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PENANCE TERMINABLE AND INTERMINABLE:

FORM, SUFFERING, AND ACTIVITY IN *PIERS PLOWMAN*

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Abstract

Penance Terminable and Interminable reads *Piers Plowman* as a penitential poem. The dissertation will argue that Langland's repeated staging of penitential fantasies, tropes, and structures of feeling helps illuminate the narrative procedures of late medieval allegory, even as it points to conceptual disturbances internal to the category of penance itself. Langland, on this account, resists the reduction of penance to the moralizing fantasies of pastoral theology; in part for this reason, the poem's interest in penance cannot be subsumed within more confessional narratives of Foucauldian historiography. Building instead on a tendency within recent Langland scholarship to think through Aristotelian accounts of ethics and enjoyment, on the one hand, and psychoanalytic accounts of longing and desire, on the other, the dissertation argues that penance is a temporally dilated and open-ended structure of activity—one in which sin is made legible as suffering, and suffering takes on a redemptive form. But for Langland, the relays and transitions between sin, suffering, and salvation are neither smooth nor straightforward. In one Passus after another, fascinated with the way peculiar styles of impasse shed light on the ways penance goes wrong, Langland produces figures who are entangled in bad, unskillful, and unproductive penance. What lies behind such fascination, this dissertation will argue, is a properly philosophical interest on Langland's part in making sense of the antinomies intrinsic to penance—antinomies that, on this account, are produced by the slippages and gaps between intention and action, suffering and enjoyment, and retrospective and future-oriented forms of activity. The first chapter sets the stage for the larger inquiry, using Robert Mannyng's exemplary narratives to ground the historical considerations of the dissertation, while demonstrating how perversion is baked into the very structure of penitential activity. The second chapter examines the complex styles of mirroring and disavowal that tether penitential to sexual

activity in *Piers Plowman*; this chapter is also particularly interested in Langland's deployment of romance genres. The third chapter turns to Aristotle and Aquinas, using form and matter distinctions to make sense of Langland's complex mapping of the relationship between sin and suffering. The final chapter turns to Hannah Arendt's distinctions between work and labor in order to think about penitential reification, the gap between fruitful and fruitless penance, and Langland's insatiable desire to begin anew.

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Introduction

Theology, Law, Exemplarity

This dissertation centers largely on a single text, William Langland's *Piers Plowman*, and it will take as its central problem that of conceptualizing and interrogating the penitential dimensions of the poem. In order to introduce the questions that will consume this project, however, I will begin in a roundabout way, turning in this section to a brief account of the *Tractatus de Poenitentia*, a treaty on penance that Gratian placed in the Causa 33 of his *Decretum*. The text itself dates back to the 12th century, but it continued to shape penitential thinking in subsequent centuries. Indeed, Joseph Goering has referred to it as "the most influential discussion of penance throughout the rest of the Middle Ages" (221), setting as it did the terms not just for developments in legal jurisprudence and canon law, but for a specifically theological inquiry—one taken up by later theologians, like Alan of Lille, Peter Chanter and Peter Lombard.[1] Lombard's use of Gratian is especially worth remarking, not just because the former's *Sentences* made ample use of the *Tractatus*, but because Lombard was required reading at faculties and schools of theology—thereby setting the terms for Scholastic approaches to Christian doctrine on penance.[2] Beyond its importance for the history of penance, however, appealing to Gratian is a way of making the argument that questions about penance are also in excess of any narrow account of the narrowly theological or canonistic developments of the

[1] Joseph Goering, "The Scholastic Turn (1100-1500): Penitential Theology and Law in the Schools," in Firey, ed. *A New History of Penance*. For the influence of Gratian on Peter the Chanter, Alan of Lille, and Peter Lombard, see Atria Larson's *Master of Penance*, 487-99.

[2] Goering remarks that "Lombard added very little concerning penance to what he already found in Gratian's *Decretum*" (228). A more nuanced analysis can be found in chapter 8 of Larson's *Master of Penance* (315-42). Part of the polemic of that chapter is to contest the primacy of Peter Abelard in the development of twelfth century accounts of penance and contrition (319)—an argument that is helpful partly because it helps to reframe narrative arcs that rely on penance to argue for the "discovery" of interiority or individuality in the period. For a classical statement of that argument (that depends heavily on Abelard's account of contrition), see Colin Morris, *The Discovery of the Individual 1050-1200*.

period. Rather, I want to begin asking how we, as medievalists, historicize penance; how we are to understand the fissures and antinomies nested in the category of penance, and what it might mean to think capaciously about the remarkable ability of penitential thought—even in texts whose main thrust is juridical and theological—to proliferate exempla, deploy metaphors and analogies, and dramatize allegorical ways of reading.

In the first *Distinctio* of the *Tractatus de Poenitentia* (hereafter cited as TP), Gratian opens with a precise, analytical question: when, *exactly*, does the sacrament of penance perform its work and reconcile the sinner to God? Is the sinner reconciled at the moment of oral confession, or is it prior to that, when the sinner has renounced the sin, but before performing oral confession to a priest? The question, as it turns out, has no simple answer—there are reasons both for and against thinking that penance performs its work in the interior of the soul, when one truly becomes contrite and ashamed of one's sin, just as there are reasons for privileging the external, sacramental ritual of confession proper. And for all the parallels to Peter Abelard's *Sic et Non* or the Scholastic *Summas* that would come after, what is immediately striking about Gratian is the rapidity with which this kernel of a question rapidly accretes material from different sources: quotations from the Church Fathers, legal canons, edicts from Roman Law, Biblical references, Gratian's own explications. These quotations and theological elaborations constantly shift the implications lodged in the original question, creating relays and connections among sets of concepts that slowly become visible over the course of the discussion. There are theological concepts, like sin, penance, contrition, satisfaction, and confession; juridical categories, like punishment, the law, and delinquency; and also terms we would today recognize as belonging to the sphere of moral psychology, like intention, volition, pleasure, shame, and action. Beneath this teeming multiplicity of concepts, sources, and voices lies the kernel of a difficult and

paradoxical issue the text keeps returning to: namely, that there is something both necessary and troubling about the distinction between interiority and exteriority—or soul and social structure, intention and action—as these emerge in penitential contexts. For some, as Augustine says, "the will is taken to be the work" (TP 3). Other sources insist, on the contrary, that "no one may suffer punishment for a thought" (TP 7). One legal digest breaks the problem down into a kind of judicial grammar of motives where there are four types of going wrong (deeds, spoken words, written words, plans), and seven aspects associated with each type (motive, person, place, time, quality, quantity, outcome; c.f. TP 9). Yet that kind of systematicity disappears almost as soon as it emerges: exceptions proliferate, and as different types of cases are considered and more authors enter the picture, the legalistic (and canonistic) arguments bleed into a different style of reasoning—a theological and even incipiently literary one, in which the arguments depend increasingly on poetic metaphors, exempla, and the Biblical stories cited by the Church Fathers.

Gratian cites Ezekiel, for example: "tear your hearts, and not the clothes" (TP 19). Those garments are for Gratian a figure for "external satisfaction," which is to say, for confession. On the basis of that citation, it is clear that contrition rather than confession carries the weight of satisfaction. But that interpretation does not bring the issue on to rest—on the contrary, it seems to encourage Gratian to continue producing further figures and stories. Turning to a widespread penitential *topos*, Gratian describes a group of lepers who are cleansed before they ever meet a group of priests—a tale that leads, in turn, to Lazarus, "who was not (Gratian says) led forth from the tomb first and afterward resuscitated," but rather "became alive again in the sepulcher and came back alive" (TP 19).[3] The gothic image of the entombed yet living Lazarus leads to an

[3] For a larger contextualization of the uses of these exempla in penitential discussions, see Larson 47-57. Calling it "a minitreatise on life and death," Larson notes the Augustinian backdrop for Gratian's excursus while also emphasizing the originality of Gratian's reading with respect to his contemporaries. For an extended account of the

even more startling juxtaposition of death and life, prompted by the need to account for what is left of confession once contrition has already happened. Dead men cannot confess, Gratian says—and since the person who confesses must be alive, Lazarus carries "his resuscitator present to him and living within him" (TP 19). In a startling and abrupt fashion, the question of how to perform proper penance has become something else entirely: an examination of the principle of aliveness and an argument for the indwelling of God in the soul. More than that, even, Gratian suggests that death and life are not just intimately connected, but are in some way nested within one another, such that sin and penance are names for the way in which we can find or lose death or aliveness in the middle of our habitual ways of being sentient.

Such a commitment to thinking with and through examples and figures is everywhere in the *Tractatus*. Indeed, and famously, the overarching question of *Distinctio* 1—whether the sinner makes satisfaction to God at the moment of confession or at the moment of contrition—is one Gratian eventually leaves unresolved. Different authorities mobilize such different figures, in such different ways, that there is no unambiguous answer, and good theological grounds remain for either position. In Gratian's words: "We have briefly explained to all what authorities or what supporting arguments both opinions about confession and satisfaction rely upon. To which of these one should preferably adhere, however, is reserved to the judgment of the reader" (TP 87). That indeterminacy should make it clear that Gratian's project in the *Tractatus* does not have a *terminus* set in advance; nor is the aim of the text to reconcile different approaches to the problem into a single, non-contradictory system—as it might be for later Scholastics.[4] Instead, as

moralizing uses of leprosy, albeit in quite different contexts, see Julie Orlemanski's *Symptomatic Subjects*, especially Chapter 6.

[4] Goering argues that a more rigid systematicity in theology emerges in the 14th and 15th centuries, when "the old academic task of presenting an entire intellectual tradition, replete with conflicts and disputes, was perhaps no longer tenable" (234).

Goering has argued, the aim of the text seems to be pedagogical, seeking not so much to shape doctrine or to reconcile different authorities as to "introduce students to a complex tradition" (226)—one that was deeply and constitutively ambivalent (rather than merely temporarily so), and which remained dependent upon the reader's active participation in various genres of ethical reading and tropological analysis.

In *Ethics and Enjoyment in Late Medieval Poetry*, Jessica Rosenfeld has argued that "the philosophy and poetry of the later Middle Ages together formed a thriving ethical discourse" (Rosenfeld 6); similar arguments can be found in Ryan McDermott's work on tropology, Nicolette Zeeman's exploration of medieval desire, Mark Miller's account of normativity in Chaucer, and Kellie Robertson's claim that representational debates in philosophy and in poetry mirror and are connected to one another.[5] Part of the aim of this dissertation is to reiterate that claim by insisting that even less philosophically inclined texts—texts we might think of as theological or pastoral—were also a part of this open-ended conversation about ethics and moral psychology. At the same time, even theological and pastoral texts often enter an incipiently literary mode, as they deploy examples and figures that grapple with conceptual problems with no clear answers. The *Tractatus de Poenitentia* is of course not a poem: the overarching framework is theological, not figural or narrative. But figures, metaphors, analogies and stories are crucial to its style of reasoning, and the return of similar tropes in different voices produces rich aesthetic effects. In the Lazarus passage, for example, the penitent is a figure of aliveness; but when, just a few pages later, Gratian argues that it is confession rather than contrition where the sacrament truly does its work, the penitent's deathliness comes to the fore: "the penitent is to

[5] See Jessica Rosenfeld's *Ethics and Enjoyment in Late Medieval Poetry: Love After Aristotle*, Ryan McDermott's *Tropologies*, Nicolette Zeeman's *Piers Plowman and the Medieval Discourse of Desire*, Mark Miller's *Philosophical Chaucer* and Kellie Robertson's *Nature Speaks: Medieval Literature and Aristotelian Philosophy*.

renounce the world, to indulge in sleep less than nature demands, to cause disruptions with lamentations, to break apart with sighs… to live in such a way that he dies to this vital enjoyment" (TP 39). Following in the steps of classical arguments laid out by Paul, Augustine, and Gregory, Gratian argues that this embrace of death is a way of fending off another kind of death, which is one of the names for sin. There is a "sin unto death," says Gratian, and that phrase becomes a shorthand for bare (or unredeemed) life itself, life lived without transcendental aspirations, in which the sinner perseveres in sin "whether by delighting in the sin or by despairing of mercy, all the way to death" (TP 43). Nor is this the end of the issue. Now in the form of a leitmotif, the phrase "sin unto death" seems to create a snag in the text, making a demand on Gratian to further explicate the notion—and to do so through narrative. First, he speaks of the snake, who is excluded from being able to embrace the death of the world and rise into (what is properly to be thought of as) life: for the snake was "not called to life through confession" (TP 45). Then Gratian turns to Cain, who was offered confession but denied it (TP 45). Snake and Cain figure are ideologemes as well as narrative kernels, and they are useful precisely because their overfamiliarity means they can be deployed in the service of ecclesiastical ends. Gratian's larger point, at least in this late part of *Distinctio* 1, is that it is imperative that one confess before a priest, even after one has repented. In this sense, part of the work of the text is to insist on the authority of the Church, and to do so through a rather flat-footed set of oppositions. But there is nevertheless something intriguing about Gratian's need to populate the texts with snakes and villainous sinners; and a quasi-literary intoxication in these slippages and reversals that render life legible as death, and death legible again as life. Such moments suggest the possibility of further elaborations and narratives. They also enfold philosophical questions, for nested in these examples is an incipient account of what creaturely

life entails. The snake, in particular, becomes exemplary of a form of sentience that inhabits ordinary time, is shaped by habit, and is shadowed by death. That creaturely life is not the same as the properly human life, which is in this text understood as a *penitential* life: a life that refuses to sin unto death; a life that dies to itself and to its "vital enjoyment" in order to live again (TP 45). The point is theologically familiar, but the examples are no less powerful for all that, especially when placed in proximity to Lazarus and the lepers. Human life, in some opaque way, is most deeply itself when it renounces itself, and that renunciation is aesthetically powerful because of the way that renunciation is legible at once as a site of mortification and aliveness. By the same token, it is equally characteristic of human life to refuse that renunciation, like Cain, giving up the specifically *human* creature's truest calling in the embrace of an everyday existence that is now equated with sin.

What are we to make of this field of concepts, texts, genres and exempla that overlap and displace one another, creating friction and tension across the surface of Gratian's text? Given the ambivalence of Gratian's conclusion, it is worth reiterating that Gratian does not have in view a single, settled theological argument, using literary figures to merely illustrate his or the Church's views—even if it remains true that, on the whole, Gratian is advocating for an apparatus of ecclesiastical rules and regulations that can be enforced by canon law. The law itself is marked by gaps and ambiguities—precisely because the sources of normativity that give authority to the law depend upon an underbelly of tales, examples, metaphors and analogies that shed light on incommensurable aspects of what drives the human creature to want to become penitential in the first place. Such conceptual cracks and fissures are even more visible when they do not as clearly depend upon Pauline or Augustinian frameworks. In the early part of *Distinctio* 1, while arguing

that penance is effective at the moment of contrition rather than that of confession, Gratian cites a more narrowly legalistic example, from the Ancient Roman jurist Marcus Antitius Labeo:

> It is a common question whether he who carries away a measure of corn from the heap commits a theft of the whole entity or truly only of that which he takes away. Offilius believes that it is a theft of the entire heap. For also he who has touched someone's ear, says Trebatius, seems to have touched all of him. Then, also, he who has opened a large jar and then has removed a little of the wine seems to have committed theft of it all. But the truth is that they are held responsible for theft for as much as they have taken. For even if someone opened a chest which he had not been able to lift and touches all the things which were in it, and in this way departs but then turns back and removes one of these things, and, before he withdraws to where he had intended, should be apprehended, he will be both a manifest thief and a non-manifest thief of the same thing. But even if someone should cut and steal away a crop before dawn, he is a manifest and non-manifest thief for that which he cuts (TP 6-7).

This episode belongs to one of the opening sections of the *Tractatus de Poenitentia*, in which Gratian mulls the possibility of being punished for a thought or an intention, even when the action itself is not performed, or is performed poorly or incompletely. Labeo's brief and enigmatic *exemplum* about thieving, on the contrary, suggests that action cannot be excised from the account of blame and responsibility. But to press that argument, the *exemplum* insists that action and intention are finally coterminous: the ultimate moral of the story is that one ought to be punished only and exactly for what one both intends to do and does, and no more. Yet the narrative that is meant to substantiate such a conclusion is troubled—partly because the world of things that is meant to ground the uncertain terrain of intention is ontologically enigmatic. What is it that makes an entity an entity, or a heap a heap, and at what moment can a heap said to have been stolen in the first place? Why do assumptions about punishment change so quickly when the thief steals some part of a jar of wine, when that same thief steals part of a heap of corn, or when the thief is not a thief at all, but merely a perverse groper who gropes (without stealing) the treasure of another? The anxiety about touch is all the more pressing because Gratian has only

just finished speaking about the intent to rob another not of their goods, but of their virginity—a place where the relation of (bodily) part to (bodily) whole is more dramatically in question (TP 6). But displaced here, into the exemplum on robbery, the thief's groping is a pure narrative surplus—one that points back to another surplus, lodged within the ontology of action as such. The obscene enjoyment of the thief haunts the tale, and his intentions as narrated remain opaque—which is also to say that the sphere of his gestures and actions extend beyond the sphere of activity that is punishable by the law. After all, the exemplum is itself a miniature narrative, and a convoluted one at that: the initial attempt to steal the chest is blocked by its heaviness, and the would-be thief is haunted by doubled motivations, half-attempts, deferred longing, and a half-hearted attempt to flee (which leads him back to the action of stealing a part of the treasure, rather than the longed-for whole). Even as it seems to endorse a legalistic account of morality, then, Gratian's story also suggests that the entangled relationship of enjoyment, sin, and penance will not be easy to parse; that there is no simple relationship between what is visible and public, on the one hand, and what is secret and invisible, on the other; and that trying to demarcate the boundaries of action for an embodied creature that moves through time will require coming to terms with fuzziness, error, and disruption.

One central argument of this dissertation is that the field of concepts summoned by the penitential imaginary tend to orbit around the central categories of action and activity. A second argument is that these concepts—embodiment, time, intentionality, enjoyment—are not, as it were, clear landmarks on a fully explored theological map that allows good Christians to chart their way down the inexorable route that goes from sin to penance. On the contrary, and as we have started to see, just to the degree that sin is messy and ambiguous, so too is penance—because penance is also a form of human activity, subject to the same troubled gaps and lacunae

that characterize sin itself. To parse the work done by contrition and confession in the larger operations of penance is to wrestle with the gap between different sites of activity—manifest and non-manifest activity, we might say, to use the language from the brief exemplum of the sinful thief. Again, to the degree that contrition is supposed to lead inevitably to confession, one might think of the tale of the thief as staging a more general question about incomplete actions and/or actions that are unhappily performed: the issue posed for him by penance is that there are no clear criteria for delimiting the boundaries of completed penitential activity, given the temporal lag that separates contrition from confession. There is, in other words, no simple method of addressing the discomfiting fact that even the most contrite penitent may find themselves halted or interrupted by circumstance on the way to confession—death, of course, being one such possible interruption, though not by any means the only one (a change of heart being another, and perhaps more terrifying, possibility). But the problem of articulating the relationship of contrition and confession is just the first in a long array of troubles that emerge for Gratian, because penance is inevitably performed by mutable creatures that turn to penance when they seek to confront the various ways they have gone astray in the past, trying to move differently—stumblingly, still haunted by the trace of sinful habits, shame, and anxiety—into the future. As Gratian suggests at a later moment: "confession of sin is rare; penance is rare. Nature and shame resist it because every flesh is beholden to guilt, and every person is ashamed to confess his sin as long as he thinks more about the present than the future… For iniquity, which gives occasion to harm, is swift; virtue is slow" (TP 191). Just as the thief may ask at what point his enjoyment in another's treasure has turned to actual stealing, and at what point the stealing of a part has become the stealing of a whole, so will Gratian inquire of the penitent when his suffering can be said to have become transformed into fruitful penance, what the difference might be between

repenting for part of one's life and repenting for the whole, and what it might mean to repent for sins even while one continues to sin (see, TP 163). To think about penance at all, therefore, even from the legalistic, systematizing perspective of a twelfth century canon lawyer, is already to throw oneself into a vibrant conversation about human activity—which is to say, into an inquiry into means and ends, intention and action, enjoyment and suffering, and time and embodiment. This is an endlessly generative set of questions—and, as we shall see, it is a set of questions that continue to shape the philosophical thought and literary procedures of English medieval writers, including William Langland.

