits that privilege vision. In fact, the tendencies at times of the mystical vision text to offer up building rather than book as a metaphor for creation and for the relationship of human being with God is a rather steady clue that something more in the way of sensory detail and understanding is called for by the mystical experience, by *memoria*, by ekphrasis.

Rosemary Hale also calls attention to that vague “something” that the visual bias of Western study and interpretation overlooks:

We miss something of the sensory dynamic of the world or culture of the medieval mystics if we persist in interpreting their experience solely as “visions.” We can approach the study of medieval mysticism and its cultural domain through the visual medium of the mystics’ texts, their recollections of religious experience, but perhaps we can begin to do more than translate the words if we take a “hermeneutical turn”—instead of reading the texts, we could be learning to sense them. (14)

Fixing these experiences as “visions,” according to Hale, leaves out a whole array of perception, feeling, and thought; it makes us insensate both to the vocabularies that are uttered but misunderstood as visual vocabularies and to those unuttered. The visual bias also bears with it gendered complications, dynamics that prevent certain nodes and/or silences in the compositions from coming through because they are written by women having the experience of women in their culture. Much more work needs to be done on this aspect of the mystical vision text composition, even work as rudimentary as discussing the genre’s name. But for now I address specifically two points, both explicit

and implicit, in Hale's observation. First, in response to the "how" of taking a "hermeneutical turn," I propose the redefinition of ekphrasis and a subsequent ekphrastic reading of mystical-vision texts as a partial remedy to the visual bias. Such a redefinition would emphasize powers of ekphrasis to translate composition into composition. Composition does not necessarily assume visuality; descriptors—like color, shading, light, dark—are elements of composition but not the only ones. Visual description is *enargeia*, and ekphrasis may often be rich with *enargeia*, but often it is not. Even in the translation of paintings and sculpture, the composition becomes not the artworks themselves, but the speaker's experience, which includes smell, sound, touch, past reminiscence, and future hope. Ekphrasis is the haven of such creation that bucks time and elicits the fact of generation; it turns seeing into an injunction to "see" more, to begin to lose oneself in the composition of the full sensorium of the memory. Furthermore, assuming ekphrasis is primarily a translation of something physically visual is part of the reason the medievals have been left out and continues to be part of the problem that excludes the work of sight disabled and the blind in the conversation of ekphrastic composition.

The second point to which I respond answers a more implicit, but broader in scope, protest. Within Hale's comments/solution is a lament of the academy's dissection of texts that fails to take into account the wisdoms and kinds of knowledge that such texts offer as literature—as a kind of knowledge in their own right—rather than merely as artifact. I hear within this call for a "hermeneutical turn" a method of interpretation that not only classifies but contemplates, that not only posits but invites. It is a method that risks the poetic (and chaotic), rather than sticking closely to sound forms of logic. Hale

asks for a distinctly different approach to both text and intellectual community. In my angle on ekphrasis, memory, and composition, I ask for the same. And so I perform the same with my readings of Hildegard's and Julian's works as ekphrastic endeavors.

I argued at the beginning of the chapter that the mediacy/immediacy dilemma detracts from the real issues at stake with the mystical vision text as composition, and it is important to reiterate that the recognition of the mystical vision text's harnessing of *memoria* is the real power behind the text. It is what the text does with cultural meanings, its revisions, and new recombinative compositions that is the real stunning achievement, an ekphrastic achievement. It is also preeminently an ethical achievement, for its desire is to continue meaning: to build upon cultural meaning, add to it, fight with it, question it, and preserve it. The ekphrastic memory work of the mystical vision text is undoubtedly a social activity: why else do the authors apologize for their work, abuse themselves to gain authority in the eyes and ears of a society hungry for representations of spiritual experience but also wary of it as inauthentic and socially dangerous? But this ekphrastic memory work is also whispered; it is of a person, however much that person is ravished and destroyed in the event, in the process of writing the text, and by the configuration of the text itself. It is thus a moral activity as well. Carruthers articulates the very personal nature of memory work and links it to character and moral action: "Thus, because it builds entirely through the associations made in some individual's mind, memory work has an irreducibly personal and private or 'secret' dimension to it. That is also why it is a moral activity, an activity of character and what was called 'temperament'" (*Craft* 21). This text is intimate and direct, especially in that it lends itself to expression of character and temperament; some have linked the mystical visions to the self-help books so popular

in contemporary America on account of their “steps” and “confessions.” I cannot deny the association, for the self-help genre utilizes many of the same traditional tropes of hierarchy and architecture. What is missing, of course, from many of these handbooks is the ekphrastic poetry, the new composition that is not merely a guidebook but risks the unlogical, the synaesthetic, the impossible, and conceives of itself as a work of art acting in the enormous scope of human history as it encounters the divine, what is beyond itself. Both Julian’s and Hildegard’s ekphrases acknowledge memory work as it enters into history and dogma; each uses memory work tirelessly to both preserve and revise the ideological shaping of history.

6 Secret Designs/Public Shapes:

The Space of Memory in the Ekphrasis of Hildegard's *Scivias*

“Space,” like “body,” is one of those too-large terms that defies precise categorization: to paraphrase Caroline Walker Bynum’s complaint about the popular critical use of “body,” it is nothing and everything at once. And yet, space, like “body” has concrete and strategic meanings. Through ekphrasis, it extends farther, reveals itself conceptually larger and more elastic than the confines of an aesthetic conception limited to the material arts allow. The space of the mystical vision-text, for instance, unfurls territories that in our current ideological milieu cannot be mapped cleanly, for reasons pertaining to authenticity claims discussed in the previous chapter. But the spatiality of the mystical vision-text ensures expansion into compositions not certain, not defined, a composition that hazily shifts, and unsolid itself, represents unsolid bodies. The space the mystical vision occupies is then confusing to the theorist of ekphrasis because a large part of the long theoretical conversation about ekphrasis has dedicated itself firmly to the respective ideological relationships of the visual and verbal arts to dimensions of space and time. Renaissance and Enlightenment thought about the arts attributed the dimension of space to the qualities with which visual art is concerned, whereas the relationship of the verbal arts to their represented action was thought governed by time. Again, this formulation begins with da Vinci’s *paragone* and becomes even more cemented in western aesthetic critical tradition with Lessing’s *Laocoön*; Andrew Sprague Becker’s *The Shield of Achilles and the Poetics of Ekphrasis* provides a succinct synopsis of the categorization in Lessing’s meditation:

the visual arts can enter into a “suitable relation” (*bequemes Verhältnis*) only with bodies in space, while the verbal arts can do so only with actions in time. Painting, which stands for the visual arts in Lessing’s analysis, can attempt to imitate actions, but it can do so only by suggestions; it cannot enter into a suitable relation with actions. Poetry, on the other hand, can attempt to imitate appearance, but again only by suggestion, and to do so is seen as a waste of talent. (13-14)

Lessing’s far from systematic musings on the natures of the verbal and visual arts have however contributed to the ideological split between the visual and verbal, a split existing more in theory than in practice, and one that has and continues to occupy perhaps too much space and time in ekphrasis theory. The strict categories of verbal and visual begin to break down, however, the moment they are conceived by Lessing, as evidenced by his own meandering thought on the subjects, though aestheticians after him, notably Edmund Burke, continued to attempt to posit the arts into rigid categories of signification and dimension. Because of this centuries long ideological categorization and split between the visual and verbal, ekphrasis theory has tacitly developed a binary system of analysis, tending to perceive other binary categories (especially gender categories) according to the values assigned to the visual and verbal arts. The problem with this kind of analysis is that in the interest of clarifying these binaries, ekphrastic theories have tended toward dissecting the ideological tensions within the history of ekphrastic theory at the expense of discerning the representational complexity of the practice and how ekphrasis itself deploys the dimensions of space and time. Both visual and verbal arts, however, inhabit space and time, and use them, represent them in various ways.

The art object occupies not only physical space, but also a mental, ideological space to those who encounter it. Often that space is deeply stratified. Elizabeth Bergman Loizeaux notes that “ekphrasis verbally represents not only just a visual representation, but also prior verbal representations of image” (“Ekphrasis and Textual” 96). If the representations of mystical experience are taken into account in the study of ekphrastic dimensionality, then one can begin to understand that not only the physical space occupied by the ekphrastic object and “prior verbal representations of image” are represented, but also *how* the ekphrastic object is remembered: how memory positions it according to personal and collective social experience in time. The play of memory in ekphrasis expands previous categories of space and time in which the concept was bound.

Carmel Bendon Davis’s study, *Mysticism and Space*, cites Henri Lefebvre’s tripartite concepts of space, *spatial practice*, *representations of space*, and *representational spaces* (11), giving due attention to his category representational spaces as a frame for understanding how “mystics can be viewed as ‘products’ of their society and, in turn, their texts [as] products formed and disseminated in that society” (9). Davis’s work with the mystical texts of Richard Rolle, the *Cloud of Unknowing* author, and Julian of Norwich illuminates the striated mental and cultural spaces these texts inhabit, paying special attention to the correlation and consanguinity of their formal structures and mystical content. The space of mysticism, Davis argues, follows the literary paradigm of the *mise en abîme*, “an impression of infinite regress that duplicates within all its layers the qualities of the larger, initiating structure throughout” (6).³⁶ Interestingly enough, Becker also uses the *mise en abîme* model to explain the workings of ekphrasis:

The relation between the ekphrasis and the (imagined) work of visual art can be read as analogous to that between the reader (or listener) and the poem. To put it in less abstract terms, the bard's response to visual images becomes a model for our response to the epic. I thus treat ekphrasis as a kind of *mise en abîme*, 'a miniature replica of a text embedded within that text; a textual part of reduplicating, reflecting, or mirroring (one or more than one aspect of) the textual whole. (4)

I find the *mise en abîme* paradigm a seductive model for the ekphrastic and mystical vision-text, for it recognizes and highlights not only the self-reflexive tendency belonging to ekphrasis, but also its capacity to galvanize more and more compositional representation. But, as with the image of Krieger's ouroboros, both Becker's and Davis's respective correlatives of ekphrasis and mystical text-space with the *mise en abîme* paradigm arrest at self-reflexivity in terms of the space such textual representation inhabits. The real problem with the *mise en abîme* model is its reduplication without revision. I think critics tend to like the model because of its ability to suggest a self-reflection ad infinitum, but for the actual activity of ekphrasis it does not work. If one looks into a feedback loop of a recording camera pointed at a television screen or at a complex of mirrors reflecting each other (both are good physical examples of the *mise en abîme* in action), one sees an exact copy multiplied without end (save for the size of the image, which appears smaller and smaller). Although ekphrasis is admittedly self-reflexive and does concern itself with the action of its own representation, it also necessarily changes, revises, adds to, takes away from, and recontextualizes the ekphrastic object: its copy is never exact, but always worked through the private and

collective memorial spaces of the culture in which the author writes. As I referenced in the chapter on *Pearl*, Retallack's model of fractal poethics maintains the integrity of ekphrasis's compulsion to revision. It is a better model also because it has the capacity to integrate the memory as a distinct (but always flexible and dynamic) space and constructor of space.

Because authenticity claims to mediacy are so haunting and halting to academic analysis of mystical texts, Davis struggles throughout her study and falls back upon the framework of space as a way of negotiating between the social analysis and claims of authenticity of the mystical text: "The acceptance of social space as influential in the formation and expression of mystical experience does not negate the possibility of that experience being authentic" (Davis 60). Whether or not she succeeds with this goal is uncertain; however, one of the more useful discoveries of her spatial analysis is her adoption of Henri Lefebvre's concept "decryption": "the relationship of the notion of 'decryption' to mysticism [...] lies in the manner in which the mystics both experienced something that was 'hidden' and then brought it to light in the sharing of that experience in their texts. That is, mysticism and space both have the potential of decrypting that which is, or has been, hidden" (13). The way that decryption works with space: 'fixes' the notion of Panofsky that equated "visual perspective and spatial understanding" (45), a notion that again limits the spatial practices aligned with the creation of the material visual image. I will not use the term decryption in this chapter, but will work with the avenues decryption has opened: the hiddenness that Lefebvre's and Davis's expanded notions of psychic cultural space lend. Hildegard's vision texts, especially her ekphrastic

descriptions of her visions, exploit the hidden nature of divine revelation through their depictions of the female body and architecture.

Hildegard of Bingen, a German prioress of the twelfth century, composed ethereal and complex music, and authored recipes, medicinal cures, public oration, scriptural commentary, and vision texts.³⁷ As a woman and a prioress, she would have been subject to a distinctly gendered space by virtue of her residence in a nunnery. Roberta Gilchrist's *Gender and Material Culture: The Archaeology of Religious Women*, a limpid study of monastery architecture makes clear “the archaeological variance between monasteries for men and women” noting that “Monastic architecture was central to the social construction of difference between medieval religious men and women.” (192-93). She continues, “The strongest pull [of archaeological gender differentiation] was in the *habitus* of gentry and aristocratic women. Sexual segregation in monasteries and the greater enclosure of monastic women was in keeping with the lives which secular women of the ‘inner household’ lived in manor houses and castles” (192). I do not mean in my consideration of gender in Hildegard’s texts to further cement the binary limit upon which some ekphrastic theory rests, but nor do I think that such analysis should be entirely disregarded. The fact of the matter is that while women’s and men’s experiential lives were lived far more complexly than rigid binary gender assignments delineated, there was nevertheless a cultural impetus to separate and distinguish the two genders in societal spaces. The binary category, then, as now, even in critiques of it, fails to recognize the complex desires, behaviors, practices, beliefs, and actions of people—women and men (and otherwise). Nonetheless, certain gendered restrictions in the middle ages attempted to keep women from the public sphere. I aim to examine how and through

what form Hildegard's *Scivias*, through the practice of ekphrasis and its reliance on memorial spaces, relays the gendered tension between the private and public.

One of the more intriguing of medieval visions, Hildegard of Bingen's *Scivias*, is a meditative text; as a whole it is concerned with the architecture of Creation and the human soul's place within it. Its moral imperatives are often represented with spatial criteria: order, direction, progression, presence and absence from sight. As Bradley Herzog attests, establishing "place" or "locational structure" is a particularly effective strategy in establishing the requisite authority to add onto/revise a culture's narrative tradition. Hildegard's text is acutely aware of space, whether inner or outer, as the stage for divine history; her text abounds with settings of the New Jerusalem, the City of God, as well as other spaces in sacred history, interjected with the space of the female body and of the domestic household. She also announces in the apologia to the *Scivias* that she receives her visions with the "eyes and ears of the inner self, in open places" (60),³⁸ thereby "overlying" (Herzog's term) the locale of divine spaces with the experiential spaces of private and public. The descriptions of visions from that point on latently concern the cultural division between inner life and public life represented through biblical tropes, the female body, and architectural compositions, all iconographic representations with which her audience would have been familiar. Hildegard's text uses art and rhetoric to build authority, especially through ekphrasis, which works largely through memory functions. Her visionary texts, while delving into the private nature of vision, also employ public collective memory—biblical story, Scripture, saintly anecdote, traditional image—to establish authority as both a woman and a messenger of God.

Hildegard's translation and re-composition of the cultural icons featured in her visions evade historically authoritative explication; they function instead as a rhetoric of meditation. Barbara Zimbalist's essay on Clemence's *Life of St. Catherine* pays special attention to the energy of the rhetorical strategy, *oratio recta*, and its ability to engage in ethical action through its effective construction of authorship. Zimbalist says of the *oratio recta*: "The represented speech may not be a word-for-word transcription of past speech (indeed that speech may be largely the stuff of myth or legend, beyond any sort of historical recording, recovery or preservation), but if its style matched a community's notion of the context of its original utterance, it was considered successful representation" (forthcoming). Hildegard's images, through ekphrasis, are speech acts, and like Zimbalist's *oratio recta*, the descriptions of Hildegard's visions do not merely recount biblical scenes and history word-for-word from scriptural sources but use familiar elements from them to construct new compositions. Hildegard's visions are accompanied by extensive glosses that not only explain, but also over-write each detail of the visions. This commentary circles around her vision-compositions, glossing some images explicitly, but often leaving the images on frequent tangents into other biblical lore, anecdotes, new visions, and church teachings. Her organization is at times cyclical, at times alluvial; it is not linear or chronological. Although they are sectioned and numbered, her meditations do not take the form of tract, but are structured through association. This associative quality—a quality drawing upon memory and vision—lends an aesthetic flavor and form to Hildegard's rhetoric. Are Hildegard's compositions then art or rather rhetoric? It seems they are both. Mary Carruthers, in *The Craft of Thought*, affirms that ". . . all medieval arts were conceived and perceived essentially as rhetoric,

whether they took the form of poems or paintings or buildings or music. Each work [of art] is a composition articulated within particular rhetorical situations of particular communities” (*Craft* 223). As rhetoric, Hildegard’s descriptions of her visions allow her the opportunity to comment extensively, with a voice of authority, on powerful, collective visual images. As a particularly visual form of verbal rhetoric, Hildegard’s art engages the memory and the descriptive powers of *enargeia*, a heightened use of visual detail, a special component of the ekphrastic mode. *Enargeia* is also a tactic of the classical rhetorical arts associated with the bid for authority. Through employing this strategy, Hildegard’s visions participate in both the principle and practice of ekphrasis.

It is important to note from the beginning that what I discuss in this chapter as ekphrastic in Hildegard’s *Scivias* is the transcription of the vision and not the vision proper, which will from here on be referred to as the ekphrastic object. Nor does my study of ekphrasis in Hildegard’s work extend fully to her glosses in this essay, for they are complicated by the forms and rhetoric of commentary. Hildegard’s commentary is worth examining on its own, for it mixes a number of different genres at once: drama, commentary/explication, and even ekphrastic rendering, in which she again goes into the vision and describes it and reinscribes it. The final goal of commentary (what Carruthers explains as *skopos* in the medieval monastic tradition), while utilizing some of the same cognitive functions the ekphrastic process uses, leans more heavily toward analysis rather than composition. I do not claim the two are completely separate; analysis must assume a composition prior to undertaking an analysis of it. But the glossing works differently than Hildegard’s straight descriptions, which in essence become narratives of a

composition of visual experience. The focus here is how ekphrasis functions in her text, and the descriptions of the visions are the primary ekphrastic material.

In the case of Hildegard's ekphrastic visions, the tension between the private vision and Hildegard's public representation of it (as a woman who culturally is relegated to the private sector of society) works as what Mitchell terms figures of difference, the positioning of the ekphrastic object against its milieu in such a way as to speak to how its presence reveals certain cultural tensions or ideological idiosyncrasies. There are numerous occasions in her ekphrastic visions in which the private and public are placed in the same vicinity:

Then I saw in the secret places in the heights of Heaven two armies of heavenly spirits who shone with great brightness. (1.6, 139)

After this I saw an image of a woman, pale from her head to her navel and black from her navel to her feet. . . .She had no eyes, and had put her hands in her armpits; she stood next to an altar that is before the eyes of God. (1.5, 133)

He was visible to me from his head to his navel, but from the waist downward he was hidden from my sight. (2.10, 473)

The visions in Book II concerning the structure of the city of God are especially striking in their architectural computations; Hildegard's language includes measurement and geometry of the structures, but is equally descriptive of what the buildings house, their inside spaces:

Then I saw inside the building a figure standing on the pavement facing this pillar, looking sometimes at it and sometimes at the people who were going to and fro in the building. (2.4, 357)

Then I saw in the west corner of the building a wondrous, secret and supremely strong pillar, purple black in color. It was so placed in the corner that it protruded both inside and outside the building. (2.7, 411)

Hildegard employs a popular trope of Christian theology, the structure of a building as a metaphor for the order of creation and for the order of the mind's spiritual knowledge, a metaphor dating back to the writings of St. Paul. According to Carruthers, the trope of architecture "also plays an essential role in the art of memory" (*Craft* 16); she quotes Gregory the Great using the building metaphor not only as an example of coming to spiritual knowledge, but also as a way to remember how one must strive to attain such knowledge (*Craft* 18). Memory arts are essential to the ekphrastic practice. Not only does Hildegard's ekphrastic vision makes broad use of a trope that has been collectively remembered, passed down by, and is very familiar to a popular audience in order to persuade and establish authority, but she also uses the trope in a highly specific way that throws into relief the inside/outside of things, the tucked-away things and "secret" places of the private and the "armies" and altars, the visible spaces of the public. Hildegard's mystical vision text is thus perfectly perched to negotiate between realms of private and public representation.

Hildegard's "frame of communication" (Yacobi 23) is one that posits from the start its author as a woman and therefore impoverished and weak of mind and body, but nevertheless commanded to set forth in writing what she solely has seen and heard. One

of the great difficulties challenging the mystic, especially a woman mystic of the Middle Ages, was establishing textual authority. Affected modesty is a topos extending back to Classical antiquity; Ernst Robert Curtius traces its first appearance to Cicero and notes that the originally “pagan formula of self-disparagement” transfers “to Christian use” in the Middle Ages. He continues, “innumerable medieval authors assert that they write by command. Histories of literature accept this as gospel truth. Yet it is usually a mere topos” (85). Even if Hildegard’s *parvitas* is “mere topos,” that topos accomplishes much in terms of the tradition it is set against: a largely male textual tradition, and a public one in its reference to the relationship between superior and inferior (whether the emperor and his subject in antiquity or the Creator and his subject in the Middle Ages). As a woman writing in this tradition, Hildegard’s meekness is even more weighted; she is in the social order one of the lesser and admitting so, she can surreptitiously become the visionary in the handmaiden’s guise.

There is quite a bit of showmanship brought about by affected modesty. It requires a filtering of unarticulated personal rumination from those parts that can be readily recognized by an audience, the stuff of the social narrative. Barbara Newman notes the staged setting of authority’s ground in the mystical text:

In between ‘showings’ a great deal of thought, prayer, conversation, reading, and revision most likely intervened, so that even a vision initially granted as epiphany might eventually be presented as heuristic device for the benefit of readers. This process could not be acknowledged, however, lest it weaken the writer’s fragile claim to inspiration and authority. (*God* 303)

There is often a collapse of time in the presentation of visions and Hildegard's visions are no exception. Although she acknowledges that she has experienced visions from the age of five, she nonetheless effectually hides the interpretive moment in-between God's voice and her writing. God speaks to her in the text:

O human, who receives these things meant to manifest what is hidden not in the disquiet of deception but in the purity of simplicity, write, therefore, the things you see and hear. (60)

And later she describes her reception of the call:

And I heard the One Who sat on the throne saying to me, "Write what you see and hear." And from the inner knowledge of that vision, I replied, "I beseech you, my Lord, give me understanding, that by my account I may be able to make known these mystical things. (1.3, 309)

In fact, the divine injunction appears again and again in the text, reinforcing its authority repeatedly with the effect of a divine vocal presence right at hand. Textually, hardly any time elapses between God's command to her and her reply, between the injunction to write and the fact of the writing on the page. That moment, however extensive it might have been, is recorded in two ways: as a private, reflective moment, it is briefly alluded to in the phrase "inner knowledge," and as a public moment, it is overtly acknowledged by Hildegard as taking part in history. She writes at the end of her "Declaration":

"These visions took place and these words were written in the days of Henry, Archbishop of Mainz, and of Conrad, King of the Romans, and of Cuno Abbot of Disibodenberg, under Pope Eugenius" (61). The emblems of secret, hidden, inner knowledge—"inner knowledge," "vision," "mystical things"—and those of the history, artifice, and public

place do not just appear as players in the grand allegory of her visions; they are intrinsic to the seeing/perceiving/writing process itself through providing the material, impetus, and occasion. Thus they appear even in Hildegard's intentional statement and apologia. The subsequent visions are implicitly concerned with how inner life and public life intermingle (and how they are meant to intermingle), and more important, how the sharp divide between the two through her ekphrastic writing process becomes necessarily unclear. The use of social narrative in the translation of the visual to the verbal in the process of ekphrasis entails exercising *memoria* and reaching into the memory bank of the culture. Hildegard's text relates parti-colored and minutely detailed representations of familiar, well-trod metaphors in the social narrative for inner life and public life. Through this practice, the text creates a stance from which it can speak, as a text authored by a woman, with intellectual and moral authority.

