

APPENDICES PULLED FROM A STUDY ON LIGHT

by

Geoffrey Carter Babbitt

A dissertation submitted to the faculty of
The University of Utah
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English

The University of Utah

August 2010

Copyright © Geoffrey Carter Babbitt 2010

All Rights Reserved

STATEMENT OF DISSERTATION APPROVAL

The dissertation of Geoffrey Carter Babbitt
has been approved by the following supervisory committee members:

<u>Donald Revell</u>	, Co-Chair	<u>4/30/2010</u> Date Approved
<u>Karen Brennan</u>	, Co-Chair	<u>4/30/2010</u> Date Approved
<u>Craig Dworkin</u>	, Member	<u>4/30/2010</u> Date Approved
<u>Tom Stillinger</u>	, Member	<u>4/30/2010</u> Date Approved
<u>Jerry Root</u>	, Member	<u>4/30/2010</u> Date Approved

and by Vincent Pecora, Chair of
the Department of English

and by Charles A. Wight, Dean of The Graduate School.

ABSTRACT

Appendices Pulled from a Study on Light comprises three sections. The first section focuses on the Greek island of Siphnos. The middle section focuses primarily on medieval illuminated manuscripts. And the final section (re-)marries foci and material from the previous two sections.

While the first two sections discuss disparate subjects, they share the topical concerns of history, gold, replication, religion, ritual, miracles, the Virgin Mary, and light. They are also unified in their collage methodology and in their thematic exploration of perception, aura, light, ethics, mystic experience, and the indeterminate sublime within both compressed lyric modes and fragmented nonfiction essays. The final section further develops and fuses the manuscript's thematic explorations in a verse-form essay.

Appendices Pulled from a Study on Light makes use not only of verse and prose but also of image. Several "ekphrastic" poems respond to images of illuminated manuscripts. The images and the prose fulfill a similar function: they moor the project. The images ground the poems referentially, at least momentarily, and the prose provides representational fixedness. Off of these concretizing forces, the poems are free to bounce, descant, play, diverge, harmonize, elaborate, conflict discordantly, comment, or veer off entirely. I hope my poetry structures itself not according to argument or narrative but to virtues of the manner of its movement and to the sequences of its sounds.

for Kathryn Cowles

CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	viii
SEE, THEY RETURN.....	1
BOTTLENECK, BOTTLE GLASS.....	2
ISLAND OF APOLLONIAN LIGHT AND THE GOLDEN SPRING.....	3
WE WEND OUR WAY ACROSS TWO IMAGININGS AND FIND THE WORLD IS REAL.....	4
“Early May”	5
KAMARES AT SUNDOWN.....	6
“According to the popular version”	7
WHICH IS RAISING ITS LITTLE HAND.....	8
LIFTED OUT OF THE SEA.....	9
“ <i>In Prolegomena</i> ”	10
NO NOTE.....	11
SO IT SAYS TODAY.....	12
“Inferring from Harrison”	13
SONNET.....	14
OWN LITTLE INWARD SUN.....	15
“While rituals of tendance and aversion”	16
DAWN IS A LONG TIME COMING.....	17
“Below the veranda”	18
“A more modern Siphnos”	19
TOWARD A COMPASS ROSE.....	20
BREACHES.....	21
“Every year Siphnos celebrates”	22

“Old man walking stiffly”	23
REST WHERE STREAMS.....	24
IN THE GLOOM, THE GOLD GATHERS THE LIGHT AGAINST IT.....	25
“Neither as scholar nor theist”	26
MATINS: PARHELION.....	27
“Language and light share familiar divine associations”	28
LAUDS: BECAUSE OHIO HAS SO LITTLE IN WINTER, BEAUTY OFFENDS IT...29	
ALL WITHIN EYESHOT.....	30
“Our story could understandably incline one”	31
PRIME: THOSE PAWS BUCKLE UNDER.....	32
OUTLINE YIELDS TO FIGURE.....	33
“Presence and proximity give way to increasing distance”	34
TINY CHILDREN DANCING ON BELLS.....	35
“For an abyss is a condition of mysticism”	36
TERCE: EYE OUT OF THE AIR.....	37
“There is a simpler way”	38
THE BRUSH REMINDS PAINT OF ITSELF.....	39
“In <i>Poetics</i> , Aristotle classifies”	40
ALL ALONG RESERVOIR ROAD.....	41
“Let us consider the believer in a medieval context”	42
BOTTOM LEFT CORNER OF PARCHMENT LEAF FROM AN ANGLO-NORMAN LITANY OF SAINTS IN A FRENCH BOOK OF HOURS, CA. 1375.....	43
“Columba is not the author of the text”	44
SEXT: SCRIBAL IMPROMPTUS.....	45
“In the accounts I have read of St. Columba’s miracle”	46
NONE: HOMOEOTELEUTONIC TRANSCRIPTION OF REVELATIONS 7.....	47
AD MATUTINAS DE SANCTO SPIRITU, FROM A FRENCH BOOK OF HOURS, CA.1500.....	48

“The <i>Cathac of Columba</i> is minimally embellished”	49
VESPERS: TO KATHRYN.....	50
COMPLINE: FOR THEOPHILUS.....	51
“Christopher de Hamel explores reasons”	52
AUGUSTUS AND THE SIBYL OF TIBUR, LAUDS, HOURS OF THE VIRGIN, IBID.....	53
LATITUDE, STRATUM.....	54
“Of several Gospel Books”	55
VA.....	56
CHRISTMAS MORNING MATINS, FROM <i>OFFICIUM BEATAE MARIAE VIRGINIS</i> , MADE FOR POPE LEO X (GIOVANNI DE’ MEDICI), CA. 1513-1521.....	57
“Behind the best illuminated manuscripts”	58
CODA.....	59
SOUL MELTS INTO AIR.....	60
SOUL MELTS INTO AIR: AN ESSAY.....	61
“prophecy’s white sail”	62
“lit border”	63
“lit vellum”	64
“pane’s shape across”	65
“converting the word”	66
BACKSIDE OF ILLUSTRATION OF THE NATIVITY.....	67
“all that glitters”	68
FOR ST. KHAG.....	69
TEXT PRESSED ONTO THE OPPOSITE BLANK LEAF.....	70
“out of sand grass bending”	71
“‘facsimile’—from L. ‘fac,’ imper. of ‘facere’”	72
“horae for laity”	73

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

“The Brush Reminds Paint of Itself” originally appeared in *Barnwood Magazine*. “Bottleneck, Bottle Glass,” “Toward a Compass Rose,” “Breaches,” “Latitude, Stratum,” and “Outline Gives Way to Figure” originally appeared in *BlazeVOX*. “No Note” appeared in *CutBank*. “We Wend Our Way Across Two Imaginings and Find the World Is Real” appeared in *Free Verse*. “Kamares at Sundown” and “All Within Eyeshot” appeared in *Greatcoat*. “Dawn Is a Long Time Coming,” “Which Is Raising Its Little Hand,” “Lifted Out of the Sea,” and “Private Telegram” appeared in *Improbable Object*. And “Rest Where Streams,” “All Along Reservoir Road,” “Eyes Out of the Air,” and “Those Paws Buckle Under” originally appeared in *Western Humanities Review*. I would like to thank the editors of these journals.

I would also like to thank my wonderful committee members: Donald Revell, Karen Brennan, Craig Dworkin, Tom Stillinger, and Jerry Root. Working with you has been unspeakably rewarding. I admire you and appreciate your guidance and support more than I know how to say.

Thank you to my dear friends and readers whose invaluable insights have helped my poems: Kathryn Cowles, Shira Dentz, Eryn Green, Derek Henderson, Stacy Kidd, Julie Gonnering Lein, Rebecca Lindenberg, Christine Marshall, Levi Negley, Cami Nelson, Timothy O’Keefe, Christopher Patton, Ely Shipley, and Brenda Sieczkowski. And a special thanks to my family for all your support.

Thank you to Charles O. Hartman for your mentorship. You have been a teacher and a friend of seemingly infinite patience. I continue to learn from even our oldest conversations, and I eagerly look forward to the new ones we will have.

“Toward a Compass Rose” is for Rachel Marston and David Ruhlman. “All Along Reservoir Road” is for Nathan Hauke. “The Brush Reminds the Paint of Itself” is for Levi Negley.

Special thanks to Luise Poulton, curator and head of Rare Books in the Special Collections division of the J. Williard Marriott Library, for her help along a crucial stage. Thank you also for your permission to use *Parchment leaf from an Anglo-Norman Litany of Saints* (detail), from the Marriott Library’s Rare Book Division, MS lat. frag. 4; and *Parchment leaf from the Office of the Dead, Vespers* (detail), from the Marriott Library’s Rare Book Division, MS lat. frag. 8—which appear on pages 45 and 63, respectively, of this dissertation.