Foucault: Ontological and Epistemological Temptations

Before turning to Langland and outlining the central claims of the dissertation as a whole, however, it is worth pausing to make sense of a methodological issue, and to make visible the stakes of thinking about penance in the way that I have started to do here. Any dissertation that grapples with the penitential imaginary of the late Middle Ages must make a detour, sooner or later, through Michel Foucault's influential and shifting account of penance and sexuality. For Foucault, the genealogy of the modern subject can be traced by examining the rise and increasing dominance of confessional practices, and the subsequent transposition of those practices from the domain of religion to the domains of psychiatry, the school, and the nuclear family. Penance becomes an object of special interest for Foucault in *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1.* As he puts it: "first the practice of penance, then that of the examination of conscience and spiritual direction, was the formative nucleus" around which the modern subject emerged, as sexuality came to bear the double pressure of being subject at once to secrecy and the compulsion towards disclosure (HS 107). For this reason, confession has a profoundly ambiguous location within the Foucauldian account. On the one hand, as Judith Butler has argued, confession emerges in

Foucault's thought as a paradigmatic instance through which to think about "pastoral power," since it is through the (enforced) "compulsion to disclose" that an entire populace produces and cedes knowledge of themselves to those who claim the position of administrators of the soul (Butler 162). To this degree, the Christian penitential project can be read as cementing ecclesiastical authority by differentiating priests from penitents, or canonists like Gratian from the people who flocked to the churches of 12th century Bologna. Paraphrasing Foucault, one could think of the penitential practices of the Medieval Church as part of a regime in which the pressure to confess meant that "polymorphous conducts were actually extracted from [the penitents'] bodies and from their pleasures; or rather, they were solidified in them; they were drawn out, revealed, isolated, intensified, incorporated" (HS 48). Such an account does not mean that the clerics, theologians, and canonists who gave shape to the doctrine of penance in the Middle Ages had any special knowledge or particularly nefarious intentions. On the contrary, it is part of the confessional ruse through which power operates, as Foucault understands it, that the one who is "supposed to know" is the penitent, not the confessor. As he puts it, the agent of domination is not the one who speaks, but rather the one who listens (HS 62). For this reason, the multiplicity and open-endedness of Gratian's discourse poses no particular problem to a reading of the *Tractatus de Poenitentia* as a participant in the dynamics of power and pleasure that made confession a central node of compulsion and truth-telling throughout the period.

But if confession is in this way a locus of power, this is also because of the productivity and generativity of these truth procedures "from below," which already in the *History of Sexuality* are understood to be techniques through which the subject comes into existence and modifies itself (HS 62). Confessional practices are sites of polymorphous pleasures, too—Foucault insists that however shaped by the spirals of power and pleasure, there is still "an *ars erotica* inherent in

confession" (HS 70). This is why Foucault's late revision to his own work, in the Berkeley and Dartmouth lectures conducted in 1980 (*On the Origins of the Hermeneutic of the Self*), are as much an extension of the threads of argument laid out in *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1* as they are an "autocritique" of his own earlier work (OHS 6). In those later lectures, Foucault is more overtly optimistic about the possibilities for self-transformation as they inhere in confessional procedures. Confession is theorized as not *merely* a "tool of domination"—though it remains that, too—but now explicitly as a "technique of the self." Such techniques of the self, he says, are those which "permit individuals to effect, by their own means, a certain number of operations on their own bodies, on their own souls, on their own thoughts, on their own conduct, and in this manner so as to transform themselves, modify themselves, or to attain to a certain state of perfection, of happiness, or purity, of super-natural-power, and so on" (OHS 25). Confession, in these late lectures, operates according to a sacrificial logic. "We have to sacrifice the self in order to discover the truth about ourself," says Foucault, "and we have to discover the truth about ourself in order to sacrifice ourself" (OHS 73). But although that shift towards sacrifice is powerful, sacrifice is not that element in Foucault's lectures I want to emphasize. Instead, what seems significant is the repeated emphasis on *truth* as the central term for understanding the operations of the techniques of penance. Whether critical or utopian, for Foucault confession creates, entraps, or promises to free subjects through the doubled promise and obligation that one ought "to declare aloud and intelligibly the truth about oneself" (OHS 20). Language is the very stuff of confession; truth is its aim. The philosophical importance of confession lies in the privilege it grants to epistemology; and because of this, according to Foucault, the self that is created in and through such techniques—the legacy of the Middle Ages to modernity—is a "hermeneutic" self.

Contained in the Dartmouth lectures, however, there is also a historical narrative that traces the growth of confessional procedures out of an earlier penitential system, one that focused not so much on the verbalization of thoughts as the manifestation of the sinner's being before the community. The technical terms Foucault gives the two forms of penance that belonged to each of these systems are "exomologesis"—this is the earlier form of public confession—and "exagoreusis"—which names the practices of private confession that grew out of this older form of penance. Exomologesis, or public penance, conceives of penance as a *status* that is imposed on or assumed by the penitent. Narratively, it follows a "law of dramatic emphasis and of maximum theatricality," and is not a practice of verbal enumeration or the analysis of sins, so much as of "somatic expressions and symbolic expressions" (OHS 59). This is the world of sackcloth and ashes; the world where one becomes exiled from the community; the world where one performs feats of ascetic deprivation; and the world where it is one's obligation to reveal before the Christian community the sinner one has turned into, in order to no longer be the sinner that one is. In contrast, *exagoreusis*—says Foucault—emerged from early monastic cultures where the emphasis was on the discursive analysis of one's own sinful interiority. Committed to verbalization as the means to pursue truth, early Christian monks would confess not so much their *acts* as the secret movement of their *thoughts*, the "whole field of subjective data" to which they alone had access, parsing the thoughts that were true (and came from God) from those that were false (and came from the Devil). In doing so, the monks became capable of transforming and producing their selves through a "perpetual hermeneutics" that centered on procedures of verification. These procedures kept falsehood and the Devil at bay, promised the monks autonomy over themselves and their thoughts, and offered these same thoughts to a divine gaze where the truth content of such thoughts might be made visible to the penitent monk as well

(OHS 72). On Foucault's account, the practice of private confession is finally the more significant one, since it is by way of the foreclosure of the terrain of action, the continuous process of self-examination, and the faith in the procedures of veridicality that the Cartesian subject, and the modern subject more generally, came into existence.

Underlying Foucault's historical account are a set of implicit assumptions that have been contested or refined over the years. Briefly, Foucault often insists on the importance of the Fourth Lateran Council as a watershed moment in which confessional practices transformed the relationship of believers to both the Church and to themselves, subjecting them to the new obligation of annual confession (HS 58). But historians have debated the importance of the Fourth Lateran, tracing practices of self-examination back into the Carolingian period and the Early Middle Ages.[6] Again, a central personage in Foucault's historical account is John Cassian, whose *Institutiones* offered Foucault a paradigmatic example of how self-examination could become radically disconnected from the entire sphere of worldly activity (OHS 69). But monastic forms of penance were only one among many, and other styles of penance (from fasting at Lent to flagellants) could and did place a different value on embodiment, interiority, and collectivity than that imagined by the medieval monks that Foucault thought of as paradigmatic.[7] Finally, Foucault's analysis of the progression from public to private penance can be used to endorse a historical narrative that evades the messiness of penitential practices on the

[6] In a different article, "The Historiography of Early Medieval Penance," he offers an in-depth account of the historical debates surrounding the importance of the Fourth Lateran. Abigail Firey's introduction to the volume where the second essay is located, *A New History of Penance*, clarifies the historical debate around the "old history of penance" and the "new history of penance." Whereas the old history of penance sees rupture, the contributors to that volume see stories of continuity and regression, confessional practices that long preceded the Fourth Lateran, and penitential practices that, without being confessional, subsisted long after confession was

[7] Dominique Iogna-Pratt's "Topographies of Penance in the Latin West" has helped me see ways in which the older, public penance continued to shape the penitential imaginary of Medieval Europe long after 1215. John Bossy's chapter on penance in *Christianity and the West 1400-1700* has also helped me think about alternate styles of periodization, and to consider what it means to think of collective practices around Lent and flagellation as paradigmatic of the penitential practices of the period.

ground. Historians have argued that private penance may not have been particularly secret, since even after the Fourth Lateran most confessions were occurring under conditions of relative publicity.[8] "Public penance" and "private confession" seem to have overlapped at various times, and become confused, and the question of how or even whether to draw significant historical boundaries at the moment where the one replaces or subsumes the other remains debatable.

Nevertheless, Foucault's interest in burrowing beneath juridical categories in order to understand how power and pleasure become entangled, leading to differing styles of embodiment and subjectivation, is one that guides this dissertation as well. Furthermore, any account that reads Foucault as overly teleological can itself become overblown. At least in these lectures, Foucault is careful to argue that private penance did not merely supplant public penance. Not only do these penitential procedures *alternate*—they can also be found in mixed form. This is the case in medieval confession, which Foucault describes as "something like a strange mixture of *examologesis* and *exagoreusis*" (OHS 93). Rather than a progression of stages, then, Foucault's account often suggests that there was a long process of oscillation, conflict, and fluctuation, as public and private penance each sought to enact different tendencies (or "temptations") within Christianity. *Exomologesis*, the fantasy of manifesting the truth through the somatization and display of the body, continued to channel the "ontological temptation" of Christianity, whereas *exagoreusis*, the fantasy of finding truth through verbalization, enacted the "epistemological temptation" of Christianity (OHS 75). Because Foucault is finally interested in bringing to bear his narrative of Christian confessional techniques on the formation of the modern subject, it is perhaps inevitable that he sometimes leans towards a historical narrative of replacement and substitution. But in the final instance, the question that Foucault poses is this: if the ontological

[8] See, for example, Rob Meens, "The Frequency and Nature of Early Medieval Penance," where he argues elegantly that private penance did not necessarily entail secrecy (97).

and the epistemological temptations of Christianity were so often jostling with and against one another, what would it mean to think about the penitential imaginary of the late Middle Ages *without* immediately assuming that the epistemological (or confessional) tendency within Christianity is the one that ought to direct our interest? What other ways of inhabiting or conceptualizing penitential practices might one find in the fourteenth century, if one were looking within these texts for descriptions of somatization, theatricality, embodiment, and work?

A desire to privilege ontology over epistemology has been articulated, albeit in a very different context, by Kellie Robertson, who in a monograph on the influence of Aristotle on medieval figurations of nature, *Nature Speaks*, suggests that there were no clear distinctions between thought about physics and thought about ethics (Robertson 15). Jessica Rosenfeld, committed to making sense of medieval love poetry through Aristotelian accounts of pleasure and activity, is another critic whose emphasis lies less in questions of knowledge than on questions of pleasure and suffering, lack and fulfilment, and activity and rest (Rosenfeld 3). This dissertation will also turn towards Aristotle in order to theorize penance as an embodied and durational form of activity, as it seeks to ground its account of penance not in language, truth, and epistemology, but in embodiment, labor, and ontology. Paradoxically, this is another reason to have introduced the issue with Gratian's text: as a jurist who helped theorize the very confessional techniques Foucault finally privileges, one might expect the *Tractatus de Poenitentia* to be most productively read in the light of its epistemological commitments. Gratian is certainly interested in developing a "hermeneutics of the self." Yet close-reading those early fragments of Gratian help us to see how and why the story cannot stop there: Gratian seeks to celebrate, explore, and demonstrate the value of confessional practices *by* continually returning to analogies, poetic tropes, exempla, and Biblical stories that make sense of penance as a process

through which truth is manifested not in language, but in "somatic expressions and symbolic expressions." We have seen already how the figure of Lazarus, alive within the tomb, breaks out of his enclosure to exhibit before others his vivified flesh. We have seen, wandering through Gratian's text, the figure of the penitent who renounces the world and wallows in sorrow, relinquishing the "vital enjoyment" that is part and parcel of ordinary creaturely life in order to follow the calling that summons him to a higher life. We have also seen how the thief in Labeo's negative *exemplum* was the mirror image of these heroic narratives of successful penance, and in particular, how that case revealed a growing tension between manifest and non-manifest activity—which is to say, between the sphere of intention and the realm of activity, between the insidious pleasures of sinful enjoyment and the bounded limits of punishable action. Rather than foreclosing attention to the embodiment, enjoyment, or the worldly sphere of activity, in other words, the stories, *exempla* and metaphors that populate Gratian's text are practically obsessed with such issues. Gratian does focus exclusively on intentionality and secret motivations. Instead, he thinks about the problem of the duration of action, its publicity, and its potential to become deferred, perverse, and punished. Even as he justifies historically novel confessional techniques, he also seeks, as Foucault has it, to draw the reader's attention to how bodies, objects, actions and events can come to *manifest* the truth—not through verbalization, but as an expression or transformation of their underlying being.

Penance, Activity, and Ontology: William Langland's Piers Plowman

The first section of this introduction covered the general topic of the dissertation; the second attempted to give an account of the methodological aims driving this project. In this section, I wish to address why the dissertation will focus so strongly on William Langland's *Piers*

Plowman, and add some further historical and critical considerations that have shaped my thinking about this poem. On any account, Langland's *Piers Plowman* is a masterful portrayal of 14th century English society: it brims with friars, kings, plowmen, clerics, clergymen and merchants. Indirect allusions can be found to contemporary political and historical events, including the reign of Richard II, the enactment of vagrancy laws, the Black Plague, and the economic circumstances that eventually led to the Peasant's Revolt. The poem theorizes alternative ways of distributing labor; it probes into the role of kingship and wealth in the organization of society; and it wrestles repeatedly with the difficulties of scarcity, necessity, and material surplus. The poem is famously autobiographical as well, portraying not just snippets of the life of the author himself, but containing a complex account of poetic making that reflects the long making of the poem itself. Capacious in its content, *Piers Plowman* is equally hard to pin down at the level of form and genre. Whatever else it may be, it is an allegory, staging repeated dialectical encounters between the dreamer, Will, and an authority figure whose advice and instructions seem to always fall short of what the dreamer most truly desires—"kynde knowing," natural knowledge of how to do well, what doing well might even mean, and by the same token, what fantasies are lodged within the desire to inhabit a world or a form of subjectivity that seems to always be ripping apart at the seams. The specter of disintegration not only haunts the diegetic narrative of the poem, it also threatens the poem's formal procedures: Langland's allegorical procedures cannibalize and spit out exempla, romances, Scholastic discourses, fabliaux, estates satire. Baggy and irresolute, the poem has been described as a text that finds itself in an eternal state of beginning, a text consumed with fantasies of apocalyptic endings, a text that moves

erratically towards some new conception of experience, and a text that continually negates itself in the pursuit of a kind of negative capability that remains beyond the horizon of the poem itself.[9]

For my purposes, however, there are three central premises that will be guiding my readings. First, and following in the steps of psychoanalytic readers of this poem, I believe any account of this poem has to come to terms with the ways the poem seeks to narrate the movements of a restless and permanently dissatisfied desire—one that moves as easily across objects as across episodes or genres, and that is disturbed further (rather than tamed or settled down) through its encounters with the allegorical figures that seek to secure and tame that desire by directing it to this or that channel. The work of Jessica Rosenfeld, Mark Miller, and Nicolette Zeeman has further taught me that it is possible to think psychoanalytically about the poem without always appealing overtly to psychoanalytic terms or thinkers.[10] Instead, following the trail of Jacques Lacan's inspired readings of Saint Paul and Aristotle, and the use that other medievalists have made of psychoanalytic frameworks of thought more generally, I have sought to derive my own accounts of the way the poem thinks about enjoyment, suffering, desire, and subjectivity by appealing to a cluster of authors who thought in powerful ways about such topics and whose work was central to the intellectual milieu within which the poem was produced. Such authors include, but are not limited to, Aristotle, Augustine, Gratian, Gregory, and Aquinas—the very figures who, in a different moment of medievalist critical inquiry, might have been deployed in more reactionary ways to try to stabilize the inchoate longings of the poem into the familiar

[9] In order, these accounts of the poem come from Vance Smith's *The Book of the Incipit*, Morton Bloomfield's *Piers Plowman as a Fourteenth Century Apocalypse*, Anne Middleton's essay "*Piers Plowman* and the Invention of Experience," and Vance Smith's essay "Negative Langland."
[10] See Jessica Rosenfeld's *Ethics and Enjoyment in Late Medieval Poetry: Love After Aristotle*, Mark Miller's *Philosophical Chaucer* and "Sin and Structure in Piers Plowman: on the Medieval Split Subject," and Nicolette Zeeman's *Piers Plowman and the Medieval Discourse of Desire*.

lineaments of a coherent and unified Christian architecture.[11] One implicit claim of this dissertation, therefore, is that, whether one is turning to philosophy or to theology for theoretical guidance, the most powerful texts circulating in medieval culture are themselves attempting to trace the discomfiting movements of desire, making sense of the opacity of the human creature to itself and narrating the paradoxical ways in which sin creeps up on (and sticks to) even the best-intentioned souls.[12] Psychoanalytic tendencies within my writing will be legible to those familiar with Freudian and post-Freudian habits of thought, but I do not assume or require any such familiarity. Instead, working with and against the writings of the Christian culture of the period, I hope to make some small step towards fulfilling David Aers' request that literary critics pay deeper attention to the strangeness and richness of the theological background against which we receive medieval literary texts.[13]

Second, following the work of Kellie Robertson and David Uebel, Vance Smith, and especially Andrew Cole, I believe this is a poem that is centrally concerned with questions of embodiment and labor.[14] The poem is practically encyclopedic in its desire to tabulate different kinds of work—selling, plowing, writing, building, studying—and equally encyclopedic in its attempt to make sense of various ways to shirk that labor. I will, in this dissertation, engage only briefly (and strategically) with the economic and political questions that are everywhere in this poem, and which would warrant several further dissertations in their own right. But I want to bring to the foreground, as these other medievalists have done, the sheer sense of materiality that

[11] The implied reference is to D.W. Robertson Jr, who has become a byword for this more conservative way of approaching medieval scholarship. See *A Preface to Chaucer. Studies in Medieval Perspectives*.
[12] Although not precisely a psychoanalytic critic, Stephen Justice's "Did the Middle Ages believe in their Miracles" has been a formative essay for me in learning how to think in powerful ways about the problems posed by medieval thought in its own right.
[13] See the introduction to David Aers' *Salvation and Sin*.
[14] See Kellie Robertson and David Uebel, *The Middle Ages at Work* and Andrew Cole's *The Birth of Theory*. In addition to *The Book of the Incipit*, cited earlier, see Vance Smith's *Arts of Possession: The Middle English Household Imaginary*.

thickens the poem and gives it so much of its vital texture. At the end of the day, the poem is a dream poem: allegorical figures appear and disappear, castles seem to get up and wander through the wilderness, Will falls asleep and wakes up so many times that it becomes hard to keep count of what dream we are inhabiting, exactly. Yet the poem also continually creates the impression that there is a world of bodies and made objects that resist the narcissistic fantasy that what we or Will see in this poem is *just* hallucination. Laborers get hungry and refuse to work; land needs to be tilled; the world refuses to accommodate itself to the pleasure principle. The poem repeatedly foregrounds the capacity of the human body to make things, destroy things, feel hunger or pain, or get worn down by the weight of the passage of time. Just as often, it makes visible forms of emergent collectivity and shared labor that offer the characters that make their way through this poem a chance at remaking the world around them, including those institutions that the poem elsewhere shows have become venal and corrupted. This is one reason, I believe, why the poem offers itself so easily to questions of ontology: this is a poem that is repeatedly puzzled by what things, persons, institutions, or desires are *made of*, who made them, why they were made, what allows them to persist over time without losing their shape, and how they might be *re*made. This is true for the allegorical figures that descend upon Will, who are often condensed out of forms of activity and relationality that Will in each case has to recognize as already present in his own lifeworld—and indeed, sometimes has to recognize as in drastic need of reforming and remaking. But the puzzle about what kinds of entities exist in the world can spread to writing, documents, and pardons, as Vance Smith has done so much to demonstrate.[15] The same question emerges with peculiar force whenever money or a commodity enters the picture, or whenever the

[15] See Vance Smith, *The Book of the Incipit*. The scene of the ripping of the pardon has fascinated many other commentators, including Nicolette Zeeman and David Aers, but Vance Smith raises the problem to a puzzle with writing itself in a way I find extremely powerful.

poem seeks to make sense of processes of valorization: perhaps for this reason, no figure exerts more of a pull within the poem than the shimmering Lady Mede, who uses money to continually convert one form of substance into another and one kind of relation to another, leaving the poem to confront not so much the question of *what is*, as much as the question of what is *not*. Questions about ontology emerge once more, in a theological register, at each and every moment when the poem addresses the enigma of the Incarnation, confronting the impossible fact that God's substance can become one with the fleshy, sentience-bearing, and speaking substance that creaturely life is composed of. Already, I hope, it is clear that to suggest that questions of ontology are at issue in this poem is not to suggest that the poem is necessarily interested in *objects*: it would be more to the point to say that its concern with *that which is* makes it continually circle around puzzles related to work, form, embodiment, materiality, activity, and temporally dilated processes of making and unmaking (though of course, particularly significant objects may become vehicles for the analysis of such issues).