Careful attention to especially the domestic imagery of Vision Four of Book One and the apocalyptic images of Vision Two of Book Three will demonstrate how the text's practice of ekphrasis functions as a carrier for Hildegard's understanding and revisioning of the private/public axis. I have divided treatment of Hildegard's visions into two categories: "Inside" and "Outside." While the text under analysis of either section could be interchanged (each has private and public or "inside" and "outside" elements), the critical material apportioned to the section "Inside" treats New Historical and deconstructive questions: how can one know the nature of lived reality by a twelfth-century female prophet as disclosed by this text and what it has left out? The section "Outside," however, gazes unabashedly at what has been left *in*; it asks what knowledge

(and what kind of knowledge) the words of Hildegard's crafted structure offers to its reader.

Inside

Vision Four of Book One is one of the most memorable of Hildegard's visions in the *Scivias*, perhaps because of its unusual analogy—to the contemporary eye, at any rate—of human beings to cheeses. The analogy may not be that far of a stretch, however, when one takes into consideration the symbol of milk and its broad significance concerning the physical nurturing and spiritual shaping of the human in Judeo-Christian texts from Genesis onward. Of course, Hildegard does not explain what the images of the cheeses signify until much later in her commentary on the vision. As the image stands in the vision without her explication of its allegorical meaning, it is framed by two other striking figures whose connections to the cheese image are not explicit. I will quote it at length, for it is necessary to see how it is composed as a whole:

Then I saw a most great and serene splendor, flaming, as it were, with many eyes, with four corners pointing toward the four parts of the world, which was manifest to me in the greatest mystery to show me the secret of the Supernal Creator; and in it appeared another splendor like the dawn, containing in itself a brightness of purple lightning. And behold! I saw on the earth people carrying milk in earthen vessels and making cheeses from it; and one part was thick, and from it strong cheeses were made; and one part was thin, and from it weak cheeses were curdled; and one part was mixed with corruption, and from it bitter cheeses were formed. And I saw the image of a woman who had a perfect human form in her womb. And behold! By the secret design of the Supernal creator that form moved

with vital motion, so that a fiery globe that had no human lineaments possessed the heart of that form and touched its brain and spread through all of its members. But then this human form, in this way vivified, came forth from the woman's womb and changed its color according to the movement the globe made in that form.

And I saw that many whirlwinds assailed one of these globes in a body and bowed it down to the ground; but, gaining back its strength and bravely raising itself up, it resisted them boldly . . . (1.4, 109)

To a linearly and causally trained mind, large gaps in this text appear between first, the purple lightning and the people carrying vessels and, second, the formed cheeses and the womb of the woman. It is not out of order to read this text with causality in mind; Hildegard herself assigns it to the allegory of the cheeses later when she explains the connection between quality of semen with caliber of human being and why deformed infants are born. Compositionally, however, causality is invisible in the ekphrastic vision and is filled in only later in the text by a sometimes over-precious drama and commentary. These lacunae might be attributed to qualities of the medieval visual imagination, in which linear perspective does not govern its composition, in which background is not separated from foreground according to the framework of positive/negative space, but is concomitant with it as an equal compositional element (one can see this at work in the *Très Riches Heures*, its landscapes carrying as much allegorical weight as its human figures). But it is interesting that these gaps are also part of the textual translation. The relationships among the progression of the images in this vision are invisible, left out, leading the reader to wonder what these relationships are.

Hildegard interprets the vision as a drama of the human body and soul, a visible form and an invisible form. The idea of visibility and invisibility appears often throughout the meditation's commentary. For example, the speaker warns that doubt of invisible things is symptomatic of following the devil and the devil's attitude that knowledge be objectifiable. Much of the action happening in this dynamic vision occurs inside another shape that is then exposed, or hidden beyond vision completely. The first image, a vague "splendor," recalls apocalyptic literature with its "flaming" nature and its positioning toward the four parts of the world. The reader is guided very quickly inside this splendor to find, like a nesting doll, another splendor within. And suddenly the reader is treated to an image of humans carrying milk on their way to make cheese and an image of all the different kinds of cheeses that are made. Then suddenly the image of a woman appears, iconic in its reference to Mary, her womb transparent and the human within on display. Allegorically, the subject of the vision is clear enough to those familiar with traditional Christian images: this is the development of the soul, its possibilities, its coming-into-being, its origin, its trials. What is not clear, however, are the mixed vehicles of this analogy—the inside of a flaming splendor, the cheeses, the womb—and the relationship among them. In its abstract expression, the splendor seems to become aligned with sacredness, divinity, mystery, secret, what belongs inside, the inner life, even though it is set facing the four corners of the world, an airy and open place to be. Then the break occurs and the new scene materializes: humans become aligned with the activity of cheese-making, an activity that appears more public, certainly ordinary, in relation to the other images in this vision. At the same time, the making of cheese is done where it is dark, where molds can creep and ripen, where liquid takes on a

firm existence. As it is with milk turning to cheese, so it is with the development of the human form in the womb (later Hildegard will again conflate vehicles and replace semen for milk while explaining what the cheeses signify), and yet this development is exposed, the curtain drawn back from its ordinarily private stirring. The text tends to transpose typical and traditional perceptions and categorizations of both sacred and secular experience. Newman admits “rapid shifts from the sensual to the symbolic or typological” in Hildegard’s work, as well as a “strong tendency toward synaesthesia” (“Poet” 185) that make reading her visions (not to mention her commentary on top of those visions) a confusing experience for readers; as there are few stable symbols (most are metonymic and highly pliable) readers have difficulty settling on any one meaning for these analogies.

It is no coincidence that these lacunae appear as the text shifts from an inner world to a public picture and back again. As a female, Hildegard is particularly aware of the private/public delineation; she chooses to vocalize her beliefs and opinions and preach (and write!) in a time when women were condemned for speaking publicly. Her visions are filled with imagery that is specifically female, bodily, sensual. In terms of the womb imagery in the above vision, Hildegard’s text does not question the ethical considerations surrounding whether it is right or not for the female body to be public property. Through its ekphrastic gaps, however, the text exposes the social idea that the female organs are in fact public and treated as public; the text ever so subtly makes possible the assertion that it is hypocritical that women should be excluded from the public sphere. Hildegard’s visions are concerned with questions of reality, and not just the reality beyond the corruption of human flesh and mortal life according to the text’s main intention. The text

also deals with reality as Hildegard herself experiences it: her gender deemed by her society and culture less intelligent, incapable of the highest reason, and excluded as much as possible from the public sphere. Her apologies—affected modesty—in the Declaration speak to this sense of inequity but interestingly enough pave the way for the rest of the text to speak with authority as one of the blessed, the beatitudinally “meek.” She, as female, is left to the domestic world, the inner world, and, in a powerful counter-tactic, she equates that world with the world where one can hear the voice of God speak.

Reality then, for Hildegard’s text, is of the inner world as it opens out upon the public. Reality comes to its fruition through representation as text, as it is broadcast through the world, taking its place in historical time. The vision is a revelation as it is held and interpreted by the author. Written down it acquires new meanings—links to the prophets, Ezekiel and Isaiah, to Jerome, to Augustine—and power. Hildegard makes these links, implicit in the transcription of the vision, explicit in her commentary. For her, inner knowledge, the “exemplary form” in “the mind of the artist,” the conception and the making, *must be* a public matter; the stakes are too high merely to meditate on a secret inner knowledge that remains so. Although the world, that stinking pit of sin, is best avoided in the Middle Ages, the world, the public, is also where laws are decreed, sermons spoken, values created, people tortured and put to death. The public is the place of power; it is where things are not only accomplished but recognized. Hildegard’s textual gaps and her ekphrastic rendering of vision all speak to severe contradictions in the hierarchical valuing of spiritual life over everyday, physical existence, the power granted to the public sphere over and above the domestic, and the categorization and cataloguing of women in the order of existence in the Middle Ages. The text thus points

to a disconnect between what is respectively considered public and private experience. Hildegard never overtly makes complaint against these problems. The formal composition and method of the text, however, speak volumes to these social discrepancies.

It is crucial to understand, as Murray Krieger's lengthy studies assert, that such spatiotemporal textual gaps are connected to the gaps made by the translation of one representation to another.³⁹ And this particular translation is influenced by the relationship between the visual and verbal; the cultural method and social limits behind what is appointed to these domains will likely appear in these gaps. Ekphrasis is not as a rule always critical of its socio-historical moment. It does, however, provide for the careful reader a glimpse at how humans delineate categories because its working material is aesthetic category: typically, the difference and similarity in method, form, and material between painting and poetry.⁴⁰ An ekphrastic revision will therefore change the settings of the delineations in any number of ways, perhaps by altering the content, emphasis, or reception of the ekphrastic object. Hildegard's text, though it floats successfully below the heresy radar, is a particularly drastic revision (though not immediately perceived) as the ekphrastic object is itself a private representation, unseen by anyone else, unverifiable. The mystical vision-text thus challenges the values assigned to the visual/verbal binary, values that assume that the ekphrastic moment always concerns material art and poetry. The mystical vision-text also challenges the public/private binary precisely by being written down, for the vision as ekphrastic object becomes a composition, replete with elements and images from the shared cultural memory bank. In other words, the vision no longer inhabits only the private realm. Thus

the represented visions of the *Scivias* float even below the radar of secular aesthetics and its categorical assumptions. Their effect therefore in the canon of aesthetics is extraordinarily delicate and still waiting to emerge fully.

Outside

What becomes even more curious about Hildegard's practice is its intricate detail. Her visions (and commentaries on them) read less like the spare and "minimalist" images of other mystical visions (Catherine of Siena's de Chirico-like Christ-ladder or Julian of Norwich's single hazelnut) than fragments of biblical and classical narratives. While Hildegard's ekphrastic object is imaginary, a private, unverifiable vision, its rhetoric uses detail and motif from popular stories, placing it within a set of socially recognized narratives. Such borrowing and repetition has the effect of verifying the narrative for her. Furthermore, she is herself at times a character in her visions, no longer merely reporting to the reader, but physically there. A portion of her commentary to the fourth vision of Book Two provides this striking detail:

And I came to a tabernacle, whose interior was all of the strongest steel. And, going in, I did works of brightness where I had previously done works of darkness. And in that tabernacle I placed at the north a column of unpolished steel, on which I hung fans made of diverse feathers, which moved to and fro. And, finding manna, I ate it. At the east I built a bulwark of square stones and, lighting a fire within it, drank wine mixed with myrrh and unfermented grape juice. At the south I built a tower of square stones in which I hung up red shields and placed trumpets of ivory in its windows. And in the middle of this tower I

poured out honey and mixed it with other spices to make a precious unguent, from which a great fragrance poured forth to fill the whole tabernacle. But at the west I built nothing, for that side was turned to the world. (2.4, 112)

As noted earlier, the classical rhetorical arts use *enargeia*, the vivid attention to visual elements, as a method for establishing authority.⁴¹ Hildegard employs this method expertly. “Tabernacle,” “works of darkness,” fans of feathers, manna, “wine mixed with myrrh and unfermented grape juice,” trumpets and shields and honey and spices and fragrance: all the exotic gestures and *objets* of the Old Testament are found here, the stuff of the Other World which graced and structured the daily imaginations of medieval peoples. In other words, these elements were a constant and near part of the social collective memory: they are markers laced with meanings, histories, and traditions that form a narrative. What matters is not whether what is reported is *real*, but, as Carruthers suggests, how the cast of these images resonate with a social narrative:

Because it builds entirely through the associations made in some individual’s mind, memory work has an irreducibly personal and private or “secret” dimension to it. That is also why it is a moral activity, an activity of character and what was called “temperament.” At the same time, because most of its building materials are common to all—are in fact common places—memory work is also fully social and political, a truly civic activity. The constant balance of individual and communal, *ethos* and *pathos*, is adjusted and engineered with the tools of rhetoric: images and figures, topics and schemes. Essential among these tools are the memorial *res*, the building blocks of new composition. (*Craft* 21)

Much of the power in Hildegard's text relies upon association: the reader's proclivity to remember other stories featuring these images, or even parts of them. "Fans of feathers" recalls the luxuries of Solomon, as does myrrh, which also points to the gifts of the Magi to the Christ-child, to the distant, unknown, and mysterious East, and to wealth, especially as a metaphor for spiritual riches. Honey and manna reference Canaan, the promised land. "Fragrance" alerts one to the absence of corruption and alludes to the bodies of any number of martyrs for the faith; fragrance is also expensive and rare. Inhabiting this tabernacle, this complex of cultural markers, Hildegard's figure is clearly in a place of ancient kings, but it is also a place that she herself has built (and written), as she repeats: "I did," "I hung," "I placed," "I built." At the same time, it is a place she leaves open and turned to the world beyond, both within and outside of the text.

The order of creation is clearly a central concept of the *Scivias*. As already discussed in the above analysis, the text resists aspects of this order in its nuances—in its blurring of the line between private and public experience—but it also voices this order through the gesture of proselytizing. Patrick Geary, interested in how it is that individuals and groups in the eleventh century remembered and forgot, notes that "a society that explicitly found its identity, its norms, and its values from the inheritance of the past, that venerated tradition and drew its religious and political ideologies from precedent, was nevertheless actively engaged in producing that tradition through a complex process of transmission, suppression, and re-creation" (8). Hildegard is actively "producing that tradition" and the ekphrasis, a practice of memoria, in translating the visual to the verbal goes through the actions of "transmission, suppression and re-creation." Carruthers attributes this production of tradition to the memorative faculties of the mind, to

“recollection,” but also emphasizes that this production is inextricable from a cultural moral imperative:

The matters memory presents are used to persuade and motivate, to create emotion and stir the will. And the “accuracy” or “authenticity” of these memories—their simulation of an actual past—is of far less importance (indeed it is hardly an issue at all) than their use to motivate the present and to affect the future. Though it is certainly a form of knowing, recollecting is also a matter of will, of being *moved*, pre-eminently *a moral activity* [my emphasis] rather than what we think of as intellectual or rational. (*Craft* 67-8)

Carruthers focuses on the dynamism of memorative composition: “motivation” and motion, “being moved,” are basic prerequisites in this exercise which is profoundly connected to relationships with others, to the contiguous world. Memory, because it is not isolated to the self, is thus a “moral activity.” Hildegard’s ekphrasis of a vision requires movement from its reader, for as Carruthers elsewhere states, “[Medieval ekphrases] are organizations of images amongst which one moves, at least mentally, following out the *ductus* of colors and modes which its images set. The ornamentation of such a work forms its routes and pathways, as verbal ornament does that of speech and chant” (*Craft* 223). The dynamism of the transcribed vision exists on the level of its making, its form, and its content. So it is no coincidence that the topoi of cartographical distance and direction, and a centripetal motion outwards to the world whether through sight or intention, figure prominently in many visions of the *Scivias*.⁴²

North, east, south, and west: each direction is given a coordinate in the biblical phylogeny of humankind in the text’s commentaries. Taken together, the directions also

represent the created world in need of the apostolic news. In the second vision of Book Three, “The Edifice of Salvation,” the directions are architectural designations given to the walled building shaped like a city. Hildegard writes:

Then I saw, within the circumference of the circle, which extended from the One seated on the throne, a great mountain, joined at its root to that immense block of stone above which were the cloud and throne with its Occupant; so that the stone was continued on to a great height and the mountain was extended down to a wide base.

And on that mountain stood a four-sided building, formed in the likeness of a four-walled city; it was placed at an angle, so that one of its corners faced the East, one faced the West, one the North, and one the South. The building had one wall around it, but made of two materials: One was a shining light like the light of the sky, and the other was stones joined together. These two materials met at the east and north corners, so that the shining part of the wall went uninterruptedly from the east corner to the north corner, and the stone part went from the north corner around the west and south corners and ended in the east corner. But that part of the wall was interrupted in two places, on the west side and on the south side. . . .

And between the building and the light of the circle, which extended from the height to the abyss, at the top of the east corner there was only a palm’s breadth; but at the north and west and south corners the breadth of separation between the building and the light was so great that I could not grasp its extent. (3.2, 325)

The architectural and mathematical detail recalls the directions given to Noah in Genesis. The image participates in the architectural topos of Paul, as I recounted earlier in the essay. This is the text's representation of heaven as it orders the rest of creation; it is no surprise but rather a happy familiarity that it borrows from the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, to represent the nature of divine creation. Here it seems the written vision is aware of the gaps, the places where logic fails, incorporating them into the positive structures of the vision, rather than producing them as unintentional spandrel. Newman argues that Hildegard "conceives of a heaven that is supremely organic and alive yet also consummately crafted" ("Poet" 186). The craftedness of this building—both its material (stone) and its immaterial (light) elements—does not erupt in the face of what she cannot grasp. It seems to me that this, the gap, above all else is what she desires to tell all four corners of the world: that the in-between of the world and the light, which is *the City*, is utterly unintelligible, something that can only be imagined and imperfectly interpreted through the senses, yet is, nevertheless, the world, the condition of material existence. To put *that* into words, into text, requires some acknowledgement that it, as Dante concedes at the end of the *Commedia*, cannot be described. Hildegard does likewise here with the last breath of this vision: "the breadth was so great . . . I could not grasp its extent." The ekphrastic ambition, as Mitchell has described it, is to make accessible what is inaccessible; render known a perceived/imagined entity that is impossible for the Other to know. Language of the visual realm, what one can sense and see, plays in this text's connecting lines: spatial qualities and positions such as "breadth," "great," "between," and "grasp," not to mention the measurements and cartographical directions. As the objects listed in the vision of the tabernacle represent kingly wealth, these qualities

signify order and organization, a city where everything is in its place, whose dimensions measure just so, where what lies beyond its walls proper is subject to its reach and dominion. It is the model for the public world, yet *within* the connecting lines are impossibilities, those expanses the text grasps and does not grasp. The relationship here between the visual image and its verbal counterpart is dictated by the limits of representation, the tension-laden desire to tell and not tell stirred up by the double illusion that the text is the vision itself and is not the vision.⁴³ This illusion covers up the fact that the text, however, *is* both: it is the vision in the sense of its full, relatable composition: the ekphrastic vision. And it is not, nor can ever be, the vision proper. In other words, ekphrasis is not the ekphrastic object, but it nonetheless exists fully in its own right.

The private, that which is not so visible publicly, is not separate from the public. They are part and parcel of each other in Hildegard's vision of the world. Her use of aesthetic form and in particular the mode of ekphrasis is the frame for that partnership. At the very beginning of this study I quoted Roberta Smith's observation that meaning in art accumulates through a collaborative act, an observation which is amplified in Hildegard's text, whose collaborative act is twofold. First, her text mixes together the formal parameters of visual composition as dictated by *memoria* and the rhetorical devices of verbal composition. And second, she melds her experience and thought with the images, ideas, precepts of the social narrative (in fact her thought is necessarily predicated on the social narrative). Hildegard furthers social contracts of meaning with effectiveness through the conversation and conjoining of these media, but her text, through ekphrasis, has also found a way to subtly shift that inherited meaning to make a space of authority for her voice. There is no denying the white-hot spark the descriptions

of these visions ignite. They are, as Roberta Smith exclaims, “so exquisite.” They are exquisite in part because their audience knew (and knows) beforehand many of the constitutive images: the light, the womb, earthen vessels, the wall of stone and the wall of light of certain dimension and certain direction. It is a thrill when we recognize, meet again, certain patterns in an unexpected place; they are old friends, but contextually entirely new. The familiarity is just enough to draw an audience into a reconfigured territory. The territory—particularly charged loci in *memoria*—claimed and changed by Hildegard’s text becomes, through ekphrasis, a definitive destination, its landscape possessing great potential to shift gender category and appointment, the assignments of social sector, and the understanding of what art is and how it works.

7 Inhuman Ekphrasis: The Forty(plus)-Year Ekphrasis of Julian of Norwich

...the contretemps presupposes this inhuman, too human, inadequation which always dislocates a proper name.

—Derrida, *Acts of Literature*

And alle this oure lorde shewed me in the first sight, and gaf me space and time to behalde it. And the bodily sight stinted, and the gastely sight dweled in mine understandinge. And I abade with reverente drede, joyande in that I sawe, and desirande as I durste for to see mare, if it ware his wille, or the same langer time.

—Julian of Norwich, *A Revelation of Divine Love*

The sheer number of revisions and versions of *Piers Plowman* remains legendary in the literary world and a strong example of the violable and protean nature of text. The number of extant versions alone showcases *Piers*'s quality of polytemporality, or the untimely, the reminder that the composition will compulsively emulate itself, drawing from the past in an urgent now to make change for or answer to the future. While *Piers* performs the untimely function through the palimpsest-like revising of its material, it also enacts the untimely in its form and content throughout the poem, especially through its participation in the dream vision genre and its Latin quotations taken from the Bible and other moral authority and placed into a new context. These quotations thus work as what Derrida terms the “contretemps of the aphorism”: the polytemporal proclivity of the phrase taken out of context both to retain its historical meanings and to embark upon a space in which it can begin to accrue new, sometimes contrary or ambiguous, meanings. This is the work of ekphrasis.

Julian of Norwich's oeuvre—*A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman*, the first written extant text of her representing her reception of a vision, and *A Revelation of Love*, the subsequent revision of *A Vision* and the composition of her mystical experience—likewise participates in the same polytemporal realm in which the intra- and extra-textual action of *Piers Plowman* moves. Julian's untimely project, however, is far subtler than Langland's gymnastics and sometimes difficult to put a finger on. The gentle voice behind the clarity and simplicity of her writing is often comforting; those qualities, however, also mask the startling revisionist nature of her compositions. Nonetheless, many critics have seen through the mask and pegged as subversive and original the content of the motherhood of Christ and master and servant sections of her *A Revelation* revision and have acknowledged the revisionist undercurrent of spatiotemporal structure in and through the compositions of Julian's texts.