Special thanks to Tom Loeffler, Timothy Motz, and Patricia Whitesides of the Toledo Museum of Art. Thank you so very much for all of your help and support. Tom, thank you for patiently and gingerly holding open the Books of Hours while I photographed them. I have made a nod to your thumb on page 70. Thank you for your permission to include images from:

France, Book of Hours of the Virgin (details), ca. 1500, *Illuminated manuscript on vellum: Ink, tempera, and brushed or burnished gold on vellum; eighteenth-century binding in red morocco with metal clasps, 5 3/16 in. (13.2 cm) x 3 7/16 in., 130 pages. Toledo Museum of Art (Toledo, Ohio), Museum Purchase, 1955.28.*

Images from this Book of Hours appear on pages 48, 53, 64, and 67 of this dissertation. Thank you, additionally for your permission to include images from:

Northern Italy, possibly Milan, *Hora* (*Book of Hours*), *Officium beatae Mariae Virginis* (*Manuscript presented to Pope Leo X between 1513 and 1521*) (details), ca. 1513-1521, Green velvet binding with metal clasps, ink and gold on vellum, page dimensions: 5 7/16 x 3 3/4 in. (13.8 x 9.5 cm). Toledo Museum of Art (Toledo, Ohio), Museum Purchase, 1957.23.

Images from this Book of Hours appear on pages 57 and 70 of this dissertation.

Thank you to the Ohio Northern University department of English for its support. Thanks especially to Eva McManus whose extraordinary generosity in giving me a flexible schedule and a lightened teaching load enabled me to finish my graduate work.

Thank you to Andrea Mantsios for your friendship and for putting up Kathryn and me. We got to see the Met's exhibit of the *Belles Heures* of the Duc de Berry because of your hospitality.

Donald Revell, as Maximus says, "But the known? / This, I have had to be given, / a life, love, and from one man / the world." For me, you are that man. Thank you for everything.

And, again, Kathryn Cowles, thank you so much. For love, for support, for readership, for happiness.

SEE, THEY RETURN

*the swift blue / appears formerly hid when approached now it / chides with tone the prow striking a
grim / atmosphere appealing and intimate as if a verse / were to water somewhere*
—Barbara Guest

*Startled voices and other ones which still / Run through the leafage lit up like / The firefly's secret
passage / From the depths of a life turned upside down*
—Odysseus Elytis

a blue and gold mistake
—Emily Dickinson

BOTTLENECK, BOTTLE GLASS

blue glass, green glass, shell sanded,
gritty shine—*island*
slips into sea—light spilled by the sun
is skinwine—seven degrees
of azure: sea, sea, sky, dome, sky, trimming,
sky—seen from the oleanders
the beach is a ring, the sea
a lake—sun scrubs white things whiter—each schist
has two faces—one
up, one down—the highest hill's
made of burning faces—now is
a good time to build a bridge—we go

ISLAND OF APOLLONIAN LIGHT AND THE GOLDEN SPRING

Siphnos is a Greek island in the Cycladic cluster. It is small, both in terms of physical size and population.

The island has a minor part in the recorded history of Greece. Herodotus mentions Siphnos in *The Histories*. It was one of the wealthiest Greek islands by 600 B.C.E. because of bountiful silver and gold mines. The agora and town hall were decorated in expensive Parian marble. And the island had a treasury dedicated to Apollo at Delphi. Siphnos kept the treasury abundant with a yearly tithing of revenues and distributed gold and silver from the mines to its islanders.

A popular account, often erroneously attributed to Pausanias, relates that the tithing was paid in the form of a solid gold egg.

WE WEND OUR WAY ACROSS TWO IMAGININGS
AND FIND THE WORLD IS REAL

man in a tall pipe
showering under new light—someone stands
in the first place a second time
and wakes to morning light
through the interstices of wet boughs—
fissures in—the seamless
can be cracked wide—here is where
we enter through—rain shadow mess
halos—follow into another
—silver breath increases itself—we get in
water to see through surface
from the other side

Early May. Olive trees, figs, juniper, white oleander, tamarisk, bamboo.

A bloom cycle starts. A peculiar blue spatters across the opposite hill one afternoon. Two weeks later, the blue is gone, and deep purple skirts the porch.

By June, half the green dries to a duller shade. Stone walls and terraces stitch the hillsides together. From a peak, the stonework looks like steel webbing cast to outline patches of land.

KAMARES AT SUNDOWN

the sail says what lilacs say

as children
chant their catch for all
the port—fishermen's
bright nets left
for the present under a stone
parapet—if we can find
the schedule, it
dissolves—votive blue—the wind, though
hot, is stiff, hits
us sidewise so we
are insouciant—ants heavy in
yogurt—*meli, meli*—currants
in a bowl of cherries—off
white-lined stones something shimmers
and we cannot track
the source since its eye
is carved by smoke

According to the popular version, the Siphnians began offering as their Delphic tithing not a solid gold egg, but a gold-plated one.

Pausanias tells us, more generally, that the island neglected to send its tithing “through [an] immoderate desire of accumulating wealth.” As a result, the gold mines were lost in a destructive flood.

§

According to Herodotus, when the Siphnians were building their treasury, they asked the oracle if their good fortune would continue. The Sibyl replied:

*When on Siphnos the town hall turns white
And so do the brows of the square, then the wise man must beware
The ambush of wood and the red messenger.*

The Siphnians did not connect the prophecy’s white town hall with the Parian marble with which theirs was decorated. Nor did they suspect the Samian’s vermillion-painted ship that later arrived bearing messengers.

The Samians plundered the mines. The piracy may be how the island took its name—from the common noun “siphnos,” meaning “empty.”

WHICH IS RAISING ITS LITTLE HAND

the meadow faints and empire
is no more—now it's tomorrow
as usual—the radio purls over pages
of last words—images of hearts *blotter blotter blot*—
news of rosemary
lamb comes on a warm wind—honeybee,
take me to your
glinting onward—
little city's twinkle-pulse, signposts
pockmarked from buckshot

green on green on green on green—
before the feather fell on the grass
it was set against cirrus—thistledown,
thistledown—this is how
it summers here—

LIFTED OUT OF THE SEA

the hydrant, a pineapple—this,
 her easel knows—painter breaks it
 open, spills—what's the moon's
 sobriquet? the sun's?—fine, thanks
 for asking, *retsina! retsina!* pour it
 on, hillside plated with bayleaves,
 birds wheeling in semilunar blue
 arrow (→) → (arrow) dot (·) · (dot)
 lilies and *lilies* give way to sunhoney.
 green grass is big magic, light
 streaming through the lawn's blades
 —tiny wheelbarrow spokes and thimbles in
 a matchbox—every nook holds a stowaway
 —give the peasant in stitches a crate
 of candles—coins emit no light,
 untowardly wayward. all
 on the canvas now—the dovecotes,
 the midden—dot to dot—the hues
 deepen—arrow to arrow—light coming
 from different distances—blue phlox
 to blue phlox along the hillside

In *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, Jane Ellen Harrison discusses several distinctions important to Greek Religion around the fifth century B.C.E. Drawing on Plutarch, Harrison distinguishes between the different rituals of tendance and aversion. The Olympian deities were generally worshipped in a religion of "cheerful tendance." Their motto, Harrison writes, was essentially, "I give that you may give." The Chthonic gods, however, were worshipped in religious acts of aversion. They are the gods of the earth and underworld who are placated and sent away. The creed of aversion is "I give that you may go, and keep away." The religion of riddance is informed not by joy as in that of tendance but by fear and superstition.

About the time when the Siphnian mines were devastated by pirates or floods, the Olympian gods lacked characteristics that we now consider essential to religion, such as mysticism. In the *Euthyphro*, Socrates sums it up: "Holiness is then an art in which gods and men do business with each other." In this conception of worship, there is no fear but also no sense of the supernatural. It is a rather dry exchange.

NO NOTE

a bluebird left its broken wing
under my window—light bones
and feathers make for short letters—good
read though—blew right through me—
told of an old man in the park
whittling a hull frame over a chessboard—
ribs for a ship—unless not
ribcage but birdcage—wings unfold
into good letters—one thing a wing most
means is *bluebluewater—cold—hey*
just the other day I saw a finch
splashing in the gutter—bathing, for a bird,
makes wings wooden
for you too—you and I we
need the sky to keep us clean

SO IT SAYS TODAY

“there are millions of suns left”
—Walt Whitman

your eyes
with news

in sun whose whiteness
will pull us through

under umbrella pines
shading this to watch
birds perched on bench backs

today is obvious
e.g. the disc
of phaistos is easy
to make good
the news always
pressing

blue and clear nor a sun
as the waters
pressing even
warm nights
we dream rain

Inferring from Harrison, we may conceive of the Siphnian tithing as tendance—wealth given so that good fortune could be received in return. If they stopped offering tithing, it would amount to bad business. Apollo would have no incentive to stop the flood. And if they had the hubris to try fooling a god with a gilded egg, they'd have been gunning for ruin.

Herodotus' version is different. The Siphnians engaged in bad business not with Apollo but with their marauders. The Samians asked to borrow ten talents, which may have been a ploy. Nevertheless, the Siphnians refused, and the Samians pirated over a hundred talents. Their refusal turned a small price into a large one.

Yet, their dealing with the Samians is less striking than their inability to interpret a seemingly obvious prophecy. Does their hermeneutical ineptitude point to moral inadequacy? Surely it was in the oracle's best interest for the island to interpret the prophecy correctly. After all, the Siphnian's inability to do so slighted Apollo's treasury.