Thirdly, and finally, I assume throughout that for all the overtly high-powered theoretical moments in this poem, most of Langland's thinking happens through rhetorical devices, tropes, figures, and the work of narrative itself. There are too many medievalists to cite who have taught me how to read Langland in this way, but I am heavily indebted to the work of Emily Steiner, Anne Middleton, Mark Miller, Vance Smith, Nicolette Zeeman, and perhaps especially Andrew Cole, for his acute theorization of the specific dialectic between figure and concept. As Cole has argued, to say that Langland thinks through images and figures is to say something about the nature of thought itself: concepts—whether theological, critical or philosophical—are not passive descriptors that remain eternally attached to stable referents. Rather, concepts are in perpetual transformation, as a movement of thought traces a dialectical movement that splits off

and returns it to itself, confronting in that very movement the self-difference that makes it lurch out into the world to make sense of whatever it was that drove it from itself in the first place.[16] That is an abstract way of framing an abstract issue, but the previous section of this introduction, on Foucault, can help make sense of what is at stake. The seduction of the epistemological temptation of Christianity, not just for Cassian but for Foucault, is that it makes it clear that there is no end to the process of making oneself into a subject—and this because, for Foucault, the project inaugurated by the early Christian monks was precisely the interminable project of placing the self before the self, situating the penitent at once in the position of subject and of object, where the subject analyzes its own mental content precisely through the form of self-reflexive thought.[17] But there are other, more dialectical ways of thinking about the burdens of self-reflexivity in the poem. Any robust account of *Piers Plowman* must begin with the thought that this is a poem that continually turns back upon itself, picking up its earlier motifs, recycling its tropes, and repeatedly (at the level of plot) making Will gain new knowledge or insight only to have that knowledge become legible, retrospectively, as yet another manifestation of ignorance that Will once again will have to surmount. As Middleton has argued, for all the fantasies Will has of finally arriving at "kynde knowing" or at some stable conception of doing well, the poem repeatedly suggests that the practical knowledge that pertains to our specific kind is defined precisely by its open-endedness, which is to say, by its extraordinary capacity to take itself as its own object and, in doing so, to inevitably discover that there is further form of knowledge to be had—and further work to be done—if one seeks to continue pursuing Dowel.[18]

[16] These formulations are indebted to Cole's much more elaborated arguments in *The Birth of Theory*, about the medieval origins of dialectical thought.
[17] Thus, Foucault says: "thoughts, in Cassian, thoughts—not desires, not passions, not attitudes, not acts—thoughts appear in Cassian and in all the spirituality he represents, thoughts appear as a field of subjective data which have to be considered and analyzed as objects. And I think that is the first time in history that thoughts are considered as possible objects for an analysis" (HS 69).
[18] See Anne Middleton, "Two Infinites: Grammatical Metaphor in Piers Plowman."

Speaking pragmatically, what this means for the project of this dissertation is that we will get a sense of what the poem is *thinking* only by attending exactingly to the *figures* the poem summons in any given Passus. Whatever the interplay of concept and figure may reveal, moreover, that stage will inevitably become legible, at a later moment, as no more than a temporary resting point within a more extended dialectic of thought and representation.

Working with these three assumptions, it will be the central argument of this dissertation that *Piers Plowman* as a whole is best understood as a penitential poem, and that penance itself is best imagined as a specific form of embodied activity. An immediate corollary to that argument is that these claims can be made clear only if we try to understand the ways in which the poem understands penance through what Foucault describes as the "ontological temptation" of Christianity, rather than through the epistemological temptation alone (as Foucault describes it). To get a better sense of what that might mean, consider that the poem is rife with confessional moments of just the kind Foucault celebrates, in which a repentant sinner not only seeks knowledge of that space of interiority anterior to action, desire or volition, but does so by confronting an authority figure who articulates a discourse that the sinner tries to deploy in the service of explicitly penitential aims—a structure that, as we have seen, is paradigmatically a "technique of the self." Such sinners famously include the Seven Deadly Sins, from Passus V, Hawkyn, from Passus XIII and XIV, and arguably (at least intermittently) Will himself. Each of these engages in epistemological fantasies of self-knowledge, engaging in a "perpetual hermeneutics" that makes verbalization seem like a viable path to fulfill their desire to be something other than what they have found themselves to be. But what is notable about *Piers Plowman* is that at no point does the poem allow these confessional practices *as such* to become legible as anything other than failed attempts at redemptive self-transformation. The Sins do not

know how to confess; they get distracted; they fall back into sin. Hawkyn throws himself into a confessional speech that does not reveal some space of pure interiority, so much as it reveals the teeming matrix of worldly activity that makes him the person he is. Langland, we might say, refuses to elide the terrain of embodied activity that Foucault (or Cassian, if one accepts Foucault's readings) brackets in order to characterize self-reflexivity as a mode of contemplative introspection that anticipated the Cartesian account of the modern subject. Not only are there are no disembodied minds in *Piers Plowman*: there are not even many opportunities for isolation. Confessional subjects, when they do emerge, obsessively refer back to their activities—describing what they did, who they met, what they generally like to do. They have difficulty separating themselves from their occupations, their relationships, their bad habits, their social situations. They are always saying something *to* someone else—but instead of speaking in the secrecy-laden confessional, they tend to speak in public, to several interlocutors. Everyone that participates in such scenes—those who listen as well as those who speak—desires something from that confessional encounter, and what they want is not always straightforward. Perhaps for that reason, the would-be interlocutors are always liable to pace around, get bored, distracted, or ashamed. They interrupt, feel the creeping urge of bodily urges, fall asleep, and move on to something else. It is not that confession does not exist, or is not important in the poem. It is, but however much weight it may carry, one is left with the impression that for Langland it is one activity among others, and legible within the poem precisely *as* activity: a strange, paradoxical, and powerful activity— but as an activity embedded within the world, and for that reason, as a *worldly* activity in some significant sense.

If the poem as a whole ought to be understood as driven by penitential concerns, therefore, it will be because it is penitential in a way other than that which Foucault believes such a term

tends to operate in the late Middle Ages or early Modern period. Earlier, I drew attention to the penitential practices that Foucault described as having been superseded by confession—those which circled around *exomologesis*, or public penance. That system of practices conceived of penance as a status that followed "a law of dramatic emphasis and of maximum theatricality," and that consisted of "somatic expressions and symbolic expressions" rather than "a verbal enumeration or analysis of sins." To the reader of *Piers Plowman*, something about these formulations will seem immediately intuitive—and not just because even those figures who do find themselves confessing their sins, like the allegorical Sins, seem to do so in a blubbering, theatrical form that repeatedly calls attention to their embodied presence. Rather, that account of *exomologesis* seems to tap into the overarching framework of the poem. The poem's opening lines, after all, describe a dreamer putting on "shroudes," dressed "in habite as a heremite unholy of werkes" (Pr 3). Taking on a penitential status, that figure is also immediately theatricalized—we wonder who he is and what he is doing; we wonder what the "unholy werkes" are which he seems to at once conceal and reveal; we understand already that there is "a law of dramatic emphasis" operating in the scene that is driving him away from the ordinary social world. The dreamer, whom we will come to know as Will, articulates this narrative drive using the language of romance: he wanders "wide in this word wondres to here" (Pr 4); he begins to dream "a merveillous sweven" (Pr 11); he finds himself in a "wilderness" (Pr 12). What does such a dreamer want? Romance narrative offers a set of ready-made tropes to fill in that longing—castles, lovers, feasts, tournaments, villains—and the poem will produce many stand-in figures that seem to channel that longing, from the castle of Kynde to the beautiful Lady Mede; from the Feast of Conscience to the final tournament in which Christ himself battles the Devil. The poem will repeatedly torque such tropes in the service of an exploration of the ethics of doing well and

loving God, thereby keeping the formal shell while giving these romance longings a different content. But perhaps—as any number of penitential knights-errant demonstrate—it is romance itself that channels the fantasies of "manifesting truth" to a late Medieval audience, together with all the "somatic expressions" and "symbolic expressions" that for Foucault were more properly associated with the stories of the Desert Fathers and ascetic saints escaping from the city. From this point of view, then, the emphasis of the poem falls not on kynde *knowing*, as though it were merely an attempt to name theoretical knowledge—a Cartesian certainty about the origin of one's thoughts—but rather on *kynde* knowing, on the fantasy of encountering some shard of embodied knowledge that might make itself manifest in and through the human creature's very *kynde*, its specific nature. Kynde knowing is a fantasy of expressing, in the body and in society at large, a state of being that is no longer bound to the endless, alienated self-judgment that sin sparks in the sinner. *Examologesis* is therefore a crucial term to make sense of the poem's desire for "kynde knowing"; and what makes *Piers Plowman* a penitential poem is not that it participates in the confessional practices that were supposedly preparing the grounds for the emergence of the modern subject, but rather that it stages a drama that emerges out of the need to manifest truth in one's very being (which is also to say, in the forms of embodied activity that characterize creaturely life).

That said—there is a vast historical distance separating Langland from the early Christians who serve as the models for the Foucauldian account of *exomologesis*, which suggests that there is still much that remains unsettled about the competing tensions of "kynde" and "knowing," "introspective activity" and "the manifestation of truth," "public penance" and "private confession." Therefore, and in preparation for the turn towards the chapter summaries and the body of the dissertation proper, I want to wrap up this section with three concluding thoughts.

The first is that if Foucault is right, and *exomologesis* and *exagoreusis* were not merely sequential historical practices, but existed in a state of juxtaposition, oscillation, and mutual influence throughout the Middle Ages, then questions about contrition, confession, guilt, and ecclesiastical authority are inevitably going to be part of the emergent world of *Piers Plowman*. One way to start to think about this problem is to phrase it as an issue of relative emphasis: in a text like Gratian's *Tractatus de Poenitentia*, the outer frame of the text seems committed to the "epistemological temptation" of Christianity, justifying the merits of contrition and confession, while the stories and *exempla* circle repeatedly around the question of what it means to "manifest the truth" (like Lazarus in the tomb). Langland, in contrast, sets up an outer frame committed to the "ontological temptation of Christianity," the pursuit of the manifestation of "kynde knowing" in a world of romance, which contains narrative sequences that turn on problems of confession and contrition. That reversal might help differentiate the relative aims of penitential treatises and some of the major works of penitential literature of the period, while also giving a richer account of how these mutually supporting penitential systems were interacting in practice. How these competing imaginaries overlap, differentiate, or split apart in specific instances is nevertheless still an open question.

One thing that does seem clear, however, is that the very meaning of "manifesting truth" or arriving at "kynde knowing" is bound to mean something different in Langland's cosmopolitan London than it did in the deserts of Egypt, even if the continuity of tropes, stories, and styles of reasoning also repeat themselves across historical time. It is worth asking whether how "the subject" ought to manifest the truth—but more than that, to interrogate the necessity of thinking about penance in terms of an individual "subject" in the first place. For Langland, as we shall see, it is often the eschatological community, and not merely the individual subject named

"Will," that is supposed to become transformed and transfigured, as truth becomes increasingly manifest in the world. In that sense, penance will be for Langland not merely a name for the ethical and aesthetic practices of individual subjects, but a way of thinking, longing, and acting which binds together friars and kings, merchants and farmers, knights and ale-makers. Penance, in other words, is for Langland as much a style of collective activity as it is a redemptive fantasy or an aspiration towards self-knowledge. As we shall see, what it means to think of penance *as* a creaturely, material form of activity—and what antinomies and paradoxes the thought of penitential activity carries with it—will be one of the key questions of the dissertation.

Finally, and from a more philosophical point of view, I want to conclude with a third idea: words like "truth," "manifestation," and perhaps especially "ontology," are bound to pose problems for Langland that it would have been impossible to think through at an earlier moment or in a different intellectual milieu. Given the interest of Langland in the processes and forms of activity that define our specific "kynde," it will be clear that the problem for Langland will start to branch out in different directions: towards an investigation of the suffering activity that makes the human creature the kind of thing that it is; towards an investigation of the specific modes of activity that can be thought of as penitential in a more narrow sense; and towards an investigation of the work that is entailed in moving towards this "manifestation of truth," or keeping such a manifestation of truth from slipping away. Such an analysis will turn repeatedly towards loosely Aristotelian categories of being—activity, pleasure, work, form/matter, and temporality. The hope is that the Aristotelian lens will reveal how the penitent is forced to negotiate between incommensurable drives and urges that are internal to the penitential apparatus itself.

Outline of the Chapters

The following chapters are each independent essays—but like Langland's *Passus*, they build on one another, dialectically moving towards more complex accounts of a cluster of related ideas. Deferring entry into the world of *Piers Plowman*, the first chapter will turn instead towards Robert Mannyng's *Handlyng Synne*, arguing for the continued importance of the fictions of "public penance" to the literary tradition of the fourteenth century. These stories operate under the fantasy that it is possible to make visible, in a cathartic moment of revelation, the presence of sin or grace in the body of a sinner or a penitent. While offering themselves as straightforward expressions of the manifestation of truth, however, I will argue that what makes Mannyng's exemplary tales fascinating is the way they defer, avoid, pre-empt, and circle around this moment of unveiling. While radical disclosure is structurally a part of the longing that makes penance get a grip on the subject it interpellates, that pressure produces in the penitent unpredictable fantasies and perverse longings that also ought to be understood as penitential in some broad sense. Increasingly, as I hope to show, the exempla become haunted by the possibilities of penitents following through such fantasies, embarking upon forms of penitential activity that undercut the simple teleologies and simple understanding of action upon which a pastoral account of sin and penance nevertheless depend.

The second chapter will begin the turn to *Piers Plowman*, seeking to elaborate on the connection between romance narrative forms and *exomologesis*. Tracking the long discussion between Wit and Will on Kynde, this chapter will argue that what is at stake in Wit's romance narrative is the simultaneous naturalization and erotics of penitential desire in a genre that makes the satisfaction of that desire threaten to annihilate its own component terms. Langland seeks to nest penitential desire within the longing sensibility of Kynde, locating the inchoate penitential

strivings in sexuality itself. On such an account, the desire to manifest truth is also the desire to be swept up in or by another, who might manifest truth in one's place. But the full collapse of sexuality and penance not only threatens to make both categories unintelligible—it produces the specter of an all-consuming, apocalyptic urge to punish, which is at once the evidence of their irrevocable difference and also a sign of the continued, and unpredictable, libidinal energies that continue to ripple through the penitential imaginary. Penitential longing, on this account, will emerge as both sadistic and masochistic; and the violent demand to be at once proximate and split away from the beloved will become a model for thinking about the relationship between penitential longing and that vey sexuality that served the penitent as a model of desire in the first place.

The third chapter will take a more philosophical turn, focusing on the category of penitential activity as it emerges in the Feast of Conscience. The dramatic horizons of the penitential imaginary will widen in this chapter, as the propulsive drive towards spectacular revelation or apocalypse gives way to a still tableau in which embodiments of sin and penance share a table. Conceptually, this chapter seeks an answer to an issue we have already started to analyze: if part of what made the practice of confession so attractive to Foucault was its capacity to give the penitent the ability to at once figure as subject and object of the operations of knowledge, what forms of reflexivity are visible when we start from the assumption that penance is not a disembodied operation of knowledge but is rather a form of creaturely activity? This chapter will seek to trouble simple accounts of penance that seek to define it either in terms of empty suffering or by appealing to the instantaneous manifestation of truth on a mute body. Instead, it will seek to give an account of the *substance* of penance, appealing to Aquinas' definition of penance as a complex arrangement of form and matter, where it is human activity itself that

serves as the matter of penance. Phrased in this way, the tension and interplay between sin and penance will appear more complexly articulated than it did in the previous chapters—for penitential activity must now be understood as self-conscious and historical, and as the constant struggle to give form to a substrate of activity whose own independent form threatens to wrest back control and *de*form the aims of the penitent. Indeed, this chapter will suggest that penance gives form to the sinful activity it takes as its matter only on condition of becoming contaminated by the very affects and desires the penitent seeks to disavow. The site where sin and penance are entangled, in other words, is a permanently unsettled zone in which the penitential subject seeks to make, unmake and preserve itself through the form-inducing activity of penance itself.

The final chapter will turn to a perhaps unexpected location: Hawkyn's confessional discourse in Passus XIII and XIV. The aim here is to take an obvious instance of *exagoreusis*, in which the penitent is consumed with a drive to arrive at certain knowledge about the self, and demonstrate how even in this case Langland starts to imagine penance as a temporally dilated form of embodied activity that is repeatedly trying to ground itself by giving shape to the underlying temporal rhythms that threaten to make verbalization itself merely an endless torrent of speech. The framework is still Aristotelian, since it is the form-giving power of penance that is at issue, but here it will be Hannah Arendt's distinctions between labor, work, and action that will take over the conceptual terrain. The problem, phrased in an Arendtian language, is how to conceive of penance as something other than fruitless labor, and indeed, as the kind of activity that can bring something entirely new into the world. Crucially, it will appear in this chapter that penance attempts to do this precisely by conceiving itself as work—which is to say, through the fantasy of objectifying and reifying its own activity onto an external object, and in doing so, giving shape to the laboring activity that figures for penance as its proximate matter. Precisely by

focusing on Hawkyn's failure to bring such different modes of activity together, I hope to show that penance is precisely the kind of practice that proliferates temporal antinomies, in its effort to reconcile disparate longings towards the past and the future, towards material objectification and the dissolution of the fetishistic prop that threaten to keep penance whirling forever in its place.