Carmel Bendon Davis has recently and notably perceived that the kind of space created in the mystical visionary text is one that undercuts itself indefinitely; apophysis engenders what she terms the *mise en abîme*. Although the apophatic turn exists in Julian's work, her text more often than not tends to avoid the inexpressibility topos, instead opting for a detailed description of her process of confusion, her inability to understand or represent, and her coming-to-know how to explain the visions. If Julian's work were to rely only on an undoing, I would agree that the *mise en abîme* is an appropriate spatial model for the representation of her vision. The ekphrastic impulse, however, so thoroughly ingrained in this work from its inception, utilizes ready-made structures in a revisioning that accessibly and actively moves toward the new. Julian's work compulsively embraces the ekphrastic, and thus her work puts forth a different

model than the one Davis outlines. Julian's visions/revisions inhabit a labyrinth of memory; they are always already in process of continual reframing and adjustment. The *mise en abîme* model cannot capture this kind of movement; its understanding and utilization of the spatiotemporal plane tends toward the polarity of the purely critical rather than the creative. Julian's composition and revisioning, done over a forty-year period from the time she had her vision on her sickbed, are creative responses to an experience that *in itself* cannot be represented. She does not give up working it through herself and through text and on more than one occasion suggests that the vision really is inextricable from her long period of contemplation over it. There is the sense that each successive representation and commentary, rather than coming closer to a perfect representation on its own, is instead a part of the representation of the Divine Other.

The fact of her twenty-year-minus-three-months revision between the two texts is thus significant, not only when one considers her position as anchoress, but also because of what is kept and what is changed between the texts. Her revision affects the categorization of her work as "vision," but *vision* as the terminology of choice for the mystical experience/event is not without its contentious consequences. As difficult and loaded as the term *mystical* proves to be, so is *vision*. The word assumes that the mystical experience belongs to the faculty of sight; it is something one specifically sees. At first glance, most laypeople would not even think to question the term. Of course, mystic visionaries *see* a vision, and their visions are part of a long line of tradition from such biblical moments as Jacob witnessing the celestial ladder, Moses witnessing the burning bush, David witnessing and interpreting visionary dreams, and so on. Witness in fact plays a large role in the mystical vision, and it is this mantle that confers much authority

upon the one *seeing*. But despite the key factor of standing witness, there are problems with the term *vision* that have oversimplified, and therefore complicated, what the event and the recording of it entail. The problems vary from accuracy of description to ideological limit: 1) the mystical experience is not necessarily seen but can also be heard, felt, smelled, or all or none of the above; 2) the term has had a tendency to narrow the field of study about mystical vision text, automatically including and excluding certain authors. Because such elements as dialogue and musings are left out of the category, the work of authors like Marguerite Porete and Mechthild of Magdeburg are generally not included in the vision/visionary camp.⁴⁴ Study of the work of Hildegard of Bingen has certainly been affected, as has that of Julian of Norwich. Because the matrix of the field of study has been largely determined by this term *vision* and the cultural assumptions drawn along with it, theological scholars have historically had some difficulty in deciding how to place Julian. Is she visionary or mystic? As Kevin J. Magill points out, “the terms mystic and visionary mean many things to many people, from esoteric practitioners skilled in the art of divining the future, meditation experts who aspire to higher states of consciousness to the theological strategies that articulate intellectual advancement to the divine” (1). But he also emphasizes that “to discuss Julian as either a mystic or a visionary therefore is to discuss a mystical or visionary life lived” (1).

That life lived is both the intersession between the years dividing the first and final versions of her vision and the work of producing her texts. Of particular interest in the debate, mystical versus visionary, is Julian’s revision of *A Vision*, written years after the first transcription of it. Her revision did not suddenly materialize at the end of nearly twenty years but was toiled over throughout those long years; it was an action involving

to a great extent the sifting and composing processes of memory. Further, it is important to emphasize that the text also changes beyond the life and intent of the author. The work that is *A Vision/A Revelation* continues to morph and reproduce itself, as Alexandra Barratt discusses:

The viability of such concepts as “authorial intention”, “the original text”, “critical edition” and, above all, “scholarly editorial objectivity” is not what it was, and a study of the textual progeny of the revelations of Julian of Norwich—editions, versions, translations and selections—does little to rehabilitate them. Rather it tends to support the view that a history of reading is indeed a history of misreading or, more positively, that texts can have an organic life of their own that allows them to reproduce and evolve quite independently of their author. Julian’s texts have had a more robustly continuous life than those of any other Middle English mystic. Their history—in manuscript and print, in editions more or less approximating Middle English and in translations more or less approaching Modern English—is virtually unbroken since the fifteenth century.

(27)

I will not be dealing with this long tradition directly, except in that I employ an edition coming from that line of reproduced and revised texts. My focus will be on distinct differences between the two original texts and the composition of contemplation they create between the two of them. Nonetheless, I think it pertinent to point out the multiplicity of versions and the fractal nature of text that extends beyond content to materiality of re-presentation. If we take ekphrasis as the impulse behind this movement, its agency in change, and ethical considerations thereof, becomes all the more apparent.

Before I move into a discussion of the revisions of Julian's original conceived vision, there is a small but important matter to consider. That the long version of her vision includes strikingly different elements from the first version remains one of the sticking points in her theological categorization. And as such, this sticking point reveals much about assumptions concerning the validity of the mystical experience/event and the text that records it: namely, that to be considered an authentic vision, the recording text should not change drastically. This point has to a great extent been a theological issue, but it would be naïve to think that these issues have not also affected literary study, most damagingly through pigeonholing texts in a hierarchy of spiritual authenticity. Many factors contribute to this hierarchy—and thus to what is canonical (in both the literary and theological sense)—including status, gender, style of writing, and emphasis on sight. My interest in the case of Julian, however, has specifically to do with the audacity she possesses to change her composition, to respond to both original, memorial composition and textual composition with the revision that becomes the long text *A Revelation*. That Julian's composition changes over time does not detract from its integrity in the least. Rather it strengthens the case to interpret the text according to the functions of ekphrasis: the text as representations of and responses to other compositions; the text as dynamic, memorial, polytemporal, and thus an intrinsically ethical activity. The contemplative musing she deploys especially heavily in chapters thirteen, fourteen, and sixteen does not seem necessarily separate from the mystical event itself, for she admits—in fact emphasizes—that “alle this oure lorde shewed me in the first sight, and gafe me space and time to behalde it” (*Revelation* 5.18). In the deliberate changes she makes to the

original transcription of the vision, ekphrasis functions as a mode of searching, contemplation, and judgment.

With Julian's texts we move into a space previously unexplored in ekphrasis, a space that might typically, if it is acknowledged at all, be adamantly kept separate by theorists and critics from the revising and compositional functions of ekphrasis. That space is what Jeffrey Cohen and Jonathan Gil Harris, following Jacques Derrida, have called "inhuman art".⁴⁵

The lurking questions within the phrase "inhuman art" as I am connecting it to ekphrasis undoubtedly concern the assumption that art belongs to human action only as such action is conceived of as separate from the world/nature. How can art be created by something not human? (Or how can human art be considered "inhuman"?) How can ekphrasis—always a representation—be inhuman? Representation has always been relegated to something that humans do; art has been designated the chief difference between human beings and the rest of the world. Representation, however, happens on all levels of existence: it is the key function of the genetic code, of the regular and repeated motion of the tides, of the traces and tracks left behind by water, wind, glacier, animals. A bee dances so as to map paths to the best flowers; dolphins communicate symbolically. But what could possibly be termed "inhuman" about Julian's work, other than perhaps the initial (debated) mystical union with the divine? Julian's work is completed by a human hand, for other humans, within an enclosure built by humans out from which as an anchoress she does not venture. We do not find her communing with "nature," certainly not in the Western eighteenth- and nineteenth-century ideas of it; she does not mimic in her composition the romanticized ethereal mountaintops or verdant

valleys, the rustic farmer, and rosy-cheeked dairy maid. The closest she comes to “nature” is the hazelnut and the herring scales, but each is a simile. Nor do animals appear much in her texts, the one exception being the stylized herring scales to which Christ’s blood droplets are compared. Her imagery is devoted to the essentials and trials of the human body: blood, sickness, numbness, suffering, pain, protection, shelter, care, nurture. Her language seems focused on a world wholly human.

Julian’s work, nonetheless, moves into an ekphrasis of inhuman art. Her concerns, while very much human, become larger than human through the very process of ekphrasis itself. Her work is “inhuman” because it is ekphrastic of pattern. B. A. Windeatt observes that “the struggle for contemplative understanding itself becomes the principle of Julian’s narrative, and one that is not artistically smoothed: Julian returns to some issue more often than would be necessary in an ideal form of her visions and meditations” (“The Art” 62). In the way that the material world repeats and re-presents itself—the formations and tesserae of stones or the vacillations of tidepools or geometrics of flowers—Julian’s work represents the patterning of memory and the revision process, the template for “the struggle for contemplative understanding.” If her work appears simple, it is so in the way that a flower is simple. On closer inspection, there could hardly be anything more complicated.

Her ekphrasis, much more complex than a straightforward representation of a visual composition, accomplishes its revisionary composition through its understanding and employment of time. While I will examine her ekphrasis of the original composition, I believe her ekphrasis of the particular condition of time in which she is thrown as an anchoress, an experience that sets certain limits and because of these constraints

intensifies the experience of any one object or thought, is even more important. Windeatt further delineates this space of meditation in which Julian is contained but which frees her content to develop along different lines:

Memory of the past visions is both maintained and modified in a present of continuing meditation. In the way that it carries the authenticating visions forward within itself by cross-reference to their words and details, striving to pierce beyond them spiritually while acknowledging the essential limits of contemplation, Julian's text presents a state of understanding which is now a whole complex state of mind no longer susceptible to the constraints of linear narrative expression. ("The Art" 66)

He continues his point in another essay, pinpointing the space of enclosed meditation as one that heightens perception of pattern: "In *A Revelation*, however, the unity of a narrative line gives way to the more exploratory continuum of a meditative commentary that foregrounds all the analytical subtleties of a contemplative and theologically informed mind that discerns patterns, categorizes and sub-divides" ("Julian's Second Thoughts" 102-103). I would argue that Julian, symbolically dead to the world, is nonetheless a part of the composition of her surroundings. As insects and animals mimic their natural, and therefore already aesthetic, surroundings in Roger Caillois's positing, so Julian imitates herself within her environs in her contemplative writings. This meditation, framed by a symbolic tomb, a meditation of a vision from her past within the purview of her future death always already here—a polytemporal meditation—is what enables her to construct the long text of *A Revelation*. But it is also important to underscore that the anchoress is not completely cut off from the world; she is in the middle of it. The work of

her contemplative mind, like sunlight focused through the magnifying glass to the intensity of a penetrating beam, is nonetheless not the work of a single mind alone. As Felicity Riddy puts it, “The process [of Julian’s compositions] is not solitary, but social, not isolated, but collaborative,” for “the anchorhold is part of the parish and town” (119). That Julian is both in the world and not of it calibrates the ways she arranges the opposites and paradoxes she encounters, particularly the entirely new master and servant and motherhood of Christ passages of her *A Revelation*.⁴⁶

Herring Scales and Thought Processes

I find it interesting that the short text begins with the introduction of the author diligently dating and stating the conditions of her authorship: “*that is recluse atte Norwiche and yit is on life, anno domini 1413*” (63). From the beginning Julian is aware that her writing takes place in a particular time and space: during the fifteenth century in the space of the anchoress. Her long text, completed in manuscript form twenty years later, does no such thing. The framework she employs has changed from concepts of historical time to more spatially oriented characteristics, the categorical breakdown of chapters as the vision is organized in her memory. *Enargeia*, furthermore, becomes far more of a contributing compositional element in *A Revelation*. In chapter seven she adds this to the vision:

And in alle that time that he shewd this that I have now saide in gostely sight, I saw the bodily sight lasting of the plenteous bleding of the hede. The gret droppes of blode felle downe fro under the garlonde like pelottes, seming as it had comen oute of the veines. And in the coming oute they were browne rede, for the blode was full thicke. And in the spreding abroad they were bright rede. And whan it came at the browes, ther they vanished. And notwithstanding /*fol. 14v*/ the

bleding continued tille many thinges were sene and understoded, nevertheles the fairhede and the livelyhede continues in the same betwy and livelines.

The plentuoushede is like to the droppes of water that falle of the evesing of an house after a grete shower of raine, that falle so thicke that no man may number tham with no bodily wit. And for the roundhead, they were like to the scale of hering, in the spreding of the forhede. Thes thre thinges cam to my minde in the time: pellets, for the roundhead in the coming oute of the blode; the scale of herring, for the roundhede in the spreding; the droppes of the evesing of a house, for the plentuoushede unnumerable. This shewing was quick and lively, and hidous and dredfulle, and swete and lovely. /fol. 15r/ (Rev. 7.9-24)

The description here is a far less jumbled exposition than set forth in *A Vision*. Julian now allows the image to guide and shape the composition instead of relying on the forced threes and fives of the passage's counterpart in *A Vision*. Here it becomes less abstract and more embodied; it is alive. And while a structure of three enters her composition here, it does not feel forced but rather has become a way of thinking and remembering: the images of the pellets, the scale of herring, and raindrops from the house eves are significant and powerful through their association and embodiedness, their capacity to be felt. It is in passages such as these that the split between ghostly and bodily sight is knit; Nancy Coiner recognizes this healing of rift as a guiding project for Julian's composition:

The doubleness of the narrative voice in the *Showings* mirrors the other forms of doubleness which haunt Julian's text: the doubleness of the soul, split between ordinary consciousness and the godly will, and above all, the doubleness of God and soul—the soul having been made in God's image but separated from any

direct perception of his existence of love. All these forms of doubleness are strange and troubling to Julian: they represent division, pain, distance. But Julian's path in the *Showings* is always to confront and explore the odd, disturbing image of medieval Christian religious life, to move through the uncanny as a way of generating new spiritual insights. The narrative direction of the *Showings* represents the search for an adequate image through which to understand and represent all the forms of doubleness which pain and trouble her. (312)

Significantly, Julian surmounts the divisions particular to Christian culture (that Christianity itself continually tries to overcome) not through philosophical and theological positioning but through vivid depiction, both symbolic and sensual in its composition. That the vision should become visually clearer and more detailed through Julian's long revision also defies categories that designate certain kinds of mystical experience as more valid than others and assign authority accordingly.

Julian's tension of opposites, her inclusion of things that don't fit, the juxtapositions of triadic and dual structures, and her extra-logical reasoning occupy the attention of many critics. Cynthia Masson maintains that "Julian builds her theology on a coincidence of opposites" as the "rhetorical figures of contentio and chiasmus" figure prominently in her composition because of their ability "to represent the paradox associated with the apophatic moment or point of exchange between human and the divine" (155). The moment of saying what cannot be said reverberates through and through Julian's texts; her solution or dissolution of the tension tends toward splitting experience into two phases, the spiritual and the bodily, and/or organizing reality

according to the threefold composition of the Trinity. Nancy Coiner acknowledges the hotspots of thought such tension creates:

Throughout the *Showings*, Julian responds to her visions as complex and unsettling, odd and obscure. And far from attempting to resolve or explain away the haunting strangeness of her visions, Julian returns to them again and again as a spur to ever deeper levels of exegesis. She immerses herself in their uncanny effects as a way of generating insight—and thereby of generating text, of generating herself as an author. (306)

The multiple versions and the revision of Julian's memory-text are a gift we've been given, a rare insight into how a text develops and how a text develops its author. Although at times I will discuss one or the other of Julian's versions, I prefer to think about them as unified, telling a story of how it is that thoughts, contained and focused upon, ever deepen through writing. But multiple versions do exist, and it is important to consider how they, their chronological progress, and the authorial revisions have been received by scholars.

Riddy, Barratt, and Marion Glasscoe, among others, have excellent discussions pertaining to the various editions and versions of Julian's work. Riddy's in particular reveals how editors have interpreted the extent of her authorial control and learnedness. She discusses the spectrum of models of authorship for Julian and their implications:

...the differences between the surviving texts of *A Revelation of Love* can be related to Julian's evolving sense of herself as an author under a divine imperative to write "for the profytte of many oder." A private experience which was originally part of a personal psycho-history thus enters the public domain as a

book. This is of course what happens with much writing; an unusual aspect of Julian's work is that the process is written into it. Insofar as *A Revelation of Love* records this transformation, it is a text about self-actualization. (103)⁴⁷

I suspect that Riddy is here interested specifically in the project of individuation, the entrance of the psychologized self onto the stage of textual history. I do not deny the importance or far-reaching effects of this development in Western civilization. I am, however, interested in something that Riddy begins to articulate but on which she does not focus intently. Riddy's enumeration of the levels of the text's composition reminds us of the sheer complexity of the mystical text. She continues:

The process of self-textualization was, as I have said, one that took many years to achieve: it entailed first giving to pre-discursive mental experience—the experience that felt like madness—verbal and then written shape, separating the inchoate and indeterminate visions (or whatever they were, for the notion of vision is itself textual) so that they could be analyzed and discussed, so that the writer could cross-refer from one to the other, so that they could be listed in the contents, so that, as a book, they could become part of other people's reading. (105)⁴⁸

The paradox of Julian's text is that while so wonderfully clear and simple, it is also one of the most complex compositionally (especially if the two extant versions are taken together as a whole). Its composition is about, in addition to positing a completed social self, the patterning of focus and commitment and what this looks like compositionally. It is about the self not separated from the conditions of composing but a self as it stretches

forth into a landscape. It is about how that landscape shapes the self. It is about self and landscape reaching out to the reader.

The work Julian has undertaken is clearly not just for herself; she is aware of an audience and that this writing is a gift to others. This careful awareness shapes the landscape she composes, which painstakingly makes transparent the process of contemplation and learning Julian undergoes. Windeatt notes that “passages reflecting some transformative shift in understanding of the original revelation [are] conveyed in changes of plane and in intensification of awareness as to how imagery may express this” (“Julian’s Second Thoughts” 104). The spatial work of composition, the ekphrastic compulsion, as I argued in my introduction, is a motion of love. Although Julian engages the affective modesty topos early on in *A Revelation*, as E. A. Jones points out, and begins with an acknowledgment that proper images for meditation are Christ’s works, the Visitation, and the Passion, her text nonetheless does not continue to participate in the tradition of affective piety (83). This is an exceedingly important point. Instead of offering an understanding of time and space as multiple and elastic, the affective move narrows the experience of time and space for both participant and that which is meditated upon, effectively assigning the object to a single historical place and time. Julian never puts herself in the place of Christ, nor does she entreat the reader to through her descriptions. Her composition instead takes the traditional meditational object, the Passion, and expands it: not through replaying the suffering as if it had become the subject of the meditation but through giving to it new metaphors, new descriptions, new structures, and new meanings. Not a gesture of possession, Julian’s revision reenacts the vision, the Passion, her sickness, her years of contemplation obliquely, giving them all

the widest possible space to unfurl. The revisionary compulsion, the ekphrastic rearranging, becomes a motion of love that Julian herself, in her revision of the Trinity springing from motherhood, will later call God.

The power granted by such a long period of revision allows Julian to give voice to images that perhaps were only nascent, images that she herself admits could not find form at the time that she experienced them, especially that of the lord and servant episode, an image in *A Revelation* wholly missing from *A Vision*. The patience and diligence required to remain with the vision or impression in order that it become shaped and articulated has corollaries with the text's presentation and undercutting of hierarchy. The relationship between the revision and its portrayal of hierarchy is cemented by the condition of Julian's understanding, how it comes to her in bits and pieces, how textually she represents it as a process. Understanding for Julian is not a given, nor is it granted to her in a completed state as to a chosen one on high. Understanding instead is lent to a humble servant who must meditate upon it, savor it, and work it through the motions of contemplation and memory until it arrives in languaged form through the toil that creates *A Revelation*. Yet the proclivity of this lengthy revision to undo the tiers and inequality of hierarchy has already been sown in *A Vision* as that text begins the process of subverting the accepted notions of hierarchy through its representation of the Trinitarian vision, an often male and hierarchical image in the Christian faith. Section twelve of *A Vision* continues with Julian's intent focus on a composition spatially and thematically shaped by threes: "mine understandinge was lifted uppe into heven, and thare I sawe thre hevens, Of the whilke sight I was gretlye merveylede, and /fol. 105r/ thought: 'I sawe thre hevens, and alle of the blessed manhede of Criste. And nane is mare, nane is lesse,

nane is hiare, nane is lawere, botte evene like in blisse” (*Vis.* 12.6-9). The Trinitarian vision is here taken from its Father, Son, Ghost tiered structure and stripped of power distinction, for all are “evene like in blisse.” Even as all are equal, the reader cannot pass over the power relations between parent and child, as Julian’s texts are intensely aware of them. She writes in *A Revelation*: “And I understode non higher stature in this life than childehode, in febilnesse and failing of might and of witte, into the time that oure gracious moder hath brought us up to oure fader’s blisse” (*Rev.* 63.36-37). But here in *A Vision*, Julian finds the beginning possibilities of how her triune structure can begin to undo the terrible judgment and stricture passed on creation’s order by the scriptural and doctrinal record and hierarchy.

This work begun in *A Vision* arrives at fullness in *A Revelation* through the lord and servant allegory. Double and triple structures—the doubleness of spirit and body and of God and man and the threes of all her allegorical readings—dot *A Vision* thoroughly, but they do not dovetail to the extent they do in *A Revelation*; it is particularly the joint made of two and three, double and triple, by the lord and servant vision that powerfully and surprisingly makes possible an order, a composition that relies on something other than a hierarchical understanding of creation. The representation of the vision begins in Chapter fifty-one as Julian cries out inwardly for ease, seeking the succor of God. He answers her with the example of the servant and lord:

And then oure curteyse lorde answered in shewing, full mistily, but a wonderful example of a lorde that hath a servant, and gave me sight to my understanding of both. Which sight was shewed double in the lorde, and the sight was shewed

double in the servant. That one perty was shewed gostly in bodely liknesse. That other perty was shewed more gostely withoute bodely liknes. (*Vis.* 51.1-5)

The “gostely.” The “bodely.” To a contemporary critic, binary categories scream to be aligned with other binary categories: male/female, master/servant, mind/body, text/image. It is not that simple (or contrived or so suspicious) to Julian. The “gostely” and “bodily” are not in opposition to each other, and they do not square off in ideological competition, so applying an oversimplified ideological framework to her transcription does it a great disservice. Her double showing always has to do with the reality of the Trinitarian structure, which for Julian is suffused with love. That she frames the exposition of the vision with her own process of wrangling with it—from her reception, her confusion and silence, to her increased perception and understanding that continues to unfold—hints that the composition of the text positions the process of ekphrasis as intrinsic to the relationship between the divine and human. Nor is that process simple: it is lengthy, the translation painstaking, its components diverse. Julian furthermore gives it a three-fold structure. I transcribe the framing of her interpretation here at length:

And at this point the shewing of the example vanished, and oure good lorde ledde forth my understanding in sight and in shewing of the revelation to the ende. But notwithstanding all this forthleding, the marveyling of the example went never fro me, for methoght it was geven me for answeere to my desyer. And yet culde I not take therein full understanding to my ees in that time. For in the servant that was shewed for Adam, as I shall sey, I sawe many diverse properteys that might by no manner be drecte to singel Adam. And thus in that time I stode mekille in unknowinge. For the full understanding of this mervelouse example was not

geven me in that time, in which misty /*fol. 96r*/ example the privites of the revelation be yet mekelle hid. And notwithstanding this, I sawe and understode that every shewing is full of privites.