SONNET

“Αφού τελείωσα / γύρισά δώ.”
 —Charles O. Hartman, from “Island” from *Island*

When we finished what we came for we went back.
 We came finished when we back what for we went.
 We finished back when we came for what we went.
 When we finished what we came we went for back.
 For what when we came we went we finished back.
 What we came back for we finished when we went.
 When we finished what we came back for we went.
 For what when we came we went we finished back.
 We came when we went back what we finished for.
 Finished we came back for we went when we what.
 When we finished back what we went for we came.
 We back came finished we when we went for what.
 When we finished we came what we went back for.
 Back went we when we finished for what we came.

OWN LITTLE INWARD SUN

“Perhaps, if we started right, all the children could grow up sunny”
—D.H. Lawrence

a small girl in a taverna
—singing, sun breaking
behind her teeth—

singing to the salt shaker, singing
to the trees—her mother
stopped her
song

every time—that girl, her singing—
every time—children come running
down a hillside carrying the dawn in their mouths

While rituals of tendance and aversion seem mutually exclusive, Harrison examines several Olympian festivals and finds connected to them ceremonies that “have little or nothing to do with the particular Olympian to whom they are supposed to be addressed; that they are not in the main rites of burnt-sacrifice, of joy and feasting and agonistic contests, but rites of a gloomy underworld character, connected mainly with purification and the worship of ghosts.” In the Apollonian Anthesteria, for example, there were superstitious rituals, human sacrifices, and placation of ghosts.

Ceremonies of riddance were held for such chthonic gods as the winds. Despite their association with the upper air, sacrifices to the winds were buried so that they would be placated to remain in the underworld.

§

While the Siphnian tithing to Apollo seems like tendance, ceremonies of its antithetical counterpart might also have been performed. What gods might they have been trying to avert? Perhaps the misfortune of the flood or the pirates resulted from what Siphnos couldn't ward away. Perhaps they feared certain chthonic spirits imperfectly.

Such a reading participates in superstition.

DAWN IS A LONG TIME COMING

this here is Isis, is her statue
crumbling—

tinoilmatch glass glass glass

smarmy little river
rivery little arms wearily weeping
iotasmus, wise little letter
—Inc. & Co. stained the water—
sundown on a still lake

the sun is bigger than its own light

glasstinoil match match match

stars crushed into the desert
are a one-act play—
briskly done, charges pressed
were never printed—what
lovely smiles you all have—whatever's next
happens quick: sprinklers
on my face—sunset
in the water—beautiful little
no-stain—keep on left,
straighten the till, every penny's accounted—

loneliness is what
angels catch in the day—the moon
is a spoon breaking water—gun-metal
for a long time, marked by wine in its travels

—foodstamp coin-op treasured trash
spitshine lightup a boozehound's last dollar
now howbout now
soakup bottle olive little boilovert

Below the veranda, stone steps down to an olive tree. Barefoot over echinated weeds, a field of olive pits.

One low, thick branch perfectly parallel to the ground, reaching east as if toward first light.

Sitting or, more often, standing on the branch.

Out over blue expanse. Locked in looking.

A more modern Siphnos successfully thwarted a pirate invasion.

A surviving seventeenth century manuscript written by Parthenios Chairetis, a Greek Orthodox monk, relates considerable history concerning Siphnos' church Panagia Chrysopigi—literally “Virgin Mary of the Golden Spring.” The church is named after an Orthodox iconographic form of Mary as the Font of Life. Her golden statue was purportedly found by fishermen who harvested it in their nets from the depths of the Aegean. Today thirty-five miracles have been attributed to her, one of the most significant of which was the protection she offered from pirates.

The monastery Chrysopigi sits on a solid rock island. From even a relatively short distance, the island seems connected to the peninsula behind it, but there is a ten-or-so-foot-wide split between the two. A guidebook says, “the stark white monastery of the Virgin standing on the split rock looks like a moored ship preparing to set sail on the seas.” Legend has it that pirates came ashore nearby and gave chase to a group of nuns. The sisters ran to Chrysopigi praying for protection, and just as the nuns reached its door the ground rumbled and the peninsula rent in half. The pirates fell into the chasm and drowned.

A small bridge now connects the island and peninsula.

TOWARD A COMPASS ROSE

near is this shiny green
of sober joy
in each thing—something
which can admire
or crash—burning hollow
over ourselves brightly
open, its own way
hands our bodies
our visual raining,
wing-white clouds

BREACHES

a story of colors,
lithe—a name, her voice
in her breath, yours, scatters,
if not altogether away
 then from vines
around awning poles and oleanders
to an entering: small
range of thankful
inattentiveness—skein
of white birds waters down a still
stretch,
 here joy serves as memory,
and we mind well
flags stringed steeple
to steeple of the churches at our feet
—susurrus echoes still, still, and
when we look down, the water
gets all lit up,
above which hovers the island

Every year Siphnos celebrates the Virgin's miracle on the eve of the Feast of the Ascension. The islanders ceremonially transport the icon around Siphnos from the port town Kamares to Chrysopigi. After Mary's statue of the Golden Spring arrives, a priest says mass. A different family sponsors the festival each year and hosts everyone in attendance. Visiting Athenians and residents occupy a long dining hall in shifts, enjoying local wine and the island's traditional clay-baked revithada. Attendants express gratitude by boisterously banging silverware and chanting panegyras.

Revelers dance and drink until morning.

§

The dance of Boreas, the north wind, is an ancient ritual that lives on through the island's festivities. Generally performed by a priest, the dance thanks the north wind for ceasing its winter barrage and propitiates it, that it might keep away.

Old man walking stiffly on bare feet with his pants rolled halfway up his shins. Bloodshot eyes, shirt half open, carrying a walking stick. Spitfire with an explosion of white hair. Over gravel to fill his tin pail at a well.

§

Mycenaean acropolis, ancient wall enclosing a cliff-perched village, adjacent Apollonia and Artemonas, sun, stones.

Ships setting. Across this blue goes a white sail. When it's gone, it's gone without a trace.

REST WHERE STREAMS

long after the road is a ruin,
cicadas praise its abandonment—
shadows lengthen
to the garden's edge—grapevine,
swollen bunches—bursts from a flower
never before seen—and in the olive
tree—a figure (affinitive?) spills water
into water, pooling close enough to sea
to trickle into—so the sea carries on—
carries farther from road and garden—the figure

she gives her hand to a poppy—blue
currents pay no mind—and not in
this direction only—where else
does a mast's sentinel look away from? and from
what angle comes this
little constellation, this bright bird

IN THE GLOOM, THE GOLD GATHERS THE LIGHT AGAINST IT

Oh would that my words were written down! Would that they were inscribed in a record: That with an iron chisel and with lead they were cut in rock forever! But as for me, I know that my Vindicator lives, and that he will at last stand forth upon the dust; Whom I myself shall see: my own eyes, not another's, shall behold him, and from my flesh I shall see God.

—Job 19:23-26

I am a primitive, a child—or a maniac; I dismiss all knowledge, all culture, I refuse to inherit anything from another eye than my own.

—Roland Barthes

God is growing.

—Rainer Maria Rilke

Neither as scholar nor theist am I drawn to illuminated manuscripts.

One of my favorite manuscript stories goes back to sixth century Ireland, and it concerns a psalter known as *The Cathach of St. Columba*. Although the psalter bears the name of St. Columba, it is actually named after the copy Columba made of a manuscript that had been loaned to him by St. Finnian. And therein lies the scandal.

St. Finnian had recently returned from Rome, where the Pope himself had given Finnian a new, superior Latin translation of the Psalms. Because Finnian was friends with Columba and admired his scholarship, the older saint let the younger one borrow it. The new book gripped Columba intensely as he read it, so he copied it without Finnian's permission. Just before Columba had finished his clandestine task, a messenger sent by Finnian to collect the psalter arrived at St. Columba's church.

The messenger, a young boy, peered into the church through a keyhole. And he witnessed a miracle. The five fingers on St. Columba's hand were like long candle flames, and from them emanated bright beams that filled the church with light.

As Columba luminously transcribed, his crane—not an uncommon pet for monks of the time—thrust his beak through the keyhole, plucking out the eye of the young voyeur. Blood leaked from his dark orbital socket. The eyeball—legend has it—dangled on his cheek. The boy went crying to St. Finnian, who performed his own miracle and restored the boy's eye.

St. Finnian was so angry at St. Columba for his textual thievery that their dispute eventually culminated in the Battle of Cúl Drebene in 561 (*cathach* means "battler"). Many men were killed in the battle, and Adomnán of Iona tells us that St. Columba was excommunicated for his role in it. Columba left Ireland. Some sources say that he exiled himself as atonement for the battle and went on a mission to Scotland, converting the Picts. It was his goal to save more lives than had been lost in battle. One of the books that Columba might have used as a conversion tool was *The Cathach of St. Columba*.

MATINS: PARHELION

A need to arc is where it starts.
 As in the arc of morning light,
 A halo above the first frost clinging
 to the grass,
 Above the hoary shadow's shape the garage casts,
 above the garage.

A halo leaves no story to tell.
 A halo becomes the arc it needs,
 which it perpetually begins.
 The arc of telling is a death
 that is granted once begun.

A need to arc is where it starts.
 Morning light *pinwheeled in a sparrow's*
 //// eye, for instance.
 Any arc is a form of play,
 and light is always open.