Chapter One:

Labor, Exemplarity, and Perversion in *Handlyng Synne*

Opening Considerations: Penance and Perversion

As a way of preparing the ground for the more baroque problems posed by Langland, this chapter will focus on Robert Mannyng's *Handlyng Synne*. In my readings of this text, I will argue for three claims. The first is that, because *Handlyng Synne* is a collection of exemplary narratives *as well as* a penitential manual, it is a text that is perched uncomfortably between a synchronic tendency to instruct, and a diachronic tendency to register and record narratives that emerged in historical contexts marked by different, and older, forms of doing and theorizing penance. *Handlyng Synne* is therefore a fascinating archive mapping multiple and conflicting accounts of how penance does the work of transforming the sinner. Second, I want to argue that the narrative logic of these exempla is committed to a moment of dramatic exposure or revelation. Sin very often begins as a site of secrecy, privatization, and selfishness in these exempla, but the narrative logic of the text means it is also always on its way towards being made embodied and public. To say that is partly is to emphasize the grotesquerie of these tales, the way they describe some part of the self that slowly gets split off, congealing into a visible form that simultaneously fascinates and repels—partly because what is made visible is a site of negativity and abstraction that signifies in excess of any specific sin. Third, and finally, I want to argue that the exempla that are strangest and most provocative in *Handlyng Synne* are those tales that start to approach a different account of penance. In contrast to the purging and cathartic removal of sin, such exempla try to fit into their narrative an account of the slowness and uncertainty that makes penance such an ambivalent site within which to make or unmake the self. Such tales, in other words, try to fit into the narrative logic of the exempla a form of

penance that does not look like a flash of revelation or exposure, but rather appears as a temporally dilated form of activity, where one repeatedly "handles sin" even as one searches for a way to become free from it. In effect, this means penance comes to be imagined, even within these tales, as a form of laboring activity. In trying to square that account of penance with the spectacular visibility required by the narrative logic of the exempla, Mannyng produces tales that are anti-climactic, perverse, and genuinely humorous. But this is just to point again to the paradoxes of penance: the way, on the one hand, it is a site of change and transformation; and, on the other, it is a style of activity that keeps the sinner bound to the very sin from which the sinner also seeks to be released.

Penitential Manuals, Exemplary Narratives

The most fruitful method of reading *Handlyng Synne* has long been understood to be through the lens of the history of penance. This is the period, after all, that oversaw a series of linked transformations surrounding the practice and theorization of penance, ranging from the growth of Church bureaucracy to the development of sacramental theology, the explosion of pastoral and penitential literature, the imaginative mapping of the topography of Purgatory, the developed articulation of the idea of the Church's "treasury of merit," and the internationalization and regularization of penitential and liturgical practices.[19] But by far the most important event in the history of late medieval penance, has for many been the Fourth Lateran Council's decision to make confession a yearly obligation, thereby authorizing and reinforcing a turn to inwardness that had already been shaping the work of Church theologians and, perhaps, was starting to stir

[19] R. Emmet McLaughlin offers an extensive account of the historiography surrounding the Fourth Lateran Council in "Truth, Tradition, and History: The Historiography of High/Late Medieval and Early Modern Penance," in *A New History of Penance.* See the discussion in the introduction to this dissertation for further historical considerations.

among the laity as well.[20] The growing prevalence of confession meant the sinner was henceforth obligated to *habitually* explore their inner life. Hiding a sin, or trying to confess different sins to different priests, rendered the confession worse than void: confession had to be complete, and it had to be performed in a single session, to a single priest; one whose growing authority was reflected in the very grammar of the phrase that concluded the confession: "ego te absolvo."[21] While earlier forms of penance linked the purging of sin to spectacular forms of atonement, penitential theory began to stress the work of self-examination and the cultivation of remorse over and above the mere "satisfaction" of sins. But if penance thus transitioned from a public to a private form, absolution was not the end of the penitential process either.[22] Rather, the repentant sinner was to carry the techniques of introspection and self-analysis practiced in confession out into the wider world, where sin was always liable to reappear in new and tantalizing shapes. Given the frailties of the human creature, ethical lapses were bound to occur, restarting the penitential circuit that led back, through remorse and confession, to absolution and the satisfaction of the sin.

Penitential manuals, a genre that loosely includes *Handlyng Synne*, have long been taken to be central participants in these larger shifts in medieval culture. The manuals divided and

[20] Michel Foucault's account of the emergence of sexuality is the most famous version of the claim that specific penitential practices—and in particular, confessional ones—led to the emergence of a distinct kind of hermeneutic subject. For his account of the importance of the Fourth Lateran council, see (among others) *History of Sexuality Vol 1*, p. 58. Theologically, Anselm and Abelard are usually held to be responsible for placing emphasis on contrition rather than penance. See Colin Morris' *The Discovery of the Individual* for an account of how this turn to interiority reflected other pressures towards inwardness in the late Middle Ages. The question of whether the Fourth Lateran was responding to the concerns of the laity or to theological developments is the difference between thinking of auricular confession as a request from below or an imposition from above. See the essays in *NHP* for these and other arguments about how to think about the place of the Fourth Lateran in late medieval culture.

[21] The rule that confession be complete, and be administered by a single priest, was formalized by Gratian and by Peter Lombard. These doctrinal claims are also articulated in *Handlyng Synne*, in the section on shrift. For the development of the priestly *ego* and changes in the formula of absolution, see Raymond Iogna-Prat's comments in "Topographies of Penance in the Latin West (c. 800-c. 1200)," in *NHP*, p. 167.

[22] The account of the work and function of the penitential manuals is here heavily indebted to Larry Scanlon's *Narrative, Authority, and Power*.

subdivided categories of sin into traditional schemas based on the seven deadly sins or the Ten Commandments, thereby collaborating in the larger movement to regularize confession and propagate methods for probing the inner life of the penitent. As Larry Scanlon points out, the very attempt to colonize the world with a vast taxonomy of types of sin presupposes that this world is vaster and more disorganized than any moral system can encompass—even in principle (Narrative, 13). This was clear to the writers of these manuals: though aspiring to systematicity, the taxonomies of sin were never complete or exhaustive, and they served less as encyclopedic tools than as heuristic devices—whether offering guidance to would-be confessors on the questions to be asked (or not asked) of the penitent or assisting the penitent in the search for evidence of ever more obscure and resistant forms of sinfulness. These forms of openness to the world, however, were balanced by a taxonomizing and totalizing impulse, and the manuals often described with an almost sociological zest the ways sins could be encountered in lived experience, thereby creating a constant tension and overlap between standard taxonomies of sin and social and economic systems of categorization.[23] Such manuals could perform other kinds of pedagogy, too: most significantly, they popularized and helped develop various lines of thought in sacramental theology concerning penance, confession, and the Eucharist.[24]

This pedagogical and pastoral context, finally, also explains the apparition of exemplary narratives in penitential manuals like *Handlyng Synne*, which is unusual among such manuals in devoting much of its space to exemplary narrative. On an instrumental reading that reifies the historical account offered above, the intrusion of exempla in these manuals can be explained, as

[23] "Moral sociography" is a term used by Peter Biller in the introduction to *Handling Sin: Confession in the Middle Ages*. Le Goff talks about the increasing mapping of social onto religious taxonomies in *Time, Work & Culture in the Middle Ages*; usury is the most famous of his examples.
[24] See Jennifer Garrison, "Mediated Piety: Eucharistic Theology and Lay Devotion in Robert Mannyng's Handlyng Synne."

D.W. Robertson Jr. put it, by "the adherence to a well-established convention which had been developed to implement certain specific aims of the Medieval Church" (162). Larry Scanlon produced a much stronger account of the ethical commitments of exemplary narrative, arguing that literature does not merely repeat theological positions, but "enacts" them—and in doing so, questions and transforms the very structures of authority whose precepts they thus enact.[25] Other scholars, among them J Allan Mitchell, have argued strongly that the exempla of this kind do their own kind of conceptual and imaginative work, shaping the lived experience of readers rather than merely indoctrinating them with dogmas, and giving them ethical resources to act, rather than corralling them into pre-arranged subject positions.[26] Such accounts undo the idea that the medieval religious tradition is only and invariably coercive or disciplinary, or that penance is fundamentally about the specification of a set of propositional beliefs, as opposed to a set of techniques for living or for acting. By the same token, they suggest that some important part of the work performed by the exempla happens at the level of social practice, rather than in some region deep inside the mind.

Nevertheless, analysis of these manuals has continued to assume a devotional and pastoral context, which is perhaps why the critical reception of *Handlyng Synne* has been less than enthusiastic. In 1984, Fritz Kemmler declared that "literary critics and historians of literature […] have so far given but little detailed attention to *Handlyng Synne*, although they have often referred to this work in their studies" (7). Over thirty years later, albeit with a handful of notable exceptions, the situation is much the same. Paradoxically, this may have to do less with the text

[25] The idea that exempla "enact" a context is articulated in Scanlon, *Narrative*. Garrison's essay is a wonderful example of complex engagement with theology that refuses the assumption that literature merely mirrors the precepts located in the theological register. Mark Miller's "Displaced Souls, Idle Talk, Spectacular Scenes: Handlyng Synne and the Perspective of Agency" stresses the importance of agency and practical deliberation in these tales.

[26] See J Allan Mitchell, *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative in Chaucer and Gower*.

itself, and more to do with the difficulty of making sense of penitential manuals without falling into moralizing traps. This is why it is perhaps Julie Orlemanski's claim that exemplary narratives are not so much a distinct genre as much as they are a literary mode, and one that embodies "a way of thinking about, and playing, with the claims of narrative order" (119) that I have found most useful. Such an account helps make visible a double ordering principle: on the one hand, Mannyng's exemplary narratives evidence a tension between the moral law and a specific case, and as such, are themselves often sites of productive ambiguity—an ambiguity exacerbated because, while the framing of *Handlyng Synne* is that of a penitential manual, and it is therefore a text responsive to the concerns and social anxieties of 14th century medieval culture, many of the actual *exempla* are either stories from the Church Fathers or tales whose circulation long preceded the framing devices Mannyng deploys.[27] Such mismatches can be productive—the lack of fit between the case and the precept prompting further ethical reasoning in Mannyng's own narrative voice. On the other hand, however, these tales present a second and perhaps more interesting tension, between what we might think of as the moral order and the "narrative order." So long as the two are aligned, the exempla operate predictably, if pleasurably: what was bound is unbound, what was hidden becomes unveiled. The precept captures the thrust of the narrative, and narrative closure and moral instruction happen at the same time. But at least in Mannyng's case, the narrative and the moral order tend to become misaligned, which is when the tales truly start to become playful, strange, and perverse. In other words, there is a tendency within these exempla to push against their own narrative structure—to resist catharsis, to see what happens when narrative itself becomes elongated, anti-climactic, or, in at least one

[27] Orlemanski points out that this may be another central reason for the difficulty in theorizing texts like *Handlyng Synne*: exempla are difficult to theorize because of "their durability across contexts and their ability to mean differently in different frameworks" (119).

important sense, anti-exemplary. But as I hope to show, it is not just that these exempla have a perverse interest in seeing their own operative frameworks collapse (though surely that is part of what sometimes reads as “play”). It is also that these tales are performing the most interesting kinds of ethical and philosophical reasoning precisely when their narrative logic no longer moves towards catharsis, and when their narrative logic starts pushing them away from the fantasy of being able to make sin visible. For it is at that moment, I think, that these tales are trying to picture the structure of penance outside of the drive that goes towards the exposure and the annihilation of sin; or said differently, it is at that moment that they are thinking hardest about the way sin and penance are not mere contraries, but are constantly falling back into mutual entanglements.

A Tale About Dragons: Sexuality, Penitential Labor, Abstraction

One place to begin thinking about penitential labor, alienation, and abstraction is in an exemplum about a dragon, which figures as the exemplary narrative at the center of the section devoted to the sixth commandment: "thou shalt no hordom [whoredom] do." As is usual for Mannyng, the tale is introduced by a long series of advice, prohibitions, and rules. Mannyng lists acceptable and unacceptable forms of consent, prohibitions on cheating on spouses, and a requirement that those aspiring to wed seek out parental permission. When Mannyng declares that this exemplum will address the specific problem of unfaithful wives—or, as Mannyng puts it, of wives that "hauntyth foly" (1731)—the tale therefore seems to find a specific niche for itself within a world of sexual malfeasance that potentially includes a much vaster array of perverse sexual activity. Indeed, the exemplum begins by literalizing this overpowering and anarchic sexuality in the form of a dragon that has been assailing a small town in an isolated island, wreaking havoc on men and women alike:

Men & wommen faste he slogh
And dede oueral shame ynogh
All that he fonde with oute house
Thys dragon slogh so merueylouse (1749-51).

If the dragon's "merueylouse" destructivity goes well beyond what would be required from an exemplum about the sexual habits of wives, this anarchic violence nevertheless channels much of the rhetoric produced by the tale's own moralizing, as though Mannyng were trying to render the tale the kind of flat-footed allegory that would practically read itself. The dragon appears in the story as an embodiment of lecherousness: it kills those it finds "with oute house"—outside of the marital home, presumably—and its way of slaying these putative sinners is associated with the production of shame, as though the dragon were simultaneously a visible embodiment of vice *and* an agent of moral vengeance. This doubled quality speaks to a characteristically late medieval way of thinking about sin, one in which sinfulness doubles as its own punishment.[28]

Yet what interests me here is not the allegorical reading whereby the dragon, which the townspeople had earlier described as "a fende of helle" (1753, 1856), represents a specific genre of sinfulness—whoredom. Rather, I want to focus on the way this tale seems to call forth an allegorical reading from within, precisely in order to undermine it. For the villagers *themselves* are fascinated with the dragon that is destroying them—or, better yet, they are fascinated, but their fascination is neither with the dragon itself, nor, exactly, with the problem of how to kill it, as much as with the place where it lives, with its *origins*, as though they had taken to heart the words of the Prologue, "Thou darst neuere recche whar thou begynne, / For euery whare ys begynning of synne" (119-20). When a hermit emerges in the tale, therefore, and tells the villagers to "wepe for [their] synne" (1771) and do penance so that their sorrows may be lifted,

[28] See Nicolette Zeeman's *Piers Plowman and the Medieval Discourse of Desire* for a complex investigation of the ways sin becomes identified with suffering.

one can already imagine the denouement of a simpler version of this story: the dragon, being nothing more than the alienated expression of the villagers' own sinful lives, will be adequately *recognized* as such, in large part through the work of penance, therefore making it possible to finally put the dragon to the sword. Such a story would presuppose that our relationship to sin is such as to be in principle capable of being made transparent, as if the moments of self-obscurity and alienation that created the fantasy of a self-standing and destructive sinfulness could, in a crystalline moment, be made perfectly intelligible, thus becoming transformed into a happy misstep in the long process of self-renewal that leads back towards God.

The language produced around the hermit, at the moment of his apparition in the tale, would seem to corroborate such an account:

> Noun of hem myghte vndyrstande
> Where the dragun was wonande [living].
> Befel hyt that yche tyde,
> An ermyte wonede [lived] ther besyde" (1759-62).

Like a *deus ex machina*, the hermit seems to already be embarked upon a transformation of their misguided desire to "understand" the origins of sin. Rather than directing their attention to the externalized abstraction of their lechery—the dragon—the hermit points them towards themselves, in this way foreshadowing the possibility that goodness might appear as magically as the hermit, in the empty space where the dragon once was. But the tale as written both insists on the reduction of the magnificent and destructive figure of the dragon to the level of concrete action *and* undercuts its own attempt to literalize and simplify its incipiently allegorical procedures. The trouble begins early on, as the potentially cleansing penitential labor of the villagers becomes disconnected from the inquiry into the dwelling place of the dragon that despoils their village. The hermit convinces the townsfolk to do penance for three days by weeping, confessing their sins, fasting, and praying; and yet it is as though, in constructing sinful

subjects through the lens of trauma, the tale had already rendered them incapable of relating the dragon's power to their embodied, ordinary lives—no matter the amount of penitential labor they threw themselves into.

Instead, the hermit, who tells them that his own penitential work will take place at the same time as theirs, but in a different place (and away from the town), offers a prayer that moves the focus of tale away from the sphere of action, sinful or penitential, and towards a prospective fantasy in which the overwhelming might of the divine overcomes the power of sin in a spectacular display of force:

> Ihu cryst, god almyghty,
> Of thys folk haue thou mercy
> That thou boghtyst on rode so dere;
> For hem shew me on sum manere
> Where y may the dragun fynde
> And hys power, lord, thou bynde,
> That the folk may knowe an se
> The mercy & the myght of the (1785-92)

Right when the tale seems to suggest that the dragon is a mere expression of concrete, sinful activity, it doubles down on the substantiality and reality of what the hermit (and the tale) figures as an actually existing dragon. In fact, the villagers' labor is under erasure from several directions, starting from the way the prayer calls attention to the fact that the folk have *already* been bought on the cross—a theological commonplace, but in this particular context one whose effect is to further blot out any specificity "thys folk" might still have, turning them into a generic and utterly passive group of penitent sinners whose sole remaining role is to observe the drama of their own salvation. The affective appeal to mercy and to the "rode so dere" also marks this as a kind of infantilization, which becomes the condition for the hermit's own anticipatory assertion of agency: "for hem shew *me* on sum manere / where *y* may the dragun fynde" (1788-9;

emphasis mine).[29] Yet it is clear that the hermit nevertheless speaks *for* them, not merely *over* them, just as it is also the case that his penitential labor is somehow associated with theirs—as though prospectively condensing it and transforming it to produce the right kind of speech; or, better yet, as though his speech were extracting from their labor that within it which was capable of being transformed or made legible as an appeal to God. Thus, the hermit serves as a paradoxical and unstable relay between the infantilized, laboring, mute, and generic folk, on the one hand, and the apostrophized Jesus Christ (who is himself, of course, a relay point between the human and the divine). In effect, the hermit allows himself to be ventriloquized *by* the folk—it is their mute voices that are expressed through him— in order to do the work of apostrophizing Jesus, which the folk themselves cannot do (except through him).[30] This means, too, that even as the prayer creates separate rhetorical persons (I and them and thou), locating them in part by specifying different roles and relationships to the prayer, it also reveals the hermit, the folk, and the apostrophized almighty God to be incipient and half-formed presences whose boundaries remain profoundly unstable.

In the unsettled frame of the hermit's speech, however, the dragon itself remains uncomfortably placed: he is at once the root cause of the prayer; the animated (and animating) power that allows God to turn his own destructive power into spectacle; and the disturbing thing which it is the business of the prayer to figure not only as an alien presence, but as already potentially *bound*—that is, as separable from the human subjects it might have already tempted or destroyed. In this sense, the theatrical display of force that the hermit tries to enact rhetorically, even as he calls for this force to be actualized in the visible world, is a way of

[29] See Barbara Johnson's "Apostrophe, Animation, Abortion" for a rich account of apostrophe and infantilization can that informs this reading of Mannyng.
[30] In this sense, the townsfolk figure here as the kind of perfect witness that Agamben describes in his writings on the Musselman, in *Remnants of Auschwitz*.

reifying and creating distance from a sinfulness that is everywhere *overproximate*, everywhere liable to be encountered again in that interplay of I, you, or they. In other words, the very strategies of invocation, visibility and animacy required to effect the rhetorical containment of the dragon complicate any hope of a stable resting point outside sin's reach. Nor is the problem here limited to the thorny issues surrounding apostrophe in general: rather, the way the human creature remains in relation to sin, even in and through *the very gesture* through which it tries to break away from the inhabitation of sin, is a central concern in the text more largely.

In the Prologue, for example, Mannyng offers a more direct account, and a more immediately phenomenological one, of how sin is a kind of structured undeadness that permeates everything: the sensibilities we have, the world we inhabit, the gestures we make.[31] "Handlyng with honde" is just that: a way of pointing to the way we catch ourselves in the midst of a lifeworld already permeated with sin. We handle sin in our thought; we handle sin in our deeds, or with our mouths (c.f. lines 83-140). Crucially, however, we also handle sin when we distance ourselves from it, whether through confession, penance, or other forms of virtuous action—or so Mannyng argues, in one anaphora after another, as the description of the various ways we handle sin "every day" turns into a call for "a nouthyr handlyng" that might offer us different genres of life and action for dealing with the ineradicable negativity of sin. If penance, too, is a type of handling, the questions the exemplum seems to ask is how we might handle without being handled; or who is the subject that handles, given that sin is also always located in the handler.