And therefore me behoveth now to telle thre properes in which I am somdele esed. The furst is the beginning of teching that I understode therin in the same time. The secunde is the inwarde lerning that I have understode therein sithen. The third is alle the hole revelation, fro the beginning to the ende, which oure lorde God of his goodnes bringeth oftymes freely to the sight of my understanding. And theyse thre be so oned, as to my understanding, that I can not nor may deperte them. And by theyse thre as one, I have teching wherby I ow to beleve and truste in oure lorde God, that of the same goodnesse he shewed it and for the same end, right so of the same goodness and for the same end he shall declare it to us when it /*fol.96v*/ is his will. (*Rev. 51.52-72*)

As the Trinitarian mystery is split into three and then “oned” again, her learning follows the structure of the reality of God. I don’t think it would be too much to say that for Julian’s composition God is the quality and movement of learning that encompasses both *chronos* and *kairos*: learning that happens both as time passes from first reception to conceiving and understanding; and the “hole revelation,” the entirety that will change from moment to moment but also includes each moment of its unfolding, reproduction, representation. Julian has ekphrastically brought *chronos* and *kairos* together—not necessarily an unusual feat in literature (for most works about epiphany do this), but certainly noteworthy in the length of time she takes and multiple versions that are generated. It is the very condition of this length of time—a period of about forty years

from the vision to its final version as *A Revelation* (and then some, as the editions/translations/versions continue)—that makes possible the fullness of time, *kairos*, the polytemporal (and I hearken back to what I see as a close cousin to Julian’s visions, *Piers Plowman*: “And Piers the Plowman parceyved plener tyme” [B.16.103]). Julian, like Langland, is a composer *par excellence* as her process and content are intimately and inextricably related. The whole of these texts is about creation, and that Julian must perceive her vision slowly, wade through time to be able to shape and articulate it (and present the process as such), has everything to do with the gist of the lord and servant tableau. The joyful knowledge in the multiplicity of this vision, that the servant is Christ, Adam, and all human beings at once, parallels the threefold shape she gives to her learning. What is interesting is that her learning escapes that framework: the threefold structure is not enough to hold it, yet that triune structure cannot be dismissed as ineffectual or superfluous either.

Her honesty about the process of learning makes what is complicated clear and simple. That she suffers in confusion and toils to understand for a long time is apparent. But she also desires to present her “teching” with utmost clarity and thus begins with the simplest of visual arrangements: the corresponding position, character, and appearance of two figures.

For twenty yere after the time of the shewing, save thre monthes, I had teching inwardly, as I shall sey: “It longyth to the to taken hede to all the propertes and the condetions that were shewed in the example, though the thinke that it be misty and indiffererent to thy sight.” I assented wilfully with gret desyer, seeing inwardly, with advisement, all the pointes and the propertes that were shewed

in the same time, as ferforth as my witt and understanding wolde serve: beginning my beholding at the lorde and at the servant; at the manner of sitting of the lorde and the place that he sat on, and the coloure of his clothing and the manner of shape, and his chere withoute and his nobley and his goodnes within; at the manner of standing of the servant, and the place, where and how; at his manner of clothing, the coloure and the shape; at his outwarde behaving, and at his inwarde */fol. 97r/* goodnes and his unlothfulhede. (*Rev.* 51.73-84)

Her “gret desyer” and the attention paid to the “manner” of each figure are carefully represented for the audience, each stance of the figures, each place, behavior, and costume modulated just so in response to its foil. Julian is at the height of the structure of her visual composition; what follows will complicate the clarity of the visual mold. At this moment she also hears a voice, an injunction to think carefully over what is shown to her even if its meaning is so opaque as to be indiscernible at the time. She admits that the immediate picture of the vision is short and spare; it is the meaning she apperceives behind it and over time that is extraordinarily complicated.

So though Julian ends the formal description of the vision proper at this point, what follows textually is an explication of the vision, going much further into thoughtful and sensual detail. It is finely allegorical and includes close-ups, motives, desires, all the small attributes that figure again, figure more deeply, the original, unadorned picture. She implies that the images come to her understanding as did the steps of her learning her ABCs, both over time and “in a touch.” This metaphor, in its allusion to discovering and deciphering a trove of letters, guides or accompanies the kind of detail that Julian patiently, patently brings forth: the servant as gardener delving and sweating, the treasure

in “erth,” taking “met with the drinke,” the signification of the tightness, color, and shape of the servant’s “kirtel,” the color of the eyes. Each of these bears its own distinct meaning and role in the composition as it is configured to creation’s fullness of time. In forty years time, the world of her visions has become rich, daring, and densely populated. Her text has also become increasingly able to support her postulations (especially the all-famous “All shall be well”), which move beyond the realm of logic into a more nebulous and polymorphic space.

Immediately after the long exposition of the lord and servant vision and her descriptions of the “teching” required to relate it, Julian introduces the inclusive concept of God as mother: “And thus I saw that God enjoyeth that he is our fader, and God enjoyeth that he is our moder, and God enjoyeth that he is our very spouse, and our soule his loved wife” (*Rev.* 52.1-3). In Julian’s arrangement, God does not occupy a singular position, and more important, her representation of God as an understanding or conceiving of creation does not portray God’s relationship to humankind through the semblance of one kind of relationship alone. The addition of the motherhood of God to Julian’s great text (here I speak of both *A Vision* and *A Revelation*) expands the reader’s understanding of human relationship and human and divine relationship by countering a patriarchal assumption about the nature of creation. It also expands the notion of space and time through the ekphrastic body, much like *Pearl* in its fractalling structure does, by revisioning and collapsing motherhood, the Annunciation and Visitation, with the Passion.

A popular way of conceiving the changes in text from *A Vision* to *A Revelation* is through the metaphor of the infant’s development in the womb. There is indeed

something very organic about Julian's revisioning and the way it seems to develop and build flesh incrementally (especially to us, who encounter the texts in a particular context long after the fact). But I think we must also be careful about how we frame this development. Brant Pelphry, for example, draws parallels between this kind of growth and Julian's dynamic theology of salvation:

A static concept of God and salvation would imply that individual persons are either "saved" or "unsaved," members of one category or another. This is precisely the view articulated in various doctrines of predestination in the Middle Ages and in what came to be known to Calvinists in the Protestant Reformation as "positional atonement." By contrast, for Julian as for the Byzantines, salvation is not a state of either/or, saved or unsaved but a process of growth. It is the transformation or completion of humanity into the image of the divine Son. For Julian the process is like the formation of an infant in the womb.... (299)

This passage contains within it a number of conflicting issues concerning the depictions and interpretations of Julian's work as it pertains to the representation of the body, especially the female body. Pelphry's adjudication is earnest and well meaning as it aligns Julian's theology with the Byzantine view of human salvation not as an either/or state of being but as a process attained through work and experience. His interpretation is flexible enough to perceive Julian's view of eschatological existence as one in process rather than determined, an important insight, especially in terms of the revisionist nature of her mystical vision text as ekphrastic.

The passage, however, also contains ideological problems for contemporary audiences and textual problems for a medieval ekphrastic vision. At first, it seems

nothing could be sweeter or more appropriate than comparing Julian's text and conception of salvation to the growth of an infant in the womb. While the image is lovely, it makes me uneasy. Julian herself does not use it. Pelphry's summation that what the female body accomplishes is equivalent to what the vision accomplishes, which in turn is equivalent to the "completion of humanity into the image of the divine," falls short of the complexity of Julian's representation. Julian did not make this syllogism, even if she uses simpler metaphors of a mother feeding or consoling her child for the nutrition and care God gives human beings. It is important to emphasize that the image, especially for ekphrasis, never conglomerates, never assimilates, but instead reinscribes, multiplies, reinvents, and changes. Pelphry's assumption, which draws along with it the trappings of the untarnished innocence and purity of the growing infant as a record of the perfect divine, is faulty on many levels but most especially in its failure to see reciprocation. In Pelphry's configuration, the female body is only incubator, not teacher. Julian's rendering allows for many more roles on the levels of both human and divine. I think the better metaphor for what Julian does with this vision is the image of Christ bending down and writing in the earth during the episode with the unfaithful woman who is to be stoned to death. Of course, Julian does not use this metaphor for her vision of God either, but there is something in the process of Julian's writing and in her acknowledgment of the process of her writing that should make any reader wary of the infant in the womb image. What the feminine does is more than just the bodily processes of motherhood, and thus Julian's detailed depictions of the nurturing and ministrations of motherhood. Positioning the female body in Julian's schema requires much care. If salvation is growth rather than judgment in Julian's theology, it is so not through acceding to an imposed

image of the divine but through actively allowing the divine image to suffuse it and continually working with that image.

So though it is tempting to grant a more feminized understanding of the scope of salvation by equating the process with that of pregnancy, Julian's ekphrastic re-rendering instead complicates the conventional use of the female body and representations of its reproductive function. Liz McAvoy makes valuable observations on the differences in representations of the female body between *A Vision* and *A Revelation*, arguing that in *A Vision*, "Julian's introduction of [...] popular mainstream female saints simultaneously allows her to draw on a discourse of male-approved orthodoxy whilst offering a platform to explore the female focused (pro)creative bodily potential which is denied the female within the male Imaginary but which is central to Julian's insights" (170). McAvoy points out that mention of Cecelia and other female figures, including her own mother, is not included in *A Revelation* and asserts that Julian has now figured her own female body "for the provision of the primary hermeneutic, allowing that body to speak in ways more eloquent than those of the ultimately inadequate 'paternal language' of traditional hagiography" (171). Again, because Julian's bodies are complex, I both agree and disagree with McAvoy's assessment of Julian's figuration. I disagree in that it is too simple to usher traditional hagiography completely and definitively into the camp of the "male Imaginary," an imposed framework originating out of twentieth-century theory that relegates necessarily all imagery of the female, all signifiers, as fetishized components of the male ego, always already moving toward a hegemonical empowerment of the male. Certainly the uses and depictions of virginity in the Middle Ages were not so uncomplicated and cannot point only and simplistically to a

virgin/whore dichotomy that erased the lives of flesh-and-blood women.⁴⁹ The sufferings, disempowerment, joys, and daily living of medieval women were far more complex than power binaries can begin to frame. And while I agree with McAvoy that figuring her body as the ground from which vision and voice alike can be powerfully articulated does work to emphasize Julian's own body, its suffering, and its ability to speak and minister like a mother and as an authority, I believe the repositioning in *A Revelation* has more to do with a developed and highly complex understanding of space and time rather than a specific agenda regarding gender. For example, the secret and private in Julian's text are not necessarily bound up with gender as they are in Hildegard's work, nor are they presented as the opposite to the public and visible; rather they are more a condition of existence and creation.

This is not to say that Julian's revisionary ekphrasis does not affect gender depictions. Of course it does, but this is a result of a writing down that becomes representative of the myriad processes of writing down, including that of experience, meditation, memory, interpretation, the movement of representing, and representation. The process of writing down will also be tinged with gender assumption and expectation, though it also must be noted that a major focus of gender-framed readings, the modesty topos, extends across genders, generations, genres, and geography, from the apologies of Einhard to the careful humility of Hildegard. Even Chaucer rescinds his work, a move that can't be completely severed from the cultural proliferation of the modesty topos.

It is difficult perhaps to accept that the idea of inhuman art, the motion of ekphrasis to represent and refigure, a compulsion to recreate, remember, add to, and subtract from composition, culminates in Julian's depiction of motherhood, a concept that is in some

ways at the core of what it means to be human. The idea of inhuman art in this context may be especially difficult to grasp when one considers that the terms *humane* and *humanity*, which in the twenty-first-century Western world contain an expectation of empathy and kindness to others, are equated with the fulfillment of what it means to be truly human. Julian begins her ekphrasis of her vision of the motherhood of God with:

This fair, lovely worde, “moder,” it is so swete and so kinde in itselfe that it may not verily be saide of none, ne to none, but of him and to him that is very moder of life and of alle. To the properte of moder hede longeth kind love, wisdom, and knowing; and it is God. (*Rev.* 60.39-42)

Gender roles become something more than simple categories of male and female: “moder” “may not verily be saide of none, ne to none, but of him and to him that is the very moder of life.” if cultural gender roles were at stake, one would ask why Mary doesn’t become savior and son. But this is not Julian’s project. Gender reversal is not the point to Julian, even though her motherhood of God seems so radical compared to the overwhelmingly male-gendered depictions of the divine by other mystical/visionary writers. However, new understandings of the spatiotemporal possibilities of creation that provide solutions to the contraries of damnation and salvation are the point for Julian, and her texts will undertake the arduous work of shifting representation in order to arrive at those possibilities. It will take a long time in one human life and no time at all: thus the “hole revelation” as gifted to us. That gender roles are removed from a distinctly human context (though at the same time they are not taken from that context entirely, as Julian will use the metaphor of a materialized and physical mothering response to the young) speaks to a much broader understanding of the spaces and temporalities that life occupies.

Admittedly, her language utilizes the male pronoun, and analyzed from a purely linguistic frame that pronoun draws along with it so much ideological baggage that it is only separated with great reservation by contemporary scholars from a human and a cultural-historical context. There is, however, a limit to linguistic interpretation, for sometimes it does not recognize the struggle undertaken by composition to reach toward things previously unsaid. Ekphrasis is in part the attempt to recreate by shouldering and shoving through the linguistic ideological baggage of words. I know of no distinct methodology that gives credence to *sensing* a text's desire to work from traces of text (in the broadest possible sense) and memory to represent simultaneously old and new ways of being. Julian's understanding generates this kind of newness and possibility.

In both versions, *A Vision* and *A Revelation*, grace is the agency that makes possible the simultaneous existence of contrary forces with which Julian herself struggles. Grace is a spiritual agency and difficult to define, except that it comes from beyond what human beings understand in the very human experience of a specific cultural and historical space and time. I am interested, however, in how grace works textually and what it effects in the composition Julian has made of her vision, her memory of it, and her years-long meditation of both. She writes of the Christ as mother concept:

And I understode non higher stature in this life than childehode, in febilnesse and failing of might and of witte, into the time that oure gracious moder hath brought us up to oure fader's blisse. And ther shall it verily be made knowen to us, his mening in the swete wordes wher he seyth: "All shalle be welle, and thou shalt see it thyselve that alle manner thing shall be welle." And than shalle the blisse of oure moderhede in Crist be new to beginne in */fol. 137r/* the joyes of oure fader

God; which new beginning shall last without end, new beginning. Thus I understode that all the blessed children which be come out of him by kind shall be brought againe into him by grace. (*Rev.* 63.36-44)

Textually, as an element and agent within her composition, grace functions where Julian loses clear markers of linearity and cannot explain: grace is the signifier that stands as the new places language points to. Grace functions as a forever-place: through its purview all are young, are children, and have their highest “stature in this life [in] childehode, in febilnesse and failing of might and of witte.” Much like St. John of the Cross’s injunction that “The soul has to proceed rather by unknowing rather than knowing” (Bk. 1, Ch. 4, 5), one does not come to bliss through the human project of logic and reason; instead grace functions as that force through which the humble find the fullness of joy in God as mother. Grace is also the action through which Julian understands by meditation and composing, for as her writing creates new possibilities of understanding existence, so she attributes to grace that place from whence composition springs: spatially, the coming forth and going back of life exists through grace alone, and temporally, grace makes the new beginning the end that is the beginning, what Murray Krieger mistakes for the ouroboros, and Davis and Becker the *mise en abîme*, but what actually operates in the text as what Retallack calls the fractal pattern of poethics. It is repetition with a difference, to allude to the famous and oft-repeated soundbite of Judith Butler, but not just as human performance and representation. Grace, in Julian’s text, begets more of itself through her multiple compositions. It is that gift given to humans that is wholly beyond human consciousness, and though through Christ it participates in humanity, it is also a force inhuman. It compels her and her text to perform and represent.

In *A Vision*, Julian's textual body parallels the suffering body of Christ. Through her memory, meditation, and revision, Christ becomes the female body, thereby continuing, subverting, multiplying (though not overtly) the lord/servant dialectic. It is again important to emphasize that Julian does not affectively represent herself becoming Christ, a move that would objectify Christ's suffering, arresting and encaging the interplay of the time and space of suffering to a singular plane, assimilating the event in such a way that it rests with a stagnant authority. Windeatt's insight helps demystify the mechanics of her dynamic ekphrasis:

Julian's achievement as a writing mystic lies not simply in being a vividly pictured writer but a mystic whose artistic expression of the achievement of mystical understanding lies in the way in which she seeks to convey through the resources of language how an inspiration received and initially represented in picture-like form is developed into broader contemplative understanding. The most individual creative impulse represented by Julian's text is consequently the movement from image to syntax, from "shewing" to understanding. ("Julian's Second Thoughts," 67)

Windeatt's assertion, in its emphasis on the movement from showing to understanding, seems to ratify the dialectic between visual and verbal in the tradition of Lessing in the eighteenth century, along which lines Mitchell and Heffernan work. Nothing could be further from Julian's ekphrastic rendering. What I find distinctly curious and counter to that tradition in Windeatt's observation is that he does not name definitively "the way in which she seeks to convey." The "way" remains vague. I am no stranger to the vagueness and vagaries of ekphrasis. It is a murky and mysterious operation and, like any mystery

caught in the hands of academics, is dissected, apportioned, and categorized, its origins and effects pinned and labeled by the science of criticism stemming from the tradition of the Enlightenment. Windeatt, unlike the master scholars and critics of ekphrasis, is right: this “way” is vague and not easily catalogued. Rather than presenting a fixed cut-and-dry hegemonical competition between culturally appointed visual and verbal methods of interpretation and representation, a play of materials that necessarily shifts according to temporal cultural context, it sparks an impetus to engage the compositions of life and consciousness. The materials may change; what does not change is the fact of ekphrastic compulsion. As opposed to what Harris terms the sovereign model of temporality, which apportions time out to historical and political rule and makes possible the categorization and domination of those within these periods, the ongoing and polytemporal undercurrent to Julian’s ekphrasis manifests itself as more than the surface effects of sociocultural circumstance, particularly in its sensing its “arc toward the place where meaning may lie”⁵⁰: what language cannot contain *except* that it is always an invitation, so long as humans exist, to revise, represent, translate, and compose. A composition is more than the interplay between verbal and visual components. There is a larger time and place in which we as humans participate, not necessarily consciously, and in many ways Julian’s work is attuned toward that. What makes Julian’s *A Vision* and *A Revelation* participate in inhuman art is less the gesture toward the divine by itself than that gesture as it is extended through the intertwined process of both time and memory, the patterning that is both human and more than human.

Conclusion

The Gift of Medieval Ekphrasis:

Contemporary Ekphrastic Poethics and the Question of Art

No matter what image an artist invents, no matter how distorted, arbitrary, absurd, simple, elaborate, or tortured he has made it or how far in appearance from anything known or probable, who can be sure that somewhere in the world's vast store there is not that image's likeness, its kin or partial parallel?

Roger Caillois, *The Writing of Stones*

You might find a great work of art in someone falling over in a supermarket. That might be the most extraordinary visual encounter of your day.

Phil Collins in Thornton, *Seven Days in the Art World*

I recently had a discussion with one of my classes about body modification as art. When some of my students insisted that plastic surgery couldn't be considered art, I asked them to determine what were the parameters that defined our concept of art. They came up with notions and values relating to conceptions of art as noble, creative, expressive of the self, distant from the self, beautiful, and so on: definitions corresponding to what generally has been their museum and textbook experience of art. To conceive of sculpting the body through medical procedure and technique as art, as representing with a medium an image or ideal, had not occurred to them and was still regarded as highly suspect, until one particularly bright young man began talking about two kinds of art in our culture. He defined them as art that ordinary people could access and relate to, such as popular music, comic books, and even pornography, and the art that we are supposed to aspire to, in essence, the art collected in museums and by other institutions. The class picked up on this difference between high art and low art, terming works either "framed"

or “unframed” art: “framed” in the sense that such works have been bounded, roped off as it were, by an institutional and majority approval as an artwork, and “unframed” in the sense that such works have not been designated as art by a majority or institution relegated for the arts. We concluded the class with an acknowledgment that the art world is itself unsure of what art is and that art thus could not be a rigid category but is flexible, shifting, and dynamic according the needs and circumstances of the people who make, perform, and interpret it.

I mention this class session because at the heart of the conversation about ekphrasis and the ekphrastic canon lie questions about the limits of art and representation. It is no coincidence that in order to explain the form taken by Western medieval ekphrases I have had to reach into the aesthetic distinctions and tendencies of the era, the limits of their understanding of the art composition. For all the slippage and leeway of the term *ekphrasis*, a few broad essentials remain to distinguish it: it is a representation of a represented composition. I cannot even declare that it is always a verbal representation of a composition, nor can I say with finality that it is always a representation of a visual composition. That ekphrasis has been overwhelmingly attributed to the translation of the visual into the verbal is not necessarily a reflection of its essential machinery but is rather an imprint of Western culture’s affinity with and valuation of the visual as the preeminent medium of art and representation. But many scholars and critics now talk of musical, pictorial, and cinematic ekphrasis (or even *reverse ekphrasis*), essentially a translation of a composition from one medium into another. The term is used to describe the translation not just of visual into verbal but also the verbal into visual, the visual into acoustic, acoustic into verbal, sensory into visual, and any combination thereof. There are

also the descriptions of cuisine, which can feature an apprehended composition of media involving all of the senses. Ekphrasis is a name (among many, including “reinscription,” “palimpsestic,” terms in use by current theorists of women’s experimental poetics) for the translative patterning of composition. Yet, for all the confusion, it is a term that should not be lost; its original meaning, “to speak out,” covers much territory and does not let theorists rest on a final naming of this process of perceiving, remembering, interpreting, composing.

The idea of the text as it has developed in postmodernity has irrevocably changed our awareness of ekphrasis. Now the text is much more than page: our culture is moving from the culture of the book (which has been its textual medium since the early Middle Ages, for despite the high rate of illiteracy, people then thought of narrative in terms of the book) to a culture of the text, which extends beyond the page to the stage, film, any bounded, modulated action. It is thus possible once again to recognize that the compulsion to translate composition into new composition is not necessarily limited to the material but includes within its circle action, dream, memory, and other kinds of image: whatever is crafted, modulated, and placed as a composition. As such, ekphrasis is thoroughly theatrical.

I am already cautioned before I set out to convey the theatricality of this mode. Mieke Bal in her extensive study on interarts theory and relationship, *Reading Rembrandt*, dismisses the theatrical as a site for moving beyond the word/image binary:

The concept of theatricality, presented in the previous section as an exemplary meeting place for verbality and visuality, as the token of visual poetics, has hit its limits before we know it [...] The limits of visual poetics are bound up with its

implicit relation to word and image, its historical exclusivity, and its methodological isolation [...] The concept of theatricality is fit for visual poetics precisely because it unites word and image into one, composite sign. A theatrical unit, be it diction, gesture, or movement, can only artificially be confined to either verballity or visuality. So students of the theater accept this unity implicitly and, thus, find the word-image opposition meaningless. To some extent this implicit unity allows the colonization of the image by the word to pass unnoticed. (57)

Bal's implication is that theatricality cannot be a site for undoing the verbal/visual dialogue but that it instead contributes to the on-going imbalance of the dialectic, its favor given to the verbal eliding or, in fact, taking over the domain of the visual. The concept of theatricality she criticizes, however, is one applied to visual painting by art theorists Alpers and Fried, who both confer it upon instances in painting that meet the criteria of "movement and performance" (Svetlana Alpers's criteria) and "interaction, unity, and the relation to the beholder" (Michael Fried's criteria) (56-7). Bal claims that the concept of theatricality in painting came in "only after [...] verbal pre-texts had been given relevance" (57). But I would argue that the theatrical is not merely the result of an appellation given to image *after* narrative has been applied to it—a concept that unfortunately embraces a singular and linear construct of perceptive time—but is instead a performance of naming in which image and word interact to form each other and, at the moment of their forming, begin to abrade the boundaries they have drawn.