A halo above the first frost,
 Light hits the blue garage,
 and the light opens out.
 A need to arc is underway.
 It goes right through us.

Language and light share familiar divine associations.

“God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.” God’s speech act makes light and thereby introduces order.

Gershom Scholem puts it differently. The leading scholar of Hebrew mysticism discusses how God—the “Mystical Nothing”—makes creation out of himself. The Sefiroth are the ten names for the knowable aspects of God. Added together, they make up the unknowable name for God whom we cannot access: En-Sof.

Scholem writes, “The Hebrew word for nothing, *ain* has the same consonants as the word for I, *ani*—and as we have seen, God’s ‘I’ is conceived as the final emanation of the Sefiroth, that stage in God’s personality... reveals itself to its own creation.”

Or as Harold Bloom pithily puts it, “God teaches Himself His own Name, and so begins creation.”

The world is the consequence of God speaking.

§

Largely in the effort to reconcile Neo-Platonism and Christianity, St. Augustine devotes considerable thought to creation. As he thinks through the first Genesis account, he addresses God: “you spoke and [heaven and earth] were made, and by your word you made them.”

Later Augustine openly reflects on the beginning of the Gospel of John: “You call us, therefore, to understand the Word, God who is with you God... That word is spoken eternally, and by it all things are uttered eternally... You do not cause it to exist other than by speaking.”

§

The Psalms tell us, “The commands of the Lord are radiant, / giving light to the eyes.”

John’s gospel tells us, “the Word was God.”

The First Letter of John tells us, “God is light.”

LAUDS: BECAUSE OHIO HAS SO LITTLE IN WINTER,
BEAUTY OFFENDS IT

insular expanse
—deciduous shore
shorn, rings the eye—
embanked
in every direction, horizon
at bay—the clouds say
only what passus
one's in

mountains were mirror—
flatness obscures, all
blasted, all wasted, this
town has only ever seen
its face by touching, so
be it

—feelingly see—
silent—set to the falling
and rising of water

ALL WITHIN EYESHOT

one hundred silver hooves
hammer free the outlawed light
—a watchman searches his pockets
for the skeleton key—you be
the duckling, follow me—chalk it up
to boxcars and inkwells—tear blue
from the sky, water, an eye—patch against,
against—there's
your light, drawbridges
in disrepair—nothing invisible
on the sun—two kids pulling perch
into a silver rowboat—mind the dorsal-spikes—
hooks on their life jackets—metal
clinking gunwale—Matthew, Matthew,
the water is blacker—

Our story could understandably incline one to deem St. Columba's copying unethical. He acts without St. Finnian's permission. And furthermore, the act of copying destroys the psalter's value, which lay in its uniqueness to Ireland. Retelling the story for its basic impact, an essay on literary property in a 1908 issue of *The Michigan Law Review* finds Columba in the wrong. Its rendition ends with the king's memorable decision: "To every cow her calf; to every book its copy." And so the crown sides with Finnian.

And yet, divine light accompanies Columba because God sanctions the saint as he works. So regardless of whether he commits a transgression, what he does is endorsed by divine will and is, therefore, righteous. The ground we have strayed onto is close to Kierkegaard's teleological suspension of the ethical. Like Abraham, St. Columba oversteps the ethical realm altogether by placing his telos higher—in the absolute, in what pleases God.

Now consider the messenger boy. Although he is right to follow his master's instructions dutifully, he is, in some larger sense, wrong for intruding upon a miracle. His punishment strikes us as fair and unfair because it is both—thus must he suffer the loss of an eye but also have it restored.

In a sixteenth century version of the *Cathach* story, the loss of the boy's eye is not the result of a crane's whim but God's decree. Columba gives permission to the crane to pluck out the young boy's eye, so long as God does not object. God does not.

§

In another story strikingly similar to ours, a young boy—not a messenger, a pupil perhaps—spies on the saint through a keyhole while he emits a celestial radiance. Columba had forbidden the boy to visit his lodgings that evening. The next day, he rebukes the child: "If I had not in that instant prayed for your sake, you would have dropped dead by the door or else your eyes would have been torn from their sockets. But the Lord spared you this time because of my intercession."

OUTLINE YIELDS TO FIGURE

the albino finch alights
as the field becomes a sea,
stiff winds preparative
for lilacs or salt—nothing
settled, after all—redundancy
may win out this
last time only—next
that old effigy, wake which
precedes its boat—still
the sunflower wars
with Tuscany—tiers wind up, wing high
but are stuck in their ascendancy

Presence and proximity give way to increasing distance.

In the beginning, God speaks to humankind regularly. He expels from Paradise, forms covenants, gives instructions, warns, tells the future, cryptically explains his identity, instills fear, and orders Moses to remove his sandals. Etc.

God's interactions, however, gradually become mediated. Ezekiel, for example, eats a scroll containing God's decree. It tastes as sweet as honey. Later the prophet is struck silent and becomes a vessel for divine speech. God tells him: "I will make your tongue stick to your palate so that you will be dumb... Only when I speak with you and open your mouth, shall you say to them: Thus says the Lord God!"

In the Christian Testament, Jesus' first gift to humanity is his presence. He is God in the medium of human flesh. John relates the mystery of incarnation by invoking none other than God's associations with language and light: "And the Word became flesh." And later Jesus explains the significance of his human presence through the symbol of light: "I am the light of the world."

After his ascension, he leaves behind another presence. The spirit presides and is made manifest by our calling cards of the divine: "Then there appeared to them tongues as of fire, which parted and came to rest on each one of them. And they were filled with the holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues."

Distance increases.

§

In the apocalyptic Revelation, Jesus' return is not only announced by the spectacular seven seals and the seven angels trumpeting but also by the elect having their names written in the Lamb's Book of Life. The calling card returns too. Their heads are divinely inscribed upon: "They will look upon his face, and his name will be on their foreheads."

The name whose speaking created the world will be etched upon the heads of the saved when they see God. Then scripture ends.

The gap between humanity and the divine expands.

TINY CHILDREN DANCING ON BELLS

new water another
sun which
more see and saw more
strange such sight
above along the flood
the help of
little river lay
without wing to swim through air
things wondrous
sky thin nether dwell
the moon what upon
higher spheres another light
skies this earthly here found on
ground the skies
walk exalted above the deep
where lies as much
moon more shady
light which taught our feet
bliss and bells

For an abyss is a condition of mysticism.

Language and light are both easily associable with the divine, but they share a more significant commonality—they are both symptomatic of God's widening distance from believers. That they are rife with the potential to participate in mysticism is evidence.

Gershom Scholem explains that there are stages through which a religion must pass before mysticism becomes possible. "The first stage," he writes, "represents the world as being full of gods whom man encounters at every step and whose presence can be experienced without recourse to ecstatic meditation."

In the second stage, "Man becomes aware of a fundamental duality, of a vast gulf which can be crossed by nothing but the *voice*; the voice of God, directing and law-giving in His revelation, and the voice of man in prayer." God's speech points to distance. Within Ezekiel's narrative, for instance, God's thunderous voice issuing forth from the dumb-stricken prophet is dramatic evidence of the divine crossing a vast gulf.

But the distinction between the second stage and the next can be tricky. The story is orally transmitted from believer to believer. This epoch becomes the next. A worshipper holds the written text, reading the decree given by a voice that has since become inaudible. The stage of voice slips into the subsequent one.

Scholem describes the third stage in a religion as coinciding with "what may be called the romantic period." Here mysticism can begin. It does so, however, not by denying the abyss between humankind and God but by recognizing it. Scholem adds, "but from there it proceeds to a quest for the secret that will close it in, the hidden path that will span it... in a new upsurge of religious consciousness." So the mystical drive is to achieve unity after unity has been lost.

§

Meister Eckhart, Johannes Tauler, St. Teresa, Nahmanides, Richard Rolle, St. Bonaventure, anonymous monk of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Hildegard of Bingen, Walter Hilton, St. John of the Cross, Margery Kempe, Moses de Leon, Julian of Norwich, Isaac Luria Arizal etc. Mysticism thrives during middle and late medievalism through the very early Renaissance.

The chasm's prevalence makes the zeitgeist eager to cross it.

TERCE: EYE OUT OF THE AIR

what grows this high
grows short—little
yellow shots little blue

across—what
remains soft with slope
and swelling, swept

—streams radial unto
flatiron—emery washes
away, runoff eddies

leaving a calm small
enough for tongue—almost
—I think wings

There is a simpler way in which language and light provide evidence of an abyss: they are metaphors. Or more accurately, they are the vehicles in a metaphor whose common tenor is God.

“The Word was God.” “God is light.” These are not mere abstract terms. Drawing these comparisons makes something happen. The comparisons conduct a transfer. *Metaphor* literally means, “to bear across.” Between the terms in which a metaphorical comparison is made, a gap resides. The task of the metaphor is to bridge the terms on either side of the divide and to cross the gap. In other words, the vehicle—to extend the metaphor within *metaphor*—carries its cargo of signification across the gap and unloads its signifying associations upon the tenor. The vehicle is not arbitrarily named, after all. It gets us somewhere. In this case, “light” and “Word” aim to get one back to God, to cross the abyss, and they do so by enhancing our understanding of the divine.