[31] The coinage is from Santner's *Psychotheology of Everyday Life*, and full phrase is about the ways we defend ourselves against our own aliveness through a "structured undeadness that keeps us from opening to the midst of life and the neighbor/stranger who dwells there with us" (23). Such "structured undeadness" remains a wonderful way, I believe, of describing the character sin had for medieval thinkers and writers. See, for example, the introduction to this dissertation for an account of how aliveness and mortification feed into one another in Gratian's reading of the Lazarus story.

If we turn back to the hermit and the dragon, taking up the perspective of Mannyng's Prologue, it would therefore be tempting to argue that, at least initially, the hermit's prayer—and/or the penitential labor associated with it—effectively constitutes just this kind of radically different handling; and indeed, that this other "handling" is purchased precisely through the rhetorical splits between sinner and penitent that we have just analyzed. On the strongest such version, the cleansing power of prayer and the work of penance delaminate the subject from his sin, and in doing so, produce, or at least make visible, a transparent and self-sufficient intention that God can read and be responsive to: "God sagh al hys [the hermit's] entent" (1795). But for all that, the tale cannot stop there—for the exemplary logic of the tale requires that penance and sin be related to one another again, and the exemplum proceed to unveil, resolve, and make sense of what it has insistently characterized as a mystifying form of self-alienation. In yet another *deus ex machina* moment, therefore, God sends an angel, and the angel directs both the hermit and the townspeople to the middle of a wilderness where they encounter a tomb made of stone:

> 'Here,' he [the angel] seyde,
> 'ys hys wonyng [dwelling],
> Wyth a nouther wykkyd thyng.
> Drede yow nat thogh he be fownde
> For al hys power haue I bownde.'
> Whan they hadde the towmbe o twynne,
> The folk stode and lokede wyth ynne.
> They sawe a womman ther vyly lye
> And her bodye cloue yn twey partye.
> Betwyxe tho twey partys that dragun lay (1813-21).

In this obscene, claustrophobic tomb, where the angel points to the location of the wicked thing itself, the very center and source of sin, indeterminacy spreads over the text, and the object doubles itself again. [32] The reference of the " wicked thing" of the text is suspended for four full

[32] I am indebted here to Fradenburg's work on the logic of the crypt and the pleasures embedded therein, in *Sacrifice Your Love*. I am also indebted to Daniel Tiffany's work on cryptaesthetics and negative substance in *Infidel Poetics*.

lines, the lack of reference pointing to something we cannot yet see, but whose enigmatic wickedness seems both related and not related to the dragon's—its hidden source and its anticlimactic objectification. Indeed, even before we know it is a woman, she is already figured as a kind of excess or remainder: she is *another* wicked thing, a thing merely proximate to the dragon whose power the angel has (again, anticlimactically) already "bownde." It is as though the tale has caught itself in a half interval between two different moments or rhythms of sublimation: the dragon is tied down and powerless, but still figured by the angel as the dreadful object one can approach only by overcoming an immense dread; the woman, on the other hand, is rising into visibility as the rightful inhabitant of the tomb, her body already emitting, to the reader and the intra-diegetic spectators alike, an aura of vileness. Yet the woman is also a corpse, and not a living creature; and not only is she dead, her body is insistently and grotesquely mutilated—cloven, to use the text's own graphic and hyper-sexualized choice of words. In a horrific mise-en-abyme, then, the tale overcompensates for the passivity of the dead and mutilated woman by recreating, between her "twey partye," *the very same* image of sin and power the tale has deployed throughout. The tautological insistence is part of what gives the scene its horror, as well as what opens the story up to the psychotic possibility that this dragon, too, is the mere expression of yet another woman's actions, who herself has another dragon within her, and so on. Though this is not where the tale ends up going, the idea suggests that it is the miniaturization of the dragon—its abrupt conversion into an intimate, disgusting little creature, at once graspable and containable—that completely confuses any intuition we might have of how we might reach out and touch *it*, this anamorphic little dragon itself; or, again, and on the obverse side, what as-yet unknown thing we might touch if we were to reach into this woman's bloody, exciting, and deadening interior. In other words, as soon as the text tries to

literalize the trope of "handlyng with honde," it reveals a deep—ontological—uncertainty about what it is we are handling, when we *do* handle sin (e.g., whether the object is internal or external; visceral or abstract), and whether it is even correct to say that we handle *it* (as opposed, perhaps, to it handling *us*).

The psychoanalytic line is tempting here for many reasons, and a full elaboration would require a deeper foray into Freudian and post-Freudian accounts of sublimation. But even as the story doesn't seem to so much as make sense without some thought about the way these two separate objects —the woman and the dragon—take turns cathecting a disgusting kind of enjoyment, and the way that they each come into full visibility only in the empty dwelling-place of the tomb, there is still a question about why the text lands on just these objects, and decides to nest one into the other—as though the underlying thought here were one that had to proceed metaphorically as well as metonymically. To that end it is easiest to start making sense of the work being done by the dragon and the female corpse by again turning back towards the Prologue, to unravel a bit more of Mannyng's analytical account on how sin gets its grip.

Curiously, given what we've seen in the tale on "hordom," Mannyng emphasizes repeatedly, in the Prologue, that talk about "pryuytees" is prohibited and blameworthy. The tales, he says, will focus only on sins that are "openly seen or wrouzt" (29). The trope of openness suggests a publicity almost bordering on theatricality, just as it reveals that the exemplum is obsessed with verifiability, and, above all, depends on some account on *social recognition*. Sins are *commune*—this matters to the Mannyng of the Prologue, not least because it means sin can be represented in speech, and therefore addressed in the peculiar handling of confession. But this means too, that sin as such is inevitably generic: indeed, "sin" is in a way the name of a kind of incorporeal dimension lodged in concrete material actions—one that allows various cases of

"whoredom," for example, to be legible as versions of the same, even when they happen in different contexts, with different participants and for different reasons. Under these terms, a particular event of sinfulness will be describable *both* in concrete terms *and* in terms of a socially recognized form of abstract generality that need not always be intelligible to the agent at the moment when they are acting sinfully. Of course, it also need not be a description that matches the agent's own preferred description of their action.[33]

One strange feature of Mannyng's account so far, then, and the one that dovetails with a certain kind of psychoanalytic reading, is that for all the focus on the generic and abstract quality of sin, "pryuytees" (or secret sins) are not excluded from having existence—they are merely foreclosed from possessing a signifier. Indeed, one way of trying to map out why the tale extracts enjoyment from the places it does is by thinking of the enigma produced by the dead woman, whose past actions the tale tries to think of as the ground level of explanation, but which the angel cannot refer to except generically, with terms that seem to leap over the specificity of whatever it was that made her a sinner. After all, by the time we get to the end of the story, the terms "lechery" and "hordam" have accrued so many meanings that for the angel to use them in this context, as he does in line 1844, is to offer up no information at all. To say that this woman took marriage vows and broke them is not much better—especially since in the complex and wide-ranging discussion in the introductory section of this tale, as we saw, the term "hordom" helped Mannyng to make quite subtle distinctions between different ways of breaching consent, say, or more disturbingly, to discuss sex with insane persons and marriages with children of inappropriate age. If the woman, with her sin, is caught outside a juridical order that cannot make sense of her in anything but generic terms, then in a way it is no surprise that the dragon—which

[33] See Michael Thompson's philosophical investigation into the concepts of intention and practice in *Life and Action.*

in this tale is a figure for sinfulness as such—ends up caught inside her, forever taking its secret "veniaunce" on a mute corpse whose impossible pain is as abstract and depersonalized as its more or less illegible life.

Mannyng's tale, however, also insists to the end that the dragon is *not* contained in the woman, but rather exceeds her. In almost the same breath that the narrator declares that the dragon forever lies revenging itself on the woman—ignoring, of course, the whole opening section of the story where the dragon was spitting fire on the *town*—the angel commands the dragon to leave that region of the world forever:

> The aungel seyde, 'y comaunde the,
> Dragun, henne that thou fle,
> That thou neuer more any man noye,
> No thys cuntre nomore dystroye,
> No that thou come nomore here
> Yn thys stede for to apere' (1853-8).

None of the angel's instructions necessarily help the tale attain coherent narrative sense, but narrative sense is in a way beside the point: the real snag is that the tale wants to have things both ways—it wants to imagine the reduction of sinfulness as such down to the embodied, concrete level of specific sinful actions, even as it wants to try to understand specificity as a concrete expression of a generic sin that is only ever actualized in individual instances. This is why the angel's command, to never come back "in *thys* stede for to *apere*" is so suggestive: there is ample reason to think that the dragon might well come back, under a different appearance, to assail these same sinners, just as there is plenty of reason to think it might go forth to destroy other countries, whether in dragon-form or some as yet undetermined or unthought kind of appearance. Such a suggestion depends, for its conceptual force, on the thought that sin cannot be summed up by our everyday encounters with rules or prohibitions after all, nor does it help us make sense of sin as such to narrate or describe our various kinds of encounters with bad objects. Both these

experiences will be true and frequent, on Mannyng's account, and yet, to return to that wonderful phrase from the prologue, the important thought is that it is precisely *sin as such*, or "synne" in the singular, that we find ourselves "handlyng wyth honde" (83). The embodied, material metaphor in the Prologue is striking precisely because it is so forcefully and viscerally trying to make sense of an abstraction which possesses a kind of virtual unity—a negative image of what Mark Miller has described as a certain kind of "holistic character" attached to virtue.[34] The dragon helps figure this fantasmatic source of evil, showing how sin creeps into objects and actions, rearranges social relations, and seeks out, or creates, new genres of badness. At the same time, the dragon also shows how this abstract dimension of sin is registered viscerally the senses, as a surplus of feeling that is insistently material.

By the end of the tale the dragon, too, feels like a remainder—a kind of excess and immaterial wickedness that cannot be pinned to a particular location, much less destroyed, but only, and at best, tied down and made to inhabit into a concrete vehicle before it inevitably rises up and leaves again. In this sense, the tale insists both on the concrete and the abstract dimensions of sin, refusing to reduce one to the other, to discount either one as merely imaginary, or to think of these as separate or disconnected entities. That refusal makes for a story that splits itself, as it keeps doubling its characters and its plotlines to try to stabilize the relationships between sin, repentance, and satisfaction. The various narrative lines function to demarcate and separate: sinners confront a sin that is made to inhere outside of them; the penitent is placed in a different body than the bodies of the sinners; the sin itself seems to divide itself repeatedly, shifting now to the rotting and cloven corpse of the woman, now to the simultaneously miniaturized and

[34] The phrase “visceral abstraction” comes from Sianne Ngai's essay, "Visceral Abstraction,” and it is part of the purpose of this chapter to bury deeper into an account of how the logic of sin makes it appear in exemplary tales such as these *at once* as painful material and specific *and* as opaque and abstract.

magnified body of the dragon. But the exemplum cannot bring itself to rest in any single configuration, because penance cannot be made to fit the spectacular narrative of destroying sin once and for all, however much the logic of the exemplum suggests that it *must* be. The more one peers into Mannyng's tale of lechery and "whoredom," the less stable the terms become—and this is because, on Mannyng's own account, sin is not something that can be abolished once and for all by being fixed in a specular image outside of the sinner. The tactile metaphor brings a different account to bear: sin is what is touched, and what touches, when one seeks to handle the world at all. And for that reason, the exemplum is left suspended—longing for another kind of "handlyng," one that might be able to better bridge the gap between sinner and penitent, and in doing so, one that might arrive at a different method for sharing both the experience of sin and the labors of penance. The fantasy of being able to handle the world differently, it seems at the end, is the fantasy of a world evacuated of "horedom"—a world, that is, where perversion is finally impossible.

A Tale of a Thief: Penance as Perversion

If the dragon is a figure of abstraction produced by sin, and the hermit is a figure of abstraction produced by penitential labor, the tale of Zenon, an exemplum at the heart of the section on thievery, begins to render the one and the other kind of abstraction completely indiscernible. Zenon begins the tale in the street of a foreign country, walking to another abbey "as fallyth yn relygyun" (2100) when a beautiful fruit appears before him, seemingly from nowhere, flooding him with desire. This is characteristic for the exempla: throughout *Handlyng Synne*, sin creeps up most frequently on those who are alone or somehow out of place, as though mobility were always a potential source of sinfulness, allowing for a dangerous unmooring of affect that could make even the most virtuous subject become suddenly attached to a bad

object.[35] Thievery, like covetousness, is a sin that is itself about mobility—about failing to respect the boundaries that turn things into property; about setting an already privatized good into circulation, if only to re-privatize it once again. But how does Zenon know that the fruit belongs to someone in the first place? The story itself is utterly silent on the matter, and the silence is all-important, because it suggests that Zenon wants to *imagine* himself a thief—wants to imagine, that is, that his act of taking a fruit on an empty street is a deeply *social* act. Zenon is imaginatively creating a world in which thievery can so much as be a possibility; and this calls for a partitioning of the world, a territorialization of it into zones of privacy through which his transgressive desire—which is also a desire to deterritorialize, a desire to break through an isolation that can only now be read, retrospectively, as the solitude of not *possessing* anything to call his own—can get its hold.

The very beauty of the fruit, its absolutely singular delectability, is therefore at least in part a consequence of the enigma of ownership that this same fruit seems at once to index and obscure. This means that *maintaining* Zenon's aesthetic fascination here depends on keeping this fruit untouched and unsullied, isolated from a pressing (but fantasmatic) social background that in fact contributes to making the fruit the desirable object that it is. But this means too that Zenon must also wish to keep the fruit isolated from his *own* grubby urge to re-privatize it—which would mean, effectively, turning it into a ready-to-hand object of use and consumption, and sending Zenon spiraling back into isolation. Zenon, we might say, is at an excruciating impasse—one that may be familiar enough from other genres and critical contexts, perhaps especially

[35] The anxieties about mobility are everywhere in late medieval literature—most obviously, perhaps, in *Piers Plowman*. "Bad object" is a term with a long psychoanalytic pedigree, though here I mean simply an object that threatens to unmake or fragment the subject, partly through the seductive promise that the bad object is not bad at all. See Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* and Sarah Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness*.

discussions of *the Romance of the Rose* and texts embedded in the ethics of courtly love.[36] But the drama here is in some sense higher, since the tale repeats so many motifs from other stories that are not so much about thievery as they are about sin. The tale seems to suggest that if Zenon could just get some distance from the situation, observing instead the rising and falling rhythm of exemplary sinners left beached on the shoals of their appetites, he might be able to put a halt to his own desire, and in so doing, might put a stop to the ever-repeating circuits of sinfulness itself.

The tale does not quite go in that direction, although it comes close; what it does do is double down on the paradox of a negativity that is somehow produced by, yet destructive of, the desire for sociality that threads its way throughout the tale. For the thing that interposes itself between Zenon and the fruit—and therefore, between Zenon and his desire for the fruit—is an elaborate juridical structure that is yet again both hyper-social and entirely fantasmatic:

> Thys gode man thoughte, 'y am to blame
> Yif y take outher mennys thyng
> Wyth oute leue of any askyng,
> For sothe,' he seyde, 'than were y a thef
> And thefte ne ys god ne gode man lef.
> And yif I stele, y am a felun—
> Hangyd y shal be thurgh ryght resun (2106-12).

The whole process of deliberation happens within Zenon's head, though it is worth insisting again that Zenon is in a foreign country, and we have no real reason to assume that his knowledge of the law is in any way accurate.[37] Nevertheless, we are firmly in the terrain of introspective deliberation—one whose style makes it sound as though Zenon had been reading some of the early penitential-tariff manuals. In its own way, though, even this impersonal

[36] See Mark Miller's chapter on the Romance of the Rose in *Philosophical Chaucer*. D. Vance Smith's work on possession is an underlying influence throughout this section, as is Fradenburg's account of how medieval subjects relate to surplus enjoyment.

[37] Notice the vagueness of "taking mens' things without asking"—this is the *only* marker in the tale that this fruit actually does belong to anyone else at all.

juridical structure does extraordinary work: the sliding substitutions work to make Zenon's desire generic, displacing his attention from the specific action before him (taking a fruit) to the generalized form (taking other men's things); and from a concrete activity (theft) to a juridical category (felony); only to finally lead his "thoughte," with the seeming definitiveness of "ryght resun," to a punishment (hanging) that would finally simplify, by obliteration, Zenon's ongoing relation to what suddenly looks like a surprisingly intricate and insistent social world.

Hanging is the end-point of the juridical structure here, a form of blame so harsh it cannot be survived. And Zenon is of course very much *not* a thief, but everything about this little thought experiment seems to cry out that in some sense, at least, he *already is*: there is the inviting opening line, "y am to blame," that only in the next line gets corrected by the hypothetical; the scrambling of verb tenses (were y / y am /y shall); and the way that last sentence seems to snap shut, reiterating through alliteration the closure of the rhyme. It is *as* a thief, Zenon seems to think, that the Law actually calls him out: were he not thus interpellated, he would *take* the fruit, thereby actualizing his potential to be a thief. But the logic is all twisted here, since by this light it is the very knowledge that he *is* a thief that prevents him from thieving. The question for Zenon, at this stage, is what to do: the force of the thought experiment requires either punishment or acquiescence to desire, and the one seems as bad as the other—indeed, at this point they are mirror versions: to take the fruit is to set the juridical system in motion, and thereby to accept death. But to hang oneself by the neck is no solution either—suicide is an even worse sin than stealing fruit; more importantly for this tale, in taking away Zenon's very ability to sin, death would also just blot out the problem it was called upon to resolve.

Zenon's solution, if one can call it that, is astonishing: it is simultaneously what gives the tale its moral takeaway, what turns it into a kind of narrative joke, and what will (finally) start to

open up questions about the sublime economy of sin and penance that is the basis for Mannyng's own religious world. Zenon decides to inflict pain on himself—*not* as punishment for thieving, but rather to see whether he can withstand the pain he will deserve *if* he decides to become sinful:

> Fyrst y wyle wete the sothe certeyn
> Yif y may suffre that yche peyne
> That theuys suffre for thefte sake
> Ar y wyle oght of the fruyt take.
> Ad yf y may nat suffre that wo,
> To thefte wyle y neuer go (2113-8)

This strange—and extraordinarily creative—inversion of action and punishment makes no sense whatsoever in the juridical terms Zenon has already set up for himself. Worse yet, it seems to exhibit a perverse and calculative attitude that feels suspect, perhaps even repulsive—and yet the consequentialist moral of the tale, that thieves should attend to the horrific forms of punishment their actions deserve, rides on the assumption that Zenon's thought is not obviously on the wrong track. There is no further commentary on Zenon's part on the terms of the punishment, but hanging by the neck will not do. So, Zenon goes to the gallows, and hangs himself by *the hands*.[38] In a wonderful formulation, the narrator of the tale verbalizes what he supposes to be Zenon's thought process, hedging against the very law Zenon has imaginatively summoned into presence: "[Zenon] hyng theron be the hond, / Nat be the nekke, y vnderstond, / For hyt is nat oeral the lawe / For to do men so to dawe" (2121-4). Zenon is pictured here as both inside and outside the law, thereby splitting the law itself, as the "overall" application—hanging by the neck—is imagined as qualified, and therefore, as indeterminate, the mere negation offering no

[38] The text reads: "He yede & clambe uppon a peyl / and hyng theron be the hond" (2120-1). I could not find "peyl" in the Middle English Dictionary, but one of the meanings of "pel" is "a gallows, or the crossbeam of the gallows." Given the disciplinary context here, a gallows seems like the right choice. Some forty lines later, the text seems to confirm this choice: "Yyf thou brake euer any kyrk... / Thou art acursyd, thou wost weyl, / And hange were wrthy on a peyl" (2163-6).

sense as to what other body parts one might hang from, or even if hanging is in fact necessary at all.