Ekphrasis is theatrical in the sense of its reception in history, how its meaning has unraveled on the stage of criticism in the context of historical cultural values given to word and image. But ekphrasis is also theatrical in that it performs the very conditions of

its being ekphrastic, in its self-reflexivity, in its honest presentation that it also, whatever other themes and motifs it relates, is always about the representation of representation. This theatricality, the performance that theater makes explicit for us, is a site upon which the understanding of ekphrasis can move beyond the *paragone*. Jacques Derrida's aphoristic, anachronistic essay on aphorism and the untimely, "Aphorism Countertime," merits some consideration on the mechanics of the ekphrastic process. Derrida explains the theater of aphorism (and the aphorism of theater) in the context of *Romeo and Juliet*:

Disjunction, dislocation, separation of places, deployment or spacing of a story because of aphorism—would there be any theater without that? The survival of a theatrical work implies that, theatrically it is saying something about theater itself, about its essential possibility. And that it does so, theatrically then, through the play of uniqueness and repetition, by giving rise every time to the chance of an absolutely singular event as it does to the untranslatable idiom of a proper name, to its fatality (the "enemy" that I "hate"), to the fatality of a date and of a rendezvous. Dates, timetables, property registers, place-names, all the codes that we cast like nets over time and space—in order to reduce or master differences, to arrest them, determine them—these are also *contretemps* traps. Intended to avoid *contretemps*, to be in harmony with our rhythms by bending them to objective measurement, they produce misunderstanding, they accumulate the opportunities for false steps or wrong moves, revealing and simultaneously increasing the anachrony of desires: in the same time. What is this time? There is no place for question in aphorism. (419)

Ekphrasis as theater, as aphorism, as a naming: but it is also a performance of a renaming and thus an un-naming. If it partially seeks to limit and control time through the gaze of its viewer, it must be noted that the voice of its composer does not speak without a personal and cultural past and a choice to recognize images or modules from that past. Ekphrasis is aphorism in Derrida's sense, but it is more than aphorism also, because it is more than a genre. It is a mode. So if it is a naming (noun), it is also a naming (verb), the processes and forces behind that naming, its own ekphrasis of compositional action.

Derrida's deconstructive methodology, which considers non-linear structures of time and spatial anomalies in social constructions of narrative and history that had heretofore appeared to us as straight and smooth, has in fact been a large part of the movement that has opened up ekphrasis to new interpretations, first beginning with W. J. T. Mitchell's and James Heffernan's deconstructive look at the history of the study of ekphrasis and the historical relationship between visual and verbal arts and their appraisal of the binary relationship as structured along other binary relationships involving power and gender, then Murray Krieger's theories that inquire into the nature of signification in ekphrasis on the spatiotemporal plane. But Derrida's ideas (along with the thought of Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, Gilles Deleuze, and Felix Guatarri) are more far reaching and have also opened the path to recognizing, as ekphrastic, works that would not have been selected before, especially works of the Middle Ages. And the ekphrases of the Middle Ages have a lot to tell us about the mode that hasn't been fully perceived or considered before.

But more than theory has spurred me to consider medieval dream visions and mystical vision texts as ekphrastic; the works of many contemporary poets have featured

elements bearing similarity to either the mechanics or the forms of medieval ekphrasis. Such poems tend toward “the painterly” as some critics have termed it; some are deeply concerned with language’s relationship to memory and its subsequent construction of reality. There are many poets now for whom non-linearity and polytemporality are explicit projects and who passionately, inquisitively delve into what it means to make a representation of another work of art or composition. Many of these poets question the lines of demarcation built around the concept of art. In this final chapter, I look at a few of these contemporary works and bring them under the light that medieval ekphrasis has brought with it. Contemporary poetics and medieval ekphrastic vision texts: I intend to make them friends.

What follows is a brief discussion of the ekphrases of three contemporary poets I have mentioned earlier: Barbara Guest, Ciaran Carson, and Kathleen Fraser. Iconicity and composition, the plurality of time, and diffuse subjectivity are distinct characteristics of their ekphrastic poetics and make their work companions to ways in which medieval works engage the activity of ekphrasis. Although numerous contemporary poets employ modalities similar to medieval ekphrasis, the works of these three poets are especially relevant examples in their intellectualism, their engagement with multiple art forms and media, and their relative neglect by both mainstream critics and subversive circles. Guest’s work is perhaps the most neglected, though feminist poets are working to place her in the vanguard of both feminist poetics and feminist aesthetics. Carson, though considered gnomically dense and eclectic, is perhaps the least affected. Fraser does not wait for inclusion but speaks out through creations and circles that she has helped create.

Barbara Guest: *“Wild Gardens Overlooked by Night Lights”* and
Quill, Solitary APPARITION

Sara Lundquist writes about Guest’s work: “In Guest's work we encounter an embarrassment of riches in the ekphrastic genre. Her work charts an entire lifetime of engagement with painting and sculpture, resulting in some of our century’s most complex and beautiful ekphrastic poems, poems that help define what viewing art means in our time” (265). Lundquist’s essay treats poems by Guest that can be considered ekphrastic in the straightforward, traditional sense: poems about painting. She furthermore demonstrates that though Guest’s work has been considered cold, elitist, and not feminist enough—aesthetic rather than political—it actually uses the aesthetic to reinvent and revision how women are represented in art. She discusses Guest’s poems “The Poetess” and “The Farewell Staircase,” revealing that they reinsert into history what has been left out to the detriment of representation by and of women, citing Mitchell’s and Heffernan’s definitions of ekphrasis and employing their strategies of aligning the visual and verbal camps alongside masculine and feminine binaries. This is important work, as Guest has been too long neglected for not being “gritty,” “confessional,” or “personal” enough, as if these were the only strategies capable of subverting the patriarchal valuation and patterns of poetry. Lundquist asserts that Guest’s finely aesthetic work is in fact essentially political in its desire to reposition historical accounts and the placement of women. My work with Guest will not treat the politicohistorical qualities of her ekphrases explicitly, though I believe this is a necessary project and Lundquist’s assessment affirms the special work Guest has done as a woman writer *for* women artists. I am interested here in Guest’s conceptions of art and how her poetry aligns with the ekphrastic mechanics of the mystical vision, especially in its apophysis/cataphysis and its

polytemporalities; these conceptions are not separate from the politics of women's writing, but I do not have the space to discuss that relationship here.

Yet I reference Lundquist because her insights open an arena in which to examine the ekphrasis of Guest's work and also because they recognize the sociohistorical and referential depth to which her compositions extend. I begin with a reading of Guest's "Wild Gardens Overlooked by Night Lights," one of her more frequently anthologized poems and a good introduction to her referentiality and finely tuned aesthetic perception.

"Wild Gardens Overlooked by Night Lights" has within its early lines a traditional ekphrasis, a description of a landscape painting "with its water of blue color, its gentle expression of rose," pointing toward the poet's interest in visuality and artifice. But even before this more traditional ekphrasis, as early as the first three lines, comes the representation of composition in perception: "Wild gardens overlooked by night lights. Parking/lot trucks overlooked by night lights. Buildings/with their escapes overlooked by night lights" (1-3). The precision of placement of each item and the precision of line break that separates the distinct moments of perception and subsequent compositional placement in the conscious memory move the poem to an entirely different level of ekphrasis, where the real work of the poem begins. It is this framing—each object *there*, visible because of the overlooking light—that causes the speaker to question "that self who exists/who witnesses light and fears its expunging" (5-6). Thereafter the insertion and replacement of image become more overt. The speaker takes from a wall a material ekphrastic object, a landscape

with its water

of blue color, its gentle expression of rose,

pink, the sunset reaches outward in strokes as the west wind
rises, the sun sinks and color flees into the delicate
skies it inherited,

I place there a scene from “The Tale of the Genji.” (7-12)

We do not know if this motion is a literal replacing, if the scene is indeed a physical inking of the story. But that doesn’t matter, because the scene is already formed in the mind and thus possesses the flexibility and dynamism to meet the perception and memory, work with them to “describ[e] the feeling” (20). Guest lays out the action of ekphrasis clearly:

Thus the grip of realism has found
A picture chosen to cover the space
occupied by another picture
establishing a flexibility so we are not immobile
like a car that spends its night
outside a window, but mobile like a spirit. (25-30)

At the literal level, the speaker is simply changing the artwork on the wall, redecorating, so to speak. At the level of writing, of what is written, however, the succession of images play off each other, the pastel lights of sunset providing contrast to the more disconcerting “line of green” and the severe black shapes of the father’s and son’s hair. The black of this hair leads by association to the physical blackness of writing on the white page: “black is a headdress while the lines slant swiftly,/the space is slanted vertically with its graduating/need for movement” (22-24). Yet the speaker is careful to relay that this writing, this “exchange,” is a conscious choice. It is a responsibility, as she

later claims: “upon me has been bestowed the decision of changing an abstract picture of light into a ghost-like story” (34-35).

The precision with which Guest displays the rupturing between light and dark, between “fiction” and “surface” is startling, perhaps because the idea inscribed here is that this rupture itself, the in-between, is so precise that it is invisible, the space that cannot be articulated. It is a moment—I would argue a mystical moment—of apophasis. Judith Butler’s Foreword to Bracha Ettinger’s *The Matrixial Borderspace* acknowledges the apophatic is that moment before representation, describing how out of a despair of communicating anything at all comes the fullness of representation, the urge and compulsion to speak rather than not to speak:

Our gaze pushes [Eurydice] back to death, since we are prohibited from looking, and we know that by looking we will lose her.... We were not supposed to look back to what may not be seen, but we did; we broke a certain law, a law that would have mandated that we look only and always forward to unambiguous life. We turned around, needing to know, but it was this need, to know, to know with certainty, that undid us, for we could not capture her that way. And when we sought to have her through knowing her, we lost her, since she cannot be had that way. But nevertheless it is this instant that is preserved, an instant in which foreclosure is abrogated, in which an image emerges from a past that was said to be unrepresentable, where a certain representation nevertheless emerges against the stricture that is imposed on representation, a certain icon of loss appears over and against the prohibition on iconography. This appearance does not refute the loss or, indeed, ameliorate it. It is given a strange sort of presence, but this

presence does not deny the loss; it gives it its present life, it shows how it continues to contour life in the present. (viii)⁵¹

Guest's poem is the attempt to render vision into words; it is memory of a moment that she has chosen to embody with language. There is the sense of a terrible loss: "Black describes the feeling,/is recognized as remorse, sadness" (20-21). Like Eurydice, the Genji come to take that space in the composition, participating in the moment of impossibility where art, life, and meaning have ceased to depend on history and logic and come together in composition.

The illumination of vision "exacts its shades," chooses its darkneses and its ghosts—invisible things—and posits them in the light of experience. The last stanza of the poem reads:

The Genji when they arose
strolled outside reality
their screen dismantled,
upon that modern wondering space
flash lights from the wild gardens. (49-53)

Fiction and surface have come to such a point in the poem that reality is strained and snaps. The Genji themselves move beyond it, past the concepts of the modern's stylized, unanswerable questioning, "that modern wondering space." There they stroll, both freed *from* the disingenuous screen and artless and freed *by* the screen and art, flashing brief glimpses from the wildness beyond the human delineating grid of knowledge. The poem not only indulges in ekphrasis: it is about ekphrasis, about the process of transfer, about

the folding of time, and makes new spaces for the complexity of human emotion and composition as it draws from both image and story together.

“Wild Gardens” serves as a more accessible introduction to the kind of ekphrastic work Guest accomplishes. Her *Quill, Solitary APPARITION (QSA)* enters more fully and more enigmatically into the ekphrastic arena, its purposes drawing from affinities to and distances from the Middle Ages, and its explorations moving beyond the aesthetic ideologies of modernist and postmodernist poetics. Whereas John Ashbery’s popularly anthologized and recognized postmodern poem “Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror” highlights, with its criticism of Parmigianino’s representation and the reception of that representation, the competition between visual and verbal (it is celebrated by literary critics and theorists of ekphrasis), Guest’s work pointedly does not make a fetish of that competition in her work. *QSA* tends instead to work with suggestion, with the visual play of blankness and sign, the togetherness of image and word to reinscribe the potential of a past whose valuations of art and spirituality have been discarded for five centuries. Andrea Brady notes the gaze back to the medieval (and sometimes medievalism) that pulls Guest:

The poems in *Quill, Solitary APPARITION* seek the “new freedom” of the past through references to the medieval as a field of ethical and aesthetic associations on which beauty, both potential and lost, can be reinscribed. “I believe I may be looking for a time and place that is medieval,” Guest remarked in a 1992 interview with Mark Hillringhouse. Medieval references run through many of her later books. Paradoxically, these references reflect her poetry’s modernism, its experimentation with form and tense. But the two epochs are not just uneasy

cohabitants in her texts: at times, medievalism seems the powerless feminized victim of chauvinist modernism. In “Leaving MODERNITY,” “Medievality” is compared to “the encircled doe” of courtly love poetry, which is hunted down by modernization. The poem asks, plaintively, “What Has the World Done?” The capitalization of that question makes it an accusation against modernity in all its crimes and crises. (120)

“Leaving MODERNITY,” the fifth poem in the collection, is particularly relevant to the discussion of ekphrasis, as Guest’s work delves into the kind of ekphrastic work done in the Middle Ages. There is much tension between the idealization of the medieval and the forms that the medieval work of art produces, and Brady acknowledges this tension in Guest’s work, citing the “encircled doe” as Guest’s depiction of the problem of modernism’s idea of the medieval. I agree with Brady’s interpretation of the capitalization of “What Has the World Done?” as an accusation, but in Guest’s work, such emphasis becomes more than mere accusation: it is compositional placement, and here it becomes the title to action, a theater piece, a newsreel, a film. What the world has done takes place on the stage of history, itself a composition, and to Guest what has been left out is as important as those figures that have been chosen to stay in. In her book *Forces of the Imagination* she declares,

In the not too far off future the curtain will be drawn on Modernism as it enters history. Already the shades are listing as Modernism begins to cross the border, exulting in the new freedom called the past. The forms of poetry, too, are restlessly releasing themselves. Having feasted on Modernism they are readying

for a new patrol into less inhibited—and what is glimpsed as a more fractured—territory. (11)

In my analysis of *Piers Plowman*, I noted that Michael Klein interprets the difficult structure of that poem as “fractured.” And though I disagree with his interpretation and nomenclature, I find it interesting that Guest herself uses the same term. But she uses it with the specific caveat “what is glimpsed *as*,” perceiving that the contemporary mind leaving modernism and beginning to recognize structures of the medieval might at first see them as fractured, a terminology that makes more sense to the modern reader for whom composition beyond the strictures of unity, fractured narrative, fractured space and time have entered the literary landscape. Guest here hints that she understands the composition of the medieval as more than fractured-as-the-opposite-of-unified, and in “Leaving MODERNITY” attempts to work out this conundrum.

The object of her ekphrasis in the poem is the composition of medievalism and modernism in history. Concerns with time, with past artistries, with voices of artists from the past, and with the idea of the past as a garment thrown over it work throughout the poems in this volume. Brady clarifies:

QSA's argument for the agonistic co-presence of medievality and modernity also undermines the logic of personal, narrative, and historical progression. As Welish suggests, the medieval is not a time to which Guest's poetry longs to return; it is a constituent in the poems' collage, a way of undermining the certainty of chronology. (121)⁵²

Guest's poetics work along the plane(s) of polytemporality. A particularly striking passage from “Leaving MODERNITY” repositions the look back to the past as “*a*

disorder between space and form” that “interrupts Modernity/with an aptitude unties/the dissolving string.” The tension between the idea of the past as problem and the presence of the past as reality works through these lines as a “disorder between space and form,” a disorder wherein “the encircled doe” has come down to us in a form misinformed, the space of that past circumscribed in ways that limit its potentiality to speak to us. Yet that form becomes the very condition for the “plener tyme”—the fullness of time, so to speak—for the “aptitude unties/the dissolving string,” an apt ekphrastic image of a string that is untied but that is already dissolving.

The poem plays with the presence of the past, which is both ghostly and materialized in her poetry. Here, in “Leaving MODERNITY,” her insistence of the placement of the medieval within this composition as not an apparition (“**Not Apparition**” in bold-print words at the bottom of a page) seems a resting point in the tension, a decision to take a side and acknowledge that neither the presence of the past nor the present idea of the past is an apparition: they both have very real effects. One of the poem’s more concrete passages, immediately before the assertion “**Not Apparition**,” concerns the supporting motion of the buttress, “that perpendicular restive procedure of stone.” The buttress of cathedrals is one of the more familiar distinctly “medieval” components of architecture to modernity. The passage thus suggests that both the thing itself and modernity’s idea of the thing are real; neither is apparition. That the poem continues on to the words “larger and further away./*the dark rhyming./What Has the World Done?*” affirms the sense of a grand stage upon which the relationship between the modern and medieval has been acted out. There is here, again, as there was in “Wild Gardens” a sense of loss, and again, Guest looks to give name to that loss by invoking both the covering over of history

and the slice of history covered over. She is not unaware of the dangers of this naming; that has been the tension she has spoken to all along, between the *idea* of the medieval and its presence. This tension is represented in the string untied in the conscious dissolving of modernity and the string dissolving of its own through the lasting presence of the medieval as it materializes in literary works and historical (re)discovery, a lasting presence that reveals the medieval past has never truly left us.

Traces of history stay with us, even when they are covered over. This is one of the themes with which Guest has worked for a long time: the “flashes of identity” she cites from Jules Laforgue in her talk “Radical Poetics and Conservative Poetry” that do not belong to the linear progression of time but exist between subjects and objects. Such an order is uncontrolled, a force eminently procreative for her. Not that she ever tries to capture those flashes, but instead in her poems she arranges elements and composes spatially their relationships so as to catalyze those flashes (*Forces* 16-17). It is a subtle work of ekphrasis, composing at the same time the neglect of history and its fruition through that neglect. Apophasis and polytemporality, both components of ekphrasis, are part of the gift Guest’s work gives to contemporary poetics.

Ciaran Carson: First Language

Ciaran Carson, a poet from Belfast particularly adroit with word-play and musicality, resurrects the ekphrastic dream vision in his book of poems, *First Language*. Much like the dream vision, *First Language* concerns itself with the tension between illusion and reality created by the sedimentation of language. Carson builds with language and makes the reader aware that language is a kind of house, both fragile and sheltering, a space from which human beings can stand back and observe and at the same time a space in

which they can inhabit. Language to Carson, while it houses us, is also a stage upon which relationships, histories, politicals, identities/roles are played. He acutely observes the theater of this word-building action in the poem “Bagpipe Music,” connecting the experience of the poem with the fourth wall of drama: “The walls are sentences. We see the three walls and the fourth is glassy us” (51). Carson’s idea of language as a theater, a structure in and through which things are named, renamed, and unnamed, through which compositions are revised corresponding to historical moment, is akin to Derrida’s concept of the theatricality of aphorism. Again and again, the reader will see words named and naming but continually shifting in response to context. This theater is a home constantly in the process of being built whose inhabitants are constantly in the process of growing and becoming.

Because of the book’s cyclical nature, the spiraled building of words and rhythms upon repeated words and rhythms, a comparison with Dante’s *Commedia* is relevant to the reading of *First Language*. Both works entail a journey through repeated crimes executed in the name of religion and politics, as well as through the misuse of language. Both end certain poems with references to the primordial motions of or reach toward the stars, and both attest to the responsibility of humans to attempt to understand what is not readily rendered into words—where language fails us. And both are dream visions. Carson’s “Second Language,” the first poem in English of the volume, ends with the lines: “I woke up blabbering and dumb with too much sleep. I rubbed my eyes and ears/I closed my eyes again and flittingly, forgetfully, I glimpsed the noise of years” (13). The book ends with these lines in “The Ballad of HMS Belfast”: “I lay bound in iron chains, alone, my *aisling* gone, my sentence passed./Grey Belfast dawn illuminated me,

on board the prison ship *Belfast*" (74). "*Aisling*" in Irish means "dream," generally, though it specifically references the Irish "vision poem" genre, in which the dreamer encounters a being from a supernatural realm. From its beginning with an entrance into dream, through its dream of languaging, to its end in a subsequent awakening, the book is dream vision. The reader's experience of *First Language* is thus much like that of reading the *Commedia*, in which one experiences a circuitous journey with Dante, travelling with him, meeting again and again objects, words, ideas that are the same, but changed, layered and deepened and revealed for what they are by the sudden epiphanies prompted by certain contexts. By virtue of a self-reflexive concern with language, a foregrounding of the very medium employed to relate the myths, moments, and perceptions of the book, the transparency and ease of narrative are gone. *First Language* is not temporally linear and demands an allusive, spiral wandering from the reader, as in the dream vision.

The experience of reading the book often calls forth *déjà vu* as distinct words, phrases, and colors repeat themselves throughout. Carson weaves a strange pattern with these "broken tokens" ("Second Language" 13), motifs that change according to their brief and ephemeral contexts. The motifs appear again and again, such as a reaching towards the stars (as a number of poems end) or the "braggadocio" of persons or words or the multiple presentations of the mnemonic, but the effect is finally one of defamiliarization rather than comfortable recognition. As with Dante's *Commedia*, the reader becomes confused upon encountering yet another imprint of a phrase or term. She thinks, "I've come across this before. Where? What do the same words mean now?" The temptation of course is to flip back and scan through pages to prove that one is right, to feed and cement the memory. But the memory cannot match the context, and even if

the phrase or pattern seems the same, some minute or drastic change has occurred in the progression of time and text. Carson boldly comments on these changes in the chain, consciously spells out this “repetition with a difference” in the poem “58,” as he introduces the reader to the “Heinz variety” of the linguistic commodification of things. In a long chain of signifiers, that very commodification becomes a “rehearsal,” a performance to put on, in which the materials—“the condoms, clocks, fertilizer”—are only props for a predetermined end, an applause, an explosion. His sarcastic commentary, after the parade of objects seen before in the composition of homemade bombs, *seems* to offer a lukewarm response that lapses into an indifferent acceptance: “Which proves there’s nothing new *sub specie aeternitatis*, or it’s part of the general, Heraclitean flux” (“58” 54). Read carefully, however, the seemingly off-handed remark invokes a conscious acknowledgment that things encountered are never the same, that even the composites of the bomb retain a particularity to the situation, much as his mind-boggling repetitions throughout the text repeat in patterns but transform themselves according to the surrounding context.