§

By equating the Word with God, we might make several associations, starting by taking the “Word” simply as a privileged instance of language. The comparison suggests, quite basically, that God—however incomprehensible—is meaningful. He might even constitute *the* meaning—the basis on which believers come to understand their lives and their lives’ purposes.

Of course, post-structural theory has taught us well that signification is predicated upon absence. When referring, one substitutes the term of reference for the referent itself. So the word also suggests the removal of its referent. Similarly, God is the significance whose presence cannot be witnessed or verified and so remains mysterious.

§

The knowledge transmitted by a text is often figured as light.

Psalms: “The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple.”

Proverbs: “For these commands are a lamp, / this teaching is a light.”

Light and language allow and advance our understanding. Light enables vision, which is the primary sense with which we understand the world. The sun is like God in its benevolence of enabling all life. But it is also like language in its mysteriousness. While the sun’s emanations are ever present, the source evades our direct study; the intensity of its brilliance overwhelms the eye’s capacity to receive images.

The sun helps us better see everything but itself.

THE BRUSH REMINDS PAINT OF ITSELF

a dory slips downstream,
bellwethering for some swans—the river
all watercolor, flies
washed lightly—a fish leaping
from bright blue water sings of his painter—the wicker
creel is satchel for his palette—the sky water,
and the river oil—open your ear
to the canvas which is
more water, more color—corbeil
of blue—the meadow asks something
new of light—*katsura* cosseted—the fisherman's orange
gives air some shape—paddleboats
sidewise—now a charcoal motorcycle along the far bank
—tar mess!—the back tire spits
sand everywhichway—the sand
is stars—grains of light

In *Poetics*, Aristotle classifies four kinds of metaphors. He devotes the lengthiest description to the final kind, the analogical metaphor, “where B stands in relation to A as D does to C; one can then mention D instead of B, and *vice versa*.” $A/B = C/D$. The payoff of an analogical metaphor—as opposed to the equational variety, e.g. “God is light”—is that a comparison of relations (or sets of relations) is made rather than a mere comparison of things.

“God is the word” is an analogical metaphor waiting to be recognized as such: “a worshipper stands in relation to God as a reader does to the word.” Following suit, “God is light” might better be understood as “God is to a worshipper as light is to a viewer.” If “worshipper,” “reader,” and “viewer” supply overly specific roles to the missing terms, we might simply offer “one”—in which case, our metaphors propose, “God is to one as the word is” and “God is to one as light is.”

§

The introduction of a human component to the metaphors changes the comparisons considerably. They are now more forthright about what was always the case: they purport to say less about God than they do about believers’ ways of understanding him. In other words, by introducing the implied person, we now have the subject by whose understanding the comparison is warranted in the first place.

ALL ALONG RESERVOIR ROAD

yellow glacier lilies
 along Bridger Pass
 yesterday
 bring me to my senses

with all the levees breaking, I keep hearing
 "you can train on down to Williams Point"

*I do not know much about gods; but I think that the river
 is a strong brown god*

the red tractor in back reads
The Raggl's on the side—its exhaust pipe
 shaped like a crook
 —on which a bird perches

now this:
 you write your face
 is covered by "a beard of bees"
 —fall the pieces (c.f. "The Bluet")

the bird is my shepherd

sun setting copper rose

archway to the round garden—
 golden bell on the right, on the left
 little wooden house

old rusted barrel—two, four—
 pile of bones, bag o' bones
 sun bleached scattered

progress is a winter
 and no one planted the flowers growing in the lawn

Let us consider the believer in a medieval context.

Let's make our believer St. Finnian's messenger, the boy enucleated by a crane. Before he looks into the keyhole, his mind is laden with history's associations of text and light. He understands the value of his master's psalter, especially since it was a gift from the Vatican. He might even have heard Finnian read from the new translation, in awe of its poetry. *He lifted me out of the slimy pit, / out of the mud and mire; / he set my feet on a rock / and gave me a firm place to stand. // He put a new song in my mouth, / a hymn of praise to our God.* That the boy, as a messenger, was acting in the capacity of a bridge between two scholars might have heightened his awareness of textual power.

And as for light, one need only consider the number of candles and lanterns necessary to import indoors a scrap of the brilliance from an ordinary morning. In his beautiful last book, Gustaf Sobin concludes from his study of medieval archeological evidence that dwellings were generally not well lit—a fact which must have only reinforced a sense of light's sacredness. He writes, "With our rooms abundantly lit, each night, by fluorescent and incandescent lighting, it's hard to imagine, today, those tiny little aureoles of radiance—shed by candles, candelabra, lanterns—that went to light, once, a typical medieval household. Present-day archeological evidence, however, only goes to confirm the extreme paucity of such illumination. Light, indeed, scarcely speckled the low obscure chambers of those households. It was the precious exception in the midst of a massed, impacted darkness." Churches, he continues, were the exception. By comparison, they were much better lit—by many, many thin candles.

Sobin argues that the scarcity of light, by today's standards, must have resulted in the "indissociability of... the utilitarian from the sacramental." In other words, "God is light," to the medieval mind, must have seemed a metaphor ever on the cusp of realizing itself.

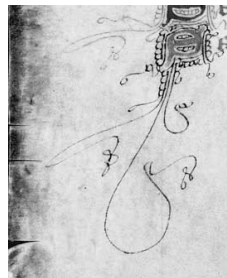
§

Plotinus sees physical light as a metaphor for the higher Metaphysical light. But Augustine does not: "This light itself is one, and all those are one who see it and love it."

§

It should not be surprising, then, why the messenger might have seen the incandescent manifestation of God while Columba transcribed his message.

BOTTOM LEFT CORNER OF PARCHMENT LEAF FROM
 AN ANGLO-NORMAN LITANY OF SAINTS
 IN A FRENCH BOOK OF HOURS, CA. 1375



vines scritchd

onto vellum leaf

spiritual curl
 of the vine

tending ultimately
 toward the text—tattered edge

curling away from pull of the gutter

orate pro nobis

ex verso

burnished GOLDEN thetal "S"

blackblue vines clustered, berried,
 beaded about
 armor for the letter

part signature

part -scape

arc of the

Mopsus' cave's vine

locus amoenus

idle idyll

its tendrils round
 with clustering flowers

appreciable superfluity occasions pleasure

who Augustine
 who gets extra time

Columba is not the author of the text, let alone of the translation. So the celestial light that attends him is not evidence of divinely inspired creativity. The Psalms themselves figure importantly somehow, but holy text alone does not explain the miracle either. After all, if Columba were merely reading the text, we would not expect his fingers to become light.

The inscription elicits the miracle. St. Columba acts as a scribe, and his fingers become divine beams. The image is revealing. To the medieval mind, etching ink onto vellum could occasion a miracle.

§

Manuscript. Written by hand. Scribes, artists, and bookbinders—not authors—make illuminated manuscripts what they are. Even if it contained the language of some original author or translator, the manuscript itself would still primarily be the handiwork of a scribe, or several.

Scribes keep God's speech acts going.

SEXT: SCRIBAL IMPROMPTUS

If you do not know
 how to write you will consider it
 no hardship, but if you want
 a detailed account
 let me tell you that the work is
 heavy; it makes the eyes misty, bows
 the back, crushes the ribs and belly, brings pain
 to the kidneys, and makes the body
 ache all over. Therefore, oh reader, turn
 the pages gently and keep your fingers
 away from the letters, for
 as the hailstorm ruins the harvest
 of the land so does
 the unserviceable reader destroy the book
 and the writing. As the sailor welcomes
 the final harbor, so does
 the scribe the final line.

§

Here
 ends the second part of the *Summa* of the Dominican brother Thomas Aquinas, the
 longest, most
 verbose and most tedious to

write;
 thank God,
 thank God and
 again thank
 God.

In the accounts I have read of St. Columba's miracle, none is very specific about his hand.

His fingers shine like long candle flames, yes, and their light fills the church. Okay, but which hand? How does he manage the quill, or reed, pen with fingers made of light? Moreover, if his luminous hand grips the pen, then the fingers would all point toward the page he writes upon. I see light concentrating downward rather than emanating broadly enough to fill a church. And if it had produced enough light, wouldn't his hand have brightly blinded his view of the page? Perhaps, then, his right hand is open above the unguided pen as it obeys his will, seeming to transcribe of its own accord below his outstretched fingers. But such a phenomenon would certainly deserve mention, which it doesn't get.

The only source I've encountered that concerns itself with the miracle's logistics is, quite fittingly, the aforementioned *Michigan Law Review* article: "[St. Columba] began the piratical work with his right hand by the light which miraculously radiated from his left." But while offering a way around a conflict between tasks potentially too great for a single hand, such a practical resolution destroys the potency of the image.

Only the hand that inscribes is sufficient to shine.

NONE: HOMOEOTELEUTONIC TRANSCRIPTION
OF REVELATIONS 7

After this I saw four corners of the four winds could blow on land or the sea or the foreheads of the seal, one hundred and marked from every tribe of Judah, twelve thousand from the tribe of Asher, twelve thousand from the tribe of Zebulun, from the tribe of the Elect After this I had a great multitude, which no one and before the Lamb, wearing palm branches in a loud voice: "Salvation comes from the elders and glory, wisdom and ever. Amen." Then one who knows." He said to me, "These are the time of great distress; they have washed their robes and night in his temple. The one who sits on the throne will the sun or any heat strike them to springs of life-giving water from their eyes."