Having decided to hang by his hands under the prideful heat (2128), however, Zenon seems to have stumbled into an obscure and puzzling form of sinfulness: he is neither guilty nor innocent of thievery; he is neither forgiven nor, exactly unrepentant; and he punishes his hands with the same gesture with which he reinforces his graspingness. The underlying thought the tale seems to be having is actually a slippery one: the very impetus to be over and done with punishment *in order to* make a decision about whether or not to be sinful means there is another, implicit desire at play: the desire to be radically sovereign, to be able to snatch up a delectable object—or not—without having to worry about the consequences of action, or about the fact that this form of appropriation has been marked, for Zenon, as a sin. In the framework of the atonement theology contemporary to Mannyng that imagines sin as a form of debt, it is as though Zenon is attempting to hoard merit—or to speculate on it—hoping that the means he has chosen will allow him to cash out this merit later, in the form of a perfectly free and consequence-less action. The very fact that this desire for sovereignty ends up looking so much like a form of death, however, means that Zenon remains entangled in sin. One might say that, in the act of creating the conditions by which he might enter into full possession of his desire to steal, Zenon gets to enact a death wish he nevertheless survives—which means that in that moment when he is hanging from his hands he is simultaneously as passive and as sovereign as he will ever be. Unlike death by hanging, though, there is no natural end to what Zenon has started—the tale is irresolvable as it stands, caught by the very dilemmas it seeks to resolve.

But the tale does not end there: the key move of the tale is when Zenon's hands replace his neck, and penance replaces punishment, thereby creating forms of circulation that are so vast and

dramatic that they seem to look forward to the more bureaucratized institutions of the late medieval church.[39] The difference between punishment and penance is purely formal, but needs elaboration: punishment, as the tale of Zenon imagines it, is reactive, operating primarily on behavior; it obliterates all difference—one could be hanged for any number of reasons, not just stealing—and it is a near instantaneous event (hopefully a broken neck and a quick death, but even if not, a couple of minutes of agony). Penance, on the other hand, is structured around ideas of exchange and substitution rather than retribution—in other words, it is built around a *reparative* fantasy, a sense that one could heal the damage opened up by sin.[40] This is what allows Zenon to imagine that inverting the order of action and consequences so much as makes sense. Penance addresses the specific sin, and in doing so, keeps Zenon in an ambivalent relationship *to* sin: the hands call attention to their desire to grasp another's possessions even as they are being made to feel pain, as though to unmake the world they are now held responsible for having created.[41] Penance thus presupposes *duration*—Zenon hangs for five days before letting go. This, too, is crucial, because it means that penance is potentially open-ended, and in principle interminable, stopping only when a certain limit has been socially recognized as necessary and sufficient.[42] Of course, one can imagine this being true for punishment also—in fact, there are slippages everywhere between the two terms, and Mannyng often shuttles back

[39] This is a way of elaborating on a point that Iogna-Prat makes in "Topographies of Penance," namely that the doctrine of the remission of sins was "rooted in the ancient practice of communtation of penalties exacted under the early medieval penitential system known as 'tariffed penance'" (NHP 161). On this view, the untimeliness of the tale of Zenon is part of what makes it speak so powerfully to Mannyng's late medieval context.
[40] The reference here is to Eve Sedgwick, "Paranoid and Reparative Reading," in *Touching Feeling.* But in fact, much of what I have to say in this paragraph is deeply indebted to Lauren Berlant, and in particular to the form of argument she takes up in her debate with Lee Edelman in *Sex or the Unbearable*.
[41] See Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* for an account of how physical pain refashions worlds.
[42] "Interminable in principle" is how Candace Vogler describes considerations for action that are taken out of pleasure in *Reasonably Vicious*. I want to make the same claim about the kind of pain saturated with enjoyment that is at stake in penance. The idea of social recognition is Marx's—he uses it, of course, to describe "socially necessary labor"—the kind of labor that creates value in the capitalist system.

and forth between them without warning—but Zenon's penance requires his own authorization, so to speak, his active collaboration in his own pain; and this is why the joke of the tale works: it depends on the fact that there is no external authority to authorize or validate Zenon's expenditure of penitential labor, so he has nothing to do after five days except walk away. That labor and suffering can become, in this sense, unproductive—and unproductive *because* not recognizable—is one of the key insights of this tale. For now, it is important to note how the extended duration involved in penance means that multiple feedback loops are always possible—penance can become overlaid with sin, as happens in the tale of Zenon, or one circuit or relay of transforming sin into penance can become superimposed over another.[43] Penance, after all, takes *time.* And while one is building that chapel, one may also cheat one's workers, or be in an adulterous relationship, or lash out at one's friend—or do all these things simultaneously. Because sin is such a permanent presence in the life of the fallen subject, at least as long as she is tethered to the Earthly City, the circuits keep going *ad infinitum*: new forms of sin producing further penance, and circuit upon circuit, at varying rhythms, shaping what the subject calls her life, or at least, her moral life.

The idea that sin and penance form an economy, then, suggests that the individual actions of sustaining a sinful intention, acting upon it, and doing penitential labor to purge oneself of the sense of blame thereby incurred, can be understood as *circulation acts*—stages or moments in an indefinite process that creates various forms of surplus along the way, and with it, various

[43] Michael Thompson and Elizabeth Anscombe's work on intention are important to this account. To recap an argument of theirs: I can be intentionally brewing a pot of tea without necessarily attending to it at every moment: intention is not a point particle, and it does not require the intentional agent to maintain a certain psychological content throughout. In Thompson's version of this example, I can at one and the same time be playing a game of poker, cheating at cards, brewing a cup of tea, and lifting a gun to shoot at the intruder that walked into the saloon—intention's extended duration is what makes such a scenario possible. In the same way, a sinner can be told to fast for a week to purge some sin or other—but even as the sinner is fasting, a new bad thought might come into her head, she might find herself committing a new kind of sin (envy, rage, pride), and so on. This means that at no time is she free from sin, no more than she is free from intention.

temporalities, rhythms of change, and ways of being creative or getting stuck. This metabolic view of morality suggests that sin cannot be easily resolved with an appeal to punishment or vengeance: precisely to the degree that the system loops back on itself, sin is bound to become indeterminate, its origins and contours more obscured as the various circuits of sin and penance start to overlay and run interference with one another. This may sound like a depressing thought, but it need not be: the economic motif is fundamentally based on a hopeful idea: that the circuits of sin and penance are themselves less about eliminating sin than they are about managing it—about finding ways to live with sin, and about shaping a life that is not catastrophically damaging despite its ongoing relation to the intrusive pressures of negativity.

Still, to imagine circuits building on circuits in this way forces a certain kind of question which cannot in principle have any clear resolution—if sin circulates through a symbolic economy, and the labor of a life is to find ways to grapple with its intrusive presence, then *where does sin come from*? Where is it produced, and by what power? This is a puzzle we have already seen Mannyng turn to repeatedly in *Handlyng Synne*. As we have seen, the very metaphor of "handlyng synne" depends on the notion that we catch ourselves already in the middle of a lifeworld everywhere saturated with negativity: we handle sin in our thought; we handle sin in our deeds, we handle sin with our mouths (c.f. lines 83-140). By Mannyng's account, we continue to *handle* sin even when we distance ourselves from it, whether it is through confession, penance, or other forms of virtuous action. In a way, this would be another (and more embodied) way of framing what has been referred to here as the problem of circulation posed by the penitential apparatus. But Mannyng also lingers rhetorically, in almost Boethian terms, on the idea of sin as a permanent point of origin and of return: "Thou darst neuere recche whar thou begynne, / For euery whare ys begynnyng of synne" (119-20). Given the vast relays of labor and

time we have examined, and the fact that sin's beginning is on this account lodged *everywhere*, what might it mean to try to pinpoint in this way the "beginning of sin"? The tale of Zenon has thus far served to think about modes of circulation of negativity created by the slippage from punishment to penance, and to begin thinking about the way physical labor emerges as a problem in the economy of salvation.

Zenon, however, could have torqued the juridical framework in ways that might have also given him access to the fruit—he might have redefined what counted as "other men's thynges," for example, or recast his desire to steal as a desire to borrow an object he might someday pay back. The tale's specific twists instead keep Zenon locked inside what we might metaphorically think of as a "hidden abode of production"—only here we are no longer talking about physical labor. The generative source of sin, the tale seems to argue, is the *will* itself—some point of desire located within Zenon's intentional structure. This matters to the conceptual underpinnings of the tale, because intention is also the kind of category that exists only insofar as it is capable of being actualized in behavior, thereby creating feedback loops between the inner and the outer that make intention finally a property of the agent rather than of any particular mental content. In keeping the will in suspension—or, as the tale at one point seems to imply, in keeping Zenon suspended by his will—the tale artificially detaches intentionality from the sphere of action, allowing it to wither away in isolation from the circuits and relays that constituted its source of life. This means that Zenon is not just embarked on a form of penitential labor that is not recognized as socially necessary—he is also caught up in an intention whose actualization he prepares for the entire length of the tale, but which he cannot translate into embodied activity of the right sort.

The weirdness of the tale is in the end its manner of blurring together these two elongations of suddenly useless activity, making the exertions of the will required to bear the pain of penance, and those required to maintain an intention with no hope of translating it into action, seem somehow indistinguishable. Zenon's perverse assimilation of action and penance, in other words, shows how the symbolic economy situates the sinner between two potentially interminable forces—the will, on the one hand, which can be imagined as located at the site of production, but only on the condition that it be already nested in embodied circuits of activity, and *penitential* labor on the other, which can be imagined as attempting to consume that which the will constantly produces, but which does so only on the condition that it be socially recognized in the right manner. The exempla have brought us back once more, from a view of external and spectacular penance—the hermit confessing in public, Zenon embarking on his spectacular form of self-cancellation—to the recesses of a secretive interior that refuses to become fully integrated into the circulating flows of sin and penance.

Final Considerations: Mannyng's Executors

Much of this chapter has been dedicated to the idea that the exemplary narratives of *Handlyng Synne*, perhaps especially those that are untimely, provide a rich resource of tropes and figures for thinking about motifs of circulation, abstraction, and labor. This suggests the vision of a vast general economy—a heavenly *oikonomia*, as Agamben has described it—but of course it also suggests that modes of thinking were therefore developed and made available to begin thinking about the shape and structure of the worldly economy, or the economy in the restricted sense.[44]

[44] Georges Batailles differentiates general from restricted economies in *The Accursed Share*. He does not mean what I mean here—he is thinking about a general economy constructed upon waste, one more inspired by the luxuriant excesses of biology than by forms of abstract or concrete labor. Still, given that the economy of worldly goods is a part of the economy of salvation (not necessarily its opposite), I find the terminology helpful. Agamben has devoted a recent book, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, to the way medieval thinkers thought of the world as organized in the

To conclude this chapter, I want to think briefly about Mannyng's more immediate historical context, and about a pair of exempla he wrote himself, in direct response to the economic and social conditions surrounding him. In doing so, I want to think both about the limits and the strengths of trying to move directly to a conceptualization of the historical by way of the exempla that seem most explicitly historical in *Handlyng Synne.* In doing so, I want to continue thinking about the way concepts become figures, and figures concepts; an idea that, as Andrew Cole has pointed out, has powerful implications for the way we understand the relationship of genre to history.[45]

Through a detailed analysis of Mannyng's immediate context, Joyce Coleman has argued that Mannyng, a member of the Gilbertine Order, was likely reading *Handlyng Synne* to pilgrims in order to solicit donations to help in the reconstruction of Sempringham Priory. Such a claim makes sense of the fact that many of the exempla Mannyng himself wrote, rather than those he gathered and translated, insistently call on laypeople to make sure to pay for mortuary masses. Our sense of the relevant milieu can be elaborated through the kind of historical account offered by Martin Sheehan: the late twelfth century was a time in which the last will and testament had finally superseded earlier juridical instruments for the transfer of wealth from the dead and dying to their relatives.[46] The executor—a legal agent whose functions had long centered on the disbursement of alms to the Church—had in the eleventh and twelfth centuries also acquired the authority to pay creditors, sue debtors, and distribute legacies.[47] Unlike the heir, however, who

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shape of a vast *oikonomia*. Missing in that text is an account of penance, and of labor more largely; he turns towards labor (though not really to penance) in *The Highest Poverty*, but as the account I'm drawing up makes clear, I think he splits medieval life too cleanly between that part of which is managed in this heavenly economy, and that part of it which is organized by work and community-building.

[45] Cole, 137.

[46] See Sheehan's *The Will in Medieval England* for a long discussion of the rise of the executor in late medieval culture.

[47] Le Goff speaks about the relationship between the last will and testament and the theology of Purgatory in *The Birth of Purgatory*, p. 233

could only answer to the testator's obligations by first acquiring ownership over the inheritance, the last will and testament made the executor a *representative* of the deceased—one that was barred, at least *qua* executor, from entering into full possession of these goods. The executor had *use*, but not legal *possession*; or, as other legal canons had it, the executor was an owner whose possession was marked off from ordinary ownership by being *constitutively* transitory. Like the usurer, who rents out the use of his possessions while maintaining ownership over them, the executor registers the way concrete objects of possession can become suddenly uncanny, revealing a lurking immateriality and estrangement that is produced by the vast economic and legal structures through which such goods circulate.

For Mannyng, such structures are *also* moral and metaphysical. If the executor emerges as a site of anxiety, and as an object of disciplinarity, it is because of the circuits of material and immaterial wealth within which he is imagined to function as a relay:

> The soule that is in purgatorye
> Loketh faste after the socour
> Of the gode executour.
> Yif he hyt helpe for to saue,
> Gret mede than shal he haue;
> And yif he do not hys ordynaunce,
> Hyt asketh of god to hym veniaunce.
> Of all false that beren name,
> False executours are most to blame (6252-8).

The flatness of this section already points to some of the troubles Mannyng will have turning the problem of the bad executors into exempla. It also, however, seems to open up the possibility of arriving at a set of extraordinarily complex thoughts about the penitential apparatus as it existed in Mannyng's time. The purgatorial soul in this passage is a spectral and uncanny "it," an incorporeal and persistent presence not reducible to personhood. If it fastens its gaze on the executor, and thereby, fastens the executor to his "ordynaunce," it does so in and through the

goods it has left behind—that is, in an abstract and mediated form. Possessions stick to the dead, and the dead to their possessions; this stickiness is what allows circulation to take place in the first place, since it is through the insistence of the dead that the executor is denied the simple ownership that would bring the flow of goods to a halt. For the soul—though not immediately for the executor—those riches have no use value: death has changed their character, turning them into placeholders for moral debts.

There is here a double binding: sin binds the soul; the soul, seeking to purge itself, remains bound to its goods; and this binding exerts pressure on these goods to move in certain flows rather than others. In a curious way, and just to the degree that the executor remains in half-possession of the goods that he only uses or distributes as a representative of the deceased, the sins of the dead themselves take the form of strangely alienable things, in that the bondage they exert over the dead soul depends in part on how those uncanny possessions circulate through the earthly economy. The executor and the deceased, in this sense, maintain a highly mediated form of relation: without ever actually coming into direct contact with one another, they each shape the other's rights, obligations, and possibilities of movement.

While conceptually promising, the overwhelming number of mediations at stake here seems to sap Mannyng's ability to create a story that is anything but formulaic. In the first tale, the executors of a dead man's will and testament split among them the money they were meant to spend on masses for the soul of the deceased. In the second tale, two executors keep an inheritance away from a rightful heir. These are not like the tales Mannyng lifts from Gregory, where ghosts come back to haunt the place of their death, to speak to the dead and ask for favors; beyond a couple of formulaic lines at the very beginning of each exemplum, there is no talk about what it is that binds the dying person to his chosen executors, and no talk of the dead once

they've gone. Even the idea of vengeance, which dominates many of the other tales and is in evidence in Mannyng's declaration about what executors should do, seems to peter out: in the first tale, the three executors walk away safely, while Mannyng prays that God send them a misadventure; in the second, one executor falls ill, while the other ends up in poverty—hardly the most unambiguous way for God to send down his vengeance.

The most interesting part of this section, however, is the speech of the clerk-cum-executor from the first tale, one that gets its strength from its declared *inability* to pierce the veil of death, either through wealth or through vision: souls in heaven have no need of masses; souls in hell cannot use them—"so be hyt yn helle or be hyt in blys, / Hyt hath no more nede of thys" (6341-2). In other words, the executor splits the general economy *into* an economy of goods and an economy of salvation, and postulates their radical difference. This little moment serves as an object lesson in the structuring power of fantasy: the disappearance of Purgatory from the cleric's description of the other world justifies the unraveling of contracts and the emergence of naked self-interest. It might appear, then, that these tales offer the initial lineament of a modern picture: covetousness, in the form of naked self-interest, is not for this tale a primitive and unchangeable force; rather, it depends on the historical emergence of a materialist structure out of the breakdown of an older, idealist one.

In the process of making that argument, though, the tale loses its narrative strength, and with it, anything interesting it might have to say about the anxieties about possession, sin, and the work of penance. To the degree that Mannyng takes the complex set of mediations between the living and the dead seriously—that Mannyng imagines that the dead *cannot* interact with the living except through institutional forms and material remainders—he starts to lose the very thing that makes exemplary narrative a live zone for him for thinking about the metaphysics of

possession, the circulatory flows of sin and penance, and everything that initially seemed to make the executor such a promising figure to begin with.

But if this chapter seeks to wrap up its thoughts by turning to the false executors, it is because of a curious moment, after the exempla have ended, where the text seems to turn back upon itself, as though determined to undercut its own extended critique of them. Here, for the first and only time in *Handlyng Synne*, Mannyng interrupts himself in the commentary *outside the exempla*, embarking on an astonishing flight of personification that allows the executor to return, this time without body or personality, to lodge a complaint against the dead. The voice speaks in the second person, directly to the reader, and the speech is worth quoting at length:

> Yif thou be ryche in yyngthe or elde
> And hast ynough of welthe to welde,
> And knowsest thy self yn wyl and dedes,
> Thy wo, thy wele, how hou the ledes,
> Al thy lyff what hyt ys wrthy,
> Thou wost hyt better than wote y.
> Wyk and gode thou hyt wyste
> And the to saue thou ne lyste,
> And haddest thy self al the power,
> Why were not thou nat thyn owne spenser?
> How shulde y than do now for the,
> Syn thy self were not so fre?
> How should I louve thy soule now,
> When thou louedest nat thy soule prow?
> How shulde y brynge the to blysse
> When thou thy self ne wldest the wysse?
> How shulde I brynge the of pyne
> When thou ne wldest whyl al was thyne?
> How shulde y, frend man, be thy frende
> When thy self, fo man, wald thy hende?
> How shulde y late thy gode me fro
> When thou lete noun fro thy self go?
> Who shulde the out of sorowe unbynde
> When to thy self thou were vnkynde...? (6438-63)

The executor continues to speak for a while longer, but the gist of the complaint is contained in this excerpt. The argument is a much more sophisticated version of the one that was put forward

by the executor-cum-cleric of the earlier tale: the soul cannot seek love if it does not love itself; it cannot seek help if it does not work to save itself. Centrally at issue here is how to apportion blame between the executor and the soul for an ethical failure that seems beyond repair, and indeed, that seems not particularly easy to pin down, despite the rhetorical force of the executor's prose. From the point of view of the executor, things are relatively clear: the dead soul should have cared for its own salvation. In life, it knew itself better than anyone else did, and had the power to do what it now asks the executor to do for it. Given the self-absorption and miserliness of the soul, it is unreasonable for it to ask the executor to be any better than it was; to "unbynde" the soul from the sorrows that it has itself brought upon its head.