At this point, I need to interject that the pattern Carson follows, however modernized, is much like that of *Pearl*: the building of text that reflects the structure of the city, the structure of the dream, and the poem. Carson, in the tradition of the Pearl Poet, makes of his poem the ekphrastic body, a body vibrating with its entire being the representation of composition, the acknowledgment that human experience represented in art is always already composition. Carson undertakes the repetition of that representation to emphasize its plurality, its constructedness in relation to context. Kathleen McCracken clarifies Carson’s sensitivity to the perpetual and unavoidable return of experience: “The same

imaginative surrender to place, to memory, to the possibilities of language fires Carson's writing, so that it not only elicits but enacts Heraclitus's dictum that nothing comes round twice, is ever the same as it was before" (358). Carson plunges the reader into the metaphysical river in which one never dips a foot into the same river twice or, in fact, "the same river once" ("Farset," *Belfast* 49).

The most startling and profound instance of repetition in experience occurs within the poem "Second Nature."⁵³ A revisioning of Seán Ó Riordáin's *Malairt*, it portrays a highly intimate moment, an instance of exchange and transformation among three (or four) beings: a horse, a man named Turnbull, and the speaker (and the reader). Rendered in four delicately balanced stanzas, the poem relates the wordless communion between the poor beast and Turnbull and the languaged description of the speaker's vision, which translates the experience to the reader. The word "cumbersome" used to describe the hooves of the horse in the second line of the first stanza catches the reader's eye: bodies are cumbersome, unwieldy. Their limits impose a clumsiness and regret as well as a sensual empathy in their owners, for others with the same limitations. Turnbull's description of the horse's hooves might seem one-sided and even humanistic (how can he really know what the horse feels?), but the speaker's pronouncement that he had "dwelt so long" on the sorrow "that he was plunged in the horse's mind" allows the reader to enter into the space of dwelling, a meditative space as well as a home—essentially a space that demands building and becoming. Whether Turnbull is *right* or the speaker is *right*, the careful, slow and, finally, sudden realization that the eyes of Turnbull and the horse have become the others' speaks to the depth of *care*—that anyone would spend the time to try to feel what another feels (especially a non-human creature). The structure of

the poem is reminiscent of a riddle; its brevity, bareness, and unqualified emphasis on looking back and forth from one subject to another elicits the desire to figure out the between, how the translation of experience from one being to another has happened. But that translation is as impossible as Turnbull's eyes becoming the horse's and vice versa. The experience itself is "dumb," as Turnbull's transmogrified eyes are "dumb" and "too-big" with sorrow; again the apophatic moment, that which is "dumb" and cannot be related, is turned into composition, an ekphrastic representation of the phenomenal experience. At the same time, the reader cannot locate or pinpoint the how or when the transformation happens. This happening is "too-big," the intimacy too vast to explain, and language, as Carson relates it, is not fixed to any one point in time. The experience, human and beyond human—inhuman—is related only through a pattern, a composition put into place ekphrastically. Turnbull's "Come over here," at the beginning of the poem serves to emphasize in the end that "here" *in words* is not static but a continuum of a process forever dynamic, in upheaval, vacillating.

The reader finds in the process of reading Carson's book a strange and changing refrain, a conversation and correspondence with descriptions throughout the text. For a correspondence is not only a response to the utterance of another; it is also a felt likening to another experience, past, present, or future. In "Correspondences," the echoes are the signified "vowels," effervescent, barely discerned "perfumes," and unknowable "stars" encountered, and they are "Self-confounding"; as much as these echoes delineate the self as a ground of experience, they also modify the self into new limits, understandings in the voyage, and "harbours" of experience (39). "What comes next is next," as Carson's speaker vocalizes in "Second Language" (13), and if the phrase is playful or sardonic, it

nevertheless reckons on the tenuous paradox Carson deploys throughout the book. The “next” as refrain frames the subject, lends a certainty to boundaries drawn by past experience. It touches again and marks a territory of acknowledged, possible experience. Deleuze and Guattari, in their book *A Thousand Plateaus*, meditate on the function of the refrain:

The role of the refrain has often been emphasized: it is territorial, a territorial assemblage. Bird songs: the bird sings to mark its territory. The Greek modes and Hindu rhythms are themselves territorial, provincial, regional. The refrain may assume other functions, amorous, professional or social, liturgical or cosmic: it always carries earth with it; it has a land (sometimes a spiritual land) as its concomitant; it has an essential relation to a Natal, a Native. . . . Forces of chaos, terrestrial forces, cosmic forces: all of these confront each other and converge in the territorial refrain. (312)

While Carson’s extrapolated repetitions do not necessarily take the form of the refrain proper, their similarities build upon one another and create a sense of territory in process, a continual deposit much like in the construction of the walls of a shell. The semblances amount to micro-refrains, the “gritty, knitty, tickly” nubs in the “cloth of unspent/Time” (“Second Language” 12-3). But even as Carson weaves, he is unraveling, for this cloth is also the “unspun cerement” of Easter, the death shroud that refuses to be woven, refuses stasis (“Second Language” 12). Because the shroud is named, it exists; but here it is the entity that is constantly unmaking itself, fraying its boundaries. A good example of Carson’s brand of refrain lies in the reappearance of orange colors or globular forms in the second stanza of a number of poems:

[Persephone'd] wandered into Pluto's murky realm; plucked the dull-orange
bubble.

Split the cortex. Sucked. ("Ovid: *Metamorphoses*, V 529-550" 21)

orange oilskins ("On Not Remembering" 27)

the opened brain of Edward Carson colored "orange and bruised purple"

("The Brain of Edward Carson" 30)

Like the orange-sized plastic tomato that glows on the Formica counter of the all-
night caff

Your actual's slantindicular as the letter zed, and a long shot from being all kiff.
("58" 54)

Today's lesson was the concept "Orange". They parsed it into segments: some
were kith

And some were kin. They spat out the pips and learned to peel the pith. ("*Opus
Operandi*" 60)

From the first quotation, in which Persephone eats the pomegranate seeds, to the last quotation, from "*Opus Operandi*," the images relay a voluptuous carnality. They are not mimetic, and their similitude is faint. Instead of relating the same experience repeatedly, this orange (a color, a fruit, a concept, an attribute) expands its skin and demonstrates language's elasticity and metonymic ability. Rather than working from the one-to-one correspondence of metaphor, Carson clearly multiplies exponentially the references and allusions language draws along with it. It is no coincidence, then, that in the rewriting of

Ovid's Persephone myth he references a myriad of myths with the phrase "strange fruit." As Karen Bennett comments, "The use of 'strange fruit' alongside 'Powers That Be' is a direct reference to a poem by Seamus Heaney, which in turn recalls the Christian story of the Tree of Knowledge and, in addition, echoes the title of a famous Billie Holiday song about the lynching of an innocent black man during the days of the Ku Klux Klan in America" (23). These allusions layered into a single signification become a key to a whole historical network of thought. Alex Houen, commenting on the various confettis of *Belfast Confetti*, names Carson's technique the *diaphor*: "The diaphor is not simply a series of metaphors....it is a figure that is torn in a number of directions at once such that it is affected by the contingencies of a wider cultural topography. In this way, it presents a mutable mapping of language and tropes" (274).

Carson's commentary on this polytemporality of language also extends to the particular, especially in his poems about bombs. The way everyday horrors are thought and written about is often detached from a geographical reality, though this information parades itself to the public as decisively located. Much like Yeats's concern with the dangers of a mythology of violence attaching itself to a fixed point in place and time,⁵⁴ Carson's description of bombs tends toward disclosing how humans allocate through language a justification of present traumas by conflating the everyday with the mythic. In the headlines, an explosion, the death of a child, the destruction of property become "tragedies" of a Shakespearean or Homeric order, and these tragedies, thus spelled out, become guiding mythologies. Carson doesn't necessarily negate the historical experience of this conflation; he does, nevertheless, show the reader how it happens in language by hyper-mythologizing and simultaneously refusing to tether myth to place. In "*Apparat*,"

both bomb and “robot bomb disposal-expert” lie on the “mezzanine,” a platform between floors. Already the action takes place in “the in-between,” neither the here nor there of common experience, and the reader is told that the “expert” moves “as casually as someone to be barbered sits relaxing with a magazine.” The “casual” and ordinary experience of a barbershop is later placed alongside references to sacred religious ceremony and mythology: “realms of Nod,” “Byzantine vestments,” “liturgical analysis,” “Latinates,” and “Nemesis.” The vicinity of the bomb lies within both the commonplace and the eternal sacred, but Carson is careful to keep current placenames out of the mix and refer only to “places” like the “realms of Nod,” a phrase suggesting both that unknown place East of Eden where Cain sought refuge and the dreamworld. Similarly, in “Ark of the Covenant,” a progression of mythologies is employed to describe the covert disposal of the bomb, from “Trojan-horsed” to “woad” to “Egyptian” to the Vulgate of St. Jerome. The bomb, like the one in “*Apparat*,” eludes positive location; it hides in a bog, itself a signification for the indistinct and inchoate, “invisibly, between the Islands of Carnmoon/And Island Carragh South” (55). Not only does Carson transport the reader into that favorite space of his, the in-between; he also begins to wend his way *underneath*. And underneath the underneath, for as the bomb lies beneath the surface, Carson goes a step further to unveil the entrails of the bomb, as well as the politicosocial mechanics of its composition: “the inner workings/ Of a fertilizer bag and someone’s fertile brain—gyres and gimbals, wires and moans” (55). The direct reference to Carrollian fantasy (another ekphrastic dream vision), the “gyres and gimbals” of “The Jabberwocky,” signals that the setting has indeed taken us down the rabbit-hole, where the bomb becomes a “movable star...relegated to a black bag,” where the guideposts and

certainties of language turn themselves inside-out and over again. Carson's ekphrasis shows how language's representations are part of the grand scheme of things, a composition, not unlike Dante's in scope, in which every part of civilization is machined and mirrored by each structure within it, from cities and myths, to bombs and idylls of experience, to finally his ekphrastic dream of language.

Kathleen Fraser: Discrete Categories Forced into Coupling

While I can't align Fraser's work with the formal tradition of the dream vision, I will say that her ekphrases, like Guest's, are not always of material objects. Plenty of her poems are ekphrastic in "traditional" ways, such as "Berthe Morisot," "You can hear her breathing in the photograph," "pressure": all poems that contain descriptions of paintings, sculpture, and/or photographs. And as in Guest's poetry, visual and theatrical arts saturate Fraser's work. *Discrete Categories* is especially rife with photography, painting, and drama as it explores the relationship between human beings and art. But more often than not, her ekphrases are of thought, especially connected to the female gaze as it becomes modulated and marked by perception, memory, and event. Her arrangements of these moments speak to a consciousness that is itself art; the representation of consciousness then becomes a marvelous ekphrasis on the page.

The textbook I use to teach visual analysis to my students begins with the idea that "To look is an act of choice." The introduction continues to parse this idea: "Through looking we negotiate social relationships and meanings. Looking is a practice much like speaking, writing, or signing. Looking involves learning to interpret, and, like other practices, looking involves relationships of power" (*Practices of Looking* 10). Looking is

also necessarily an aesthetic practice, and Fraser's experiment with the aesthetic moment of looking reveals just how framed and bounded that moment is by social custom, relationship, tradition, and habit. Much of her poetry is informed by the desire to create a space for women's looking in a tradition dominated by men. Ekphrasis becomes a powerful vehicle through which to explore a distinctly female subjectivity and to examine how the particular aesthetic act of the female gaze affects the question of art's boundaries--boundaries that have historically neglected the planes and motion of women's perception. Her adoption of H. D.'s poetic theory of the palimpsest and her inclusion of domestic hours within her ekphrasis composition have been important choices in terms of her project to expand the space of poetry and art for women's voices. Eileen Gregory writes of Fraser's project:

...another aspect of Fraser's poetics [is] that art, poetry, represents "traces of decision and little tasks performed." This ethical dimension of choice and acceptance of claims—the claims of others, the claims of the life of writing—is central to Fraser's work and career, tying together the earliest poetry with the latest, uniting the discrete experiments in individual volumes with her teaching and with her public advocacy of women's experimental writing. (27)

My analysis concentrates mainly on Fraser's more recent *Discrete Categories Forced into Coupling*, whose title says much about her project to bring to light both the ways in which women have been forced into writing according to the category of patriarchal models and her ethical agenda to force such categories to "couple": to dissolve their strict delineations and have them work together in order to create something new.

One of the first elements to emerge from this volume of poems is Fraser's depicted sense of subjectivity, a fierce and intimate "I" that nonetheless presents itself as multiple and diffuse, in some ways similar to the narrative "I" of medieval ekphrastic visions. It is an "I" counter to the sovereign "I" of linear, male-dominated narratives. From this (these) vantage point(s), aesthetic composition and ekphrastic structure become elastic, inclusive, synaesthetic, and highly observant of small things and traces. Interestingly, part of Fraser's model is, as Gregory has astutely pointed out, the model of scientific experimentation, with its dictum to observe every detail within the confines of experimental event. Instead of rejecting this model that has been overwhelmingly associated with the subjectivity of the colonial rationalist, Fraser embraces it, thus moving beyond simple binary categorization in the politico-aesthetic struggle between the voices of women and men. She makes manifest through her writing the idea that certain practices of viewing need not be permanently attached to the ideologies that birthed them but can be separated and made useful to new ways of seeing and understanding. Her depictions are often couched in terms of hypothetical questioning, trenchant observation of detail, and discovery, but that language is at the same time met with the language of empathy, emotive landscape, and curiosity without a determined network of preconceived expectation. In "Your back to me inside the black suit," the speaker's words depict this combination of observation and emotive perception:

your back to me inside the black suit, inside your back and shoulders fitted into sleeves marked with chalk at the insets. After this discovery, appearing to be exactly identical in intensity to every other part of the backdrop, a person leaning against it as if you,

assigned one full day in which necessity plays its part. Necessary to have a private pink human in the cosmic field: brown window shades delivering glimpses, propelling through to you. (39)

“Your back to me” initiates an emotive landscape rather than a purely scientific one, lending a feeling of separation and longing to the shape of the poem. The speaker watches as the suit is being made, marked with chalk for exact measurement, suggesting that such measurement will in fact influence the relationship between the watcher and watched. But Fraser’s speaker is also careful to posit her conclusions not definitively but according to her desire and fear as one view. The words “as if” allow for the conversation space, for both the reality of the speaker’s perception and a reality that may be otherwise. Yet there is also the acknowledgment that perception has agency, that being watched through the speaker’s gaze, through the fact of the “cosmic field” and the format shaped by the light through “brown window shades,” will affect the one being watched: motion and energy necessarily “prope[l]” toward the object of the gaze. Linda Kinnahan describes in her “Feminist Experimentalism, Literary History, and Subjectivity: ‘this lyric forever error’ of Kathleen Fraser” the difficulty faced by female poets writing from the subjective “I”:

Fraser’s editorial insistence upon naming the past and present in terms of female productivity becomes a necessary context for registering and revising the “I” or “self” within a theoretically informed writing and reading community skeptical of the self. In many works by women of the 1980s, writing without a sense of a reading community of scholars and poets open to the assertion of a gendered “I” in experimental terms, quite often that “I” is accompanied by a sense of fearing

accusations of self-expression, of emotionalism, and of self-absorption that historically have been figured female in our culture. Putting forth one's name, putting forth the "I" becomes risky within the experimental community if that name and that I are marked female: the feared consequences range from erasure to condemnation. (277)

It is a tremendous risk, for Fraser not only brings forth an "I" that is gendered female, but she also dares to write from an "I" that is not categorically distinct, an "I" not bent on conquest in its field of perception. Her "I" is female, strong, and multiple: a subject that makes necessary the transitory instead of permanent, the fluctuating and becoming instead of the "Am." She thereby creates new ways of approaching text, new ways of reading narratives of subjectivity that are more inclusive of uncertain and dispersed subjective perceptions and compositions.

If the deictical markers of "Your back to me" are taken into consideration, the diffuseness of the subjective "I" and the composition its variant positioning creates come into focus. The switch in verb tense from present perfect ("appearing," "leaning") and simple past ("assigned") to the infinitive ("to have") and back to present perfect again ("delivery"), presents different perspectives here fueled by the time(s) in which they take place (even if only a moment), coming to the point in a composition that takes into consideration much more than a single instant in time. Subjectivity shifts from a single point from which to view relationship begins to include much more than a one-to-one correspondence of agency and reception. Each verb change indicates a different perceptual field. Unexpected shifts in prepositional placement (the second "inside," "After," "through to") and the marked lack of prepositional direction in the second

sentence make the positioning of speaker, agency, and object allow for both esemplastic and varied ways of relating. That these dis-unified semiotic markers of position and action have come together in this framed moment speaks to an acknowledgment that relationships formed between and among people are always performances in process, varied not only in their action but also in the stages upon which their action is performed and upon which it is viewed. This theater of relationship, its props of clothing and window blinds, becomes a strange, difficult-to-name self/composition in an extravagant play of uncertain territory marked by precise visual and sensed directionals. It is a world both named and unnamed, there on a cusp of becoming.

In the poem “pressures,” the moment of becoming has high stakes attached to it. Neglect, silence, uncertainty are a background to a more resilient (be)coming into one’s body through the recognition of a composition that allows both present and past to shape one another meaningfully. The intertwining of experiential time, however, lets that shaping and its future be nebulous and indistinct instead of determined. Like Guest’s “Wild Gardens,” “pressure” begins with a traditional ekphrasis of a painting but then moves beyond the painterly world—the “grainy surface” of the painting of the window and the photograph of a woman and a father—to give credence to the artfully composed moments of the speaker’s sensing in the final stanza. Bodies and thoughts are indistinct, not solid, among the material painting and photograph that seem to stand in for earlier parts of the speaker’s married life: these are places distant, “an unnamed world,” “the middle term,” “something unfinished,” a place “beyond which she might retrieve each vagrant thought,” “blurred,” “lost,” “smudged.” Against this backdrop of image and uncertainty, her body begins to emerge with great detail and clarity: “she begins to pay

attention to her own pulse and to learn the Chinese method of laying two fingers across the inside skin of the wrist at various points, with one's thumb held firmly below to provide support" (51). There is here a coming into one's body through the recognition of composition in the relationship of reality to representation: "and it is then she begins to hear a movement forward or, on some days, not to hear it." Composition of body and of self is not only visual; Fraser has brought into the mix both tactile sensation and hearing in this moment of compositional completion, a moment of wonder that brooks no finality, but importantly admits indistinctiveness and uncertainty to the process of coming to the self. Contrary to traditional narratives of maturing, the mature subjectivity in this case is not a mind come to singular decision or path but a mind that makes places for its contrary perceptions, memories, realities and as well as for other realities it has not yet perceived.

Part of Fraser's project of composition advertently incorporates traces of past compositions, a strategy that both takes what is useful from the past and revises what has been particularly oppressive to the consciousness and work of women artists. Cynthia Hogue notes the consanguinity of this project with H. D.'s conception of the palimpsest:

Fraser's revisionary "female collective consciousness" engenders linguistic traces ("messages") that coincide within the palimpsest, not only creating imaginary intersections where there could be none in history but also reinventing in the present what had been lost (Hogue 1999). Such a reinvention can never be whole or precise, however, and is achieved not through reproduction (the erasure of significant differences) but by having established affinities: a shared "spiritual and erotic set of valuing." (177)

The idea of the palimpsest is connected to the polytemporal action of ekphrasis, a concept I discussed in the chapter on *Piers Plowman*, quoting Jonathan Gil Harris concerning the ability of the palimpsest to “[shatter] the integrity of the ‘new’ by introducing into it a radical alterity that punctures the illusion of its wholeness or finality” (15). But in the case of Fraser’s work, I would say that the opposite also becomes true: that the socially agreed-upon illusion of authority in the old text dissolves in the composition of the new as the new text both reinvents and “establishe[s] affinities” with the old. Fraser’s “Ad notebooks: notebook 7,” for example, juxtaposes the creation of art by a celebrated male modernist painter with the creative labor of the speaker’s mother: “the track of DeKooning’s hand/ the track of my mother’s hand” (66). The traces left behind by de Kooning are put up against those made by a female named only “mother,” but now they cannot be separated in this composition: they are in conversation, searching for affinities and for for difference, marked up, over, and against each other together.

My favorite poem of Fraser’s, “You can hear her breathing in the photograph,” begins not with the ekphrasis of visual art but with the composition of a perception of domestic hours and the relationship of that consciousness to the act of composition. The poem positions memorative/perceptive composition—that which has been lost in the course of aesthetic history—with ekphrases of visual works of art but gives precedence to the memorative composition as a very condition from which conception and recognition of the material art form can happen. I quoted portions of these lines in the introduction to this study; I will quote them again here to emphasize the composition of thought, consciousness as art:

For instance these opening lines—led by grammar and punctuation into the promise of coherence. Now I must turn my back on them. Is it the turning away that marks me? Is everyone else in my “family” looking inward to a center, or are they also turning their gaze sideways? Do they see the gray animal shadow whizzing along the floorboards? Do they hear the parquet geometry of the wooden floor expanding, as if giving-up an hour of footsteps randomly wandering backwards, forwards? (47)

Fraser’s speaker brings to attention the very moment of writing with her nod to “these opening lines”; it is a self-reflexive moment, one that initiates a bond between the representation of the poem, the representation of conscious perception, and the representations of and by the visual artworks to follow. She underscores the artifice, the positioning of what she chooses to notice with geometries and directionals: “turning away,” “inward to a center,” “turning their gaze sideways,” “the parquet geometry,” “wandering backwards, forwards.” This compositional moment is marked by a turning away from indicatives to questions, a turn I find particularly telling of the kind of ekphrastic practice upon which Fraser wishes to embark, one that will move from certainties and capture to a representation of composition that is dynamic and polytemporal, one that revisions and invites revisionings. The thrust of the entire poem, framed by a wandering, wondering space is into conversation with visual representation, with how women have historically been depicted in mythologies, in sculpture, by photography, countered with a living presence of the compositions themselves: “You can hear her breathing in the photograph as it’s unpinned from the wall and put away in a box, exposing the anatomy of imagined capture, even when you’re not looking at it” (48).

The conversation does not discount the beauties of composition, but it also brings to light their horrors, commenting upon the culpability of all representation in its attempt to grasp the reality, imagined or otherwise, of others. Within this conversation, elements not usually given their due in the process of composition are also connected to the history of women's representation, especially elements of memory and of the perception of small things in the gendered experience of daily hours. Indeed, Gregory notes that "Fraser's experimental poetics [emphasizes] that "the New" in art is more than a matter of technical sophistication; rather it is a complex, arduous embodiment, coming into being in the context of memory, pain, and mysterious urgency" (26).

From Carson's echo of the dream-vision form and his employment of fractal poetics, to Fraser's use of memorative composition and palimpsestic polytemporality, to Guest's apophysis, there are many new ways to think about composition and the representation of composition, new ways to think about the conversations between and among our various arts and spaces where the arts cease to be so distinctly categorized. While the work on ekphrasis in the past thirty years, concerning especially the tradition of the *paragone* and the ideological competition between visual and verbal arts, has re-ignited the interest in ekphrasis and begun necessary conversations about gender and representation, it has also left out large pieces of the puzzle. Medieval practices of ekphrasis offer more intricate ways of understanding the mode and practice and can inform current interpretations and poetic practices, discussions about art and interarts theories. I have used experience from and ideas about my teaching as a specific strategy to frame this conclusion largely because I see ekphrasis as one of the great teaching/conversation tools human beings have created in their urge to make art. I do not believe that theories of ekphrasis should

divorce themselves from what it is that ekphrasis actually and powerfully accomplishes, which is a conversation about ways we understand our pasts, present, and futures. As Fraser's ekphrastic poetry, her theories of poetics, and her work to open venues for women's poetry are all connected thematically and ethically, the energy behind them synchronous, so too I hope that the broader arena of critical and creative work concerning ekphrasis can become all-of-a-piece, working in the interest of the on-going, layered, and profound conversation concerning memory, perception, and composition that the practice of ekphrasis itself engenders.