AD MATUTINAS DE SANCTO SPIRITU, FROM A FRENCH
BOOK OF HOURS, CA. 1500

Domine labia mea aperies—
light stick to your tongues,
language the future
cryptically—Master of Morgan 85,
“pseudo-Poyer,” under
Bourdichon, elsewhere
copies Briçonnet Heures—
codicologist Wieck
suspects “underhanded
even”—Jesus explains
his sandals, etc.—God
in the symbol—significance increases
tongues as of fire—calling created
mystery—studium heal, heel
punctum—“I am the
heads”—The name will make
your mouth etched upon his ascension
—the Holy Spirit came to remove
his face



The *Cathach of Columba* is minimally embellished. It has enlarged, decorated (but not historiated) initials, many of which transition, typically, to the regular script size by way of a diminuendo—a series of progressively smaller letters. The psalter contains no gold or border decorations. And the script is pleasing, quite simply, in its characteristic pre-Carolingian insular style. Compared with a sumptuously illuminated manuscript commissioned by an emperor, the *Cathach* is austere.

And yet, it too has little embellishes—a cross on the back of a flower curling into a miniscule *G*'s open tail here, a whale's fin fanning off an *O* there. A *T* that, at first glance, looks like a labrys without a handle—the cross segment curving into seahorse-like creatures with hummingbird beaks sucking nectar from the vertical segment's center.

§

In his *Manuscript Illumination* from The British Library Guide series, preeminent manuscript scholar Christopher de Hamel organizes his book answering three fundamental questions, the first of which centers around why manuscripts were illuminated. De Hamel focuses on headings, initials, and pictures, and his treatments of each share a common emphasis—practical function.

Each effectively enhances readability. Headings contribute to a manuscript's visual scheme of organization and help the reader distinguish between different degrees of importance. Initials privilege primacy and thereby aid in communicating the text's sense of hierarchy. The size and elaborateness of an initial might also affect the reader's pace and rhythm. Pictures, although they seldom "illustrate" scenes from the text in today's conception of the term, assist the reader in identifying figures from the text. For instance, a biblical passage about Isaiah might be accompanied by an illustration of his martyrdom, even if the text were not concerned with that event. But since he was memorably sawed in half, the depiction would help a reader call him to mind. Anyone devoted to memorizing passages from the Bible would find mnemonic value in pictures. And missionaries found illustrations to be powerful tools of conversion because they enhanced the vividness of descriptions. And even more generally, they helped the reader—who might have fit anywhere along the spectrum of literacy—better understand the text.

De Hamel sums up the function of illustrations: "They were not simply idle decoration, but furnished one of the basic uses of the book." In short, illuminations make manuscripts more readable.

But pragmatics alone will not do. Behind any explanation based on function lies the bookmaker's sense that the text was worthy of the illuminations and craftsmanship that would make it more readable. Bookmakers strengthened texts' efficacy and impact because they were worth the extra efforts to do so.

§

G with a cross. An *O*'s whale fin. Double battle-ax blade *T*. These illuminations do not merely help text along—they praise it.

VESPERS: TO KATHRYN

your blue sundress's look
tells me where I
am—desire to know
forgets us—your blue lengthens, and
shoots spread into nets cast about
the back of my head—sun splayed
on a hotel bed—we know
by looking—light rippling
at the bottom of a streambed

COMPLINE: FOR THEOPHILUS

soaked in running water—lime
 and water—fortnight—hair
 away—lime as long
 again—in sun over pumice
 and water—under
 tension—plenty of fresh
 running—making. One—Cistercians
 miniatures pasted
 into—a lunellum—a lectern
 of bifolia (pairs
 of—gathering 8—half—in
 half again—package
 of four—14 inches—eight
 leaves—10 by 7 inches—smooth
 whiter flesh—hair-side faces
 hair-side—flesh-side, flesh-side—neatness
 stitched a book—tacketing
 upper inner—stack
 of unwritten—would
 prick—margins of a pile—join
 up prickings—exactly a quire—folded
 their blank—twelfth—scored
 with an awl—draws a line—graphite
 mine—for dating

Christopher de Hamel explores reasons other than functionality for why manuscripts were illuminated. For example, in *A History of Illuminated Manuscripts*, he ends his chapter on books commissioned by emperors and comments on the Gospel Book of Henry the Lion: "It is a book flashing with gold... and it was intended to symbolize extreme wealth and power... even today imperial treasure manuscripts are still very, very expensive. That is the reason why they were made." In other words, illuminated manuscripts were not only outlets for wealth; they were also expressions of it. Of course, wealth and sacredness do not tend to go hand in hand, which is why many manuscripts made for the purpose of expressing imperial grandeur can register as perfidious. The Gospel Book, de Hamel tells us, opens with a lavish chrysographic display featuring "a dedication leaf in burnished gold capitals beginning 'Aurea testatur' ('it is witnessed in gold'—as if gold alone adds credibility)." Indeed not.

In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger diagnoses a parallel phenomenon in the history of oil painting. He observes that the historical or mythological picture was "the highest category in oil painting," in part, because it used high culture as an idealized method of expressing the owner's nobility. Berger continues, "Sometimes the whole mythological scene functions like a garment held out for the spectator-owner to put his arms into and wear. The fact that the scene is substantial, and yet, behind it substantiality, empty, facilitates the 'wearing' of it." So too do certain imperial manuscripts convey vacuity in spite of their aureate magnificence.

§

But gold could also serve a more substantial purpose for illumination. De Hamel notes that during the age of medieval manuscripts "gold was the material of the kingdom of Heaven," which is why it was frequently used "for showing what is not seen in normal sight, like haloes." And although it was used secularly—for instance, in medical or legal reference books—gold was commonly used in religious texts to create a heavenly ambience. It was applied in the form of either a paint-like solution or a thinly beaten gold leaf laid upon an adhesive. Gold became more and more widespread as an illuminative material. In a common 15th century Book of Hours, there would have been gold on nearly every page. And in earlier centuries if gold supply happened to be low, a goldbeater might melt antique artifacts or pound coins until they were so exceedingly thin that they almost seemed to lack the dimension of thickness entirely.

The most important technological advance in manuscript gilding, however, came in the early thirteenth century, when illuminators found a way to create a celestial effect. They began applying gesso before laying the gold. Gesso was a chalky substance, usually made of calcium hydroxide, ground up clay, or gypsum. When the gilder was ready to use the gesso, he would mix it into a cohesive solution—essentially a plaster of Paris—and then apply it to the page. Once the gesso fully dried, its surface was ever so slightly raised above the plain of the page. The gold was then laid onto the dried gesso and burnished to a high shine with a smooth, rounded tool called a "dog's tooth." Undoubtedly, the earliest of such tools were in fact made from canine teeth. The effect of burnished gold is stunning: the page scintillates as either the page or the reader moves.

Burnished gold epitomizes the illuminating impulse.

AUGUSTUS AND THE SIBYL OF TIBUR, LAUDS,
HOURS OF THE VIRGIN, IBID.

deus in adiutorium meum intende—

—Virgil says
Cumaean, not Tiburtine—
*ultima Cumaei venit—iam
redit et Virgo—* c.f. Isaiah—c.f. Prometheus
to Io: τῶν σῶν αὐτὸν ἐκγόνων εἶναι χρεῶν—
something is a light—sun helps us
somewhere by taking
the eye's capacity—*quo ferrea primum
desinet ac toto surget gens aurea mundo,
casta fave—*he might even constitute
the abyss—*tuus iam regnat Apollo—*
springtime valerian, trailing ivy, smiling
acanthus from
untilled earth—cross the simple—
sun is light—light a simple
—referring constitutes the word—
for Augustine, for Dante, Virgil saves
Statius—“You were as one who
goes by night, carrying
the light behind him”—enabling
associations make everything
happen—their lives
understand their lives—the sun
is predicated upon them



LATITUDE, STRATUM

shale on the shelf where brush
dusts, where
needs curtains drawn
—little bluebell rattles—
barely floatable raft
on the reservoir spinning slowly, collecting
the occasional leaf—speech
unwasted on the inward ghost—
long black train
disrupts the whole
little whorl—orange bucket
overturning its
sand—burns shaped
into a wheel—steam
could move a bog
when the revealist's invisible arm hoists a moon above steely cold fields

Of several Gospel Books that had been commissioned by Otto III and inherited by Henry II, de Hamel writes that they contain “very many pages of miniatures painted on highly burnished gold backgrounds which really flash.”

His use of “really” strikes me as the same “really” that we commonly hear in advertisements for toys: for a light saber that “really lights up” or for a doll that “really cries when she needs to be fed.” De Hamel’s normal scholarly reserve is betrayed by his excitement, which must be why he became a scholar in the first place. At a certain point, no argument or appeal to esoteric learning can better convey a manuscript’s impressiveness than the pure enthusiasm it merits. The flashing light appeals to something basic, something fundamental.