Guiding the claims here is an implicit argument for the logical and temporal priority of the soul over the executor: the executor emerges only as a response to the gaps and insufficiencies that the soul, if good, should have been responsive to while it was alive; and, if bad, has no right to complain about now that it is dead. Mannyng, after ventriloquizing the executor, ends up endorsing this line of thought. "Make thy self thyn own wey," he says, now in his own voice, "That thyn executour ne of the thus say." This moment of ventriloquy, if nothing else, thus lays out the conditions for an ethical *sentence* that countervails an earlier position—balancing the one-sided obligation to "pay masses for the dead" with the opposite, but on its own perhaps equally one-sided duty to depend upon oneself.

What is so striking about this moment is that the voice speaks entirely from the position of the bad executor, and in fact summons the soul into existence as its own rhetorical double. There is nobody here to contain this undead voice, no scene within which this executor might act—were it to find such a body, or such a scene, the ethical *sentence* would collapse into a spectacle of the very covetousness Mannyng is using the figure of the executor to critique. To do its proper work,

then, the voice depends on its disembodiment—which is to say, it depends on the executors in the tales being punished and verbally abused, and on the executor being the worst "of all that beren the name of false." The voice speaks *from* falsity and self-cancellation, and reasserts that falseness as a condition of its coming into speech. Even as it berates the dead soul for unkindness and selfishness, the shapeless, quasi-allegorical executor insists on the right to be ethically obtuse, and on the freedom to be careless and loveless.

The executor is not self-made, however much he may want to think of himself as such; as the pure personification of a social function, he derives his very being from the fact that there was in existence, at some point, someone else who accumulated wealth, wrote a will, and thereby both created a juridical person (this selfsame executor), trusting that person to follow through on the requisite obligations. This is what gives the executor's interpellation of the soul as a "you" its fierce competitiveness—it is as though the executor were trying to overwrite the dead soul, or speak over it; to take away its ability to make a claim on the executor. But the executor's gesture of power only works if he can bring the dead soul into the scene to listen to him—*this* dead soul, that is, the very one whose will and testament first summoned him into being. So, the executor insists on the soul's deadness even as he keeps apostrophizing the soul back into presence; he insists on the soul's inability to move the heart or the intentions of those who remain alive even as he both props up his pride and reinforces his enjoyment with the thought of being the one thus continually unmoved.

The thing that ties the executor to the dead soul—mutual obligation, an expected reciprocity of gifts—cannot be acknowledged except disdainfully, as though dependence were not just a distorting fantasy, but actually evidence of moral turpitude. The executor replaces a reciprocal relation with a mirroring one, and authorizes his never-ending production of speech with the

continual need to guard against unkindness. The executor *knows* what vices the dead soul cultivated, and what the soul's logic of self-justification is, because, he says, this logic is his own, and it is a logic that needs to be continually, impossibly undone. Vice thus creates a curious kind of intimacy between the two, the executor and the soul, an intimacy that seems as much predicated on disappointment and lost affection as it does on the habit they share of hoarding goods. "How shulde I louve thy soule now," asks the executor, "When thou louedest nat thy soule prow?" (6450-51). The executor despairs at the soul's own lack of love for itself, just as he despairs at his own inability to love the soul; a despair that everywhere throws the executor's self-hatred back upon himself.

The claim here cannot be that there is nothing to be gained in turning inwards; much less that relying on one's own resources is the ethically impoverished choice, as opposed to the morally proper decision of delegating what Mannyng sometimes calls "soule-werke" to somebody else. That would merely constitute the ideological reversal of the executor's arguments, a way of ignoring the way his anger at the whole penitential apparatus is attuned to much that has felt (or feels) frustrating or unjust about the structures of the late medieval church. But more than this, the extraction of a straightforward moral that either directly affirms or denies the executor's argument does violence to the underlying complexity of this moment, and the dialectical interplay it contains. This allegorical executor acquires a voice through self-cancellation and disembodiment, speaking *for* the soul as well as *at* it. The soul, for its part, remains a resistant, stubborn, and silent presence—one that solicits the production of speech precisely through its mute insistence that it be unbound from sorrow.

This scene should be familiar from other contexts: Mannyng is arriving at the kind of structure that is recognizable from debate poetry, wherein a pair of interlocutors condemn each

other for being the source of their mutual wrongdoing. It is not a full debate, obviously—more like the moments in early sermon literature where a soul rails against a body that is nameless and voiceless for driving them both towards sin.[48] But the proto-debate that emerges in this particular moment is unique in that the debate it stages cannot be healed through the reconciliation of the two facets of an individual agent—body and soul, for example. Because the executor, in becoming allegorical, is neither an individual person nor a facet of that soul that silently resists its attacks; rather, it is as though the trappings of flesh, identity, and juridical personhood had finally dropped away, revealing themselves to be merely accidental features adhering to the principle of circulation itself. But if that is so, the thing that is left static and unmoving is the soul, the thing that sins, and wants to move, but somehow cannot unbind itself from sin. This moment with the executor is in this sense constituted as a failed dialectic where the sin is all on one side, and the work that would unbind this soul from sin is all on the other.

But this is just to encounter again, in a new form, the splits that have marked the investigation into these exempla all along: the splitting of the dragon from the sins of the islanders, for example, or the splitting of the praying people from the hermit that represents them; or the less easily theorized split between Zenon *qua* sinner and Zenon *qua* penitent. These splits emerge at the site of penitential labor, where the sinner—or the community of sinners—seek to move towards a better version of themselves while also remaining what they are. We might now see in these splits the pressures pushing exemplary narrative into a different genre, into allegory, with its disembodied personifications and its more explicit concern with social structure. But in

[48] See Masha Raskolknikov's *Body Against Soul*. Her account of the birth and development of allegory by way of debate poetry is extraordinarily helpful, though the difference in emphasis between us may be tracked in the way she prefers medicinal metaphors (*soulhele*) to track those things I want to think about in economic ones (*soul werke*). The two models are not incompatible, though they point to different ways of becoming reconciled. To me, reconciliaton has to happen through the circuits extended into the social terrain. For a wonderful account of sickness and health that has influenced many of my views of how to think about sin, see Jean Luc Nancy's essay "The Intruder."

Mannyng, this aesthetic opening is foreclosed, because allegorical imagery can still only emerge in the form of falseness, and as an expression of the false, which is also to say, as the expression of a world so dominated by contractual obligations, self-interest, and rapacity that no possibilities for entanglement remain. But this is also to say that in Mannyng, this brief allegorical moment emerges in the form of the occlusion or the avoidance of penitential labor, which is after all the link between the executor and the Purgatorial soul that the executor feels obliged to deny. After all, if one difference between this and traditional body and soul debates is that here the disembodied figure is constitutively marked as social, the other difference is that the mute and silent witness—the soul, in this moment—remains plugged into the circuits of sin and penance, precisely by remaining in Purgatory. If for Mannyng, then, allegory can only respond to the historical present by situating sin and penance in yet another bald and irreconcilable antinomy, the conditions are already in place for an allegory that moves otherwise, historicizing its terms and narrating the conditions under which sin can become penance, or penance can enter into the material and collective space of human activity.

Chapter 2:

Lat bring a man in a boot amyd brood water:

Penance, Sexuality, and Romance in *Piers Plowman*, Passus VII-IX

Preliminary Considerations: Pain, Penance, and the Penitential Impasse

This chapter seeks to initiate a longer investigation into the operations of penance in William Langland's *Piers Plowman* by reading the two Passus that initiate what has come to be known as the *Vita*: Passus VIII, where the conversation between Will and the Friars lays the terms for an understanding of Dowel as penitential activity, and Passus IX, which introduces into that discussion Wit's long exegesis on Kynde. This is a vast amount of ground to cover, but the premise of this chapter is that Langland proceeds dialectically, staging at each step of this section a conceptual and figurative collapse that sets the terms for subsequent Passus. The argument will proceed along two different but related axes. On the one hand, this chapter seeks to set the terms for describing how Langland negotiates the different temporalities lodged within penitential fantasies, balancing competing drives towards cyclical and linear narratives. That argument prepares the ground for an emerging theorization of penance as a distinctive form of human activity—one that, lacking a natural or intrinsic structure, blends genres and narrative forms in an attempt to give shape to penitential time itself. But while the analysis of the temporal duration of penance is crucial to the larger project of the dissertation, and will carry over into subsequent chapters, it will in this chapter be subordinate to the second main axis of this paper. That axis is spatial rather than temporal, and it seeks to map out the generic impasses of penance by attending to the strange topographies of penance, and in particular, to the way fantasies of penitential suffering are continually unsettled by the pressure to move in two different directions

at once.[1] On the one hand, the penitent experiences suffering as a means of extending the boundaries of their sensorium—which is to say, such suffering becomes for the penitent a means of stretching out towards that which remains unknowable, unforeseen, and distant from immediate perception: here, that is the messianic love of Kynde . There is a powerful eroticism nested in that desire for what is strange and alien, which means that penitential suffering has an explicitly sexual dimension—something that critics such as Nicolette Zeeman, Stephen Justice, and David Aers have already done much to emphasize. On the other hand, confronted with a self or a world already ravaged by sin, penitential suffering exhibits an opposing tendency, finding solace in a violent form of enjoyment which collapses the domain of sentience rather than extending it, seeking to lay waste to the world in and through the very movement that leaves the penitent reduced to a mute, opaque, and contentless kernel of suffering experience—that is, in a penitential position that is akin to what has at times been theorized as bare life.

Crucial to the overall argument will be Elaine Scarry's brilliant account of sentience in *The Body in Pain*. In a *tour de force* that addresses narratives of torture, Biblical tales, and the history of philosophy, she argues that sentience in general oscillates between two poles that for her take the names "pain" and "imagination." Pain, on her account, is a private and privatizing form of sentience, one whose presence is paradigmatically a site of certainty for the person feeling pain, but that is also intrinsically opaque and resistant—not just to language, but to taking on intentional content generally.[2] Because it reduces the sphere of sentience in this way, dissolving the veridicality and certainty of anything not directly related to pain, pain can be deployed by

[1] In "Topographies of Penance in the Latin West," in the collected volume *A New History of Penance,* Dominique Iogna-Pratt has argued eloquently for the importance of thinking about "the topography, or rather topographies, of penance," a topic he believes has mostly been ignored in discussions of penance. Although he has a more anthropological view in mind, his idea of analyzing "spatial manifestations of enclosure" in penitential discourse has been important to me, as has been his link between the topographies of penance and the romance form.
[2] Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain* is the reference here, and what follows is a general paraphrase of her argument as it can be found especially in the introduction and Chapter 3, "Pain and Imagining" (p. 161-181).

those who would destroy or de-realize the world of the person suffering, just as it can be deployed by those seeking to verify, on the surface of the body, an idea that otherwise has no way to become materialized. Imagination, on the other hand, extends sentience outwards, towards the material realm, the world of artifacts, and what can be shared in common: it is the counterpart to pain, and the movement through which sentient creatures seek to lose themselves in what exists outside of them—and to build in that external realm a world that has hitherto existed only in imagination. In pain, sentient matter serves as the substratum for an act of creation that initiates elsewhere; in imagination, sentience acts upon the world, materializing its own creative powers. Such intuitions will guide many of the underlying discussions in this chapter, but the explicit argument will be fixated on neither the category of "pain" nor on that of "imagination." What interests me instead is the way Scarry describes what is painful about pain (namely, as the withdrawal into forms of sensibility that are silent and unnamable), and, by contrast, how she characterizes what is liberating about the imagination (namely, the transformation of sentience itself from passively suffering substance to a subject whose circle of activity expands ever outwards). One way of drawing out the argument that concerns Langland's account of penance, as we shall see, is to say that penance in general, and penitential suffering in particular, is assimilable neither to what Scarry thinks of as the pole of pain nor the pole of the imagination. Instead, penitential suffering seeks to move simultaneously towards *and* away from a kernel of mute, pain-laden feeling that lies at the very heart of the penitent's subjectivity, struggling to find a way to form a collective life around painful instances of unmaking. That kernel of pain can become associated with both sin *and* with penance. Sometimes there is no obvious label for the feeling of "sin"; that assails the subject sometimes it is penance itself whose redemptive fantasies seem to require that the penitent blot away all forms of subjectivity. Indeed,

and as we shall see, at moments of heightened intensity, penance scrambles the very distinction between inside and outside, what is deepest within (*interior intimo meo*, as Augustine put it) and what is farthest from the self.

For now, it is worth emphasizing that *both* of these opposing movements—on the one hand, a retreat into the sphere of interiority, on the other, an imaginative reaching out to what lies outside the boundaries of the self—are for the poem characteristically penitential, and their repeated confrontation produces in the poem a rich account of the potentials and impasses of the penitential imaginary. Langland, however, does more than merely produce static antinomies, working through different genres in an attempt to find a way through the irreconcilable forms of penitential longing or sensibility. While the Friars' exemplum attempts to set the terms for a clear, but static, opposition between a penitential self and a sinful world, Wit's romance-driven association of sexuality and redemption will propulsively drive the poem into a dialectical spiral that starts to shift the meanings of "interiority" or "exteriority." More elaborately, the poem will encounter quite different articulations of this tension between withdrawal and self-extension—one in the register of the body and sexuality, the other in the register of language and signification. Precisely because what is at stake for Langland is a penitential subjectivity that is leaky and non-sovereign—one that continually seeks to attach to something outside of itself while also seeking to retreat from the attachments it has belatedly discovered to be sinful—the Langlandian investigation into the aims and modalities of penance is political just as much as it is ethical. In other words, the poem is inevitably marked by the desire to either moor oneself to, or untether oneself from, a world saturated with objects, persons, and fragments of language whose effects are never set in advance. How to tame these discomfiting and potentially perilous oscillations between what is within and what is without the self—and more than tame, discipline

them—will become central to the analysis of these Passus; for, as we shall see, the poem's interest in the double-facing aims of penance makes it continually project this very split out on the social world, simultaneously creating dreams of more utopian social arrangements *and* apocalyptic fantasies of world devastation. Langland will offer no final reconciliation of these antinomies, either at the scale of the individual or the scale of political life; nor is the interest of this chapter to do the work that Langland does not. Rather, this chapter will finally argue that these opening sections of the *Vita* stage an attempt to find a specifically penitential way of articulating sin and redemption into a politics of what the poem elsewhere calls "common lyfe," while also, and at the very same time, embodying a critique of the fantasy that penance might be incorporated once and for all into the normative logics of everyday life.

Sinning and Aliveness: The Exemplum of the Friars' Boat

As a kind of preamble, then, I want to begin the more detailed articulation of the way *Piers Plowman* seeks to make sense of penitential life by analyzing an exemplum that emerges at the beginning of Passus VIII, at the start of the so-called *Vita de Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest*. The dreamer, having experienced the complete collapse of the social and ethical experiment of the Half-Acre, and having just seen Piers rip the Pardon in half, begins this new stretch of the poem by inquiring of a couple of friars where he might be able to find Dowel—the figure who in the imaginary register of the poem has begun to emerge as an alternative to the repetitive and self-defeating cycles of pardons, prayers, and penance (VII, 178). The Friars have an answer for Will: Dowel lives with them, which is to say: it is among the Friars that collective life is regulated in such a way that human activity is generally legible as "doing well." Given the critiques of the Mendicant Orders the poem has produced throughout the poem, such an answer is obviously

unsatisfactory[3]; but as Will presses the Friars for further elaboration, insisting that even the virtuous repeatedly fall into sin (VIII 22), it becomes clear that the problem is less about the specific forms of corruption lodged in mendicant or monastic institutions than it is about the precariousness of the very category of "doing well." It is in this context, and in response to Will's insistence on fallibility, that the Friars produce the brief exemplum of a man in a boat:

> Lat brynge a man in a boot amydde the brode watre,
> The wynd and the water and the boot waggyng
> Maketh the man many a tyme to falle and to stonde;
> For stonde he never so stif, he stumbleth if he meve,
> Ac yet is he saaf and sound, and so hym bihoveth.
> For if he ne arise the rather, and raughte to the steere,
> The wynd wolde with the water the boot over throwe;
> And thanne were his lif lost, through lachesse of hymselve (VIII 30-37).

That exemplum emerges from a long tradition of using the figure of a boat to think about sin and penance—versions of this boat appear in Gratian and Lombard's discussions of penance, for example[4]—but framed as it is, in isolation, and absent further tropes or figures, the boat is an ambivalent figure, deploying a fantasy of isolated perfectionism and self-mastery to make the

[3] See, e.g., Mede's friar confessor in Passus III, and Wrath's production of "anger stews" in the monasteries of Passus V. For a larger discussion on Langland and his complicated relationship to the mendicant orders, see Wendy Scase, *Piers Plowman and the New Anticlericalism*. Anne Middleton's "Two Infinites: Grammatical Metaphor in Piers Plowman" is still the standard argument for the impossibility of locating Dowel in any particular place or form of activity. In this respect, see also Vance Smith's discussion of the issue in *The Book of the Incipit*.

[4] Gratian, *Tractatus de Penitentia*, Distinction 1: "For what does it matter to a shipwreck whether the ship is covered over and overwhelmed by a large wave or whether water gradually creeps into the hold, is left behind deemed unimportant by men guilty of negligence, and fills up and submerges the ship?" (Gratian, 63). The argument is repeated almost verbatim by Lombard: "And if [venial] sins are gathered against us, they will burden and oppress us as much as some one great sin. For of what relevance is it in a shipwreck whether the ship is flooded and sunk by one great wave, or whether seeping water little by little enter the hold and, by the negligence of the crew, fill and sink the ship? And so let them be intent upon fasting, alms-giving and prayers" (Lombard, 92). There is perhaps an even richer history of this trope that might extend through Gregory back to Classical Antiquity. The ur-text here, as best I can tell, is Jerome's letter cxxx, to Demetrius: not only is the shipwreck a theme that Jerome there picks up on, as he does in other letters—he specifically mentions penitence as "a plank for those who have had the misfortune to be shipwrecked"; a description that Aquinas will use as the centerpiece for his discussion in ST III 84.6. The boat motif, as Langland uses it here, may even have Aristotelian antecedents: at the end of the *De Anima*, for example, Aristotle affirms "again, it is not clear whether the soul may not be the actuality of the body as the sailor is of the ship" (413 a8-9). The exemplum of the ship captain that must preserve his ship by throwing away what burdens it down emerges in chapter III of the *Nichomachean Ethics*; Joel Kaye has noted the importance of this exemplum for late medieval interrogations of voluntary action, in ethical as well as economic contexts (Kaye, 232).

paradoxical claim that repeated sinning is an inevitable part of being alive. The glossing of the friars themselves helps us better see what is at stake: The water is "the world, that wayneth and wexeth"; the "grete waves" are "the goodes of this grounde" that toss the boat back and forth; the boat is the body "that brotel [or fragile] is in kynde," and which sins repeatedly through the flesh, the fiend, and the "frele [or changeable] world" (VII 39-44). A structural opposition between sin and salvation—or doing well and doing evil—organizes the exemplum and guides its pedagogical aims: to fall into the water is to fall into deadly sin and die; to remain on the boat is to keep one's soul "saaf" (VIII, 50). In this telling, the winds, the waters, and the wagging of the boat are all laden with agency and intensity, as they throw the man down repeatedly. On the other hand, commodities, the body, and the principle of evil itself are all collapsed into a hostile and inanimate force; the onus is on the living creature, the sinner, to again and again return to the "steere," under pain of having the boat finally "over thrown."