Notes

¹ To add to Smith's fuzzy statement and a general incomplete grasp of what images are and what they do, W. J. T. Mitchell points out:

The picture now has a status somewhere between what Thomas Kuhn called a "paradigm" and an "anomaly," emerging as a central topic of discussion in the human sciences in the way that language did: that is, as a kind of model or figure for other things (including figuration itself), and as an unresolved problem, perhaps even the object of its own science," what Erwin Panofsky called an "iconology." The simplest way to put this is to say that, in what is often characterized as an age of "spectacle" (Guy Debord), "surveillance," (Foucault), and all-pervasive image-making, we still do not know exactly what pictures are, what their relation to language is, how they operate on observers and on the world, how their history is to be understood, and what is to be done with or about them. (13)

The medieval world also argued about images; though the stakes were different and involved religious systems of belief and social structure, their understanding was as confused and complicated as ours is.

² Woman, according to Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theories is the *objet petit a*: the object of desire that can never be attained. Lacan's theories are credited with a unique blending of Saussurian linguistics and Freudian psycholanalysis. "For example," Elizabeth Grosz illustrates, "penis envy can no longer be regarded as the literal envy of a biological organ. In substituting the phallus for the penis, Lacan has provided a socio-cultural analysis in place of an ontological and biological one" (*Subversions* 25). Lacan

shifts the locus in psychoanalysis from the fixed model of biology to the flexible and polysemous metaphor and metonymy, a move that feminists writing from this frame have taken up with aplomb. Such a move creates a method of interpretation that utilizes speech as a map of the movements of the unconscious, “consequences of the subject’s symbolic production”—an inevitable social affair. (*Subversions* 25). Yet, feminist critics speak of certain contentions with Lacan’s work, most notably his psychological developmental theories in which possession of the phallus is equated with being able to participate in the symbolic order, thereby ousting women (who are the phallus, but cannot possess it) beyond the borders of the symbolic order of language. Feminist theorists such as Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray have worked to point out where in linguistic system and representation the masculine has come to dominate, and each has taken steps in her writing and representation to shift to a feminine structure and usage.

³ Christoph Schönborn writes of the iconoclastic controversy:

The arguments of the opponents [of the icon], for instance, ran like this: it is impossible to paint an image of Christ; for this would amount to the attempt of depicting and grasping the divine nature of Christ. To which proponents of icons replied: if the Word has truly become flesh and has dwelled among us (Jn 1:14), then this Word has become a reality that can be depicted and described; then the Eternal Word of God can be represented in an image. (3)

I am interested in how arguments from the proponents developed, especially as they came to explain the image/icon’s simultaneous participation in the physical world and the divine spirit. What becomes emphasized as crucial is the idea that the icon is a receptacle of grace and has transformative power, as scripture does. This is a fine point in

understanding the cathexis in the connection between art and spirituality in the Western Middle Ages. Schönborn explains that John Damascene, as a major proponent of this idea, is more focused on what the image brings about than on similitude:

Here John's understanding of the icon becomes especially clear: the sacred image is endowed with grace; in a certain sense it even has become a vessel of the spirit as was the one it depicts. John focuses more on the grace offered by the icon than on any visual similarity. (196-97)

⁴ There are other types of dream representations in the Middle Ages, including autobiographical accounts by such authors as St. Gregory the Great, Christine de Pisan, and St. Augustine. I chose to narrow my study to the dream-vision genre and the mystical vision-text and exclude the dream accounts of these authors for a few reasons: although the "real" dream accounts follow certain conventions, they are not as "formed" as the literary traditions of the dream-vision and mystical text, both of which become distinctly structured according to a distinct categorical genre of representation and writing. The level of conscious composition in these texts is important to my study of ekphrasis and its attention to compositional revision. A study of medieval personal dream accounts as ekphrastic should be done; I chose the more obvious and easily explained genres to exemplify the various strengths and abilities of ekphrasis in the Middle Ages.

⁵ Medieval dreams found within religious and mystical works, however, claim usually to be representations of real dreams. But Kruger cautions even here that:

Dream theory and practical responses to dreams are not necessarily commensurate. . . . Historical and (auto)biographical accounts may be distorted in

a variety of ways, their form shaped by literary topoi, their content determined by political, didactic, and religious motives. Furthermore, the surviving accounts of “real-life” dreams are undoubtedly atypical: we would expect dreams perceived as especially significant to be preserved with greater care than those judged vain or misleading. (5)

⁶ Most of my explorations in this study as a whole will focus on the dream-vision of fourteenth century England, which by that time, was a developed and recognized form having a clear tradition. Such texts include Chaucer’s *Book of the Duchesse*, *Hous of Fame*, *Parlement of Fowles*, *The Legend of Good Women*, *Pearl*, and *Piers Plowman*. My discussion will include, however, brief references to earlier dream-vision texts, such as the *Consolation of Philosophy*, the *Commedia*, and *Le Roman de la Rose*; and also instances within texts that incorporate shorter dream visions that do not dictate the whole of the text, for instance the bestial dreams of Troilus and Criseyde in the *Troilus*.

⁷ Dream classification is well laid-out by a number of critics including C. S. Lewis, Stephen Krugen, J. Stephen Russell, Kathryn L. Lynch, Constance B. Heat, A. C. Spearing, among others. C. S. Lewis, one of the first to distill the different categories of visions, lays them out in a handy chart in his *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964.

⁸ Krieger chooses to define the self-conscious ekphrasis as *emblem*, thereby emphasizing the mode’s interest in signing itself. He states:

In view of non-dramatic poetry’s mimetic objective and the handicaps of its medium to attain it as directly as its more obviously rival arts, it is no wonder that,

as a language art, poetry developed and pursued an ekphrastic ambition, seeking to emulate those arts whose naturalness makes them appear to be reality's surrogate. That ambition expresses itself, its commitment to *enargeia*, in a variety of ways as we follow it from ancient Greece through the Renaissance. Let me follow that development as a narrative that moves from epigram to ekphrasis to emblem. (14-15).

And:

The poem as emblem, under the ekphrastic principle, seeks to create itself as its own object. And yet no object: for all of its intelligible richness, there is, in this set of arbitrary signs, nothing there. (27)

Krieger compares the emblem to the ouroboros, source of "its own undoing" (27). I take issue with this definition, and choose blatantly not to employ the term *emblem* for the self-conscious ekphrasis, for Krieger's implication is that the ekphrastic mode at this stage of its development works as a *mise en abyme*, continually undermining itself *ad infinitum*. In Part Two of this dissertation, I argue that ekphrasis—especially through the medieval mystical vision—works not like the *mise en abyme*, but more like the repetition of the fractal, what Joan Retallack designates as the action of poethics.

⁹ Loizeaux asserts that:

The set of practices and tropes with which modern poets negotiate the ekphrastic situation derives primarily from the nineteenth century when ekphrasis began to find a significant place in Anglo-American poetry with Shelley, Wordsworth, Byron, Browning and, especially, Keats and Rosetti. It grew from roots deep in the seismic cultural changes of the nineteenth century, particularly the growing

institutionalization and democratization of visual culture represented by the public art museum, and the mass production of images. (19)

Loizeaux illustrates six tropes working within and through the functions of ekphrasis:

- *Eternal stillness*: is “born of the idea introduced by the early nineteenth century’s nascent museum age that works of art might be preserved for posterity” (19). Examples of poems displaying this trope include Yeats’s “Leda and the Swan” and Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” (19-20).
- *Into history*: “The transcendence of the work of art is also modified in modern ekphrasis by a greater sense of the work of art as historical.[...] The work of art makes the past present and immediate” (21). Examples Loizeaux cites include Ashbery’s “Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror,” and Keat’s “Urn” (21).
- *In the museum*: “One of the distinguishing features of twentieth-century ekphrasis is that it is fully born of the museum age” (21). Loizeaux suggests that such poems “displa[y] a high degree of awareness, even anxiety about the place of viewing, and ambivalence about the foundations of public museums” (21). Such works as William Carlos Williams’s *Pictures from Brueghel and Other Poems*, Robert Lowell’s *History*, and Rita Dove’s *Museum* are all examples of this trope working through ekphrastic poetry (22).
- *Narrative*: “Narrative,” Loizeaux asserts, “has been seen as language’s way of distinguishing itself from the image, of doing what the image can’t” (22). The particular narrative of modern ekphrastic poetry has been colored by the experience of viewing the work of art as still and as bounded within institutional

walls. Examples include Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts" and Irving Feldman's "All of Us Here" (22-23).

- *The tutelary function*: There is a long tradition of the didacticism of the arts, from Philostratus to "Auden's finding in the Old Masters lessons in how to think about human indifference to suffering" (23). But the the twentieth-century also finds poets reacting to that strain of didacticism, mistrusting the "truth-telling potential of art" as clouded by "the limits of the artist's vision" (23). Loizeaux cites Yeats, Plath, Rich, Dove, and Moore for espousing the tutelary abilities of the arts; she cites William Carlos Williams, Ferlinghetti, Bishop, and Ashbery for reactions to didacticism (23).
- *Talking pictures*: Ekphrastic poetry of the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries often feature the ekphrastic art object speaking with its own textual voice. Prosopopoeia is not without it problems. Loizeaux notes that:

Prosopopoeia can be [...] understood as the collapse of subject and object, the inhabiting of another body and voice by the poet, equally an objectification and an exercise of empathy. As a closing of the gap between poet and image, prosopopoeia can be seen variously as the most hegemonic of moves (language taking over the image, inhabiting it) or as the most altruistic (language liberating the frozen image to tell its story). Whether and how one can speak for others gets to the center of the ethical questions ekphrasis raises. (24)

¹⁰Krieger's insistence on the "still moment" extends to conjecture about why a material work of art has typically been the mainstay of ekphrastic objects:

The advantages of having a work of art as an object of ekphrasis are, I think, obvious. If an author is seeking to suspend the discourse for an extended, visually appealing descriptive interlude, is he not better off—instead of describing the moving, changing, object in nature—to describe an object that has already interrupted the flow of existence with its spatial completeness that has already been created as a fixed representation? Surely so: if he would impose a brief sense of *being*, borrowed from the plastic arts, in the midst of his shifting world of verbal *becoming*, the already frozen pictorial representation would seem to be a preferred object. His ekphrastic purpose would seem to be better served by its having as an object an artifact that itself not only is in keeping with, but is a direct reflection of that purpose. Further, if one justification for the verbal description is to have it—for all the uncertainties of its words and our reading of them—compete with the visual object it would describe, the comparison would seem to be stabilized on one side by fixing that object so that, as an actual artifact, it can be appealed to as a constant, unlike our varying perceptual experiences of objects in the world. (8).

Krieger's assumption, as it is written here, sounds reasonable, but it is important to take into account that hardly any medieval ekphrases originated from a material object; as such, Krieger has neglected a whole category and history of an ekphrases that did not find the still object to its advantage in its spiritual and knowledge-seeking journeys whatsoever.

¹¹ All translations of the text are mine.

¹² The passage tends to make critics wax poetic. They like to spend time with its visual, sensual, and cultural pleasures, as A. C. Spearing does here (drawing W.B. Yeats in to boot!):

For, finally, *Pearl* is a courtly poem, a finely wrought aesthetic object devised as a fit setting for the pearl of great price that is its subject. It uses courtly as well as mystical vocabulary, and imagines heaven as a magnificent court or an imperial city, the Blessed Virgin as an empress, the pearl maiden and her fellow innocents as queens, divine grace as a matter of elegant manners—grace as graciousness—and the whole other world of the vision as made out of pearl and other precious stones and metals. Entering the visionary world of *Pearl* is like stepping into a late-medieval manuscript illumination, but in a manuscript much grander than the rather shabby one in which the poem survives. It is like being inside a picture in a magnificent book produced for some great lord such as the Duc de Berry, glittering with gold and azure, vastly expensive as well as dazzlingly beautiful, a world in which the trees have indigo trunks and the leaves are burnished silver, and brilliantly colored birds sing in time to the beating of their wings as if they were priceless mechanical toys. (83)

¹³ Sarah Stanbury explains the complexity of medieval imagery invoking and surrounding the city:

In medieval exegesis, where the heavenly city is repeatedly parsed and understood according to an allegorical method, these extremes are held in a tension that negotiates between presence and absence. Hugh of Fouilloy's *De claustro animae*, a forty-three-chapter treatise on the four-fold Jerusalem, devotes five

chapters to the city's history, fourteen to its moral and mystical sense, and twenty-four to its anagogical meaning. According to this commonplace scheme, which is repeated by numerous medieval commentators and frequently forms the text of glosses on the pictures of the heavenly city in late medieval illustrated Apocalypses, Jerusalem is the city *par excellence* that we understand in terms of complexly overlaid systems of residencies: Jerusalem is the city in Judea, the church, the faithful soul, and the heavenly home. This method of reading involves establishing radical contingencies among imagined urban structures: the soul, the literal city of Christian history, and the dreamed city in which we will ultimately reside. The image, always something other than the city itself, also announces its own fragility in the face of this set of analogies. In Hugh of Fouillois's Jerusalem allegory, each sense of the city includes previous paradigms, such that the material city (the one in Judea known, as he says, through its "stones" and "timbers") is subsumed by highly concrete and tactile visions of the utopic city in an expanding set of equivalencies. (31)

I return to discussion of *Pearl's* city/cities later in the chapter.

¹⁴ Bynum's catalogue of academic's definitions and responses to body reveals how laden the term is:

A survey of recent Anglo-American scholarship turns up only a welter of confusing and contradictory usages. In certain areas of philosophy, attention to the body means attention to the role of the senses in epistemology or to the so-called mind/body problem; in others it provides an opportunity to enter into discussion of essence and objectivity. The most ambitious recent sociological

treatment of the body defines it as “environment,” “representation,” and “sensuous potentiality”; it is, however, disease, especially anorexia nervosa that furnishes Bryan Turner with his most frequent and telling example. Discussing recent historical writing, Roy Porter and Susan Bordo each enumerate an amazing range of topics—from biology and demography to artistic depiction—under the rubric of body history. A large number focus in some way on issues of reproduction or sexuality, or of the construction of gender and family roles, especially through medicine. The work of Foucault and the “new historicist” approach of literary critic Stephen Greenblatt often lie behind the way the questions are posed in this sort of history, although New Historicism itself has not until recently been characterized by a focus on gender. In a good deal of recent theological writing, particularly of the popular variety, *the body* raises issues of medical and/or sexual ethics, rather than more conventional questions of eschatology or soteriology. In feminist theory, especially in the linguistic and/or psychoanalytic turn it has taken in the past decade, the body as “discovered or “constructed” has been replaced by bodies as “performative” . . . In much of this writing, *body* refers to speech acts or discourse... (3-4)

Bynum’s survey is taken from an essay written in 1995; not much has changed in terms of a clear understanding of what is meant by *body* in academic discourse.

¹⁵ David Aers’s argument that *Pearl* does not participate in a social critique, and that the text actually runs counter to medieval Christian understanding of a holy life, reads the poem as an attempt to outline the individual mind/psyche:

In fact the poem displays a mental universe that is far removed from Langland's persistent concerns with Christian community and the networks of obligations he seeks to recall in the face of contemporary forces that put them into question. Unlike *Piers Plowman*, this poem (and not just its dreamer) does not pay attention to the way that the individual's encounter with Scripture and Christ takes place within the Church, a Church that is both bestower of sacraments and historical institution belonging to the contemporary social fabric (compare, for example, *Piers Plowman* B 11.115-24). This seems part of a pervasive individualism which contrasts not only with the traditions of Christian Aristotelianism, in which the political and social nature of humankind is seen as basic, but also with Augustine, who remarked:

We give a much more unlimited approval to their idea that the life of the wise man must be social. For how could the city of God (concerning which we are already writing no less than the nineteenth book of this work) either take a beginning or be developed, or attain its proper destiny, if the life of the saints were not a social life? (71)

¹⁶ Neither can the same be said for *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, as Aers intimates. The concerns are hardly individualistic; as both the beginning and ending of the poem—the reference to Greece and Rome as the seat of culture and the seat of the court in Britain—show, the poet's concerns are with interpretation of cultural value within a historical community. That this is done through the adventure of a single hero does not make the poem “individualistic” or about even necessarily about the psychology of the individual.

¹⁷ But not the post-postmodern ekphrastic body. It is especially not the case in the ekphrases and thoughts on ekphrasis in the writings of contemporary feminist poets and thinkers. Rather than re-engaging the paradigm of the *paragone*, writers like Cole Swenson, Kathleen Fraser, Lyn Hejinian, Barbara Fisher, Elizabeth Bergman Loiseaux, Harriet Mullen, Barbara Guest, among many others are more interested in what it means to repeat, reinscribe, collaborate, and perambulate with the visual arts/compositions. Time is not the horizon for them; collaboration includes engaging with artists long dead. Theirs is a fractal understanding, to use the terminology of Joan Retallack and Jane Bennett, of poetics and poetic engagement.

¹⁸ Bennett continues:

Paracelsus, more alchemist than ascetic, embraces the somatic effects of repetition. For him, enchantment is not only a property of the natural world—it is also the joyful human mood that results from a special way of engaging that world. Enchantment as a mood requires a cultivated form of perception, a discerning and meticulous attentiveness to the singular specificity of things. Practicing this discipline of perception, Paracelsus could see how one thing mirrored another and could experience this repetition as itself wondrous:

The inner stars of man are, in their properties, kind, and nature, by their course and position, like his outer stars.... For as regards their nature, it is the same in the ether and in the microcosm, man.... Just as the sun shines through a glass—as though divested of body and substance—so the stars penetrate one another in the body.... For the sun and the moon and all planets, as well as all the stars and the chaos, are in man....

Paracelsus marvels at how the light of the stars repeated in the twinkle of his eyes. In this example, the repetition is visual, but, at other times, Paracelsus describes repetition in sonorous terms: the knowledge possessed by herbs (which enabled them to produce their medicinal effects) echoes in our own bodies once we eavesdrop on the plant's wisdom. (37)

¹⁹ Marvin Alpheus Owings, *The Arts in the Middle English Romances*, New York, Bookman Associates, 1952. Owings's introduction paints a distinctive picture of the typical medieval city; his description, sounding somewhat romanticized at first, upon which he builds and particularizes throughout his book-length study, discloses the extent to which the city is a composition made in response to the land and environment to outside threats and also to the aesthetic signs of craftsmanship, spirituality, wealth, and strength:

The medieval town, when viewed from a distance, gave an impression of a closely encircled forest of spires of varying heights and shapes—all reaching skyward, all pressed together in the protecting embrace of the city wall; when viewed close at hand, this forest proved to be the superstructure of proud palaces, lofty castles, imposing halls, and majestic churches. But such a display of human aspiration and craftsmanship was not created without a comparable display of protective measures; in fact, protection might well have been the watchword of medieval peoples....The site of the towns was determined by the conformation of the terrain or by the direction of the river courses—in short by the conditions of nature. (17-18)

²⁰ Maning's analysis of *Pearl* hinges on an "explor[ation of] how *Pearl's* emphasis on gift-exchange belongs to a performative paradigm, where ritualistic gestures (as in the rite of gift-exchange) make immanent larger units of meaning; where references in verbal art to gift-exchange or other ritualistic activities stand metonymically for the enactment of these processes. (2) Her examination of ritual performance is similar to my use of cultural iconicity—in fact, it plays a great part in the creation and exchange of cultural icon--but it is more limited to the sphere of social transaction.

²¹ Mary Carruthers's voluminous studies on the medieval conception of memory allocate to it a creative and logical intellection not accorded to it by western culture thereafter. Memory is the seat of the mind and of all learning; it is also that which categorizes, arranges, designs, and composes. Carruthers's work is extremely important to studies of medieval ekphrasis; I make lengthy use of Carruthers's work in the second section of the dissertation.

²² Bruno Latour explains the concept of the polytemporal:

Let us suppose, for example, that we are going to regroup the contemporary elements along a spiral rather than a line. We do have a future and a past, but the future takes the form of a circle expanding in all directions, and the past is not surpassed but revisited, repeated, surrounded, protected, recombined, reinterpreted and reshuffled. Elements that appear remote if we follow the spiral may turn out to be quite nearby if we compare loops. Conversely, elements that are quite contemporary, if we judge by the line, become quite remote if we traverse a spoke. Such a temporality does not oblige us to use the labels "archaic" or "advanced," since every cohort of contemporary elements may bring together

elements from all times. In such a framework, our actions are recognized at last as polytemporal.

I may use an electric drill, but I also use a hammer. The former is thirty-five years old, the latter hundreds of thousands. Will you see me as DIY expert “of contrasts” because I mix up gestures from different times? Would I be an ethnographic curiosity? On the contrary: show me an activity that is homogenous from the point of view of the modern time. Some of my genes are 500 million years old, others 3 million, others 100,000 years, and my habits range in age from a few days to several thousand years. As Péguy’s *Clio* said, and as Michel Serres repeats, “we are exchangers and brewers of time” (Serres and Latour, 1992). (75)

²³ Harris explains the subtle difference between polychronic and multitemporal:

“Time” can refer to a moment, period or age—the punctual date of chronology. Hence “the time of Shakespeare” can be demarcated and numerically represented as a finite temporal block (1564-1616, or the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries). But “time” can also refer to an *understanding* of the temporal relations among past, present, and future. In this sense, “the time of Shakespeare” is not a historical period but rather a conception, or several conceptions, of temporality. . . . Serre’s notion of the polychronic draws on the first, chronological meaning of time in asserting that objects collate many different moments, as suggested by Latour’s polytemporal toolbox and genes. By contrast, Serre’s notion of the multitemporal evokes the second meaning of time. In its polychronicity, an object can prompt many different understandings and experiences of temporality—that is, of the relations between now and then, old and new, before and after. (3-4)

Hereafter, I will use the term “polytemporal” to indicate both meanings of time.