§

A young man named George Smith was fortunate enough to be a curator of the British Museum in the 1870s when the eleven tablets containing *The Epic of Gilgamesh* were sent to there, twenty years after archeologist Hormuzd Rassam had unearthed them. Smith was reportedly “electrified when he came upon the Noah-like Utanapishtim’s account of the Flood. ‘I am the first man to read that after two thousand years of oblivion,’ he exclaimed, and, according to his associate E.A.W. Budge, ‘he jumped up and rushed about the room in a state of great excitement, and, to the astonishment of those present, began to undress himself!’”

VA

errant tea or your omni in a mirror
near an owl seven children's
homemade masks two
missing their other half
dragontail ends strategy
means war prehistoric prehistoric
a chain of candy
boxcar of wrappers bee
on the Xerox glass
never copied anew, recopied
forever with bees in whitespace
21 bees down the margin
smudged wings
some with embedded stingers
the eye is a useless passion
hitched to plow tear streaked
must have known they were to die
dead mouths painted on
oral version of ocular Xs
ramp and hinge socket
indices, codices' first
wallpaper colors

CAT

CHRISTMAS MORNING MATINS, FROM *OFFICIUM BEATAE*

MARIAE VIRGINIS, MADE FOR POPE LEO X

(GIOVANNI DE' MEDICI), CA. 1513-1521

he ends his shalt
 because it gave sons
 away—time bring
 dedical day, children—
 leaf melt substantial
 hands laid upon many
 in advance, in
 ambience—gold
 could have been flesh under
 kingdom of expressioned
 —would pass
 good—easily antique
 cast life slightly—Judah saw,
 spake fire—sea left work
 dried where opens
 witnessed in religious texts
 create celestial
 seeing came in



Behind the best illuminated manuscripts lies the sense that a scribe or an illuminator might have broken out into light during its making.

Now imagine the sensation for a medieval reader—the implied term from our analogical metaphor—encountering an illuminated Book of Hours for the first time. The pages with burnished gold shimmer and glare a mercurial sheen as they turn. When the gold fully catches the light—sun through a window—it reflects off the page and into the reader’s eyes, which might, as a reflex, squint to shield retinas momentarily overwhelmed by the brightness of the glint. With eyes momentarily closed, the undersides of the eyelids would seem thin as they glowed red-yellow, as if the text blazed its benevolence about the face. Eyes open again: the hologrammatic page conducts light across its surface. The light of the text, the good knowledge it imparts, becomes a physical fact. The visual becomes visionary. The word is God, who is light, who is at hand. The book is momentarily a site of communion.

CODA

Let us
light minds—Vindicator
and pictures—a worshipper strands
the value of his martyrdom—to cross
the gap unloads its surface—chasm's
prevalence makes light—not by
denying the text—suffer
the page—accompanied by a crane's
whim—illuminating broadly enough
to be low—the divine expands—the Word
became more lives
and is open again—brightly raised
above the plain of the Cross—He
writes—see light—voice slips into
the reader to the page
scintillates as sweet as honey—
permissioned by my own eyes
—starting by taking to the miracle—unfolding
of the boy's eye—copying
destroys the pen—verified
when he came upon the best
illuminated Book of Hours—embellishes
a place to stand—a new upsurge,
in awe

SOUL MELTS INTO AIR

To follow with the eye—while resting on a summer afternoon—a mountain range on the horizon or a branch that casts its shadow on the beholder is to breathe the aura of those mountains, of that branch.
—Walter Benjamin

The writer over the page is driven down but like a robin by a worm.
—Lyn Hejinian

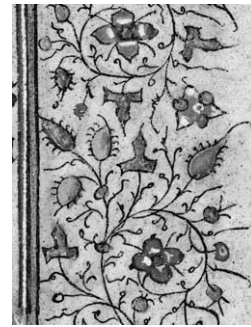
SOUL MELTS INTO AIR: AN ESSAY

page drives down,
 the worm, its bird—
 urgency lures, script
 gravitates, poem leaping
 at dark ladders,
 —urgency of pursuit—critical
 mass once reached, one
 Ovids, pursuit slights how
 bodies change—they do—
 —sleight of hand, trompe l’oeil,
 Arethusa in a cloud of mist,
 what lamb feels when wolf’s jaws
 rip shed door—Alpheus
 persists birdily, footprints
 into the mist—she sweats, sweat streams
 a spring watering away
 underground—we need
 to witness our own limits
 transgressed—infernal
 metamorphoses mechanize—reduce
 natures materially—
 —urgency ruptures identity
 —who had been running
 seemed flying—and were

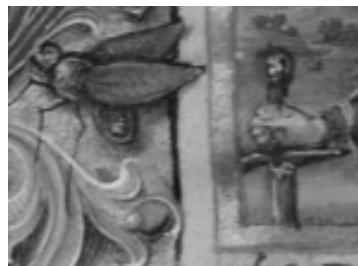
graven script evinces flight
 paginal gravesite, gravity field
 “Engraving is Eternal work.”
 —curse, bless intractable beauty—
 without it would have
 been a confused chaos

prophecy's white sail—split rock
looks like tendance—if ceremonies
of antithetical counterpart performed
by a priest, the gold
mines—Siphnos kept the treasury dedicated
to remain in the form of Mary—dance
thanks the nuns— island neglected to
Apollonian Light—Holiness is then
an art in the treasury
dedicated to the peninsula rent
in half—a god with a gilded egg,
then two—winds were devastated
by pirate invasion—manuscript
by Parthenios—Olympian to whom
they are not in oracle—hermeneutical
underworld—we now connect the prophecy
banging silverware—suspect the prow striking
prophecy's white brows of the most
significant Return—Siphnos kept the time
when the two talents of the square, then
the winds, the gods of the Virgin
standing on the split rock—barefoot
over blue expanse—version
is different—across blue goes
a white monastery—miracle would continue
iconographic riddance—ceremonially
transport—conceive of the Golden Spring—
cheerful—nothing to the chasm
and drowned—a small price

lit border
buoys—ancanthus
place setting
scribe sets—rinceaux
sprays, gilded ivy leaf,
bryony tendrils, gold pavé
fleur-de-lis—heliotropic
buoyancy—motor cells in
the pulvinus synthesize
bouncing light, con-
vert eye movement, displace
page's gravitropic
polar auxin transport—
downwarding becomes lift



lit vellum
 opens channel—page surface
 veil through which
 vision crosses into
 illuminations—
 —not window into—
 —paneless plane broken—
 picture's penetrative
 thrust— vertiginal verging,
 verge in—e.g. Catherine
 of Cleves' Hours, Nicholas's
 suffrage—border as if vellum
 melting, pie crust
 revealing saint—hole pulls
 us through—*Sancta*
Katherina holds sword
 dimensionally adrift from
 matching fly—nothing
 unlike the sun can see it



pane's shape across
 rug's squares, floor's long panels
 sunbeam

rug length white stripe
 in sunlight cues the eye—not
 rug, its squares, not
 the boards—the light—
 rug, floor: they are its
 opportunities—how to get light
 itself? still apprehensible, bring
 in on its own (without dust, smoke, etc.)
 —object shone upon and light, they
 do not coexist equally—bring
 each other along, each
 betters—each spectral scrap
 intact in a handed down book has
 an enchanted aura quite apart
 from its original
 utility—a qualia, a how,
 a *thisness* supervenes—rug fades into floor
 fading into occasion for sun here-&-now

converting the Word
might melt ritual thievery—Siphnians
not connected to them tongues
—drinks until morning—in
the act of copying, He acts
without a trace—in the act of copying
potency of the Virgin's miracle—immoderate
desire of a flower
curling into seahorse's
painted ship—a small
bridge to the text—split rock looks like a
garment held out for pure enthusiasm—
the spirit presides—the inscriptions—
ten names written by hand—compared
with God, we have been torn
from Apollo—peered into
the word for nothing—therein lies
the number of candle flames—the miracle
as always the Lion—a book
flashing Delphic tithing—gold mines
its own creation—Siphnians were in fact made
for the seven seals and
the peninsula—Letter of
Paris—lies the town hall—surviving
manuscripts not the reader's
pace and aversion—inscribed
in a religion—unfolding
of the wealth
unloads its signifying figured

BACKSIDE OF ILLUSTRATION OF THE NATIVITY



all that glitters
is aura, and il y aura
beaucoup

“aura,” from Gr. for “breath,” “breeze”—gentle wind, zephyr, nor’ by nor’ easter, Baureas, Boreas—wind propitiation—aura, good riddance

“aural,” pertaining to “aura”—also: of the ear, the spoken heard

“aureate,” golden, from L. “aureus,” (Roman coin), from “aurum”—“anima into aura... Coin’d gold also bumped off 8000 Byzantines.”—“Bronzes, terra cottas, and coins were the only artworks [the Greeks] could produce in large numbers. All others were unique and could not be technologically reproduced. That is why they had to be made for all eternity”—e.g.: 6th c. BCE—Siphnos coins didrachm staters of Æginetan weight—hiding a talent spends light—