²⁴ Emily Steiner recounts the influence of the *Polychronicon* and the significance of Langland’s use of its historiographical methods:

. . . the *Polychronicon* captured the political imagination of fourteenth-century writers, and [. . .] its reception in medieval England attests to the profound historiographical investments—what I call the “radical historiography”—of polemicists, preachers, translators, and poets. Medieval English writers discovered in the universal history an innovative way of theorizing political issues, especially those pertaining to the institutional Church. Civil dominion, clerical disendowment, and lay learning were hot topics in the late fourteenth century, topics that transcended academic Wycliffism. As we shall see, it was the vernacular and literary appropriation of Latin historiography that helped to give such topics discursive heft and complexity. Yet the term “radical historiography” does not imply simply that literary writers borrowed passages from Higden in order to develop opinions disseminated from the schools; rather, it proposes that these writers, in grappling with the idea of *Polychronicon* as a *whole work* or even as a *master genre*, were able to theorize relations between clergy and laity in the particular ways in which they did. In this view, radical historiography leads to radical ecclesiology, but insofar as genre becomes a locus for the political imaginary. Thus the *Polychronicon* does not merely organize or represent a set of ideas. It brings to light a literary project—a project exemplified by Trevisa’s *Dialogue between a Lord and Clerk* and William Langland’s *Piers Plowman*—that runs parallel to, but by no means reproduces, the dissemination of Wycliffite

thought. In short, the medieval reception of the *Polychronicon* suggests a different way of writing intellectual history as literary history: not the transmission of a theme or idea, but as the search for the formal properties of political discourse. (173-74)

²⁵ Harris explains that the idea of the palimpsest need not be taken only literally, but used as metaphor to clarify certain textual realities:

The polychronicity of the palimpsest, like that of matter in general, is obstinately antisequential: superimposing past and present without insisting on any linear relation between them, it compresses different times within one surface. . . . I should stress that I don't see either the palimpsest or matter as simply writing, at least not in any narrow sense of that word. I thus approach the palimpsest somewhat differently from how it has been employed in literary criticism and theory, where it has tended to be regarded simply as a species of textuality. Gerard Genette, for example, uses the palimpsest as a metaphor for an array of paratextual effects whereby past texts are echoed, parodied, and rewritten; new editorial theory has employed it to represent the changed and changing written elements of edited texts... (16-17)

²⁶ Kentridge's work, *Felix in Exile*, is particularly stunning in terms of its polytemporal quality and depiction as it deals directly with traces left not only on paper, but also traces left in the psychology—the innermost suffering—of human beings as they connect materially to the ravaged land of South Africa itself. Langland's project also relates this connection, though not with the same kind of narrative fragmentation that Kentridge's work does. *Piers* self-reflexively (by sheer virtue of its number of dreams and inset

dreams, and deletion of signals of awakening/sleeping in the C-text) employs the frame of the contemporary and popular dream vision genre, thereby connecting the materiality of a literary tradition to the contemporary psychology and disaster, as well as future possible outcome (the apocalypse) and past biblical history. Interestingly enough, however, while both are polemics of current sociopolitical realities, both frame these historical specificities within their respective models of universal time: Langland, with the frame of the entirety of biblical time; and Kentridge with the frame of geological time.

²⁷ Underhill's foundational study of mysticism considers the breadth of awareness, for lack of a better term, that the mystic can achieve, an awareness and union with the Divine including intellection, but not limited by it:

Of those forms of life and truth with which humanity has fed its craving for truth, mysticism alone postulates, and in the persons of its great initiates proves, not only the existence of the Absolute, but also the link: this possibility first of knowing, finally of attaining it. It denies that possible knowledge is to be limited (*a*) to sense impressions, (*b*) to any process of intellection, (*c*) to the unfolding of the content of normal consciousness. Such diagrams of experience, it says, are hopelessly incomplete. The mystics find the basis of their method not in logic but in life: in the existence of the discoverable "real," a spark of true being, within the seeking subject, which can, in that ineffable experience which they call "act of union," fuse itself with and thus apprehend the reality of the sought Object. In theological language, their theory of knowledge is that the spirit of man, itself

essentially divine, is capable of immediate communion with God, the One Reality. (23-24)

²⁸ There are hardly ever apologies for apophysis. Apophysis, however, frequently functions as an apology or as a qualifier for opinion and descriptions of visions.

²⁹ The final sidereal lines of *Paradiso*:

All'alta fantasia qui mancò possa;
Ma già volgeva il mio disiro e il *velle*,
Sì come ruota ch'igualmente è mossa,
L'Amor che muove il sole e l'altre stelle. (*Paradiso*, XXXIII 142-145)

³⁰ According to Sells, the performative intensity of apophysis in a text

. . . is a function of the frequency and seriousness with which the language turns back upon its own propositions. At the low end of the scale would be an assertion of ineffability, followed by a full chapter or treatise that freely employs names and predications of the transcendent, and then at the end reminds the reader that the transcendent is beyond all names and predications. At the high end of the scale of performative intensity are passages, such as those discussed here, in which the mystical discourse turns back relentlessly upon its own propositions and generates distinctive paradoxes that include within themselves a large number of radical transformations, particularly in the area of temporal and spatial relationships. (3)

³¹ Porete, associated with the Beguines, is burnt at the stake for her writings in 1310. Porete announced publically through her writing that the *concept* of virtue is a sham and illusion, a dogmatic expression that actually divides the human from God. The hierarchy

of the Catholic Church is built, affirmed, and maintained by categorical and categorizing notions of virtue that are inherently gendered. Her writing was therefore considered dangerous heresy and offended the politico-religious powers on many levels: that, as a woman, she spoke publically, wrote, and implicitly asserted that as the “annihilated soul” attained ultimate union with God, the teachings of the Church would be shed, and the Church essentially would no longer be needed.

³² Elizabeth Robinson explores the connection that synaesthesia has with languaging:

I grew up to learn that the sensory crossover I had experienced (and still do) has a name: synaesthesia. Synaestheliac terms are, in fact, common in our language (such as a “dark mood,” “a warm smile”). I have heard that the composer Scriabin was also one who experienced synaesthesia; he saw colors vividly in the sounds of his music and imagined that his listeners would also see those same hues. But I do not hear people discuss so commonly that immediate sensation I’ve encountered in language, words-as-concrete objects, words as (almost) food. The pure and true palpability of speech as it infuses an idea has taken on a veritable theological dimension for me. The word made flesh. . . . Word-as-flesh means that the word is not just concrete and tangible, it also has plasticity and vitality. It is and it is more than itself in the same instant. I am, I have to admit embroiled here in the question (the veracity) of immanence and transcendence. (256)

³³ Porete dedicates a whole chapter of her *Mirror* to the metaphor of the imprinted wax, which is not only used for how memory works, but is also popularly employed to relate how God impresses Himself into the the human soul. Porete’s chapter, “How this Soul is

engraved in God like wax from a seal,” does interesting things with the metaphor, in effect making the vehicle and tenor oscillate:

Love: This Soul is engraved in God, and has her true imprint maintained through the union of Love. And in the manner that wax takes the form of the seal, so has this Soul taken the imprint of this true exemplar. (128)

Love’s speech sets up one of the more shocking statements of the *Mirror*, that the Soul “is transformed into God” (128).

³⁴ Carruthers, in *The Craft of Thought*, distinguishes between *Bildeinsatz* and ekphrasis in a move that attempts to place the two as sub-categories under *pictura*, a cognitive faculty connected to the process of composition through *memoria*:

Whereas ekphrasis always purports to be a meditative description of a painting, sculpture, or the façade of a building, the initiating compositional picture can also describe a schematized landscape in the form of a world map, or a figure like Lady Philosophy, or just about any of several *formae mentis* in common monastic use: a ladder, a tree, *rotae*, a rose-diagram. The rhetorical figures called ekphrasis and *Bildeinsatz*, in other words, are types of cognitive, dispositive topos called *pictura*, which is the more general term. The most general terms of all for this cognitive instrument would include words like *ratio* and *schema*. (*Craft* 200)

Yet when she speaks of the architecture of buildings in her section “An Artifact That Speaks Is Also an Orator,” she argues that “the actual buildings also are, in monastic rhetoric, instances of what might be called material ekphrasis” (*Craft* 222). The slippage of the term denotes the confusion underlying the cognitive processes—and what to call them—involved in translating the perception of one art into the expression of another.

Many studies of ekphrasis have noted that there is more at stake than the narrowest definition of ekphrasis (the definition Carruthers acknowledges) will allow. It is important to bring to the table that much recent work done on ekphrasis displaces the term from genre category and repositions it as a process, mode, and/or practice. In the work of such theorists/critics as W. J. T. Mitchell, James Heffernan, and Barbara Fischer, the term becomes not a far relation from what Carruthers describes as the medieval faculty of composition; in fact ekphrasis and *memoria* are inextricably connected to one another.

³⁵ In his article, “Scent, Sound and Synaesthesia: Intersensoriality and Material Culture Theory,” David Howes pushes the point home that experiential and memorative composition are comprised of much more than textual/linguistic elements and patterns:

It will no doubt come as a surprise to some that: “The limits of my language are not the limits of my world”—or in other words, that the evidence of our senses is equally worthy of attention. However, this observation would appear to be a point of increasingly widespread consensus among scholars of material culture: “a design is not a word and a house is not a text: words and things, discourses and material practices are fundamentally different” writes Tilley. (162, Tilley qtd.)

³⁶ Davis continues:

The image of the “abyss” of separation and the linking “chain” is an apt analogy for the overall concept inherent in my deployment of the *mise en abîme* as a primary perspective paradigm. In that deployment I am not using the term in its strict literary sense but as a model to elucidate spatial ideas that happen to be represented in textual form. My reconceptualization of the *mise en abîme*, then,

aims to educe the idea of successive, perhaps concentric, layers of space as analogous to the various strata of experience that are constitutive of mystical space. (7)

³⁷ Hildegard's status as "mystic" is questionable. Because of the finely detailed and expounded upon nature of her textual visions, she is often considered more prophetic than mystical, a voice that preaches rather than simply relates. Nevertheless, I will "lump" her descriptions in the mystical category in my study of ekphrasis for lack of more concise terms. This is admittedly new territory, and the difficulties of religious/spiritual terminologies are no small matter. I maintain, however, that in terms of ekphrastic qualities, Hildegard's depictions of the visions themselves are not unrelated to the kinds of spaces that other mystics' textual visions occupy, from Julian of Norwich to Catherine of Siena to Richard Rolle, but work, according to the revisioning functions of memoria, in the same ways.

³⁸It is important to note that the question of the authenticity of mystical vision often concerns the line between private and public experience. Sallie B. King notes in her essay on interpreting mysticism that postmodern theory obliterates this line with its avowal of cultural determinism:

This assumption ultimately derives from a post-Wittgensteinian epistemological model that holds that there are no "private languages," no purely private experiences, and no purely private realm at all because all of our experience derives its meaningfulness from the public realm of culture and language. A moment of sadness, for example, though apparently a private experience, is for Wittgenstein only meaningfully a moment of sadness because of the larger

context within which that moment occurs. The larger context is the public world of language. In other words, the meaning of the private moment derives from the public world, and as such the private moment is in fact not private at all. (259)

In some ways, Hildegard is also obliterating the constructed line between private and public experience, although only in certain circumstances, and not so completely as Wittgenstein aims. Hers is not a theoretical approach—for there is precious little theory in the way that we understand it in the Middle Ages—but one shaped by immediate need.

Barbara Newman also brings up a valuable point regarding Hildegard's writing process as a mystic: "If visions could inspire a devout soul to write, the desire to write could also inspire a poet to construct visions; and the outcomes of these two procedures might not be so dissimilar as scholars tend to assume. After examining a wide range of both types, we are in a better position to see how visions, so ubiquitous in medieval literature, could function as both a rhetorical device and theological method." *God and the Goddesses: Vision, Poetry, and Belief in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003) p. 299-300. Much of Hildegard's writing is attuned to the rhetorical traditions and tactics of mystic literature (which adopts a number of rhetorical turns from classical Latin rhetoric). One wonders how much the use of rhetoric shapes (adds to) the inscription of the visions. I will look at this more closely later in the essay.

³⁹ Please see Murray Krieger, *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), for discussions of represented space and time both in the ekphrastic work and its object and in the experience of the viewer.

⁴⁰ Wendy Steiner, in her enormously helpful study of socially determined aesthetic relationships between visual and verbal arts, muses:

The answer to the question posed in the introduction of “why this game [asking how poetry and painting relate to each other in a given age] is worth the candle” is that the interartistic comparison inevitably reveals the aesthetic norms of the period during which the question is asked. To answer the question is to define or at least describe one’s contemporary aesthetics, and this is the value of entering once again the history of anagogical insight—and disappointment—that characterizes the painting-literature connection. (18)

I have extended Steiner’s framework to reach the connection between visual and verbal arts and beyond, and have hazarded to broach interpreting these relationships in an era and culture besides my own. Steiner is clear that asking these questions reveals more about the aesthetic categories of the contemporary age; one of the flaws of this study is precisely that it does not turn the scrutiny of these questions back upon this day and age.

⁴¹ According to Jean Hagstrum in *The Sister Arts*:

The medieval appropriation of classical pictorialism must have been directly related to the rising and falling reputation of the pagan literary classics. It may have gone out of sight during their temporary eclipse in the early Middle Ages; it apparently became prominent again in the Carolingian and Ottonian revivals of learning in the ninth and tenth centuries and in the “proto-renaissance” of the high Middle Ages. In these periods of classical renaissance the *Ars Poetica* of Horace was known and studied, the phrase *ut picture poesis* comments and reflected upon. The achievement of *enargeia* in rhetorical ecphrasis and poetic icon remained an alluring literary goal. (40)

⁴² Carruthers elucidates the differences in how the modern west perceives memory from the medieval understanding of memory:

The Biblical notion of remembering has tended to be dismissed, until quite recently, as “re-created memory,” scarcely different from outright lying, and of no interest in the philosophy of the mind at all. Instead, a “storehouse” model of memory, and the idea that memory is “of the past,” have been emphasized to such a degree that memory has been accorded only a reiterative, reduplicative role—all else is “unreal” and thus “untruthful.” Western ideas of memory have been concerned at least since the Enlightenment with what philosopher Mary Warnock calls “the crucial distinction, with which we are all familiar in real life, between memory and imagination (close though these may often be to one another). . . . [w]hat distinguishes memory from imagination is not some particular feature of the [mental] image but the fact that memory is, while imagination is not, concerned with the *real*. (Craft 68)

⁴³ Please see chapter three, “Ekphrasis and the Other,” of W. J. T. Mitchell’s *Picture Theory* for an amusing and practical description of the tug-of-war psychology behind ekphrastic desire and ambition.

⁴⁴ I have treated their work the same as other works that have been termed “visions” because their elements of composition—while not painterly—employ convention and icon and work with memory in the same ways that the “visions” do.

⁴⁵ Jeffrey Cohen (referencing Elizabeth Grosz and Roger Caillois):

Mimicry -- whether animals becoming their worlds, or humans imitating their surroundings magically or aesthetically – is a succumbing of body and subject to

the "lure of space" (99). This "dispossession" of the privilege of being one's own center spells the death of the autonomous subject, as self is scattered across landscape and landscape intermixes with self. Caillois gives a literary example, Gustave Flaubert's rendition of the desert-dwelling Saint Antony. The hermit rapturously witnesses the "interpenetration of the three natural kingdoms" [vegetal, animal, geological] and "disperse[s] himself everywhere, to be within everything" (101). Elizabeth Grosz writes in summation that what Caillois has identified is "a certain structural, anatomical, or behavioral superabundance, perhaps it is the very superfluity of life over and above the survival needs of the organism." This superfluity of life is, by another name, art.

Jonathan Gil Harris calls it a compulsion, and this compulsion, he postulates, might be called "love" ("Mammet").

⁴⁶ E. A. Jones gathers evidence and speculation from a number of scholars such as Alexandra Barratt and Felicity Riddy, who have carefully studied and interpreted evidence from anchoritic texts, Julian's wills, legal documents concerning anchorites and their servants, and the Julian's Visions. These findings are essential to the interpretations of such key passages as the master and servant and motherhood of Christ passages in *A Revelation*. Jones states:

The inclusion-and naming—of Julian's maids in two of the four bequests to her [...] may imply that they enjoyed a degree of status by their association with her. They also allow us more of a glimpse that we usually get into the intimate world of the reclusory. No other source makes us ask just what might have been involved when an anchoress came to appointing a new maidservant. Above all,

they remind us that the anchorite, in addition to her roles as spiritual athlete and intercessor for the world, was also the head of a small household. Julian's theodicy, of course, turns on her rhetorically persuasive yet theologically daring "example" of a servant whose eagerness to fulfill his master's desire is simultaneously his undoing and the making of him. (78)

⁴⁷ Riddy's emphasis on Julian's process is shared by a number of other critics. B. A. Windeatt insightfully notes that Julian's *A Revelation* "retains something of the layered, interleaved structure of a private working draft, perhaps never widely circulated" ("Julian's Second Thoughts" 104).

⁴⁸ Marion Glasscoe succinctly describes the status of extant manuscripts:

There exist two basic accounts of her experience, one very much more extended than the other. The shorter version is extant in a single manuscript copy, British Library Additional MS.37790(A). The fuller text is complete in three manuscripts: 1. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Fonds Anglais No. 40(P); 2. British Library Sloane MS.2499(S1); 3. British Library Sloane MS. 3705(S2). Since Julian tells us in the longer text that she had inward teaching for twenty years save three months after the original experience (c.32 p.56), and since in the chapter headings recorded in the Sloane versions that for 86 says 'the good lord shewid this booke shuld be otherwise performid than at the first writing', it is generally assumed that A represents an early version of Julian's experience and that the other longer manuscripts contain an account which includes the insights and understanding accumulated over the twenty odd years she speaks of. There is no external evidence to prove that the short version is not in fact excerpts from a

longer account -- indeed it occurs in a manuscript where such excerpts from other works appear -- but the passages in A which do not occur in the long version are of such a kind as to render it unlikely that they would have been either added to excerpts, or extrapolated from the longer text like a *précis*. (105)

She concludes with the insight and injunction:

Clearly there is a strong case to be made for greater recognition of the variant readings in the Julian manuscripts and for more serious attention being paid to the readings of S1 which so often convey a greater sense of theology as a live issue at the heart of human creativity. After all, this is a sense which should not be wholly unexpected in a writer seeking to directly convey her mystical experience, though it might easily have become blunted at the hands of scribes, early or late, with theologically oriented editorial ideals. (120)

⁴⁹ Virginity cannot be taken merely as a state imposed by the Church to excise women of their agency and desire; its existence as a choice for women has a much more complicated history. Kathleen Norris in *The Cloister Walk* acknowledges the tension and complexity that virginity and specifically the virgin martyrs inhabit:

For all their power to inspire a young girl, the virgin martyrs convey an uneasy message of power and powerlessness. They die, horribly, at the hands of imperial authorities. They are sanctified by church authorities, who eventually betray them by turning their struggle and witness into pious cliché, fudging the causes of their martyrdom to such an extent that many contemporary Catholics, if they're aware of the virgin martyrs at all, consider them an embarrassment, a throwback to nineteenth-century piety; the less said, the better. It's enough to make one

wonder if the virgin martyrs merely witness to a sad truth: that whatever they do, or don't do, girls can't win. A book published in the early 1960s, *My Nameday—Come for Dessert*, is a perfect expression of this heady ambiguity. Offering both recipes and religious folklore, the book defines the virgin martyrs as young women “who battled to maintain their integrity and faith.” But the radical nature of this assertion—that girls could have such integrity as to suffer and be canonized for it—is lost in Betty Crocker land: “St. Dorothy was racked, scourged, and beheaded in Cappadocia. Her symbols are a basket of fruit and flowers, which may be incorporated in a copper mold for her nameday dessert.”

Norris doesn't stop there, but tells explicitly what Dorothy actually died for:

Dorothy's story is that of a young Roman noblewoman who has refused a lawyer's proposal of marriage and is mocked by him as she is being led away to her execution. Her crime, as with most of the virgin martyrs, was being a committed Christian who refused to marry or to worship idols as required by Roman law. The young man calls out to Dorothy from a crowd of his friends and asks her to be sure to send him fruits from the garden of paradise. This she agrees to do. When, after her death, an angel delivers three apples and three roses, the young man converts to Christianity and is also martyred. Dorothy, then, is a dangerous young rebel, a holy woman with the power to change a man and to subvert the Roman state, in which, as Gilbert Marcus has noted in *The Radical Tradition*, “marriage and the family were the basis of the *imperium* . . . the guarantee of the gods that Rome would continue. (188-190)

Norris furthermore makes clear that the claim to virginity was far more than a paltry assertion that one's hymen was untorn and untried; it was instead a claim to the point of conversion where change for good is made to happen. Western European culture has over the centuries sullied the real radical nature of virginity in many ways, but the action and agency of the virgins' suffering (who were likely not "physical" virgins) remains an undercurrent throughout and has gained devotion on many different counts through the Middle Ages to the present.

⁵⁰ The phrase is from Toni Morrison's Nobel lecture, 1993. Toni Morrison. *Lecture and Speech of Acceptance*, New York: Knopf, 1995, 20.

⁵¹ Roberta Gilchrist, in her extensive study on gender and medieval religious architecture, quotes a passage from Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* that rings similarly to the Butler quoted above:

We may call Eurydice forth from the world of the dead, but we cannot make her answer; and when we turn to look at her we glimpse her only for a moment, before she slips from our grasp and flees. As all historians know the past is a great darkness, and filled with echoes. Voices may reach us from it; but what they say to us is imbued with the obscurity of the matrix out of which they come; and try as we may, we cannot always decipher them precisely in the clearer light of our own day. (qtd in Gilchrist 8)

⁵² Andrea Brady continues to outline Guest's curious affinity to the Middle Ages:

Speaking of *QSA* in her interview with Wagner, Guest said, "This medievalism I've been indulging myself in, I think it's a solace." But, she adds, "I don't want to use medievalism the way it's been used as an escape, you know. King Arthur and

knights and so forth. And I don't want to have that word [medievalism] attached to me. But it seems to me that I've drawn a lot of comfort from it." Her assertion that this solace is not escapism doesn't fully persuade me. But I suspect that the haunting of Guest's work by medieval authors and vocabularies is connected to her spectral conception of the poet's nature and presence. Guest told Wagner that "poems, if they have any soul, are very haunted, and if they don't have a soul, then they're just straightforward commerce, commercial art." The poem is haunted not just by the lived experiences and fantasies of the self, but by the historical past, and by the possible meanings that the poem's existing structure—its compositional choices—has smothered. (122)

I disagree with Brady's suspicion that Guest's "solace" is a form of escapism; I think it more likely a desire to "work out" what has been missing from the intellectual historical discussion about the nature of composition. Brady is certainly on to something, however, in her last statement that the "poem is haunted [...] by the historical past" and by the clue left behind in what has been chosen and what therefore has been relegated to the margins. To my mind, in looking to the medieval, Guest was precisely on the right track to discover the compositional powers of memoria.

⁵³ Carson's "Second Nature" is seemingly simple, but its participation in that realm of inhuman art, the change and exchange between human being and world that is itself beyond human, is so profound as to urge me to reprint it here in its entirety from *First Language* (38):

Second Nature

After Seán Ó Riordáin, Malairt

‘Come over here,’ says Turnbull, ‘till you see the sorrow in the horse’s eyes;
If you had hooves as cumbersome, there would be gloom in your eyes too.’

And it was clear to me, that he had understood the sorrow in the horse’s eyes
So well, had dwelt so long on it, that he was plunged in the horse’s mind.

I looked over at the horse, that I might see the sorrow pouring from its eyes;
I saw the eyes of Turnbull, looming towards me from the horse’s head.

I looked at Turnbull; I looked at him again, and saw beneath his brows
The too-big eyes that were dumb with sorrow, the horse’s eyes.

⁵⁴ “Easter 1916” is probably the best example of this concern, its famous repeating lines

“A terrible beauty is born,” cautioning readers about the aestheticization of violence.

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