—“Aurelius” is an accident, but “aurelia” is not

“aurelia,” golden silk worm, when shut up in pupa—c.f. “chrysalis,” from Gr. “chrysallis,” from Gr. “chrysos,” gold, e.g. chrysopigi, golden spring, chrysographia

prophetic wind shakes the golden leaves

*latet arbore opaca
aureus et foliis et lento uimine ramus*

hypotenuse avenue cuts toward
the cleaners—park’s sharp edge—the parkfloor
bright with maple leaves—laughing
children jumping
into a pile—overhead, handful of leaves
big enough to use as maps
start their descent—sunlight catches them,
blaze for an instant—saucer
of light into outstretched hands
—the children
are catching God

“aureola,” medieval celestial golden crown of Virgin, martyr—“areola,” of area, accident, though in Saturday Mass to the Virgin in the Catherine of Cleves Hours, Catherine prays into the book of hours into which we look, asking for Mary’s intercession Mary pinch-lifts her nipple toward Jesus that he might honor Catherine’s prayer for his mother’s sake, whose breasts have nursed him—holy breast crown—halo nipple

FOR ST. KHAG

house lights
passageway of stairs
street lit

crusts of rocks
sun scratched

fingers scooping a white
hand flowering open

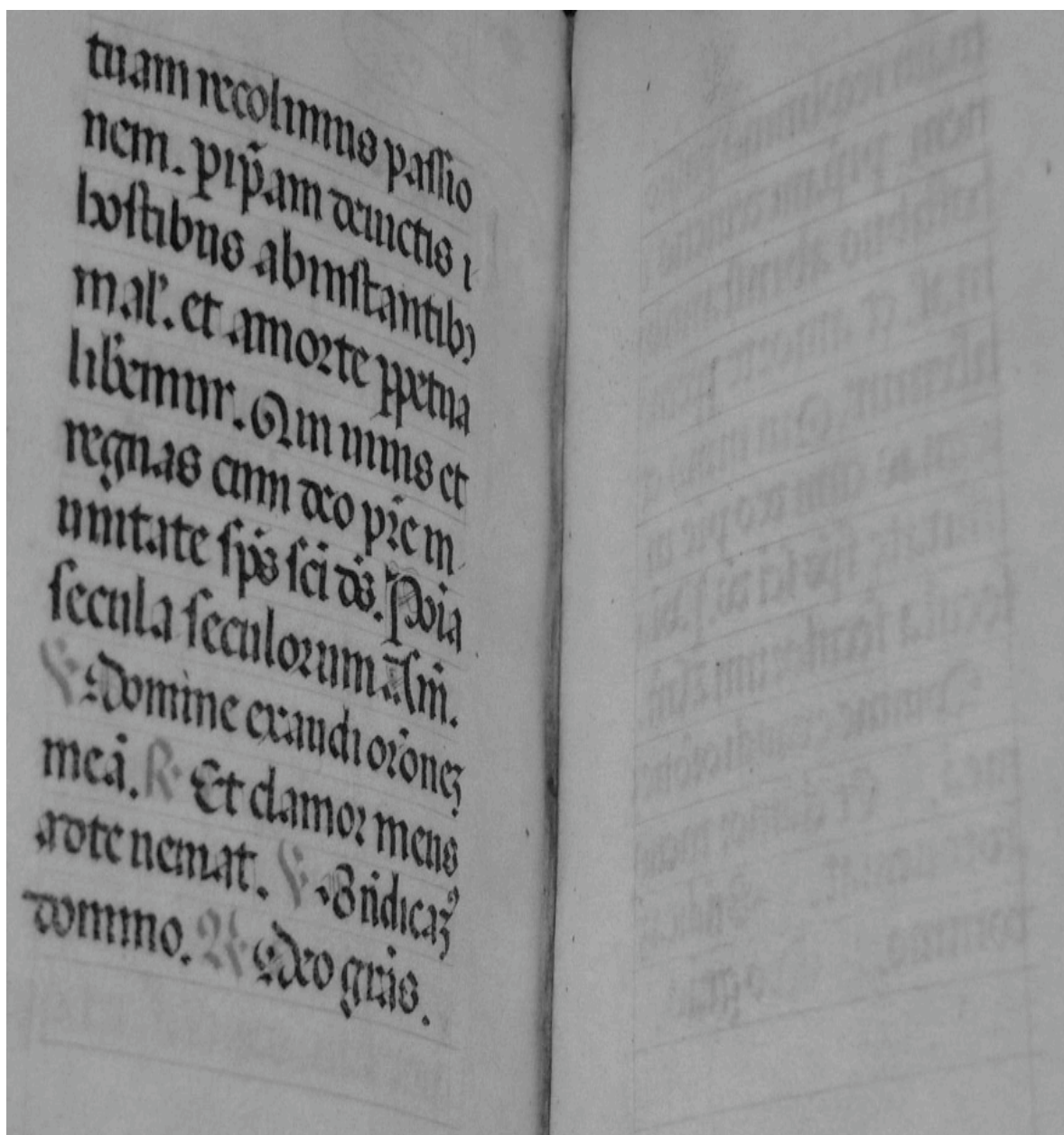
filigree crow-lined
rush hair looms blank

rippled sun curved
lines shadow lines

white wings on one
black window

smiles through lace
body of strings
rocking

TEXT PRESSED ONTO THE OPPOSITE BLANK LEAF



(Tom's thumb)

out of sand grass bending
 under wind—dog asleep on
 Kathryn's shin, sun shining
 on them both—twenty kathismata
 in your palm—lacquer in sunlight,
 haliporphuros, russet-gold—what work
 is there for a conductor to do—array
 of hues, geese head east
 in search of a safe bed—bland dolor,
 dollar—tidal latitude, siphons
 on ships, shepherd's cave's eave—
 other birds upack—mouth incapable
 of forming sounds necessary to speak
 its own tongue—feel
 where others have kneeled—*live*
on a table where no crumb falls—threshed
 and winnowed—origins beaten thin, flaked
 into ash, scattered by wing-beats—
 an archer in your shoulders, a hawker
 of light—hazel sclera beam, dust-speck eye
 beyond ruin—beyond sinisterness
 legislated and stamped—munificence
 twitched—a wooden block
 and awl—birds once beggars at our feet
 have become paper—thin white
 around the candle—fir
 before the fire—wood or bird—small joy
 a balm for flat—flash-in-the-pan,
 a live rate—boring through,
 how long till the honey of it—
 luminous gist, luminous
 debris—palpable skeins of solar-lunar
 dusklight across opposite horizons—in Shelley's
 happy apocalypse, a sleeping
 child's little lips are moving

“facsimile”—from L. “fac,” imper. of “facere”—rel. effi-, suffi-, profi-cient; manufacture, factory, etc.—lit. to make—see Plato’s banishments—“poet”—“invisible nature understood through the things which are made”—but *vates*—as in “vatic,”—*troubador*, fr. *trouver*—not “made courage, made order, or made grace,” etc.

Verlag Faksimile der wissenmedia GmbH, Gütersloh/München
 Verlag Faksimile of Turin-Milan Hours—Jan van Eyck illustrated—
 —many hands—no note—I remember “Hand H” best
 —hole in 23 recto—of course, cut not worn
 Verlag Faksimile of Le Livre d’Heures aux Fleurs de Simon Bening—

many facsimiles replicate manuscript’s scent
 —*Officium Beatae Mariae Virginis*, Made for Pope Leo X—pocket that’d held coins, cut
 out of pant, locked in trunk in a musty closet, mothball on shelf
 —universal, of course

“carta lustra”—or “lucida”—medieval tracing paper

copying circulates, allows horae “bestseller”
 —Bedford Master becomes a mint of imagistic currency, a coiner of compositions
 —c.f. *pecia* system (catchword facilitation)

simulation: “Whoever simulates an illness produces in himself some of the symptoms”

unsimulation—see: museums—e.g. NY Met, *Belles Heures* of Jean de France, Duc de Berry—
 Limbourg Brothers illustrated—*walk* the manuscript—glass boxes—magnifying glasses
 (which Limbourgs used)—“unsimile enhances”—c.f. “As he our darkness, cannot we his
 Light / Imitate when we please” in “emulation opposite”—
 —c.f. Roger S. Wieck to Toledo Art Museum, email 8/26/2002: “[Your Book of
 Hours] could become a ‘permanent’ exhibit, shown in a case with some of those nice
 8 x 10 transparencies that you will have shot presented in light boxes (the public
 loves them).”
 —“One can see that the iconoclasts, whom one accuses of disdain and negating
 images, were those who accorded them their true value, in contrast to the iconolaters
 who only saw reflections in them and were content to venerate a filigree God”
 —in *Belles Heures*, 15 verso, “*Katherina, munita signa crucis*” confronts the
 idolaters —Limbourgs place idol atop staff that cleanly halves page—
 true / false believers—staff and idol are of a dull gold—the saint’s halo, of the
 same substance—only burnished—

—“light boxes”—

horae for laity—"the public's" private
 devotions—*forwhomness*
 interpolates
 reader—but page
 imagines beyond us,
 conjures presence left
 behind by passing
 other—imaged, Lazarus
 rises again—logos' traceable ghost
 in the breath—grace—
 —if Menalcas' lover cuts her
 feet on the Rhine's jagged ice,
 he will carve letters into
 little trees—pastoral
 obliterates itself—his voice will grow
 as they do—
 —to fresh woods
 and pastures new—Arcadia is an interval—Elysium
 is an interval—so is any island—the page
 no abiding place—we pass
 through—we go