In this way, the exemplum of the boat marks the entry of penitential thought into the Friars' articulation of what it means to do well. Sin is constitutive of being alive, in the same way that falling down is inevitable for the fictional occupant of the Friars' boat. The acknowledgment of that fact, however, depends on the implicit valorization of the position of being at the helm, which means the exemplum continues to organize its narrative around the very fantasies of control and self-mastery whose loss the remorseful sinner is in the same breath being told to accept. The perfect steersman does not exist, but his fantasmatic presence propels what little narrative there is in this tale, guiding the sinner's attempts to return to the "steere," and initiating this miniature drama of repetition. In doing so, the exemplum forecloses what is most exciting about its own narrative logic—namely, the underlying association with penance and open-ended improvisation, since the fall of the boatman and the return movement to the "steere" is precisely

the kind of action that cannot be determined *a priori*, on the basis of a description of the winds or the waters or the "wagging" of the boat. Instead, the Friars' figuration of the aims of penitential activity is from the start limiting the possibilities of action: the boatman can do little more in this scene than get up, arrive at the steer, try to resist the rising swells, and get up once more. All such activity, which happens under the threat of drowning, has a conservative aim: movement on the boat is subordinate to the compulsion to *return* to the sovereign place on the boat where the boatman can avoid being swept away by the waves. Not only are the ends of action postulated as determined in advance, there is only ever a single aim: penitential activity is a way of keeping what *one already has*, of staying "saaf and sound." Precisely because moral activity is little more than the preservation and defense of what is given—for even the boat is a thing given from the start, and therefore a thing to be defended— this description of the moral register is already picturing ethical behavior as a paranoid activity marked by material or immaterial hoarding (what the poem, at various moments in the *Vita*, refers to as "coveitise").

It is worth emphasizing that despite the sensuous intensity of the wind and the waves, the exemplum works as it does just to the degree that the boatman is kept minimally in contact with the surrounding world. Keeping oneself erect is an end in itself *because* the surrounding world has been simplified and abstracted: material goods, vicious behavior, other people, and anything reminiscent of a social world have become undifferentiated waves whose only function is to threaten the boatman into moral action. There are no shoals, no beaches to be explored, no fellow boats to be met, no distinctions between sailing in this or that direction: the exemplum maintains its force only when all and every form of exteriority is mapped onto the endless ocean, and every form of movement is reduced to scrambling to get back up after an involuntary fall. In other words, the Friars' way of thinking penitentially depends upon a radical simplification and

abstraction both of the internal life of the subject *and* of the external world; or, more strongly yet, the simplification of one side of these dialectical terms produces and entails the simplification of the other. It is not self-evident that penitence should require this kind of abstract opposition and conceptual flattening—there are, after all, ways of thinking of the way penance—like plowing—allows the penitent to change oneself and produce a change in the surrounding world. But the Friars' exemplum does not produce any such entanglements: rather than functioning as deep inquiry into the structure of human life and action, the exemplum reifies, isolates, and abstracts its terms. The steersman (the soul) is distinct from the ship (the body), the latter is to the former a mere instrument; and both, in turn, are isolated from the vast ocean of goods and other people in which everyday life occurs. If the vicarious pleasures of mastery and ethical perfectionism still control this scene of ethical activity, this is partly because such a fantasy of sovereign agency is itself continually displaced and abstracted, figuring as an end-in-itself *because* the boat-as-body is figured as inert matter that exists in the water without becoming inundated by it, and *because* the sinner-cum-steersman is isolated in a body-boat whose very function is to keep the world at a remove.

The exemplum, in this sense, undoes the complex entanglements that proliferate in ordinary ethical activity. One reason to take it seriously, despite the simplification it enacts, is because of the structural location it occupies in in the poem, and—as we shall see—the influence it exerts over the Passus that follow. But it is also worth pointing out that this exemplum, despite, or, perhaps even because of, its abstraction and simplicity is also paradigmatic of a larger question about how to situate *Piers Plowman* in a larger intellectual context and how to make sense of what the developing Langlandian account of penance might look like in this poem. To be clear, it is not that the Friars do not have thoughts about sin and penance: on the contrary, we have seen

already how the exemplum imagines the soul to be a slipping, sliding thing, belated to itself and incapable of attaining the sovereign mastery that is always a fantasmatic possibility for it. What is absent in the Friars' account, however, is a richer account of mediation between self and world, which is also to say, a sense of how the will of the penitent itself might be transformed through and with its encounter with those things it comes into contact with. The boatman's capacity to move towards the "steere" is never affected, no matter how bad the storm, or how battered the boat: however difficult it is to regain control over the boat, there is no trouble here for the will itself, or for the transparency of its aims. Disconnected from any richer interplay with the world, however, this pure activity of the penitent starts to look like a labor of endless drudgery, cyclical and unending. There is no account of how and when the movements of either the soul or the body come to count as work—or of how work might itself become situated in the larger structures of sin and redemption within which the subject is always losing or recovering itself, but not always in the same ways. There are no independently existing artifacts, other than the ship/body, in this exemplum; there is no production of either material or immaterial value. There is no destination, no memory, no attachments, no need for language: no actual *world* that might summon or resist the desires of the steersman. There is no space for other people either—as people, rather than as drops in the boundless ocean. As a consequence, there is also no account of how a relationship to others might be imagined as either ethical or political in anything other than a solipsistic and flattened sense. To wonder about the place of this exemplum in a text that elsewhere raises precisely these kinds of issues is therefore to inquire about the place of fantasies of isolation and self-mastery in the penitential imaginary of the poem. Whether this penitential imaginary is open to more complex mediations between self and world, and whether the category

of penance can be said to open out onto less abstract and simplified accounts of the relations between self and world, is the question that will guide Langland's poetics in the Passus to come.

The Romance of Penance and the Castle Caro

We have seen how the Friars integrate penitential considerations into their description of doing well—and how, in doing so, they establish an abstract and simplified account of penance itself, using the figural logic of the exemplum to create clean breaks between the soul, the body, and everything that in the exemplum is imagined as a boundless sea of exteriority. But that exemplum is only the opening gambit in Passus VIII, and it is Wit, rather than the Friars, who is the main interlocutor for Will in this section. What Wit does in this stretch of the poem is to produce an account of Dowel that resituates the conceptual issues staged by the Friars' exemplum into the narrative form of romance, deploying a new set of tropes that continue to exert pressure on the fantasy of a self-determining, autonomous form of selfhood. The romance narrative does more than that: in deploying romance tropes, Wit places sexuality at the foreground of his account of what it means to be an animate creature, and the problem staged by the Passus as a whole is therefore how to think about penitential longing as an urge that at once mirrors and resists the sexual drive that lies at the heart of creaturely life. To arrive at that thought, however, and in response to Will's questions about Dowel, Wit begins by staging an oblique return to the kind of fantasy the Friars held, in which Dowel was pictured as some*one* that might live some*where*, and in which the model of ethical action depends on paranoid fantasies of enclosures and safeguarding. That said, to call what Wit produces an "account" is to assert at once too much and too little: what Wit produces, in effect, is another ideologeme—a narrative kernel in which the body is figured not as a boat, but as a different kind of artifact: a

castle, made of the primordial and "commune" elements of nature. "Closed therinne craftily withal," by Kynde or Nature, is the principle of sentience itself—the lady Anima. Guarded and tended to by aristocratic figures associated with Dowel, Dobet and Dobest, her secluded existence within this body/tower is safeguarded by allegorical guards who personify the senses. Even at this stage, Wit's tale is shifting the grounds of the Friars' exemplum by gendering the relationship between body and soul, showing how the barriers to the outside world require active maintenance.[5] But overall, the paranoid sensibility of the Friars not only carries over into Wit's tale, but is further intensified by the gender dynamics of the genre. For these chivalric senses are not so much tethers to the external world as they are defenses against it—when the poem says "thise fyve ben set to save this Lady Anima" (IX 23), "save," does not mean that they will "rescue" Anima from her isolation. Rather, their function is to *keep* her safe—and in particular, to keep her safe *for* Kynde, who made her, and to keep her *from* "a proud prikere of France," the "Princeps huius mundi" (IX 8) whose shadowy invocation condenses the entangled tropes of flesh, fiend and world. If anything, then, the soul is even more tightly secluded than it seemed to be for the Friars: indeed, it is hard to imagine how Anima might so much as get a glimpse of anything in the outside world when sensory perception itself is so heavily filtered and mediated by guards whose very reason for existence is to keep the outside out and the inside in. Wit's romance narrative maintains the structure of what we might think of as spiritual coveitise: a paranoid, conservative, and outward-facing form of ethical activity that protects the silent, threatened, and passive principle of sentience itself.

[5] For a formidable account of the history of gendering the soul in medieval allegory, see Masha Raskolnikov, *Body Against Soul: Sowlehele in the Middle Ages*. Her account is ultimately directed towards a reparative account of "sowlhele" that runs against my own intuitions, but her description of the erotics of personification is helpful in describing the unstable framework that separates and conjoins soul and body.

Nevertheless, and despite the smooth transition from boat to castle, we are not in the Friars' exemplum, for the romance's hazy emplotment elides the penitential time of the Friars, where one is falling and rising, sinning and repenting, in cycles that make one constantly belated to oneself. Instead, Wit's romance, even more so than the Friars' exemplum, is driven by the thought that whatever lies outside the pale of the soul and the body is at once threatening and seductive. At a purely narrative level, such a frame creates disturbances for the Friars' account, for if the castle, insofar as it is a figure of enclosure, creates a constitutive outside, it also creates narrative pressure towards penetration and rupture. After all, even as the scene valorizes the successful defense against intruders, it is the shadowy French devil, rather than any of the knights, who jumpstarts the possibility of further narrative pleasures. Such a view would accord with a point made by Emily Steiner regarding the way the romance underbelly of such scenes in *Piers Plowman*, organized as they are around the figure of the castle, depend upon half-articulated fantasies of seduction and rape that stem from the *Romance of the Rose* and similar texts.[6] Worse yet, the romance framing suggests—as such romances do—that the vivid external threat is merely a displacement of a deeper and more unsettling possibility, namely that the guards will be defeated not from the outside, but rather from the interior of the castle itself.[7] Anima is to be won away with "wiles," says Wit: but to say that is to suggest that *her* acquiescence and desire are a crucial element in the narrative possibilities to come. No wonder,

[6] See Emily Steiner, "*Piers Plowman* and institutional poetry," in *Etudes Anglaises*, 2013. Steiner is helpful in outlining the Romance influence on *Piers*: "*Piers Plowman* draws on chivalric romances such as *Gawain*, but also on allegorical dream-visions, such as the thirteenth-century classic, *Le Roman de la Rose*… Of course, allegorical dream-visions also borrow heavily from romance, not only their quest-narratives… but also their fascination with institutional objects, such as castles" (Steiner 300). Steiner's discussion of castles in *Piers Plowman* informs my discussion throughout, though our aims in analyzing these tropes is quite different.

[7] The paradigmatic instance of such internal threat in romance narratives is Mordred, who in Arthurian legend indexes the double threat of political and sexual betrayal, but there are many more such figures that figure (and often, gender) such a threat, from La Viellie in the *Romance of the Rose* to Lady Bertilak in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

then, that Kynde emerges in Wit's narrative, like a *deus ex machina*, to fill and close the narrative void opened up by Anima's desire for whatever it is that lies outside the castle's interior. It is Kynde, says Wit, not the Proud Prikere, whose messianic arrival the narrative is said to desire; Kynde whom the senses are truly said to be preparing (the lady Anima) for, as the poem's very language enters the optative mood: "Til Kynde come or sende to kepen hir hymselve" (IX, 24). A narrative committed to the paranoid defense of its beloved object has been turned inside out: Anima's desires still reach outward, but for Wit, at least, the invocation of Kynde has dramatically transformed her potential "wiles" into a shorthand for the lovelorn desire to encounter and be transfigured by the source of all goodness and natural knowing.

This refiguration of Anima's desire implies that a different account of the subject is struggling to find a place in Wit's account, one that is defined not in terms of what it already possesses, but rather in terms of its desire to possess and be possessed by something beyond itself, whatever that something may be. More could be said about the fantasies of selfhood and sexual difference that Wit's discourse produces, but it is clear that the apparition of this suddenly vulnerable and desiring form of subjectivity ought to affect how we understand the category of penance as it emerges as a problem for this set of Passus. That penance *does* remain at issue is suggested by the proximity of the thematic concerns that shape the Friars' exemplum and Wit's romance. More strongly, Zeeman has eloquently argued that the heart of this section of the poem consists in the development of a dynamic and transformative account of Kynde, in which Kynde (or Nature) is conceived as a locus of suffering and a space of desire—that is, as that region from which our natural neediness stretches out to the possibility of becoming transfigured into something else.[8] One name for the open-ended search for realignment and coherence in the

[8] Zeeman's *Piers Plowman and the Discourse of Desire* is an extended defense of just this claim, but see especially Chapter 5, "Seeing and Suffering in Nature."

world of the poem is "penaunce"—indeed, it has been, ever since Piers swapped his plough for penance in the Passus immediately preceding the start of the *Vita* (c.f. VII 120). But it is worth emphasizing that what "penaunce" means in such an account is something quite different than a Friarly interest in correcting individual failings. Instead, Zeeman's argument about penitential suffering hinges on a link between suffering and penitential structures of experience: "in these episodes suffering is associated with sin and is experienced penitentially" (Zeeman 13). Suffering is what defines the penitent *as* penitent in this broad sense, and the penitent is an exemplary figure of desire because something about desire-laden subjectivity, as such, is coterminous with suffering activity. As we have seen in the introduction, and as Zeeman herself makes clear, a long list of thinkers have described penance in such a way: Gratian, for example, in a rather awkward formulation, offers as one of his definitions of penance "the *activity* of which we are to undergo with the perpetual humiliation of supplication throughout that whole life in which we carry on in mortal flesh" (Gratian 61, emphasis mine). This penitential activity which we undergo, rather than perform, is distinguished from the cleansing of sins in baptism (what Gratian calls "first penance") *and* from the specific acts of penance we undergo for infractions of Commandments (what he refers to as "third penance"). Penance in the sense that emerges in and through this romance—what Gratian calls "secondary penance"—is not an end-directed (or end-stopped) action, nor is it a set of discrete practices. It is, instead, inseparable from the ongoing "activity" that characterizes creaturely life as such: an activity that Gratian metaphorically describes as a perpetual "supplication" because it tethers our "mortal [but living] flesh" to whatever is beyond the boundaries of our life imagined as a "whole."

Wit seems to suggest that Anima, as she looks out from the castle of flesh, waiting for Kynde to take her away, is a figure for this open-ended suffering, waiting, and wanting that can be

described as the activity of perpetual supplication. But if romance is the way Wit describes and emplots this penitential subjectivity, this is nonetheless a narrative that is already bursting at the seams. Kynde or Nature is more than a character: he is at once the creator or maker *of* the castle, the knight who releases his lover *from* the castle, and the figure whose name and status as a personification depends on the continued existence of animated flesh-castles of just this sort. The messianic coming of Kynde therefore undoes the very distinctions upon which the romance ideologeme depends—not least the distinctions between the enclosing castle and enclosed object, the imprisoning maker of the enclosure and knightly rescuer who comes to release the soul from any and all enclosures. Having nowhere left to go, the romance collapses under the weight of the longing to which it is trying to give shape, and Wit is left producing incoherent and half-baked tropes as he tries to integrate the affective and temporal impasse produced by Kynde's invocation back into some semblance of narrative. "The castle Caro," Wit had told us from the start, means not just flesh, but "man with a soule," and in the aftermath of this tale, Wit offers a broken epilogue in which the castle becomes a weirdly mobile, lovelorn figure that *itself* "walketh and wandreth" for love of "the lady *Anima*, that lif is ynempned" (IX 54-5). In other words, in Wit's topography of penance it is *the castle* that has discovered itself to be not only sentient, but dispossessed, walking and wandering in an alienated landscape where it is shut off *from* the lady Anima, who is also named life, and who Wit nevertheless continues to speak of as lodged in the heart, where she is still directed by the senses. The poem, in this sense, is left invoking and literalizing the Augustinian notion of the *regio dissimilitudinis*, the unhappy spiritual landscape in which the human creature seeks outside itself the source of goodness that is nevertheless carried within—"in the herte" (IX, 56), as Wit says; or as Augustine puts it, *interior intimo meo*, in the most intimate region of the self. In this space, marked by wandering and desire, Wit allows

the romance to linger and dissolve, as the distinction between the figure seeking and the figure sought—a precondition for any more sustained narrative to continue developing—becomes impossible to maintain.

The richness and depth of Wit's appeal to romance, and the way the romance form breaks apart, offer an opening to elaborate the ways in which penitential sensibility is being articulated in this poem. Zeeman's description about suffering and experience is worth returning to: "suffering is associated with sin and is experienced penitentially" (Zeeman 13). Zeeman's apt description entails that suffering, in itself, can be conceptually distinguished from the penitential experience *of* suffering. To say that suffering is experienced penitentially means that penance is in part the imposition of a kind of generic structure on what might otherwise register as meaningless or useless suffering; or indeed, upon the kind of suffering that might not even be legible *as* suffering absent this structuring—especially if or when the suffering at stake here is, as Zeeman puts it, "associated" with sin and its tendency towards self-opacity. Zeeman's pithy description therefore suggests that the problem of how to theorize penance comes down to a question of narrative form: how to emplot suffering in a way that makes it a source of (penitential) meaning. In this sense, what the Friars' exemplum and Wit's romance narrative demonstrate, especially when set in contrast to one another, is how much this "penitential experience of suffering" is molded by genre, and thus, how much work literary form does to provide content to theological categories like sin, suffering, and redemption. But it is also hard to imagine that any single genre will be adequate to the insistent desire to turn suffering into sense. We see this even in Wit's half-hearted attempt at narrative, for if there is no single narrative form that will sustain the desires rippling through Wit's romance fantasies, it is not just because there is no object adequate to this desire. Rather, it is because desire itself—including, as we have

seen, the suffering desire that we have characterized as penitential—takes incommensurable forms: to possess and to be possessed; to wander and to be enclosed; to inhabit a defined narrative form—whether organized around rescue or return—and to experience the collapse of narrative form itself. Importantly, it is precisely because of this incoherence at the heart of desire that the impasse Wit arrives at can be said to be *propulsive*: it pushes forward, advancing *towards* something, even if nobody, and least of all Will, has a legible or easily narratable way of picturing just what that something might be. Indeed, the fracture of the romance is what eventually propels Wit's discourse into further generic modes: sermons, biblical exegesis, exempla, and so on.

It is worth emphasizing, then, that the relevant genres themselves start to become unsettled as penitential desires start to ripple through them. One transition that has gone unmarked in the discussion so far, for example, is the one that moves from the inanimate boat, to the composite matter of the castle, to the suddenly *animate* castle *Caro* wandering the wilderness. While remaining locked in the form of an artifact, the body has increasingly developed its own independent capacity for sentience—and that sentience, which is experienced above all as suffering activity, is partly why every other element in Wit's brief narrative also becomes increasingly complex: Anima is within the body, but now she is also something that the body seeks; Kynde is a figure somewhere far outside the body, but it is also the miraculous principle that makes the castle itself become animated. Following Scarry's style of inquiry, as outlined in the introduction to this chapter, we might say that the desire to turn suffering into sense is doubled by a desire to turn sense into suffering—that is, to find substantiation for a figure (Kynde) who compels belief and reality, and who without the sense of reality provided by the suffering castle would remain a mere abstraction. Put differently: although the castle is initially a

figure for enclosure, it functions in exactly the opposite way, as a nexus of longing and desire that cements an association between sentience, longing, and suffering activity. But that is also to say that the castle, in acquiring its own principle of animacy, has also become a potentially unruly figure, threatening the penitent in this wide sense with the possibility of becoming lost in the wilderness, or worse, becoming compelled by the wrong object—the *Princeps Huius Mundi*, for example, instead of the sovereign Kynde. Or put more simply: sexuality has entered the picture—both as a model for penitential longing and as that which penance must defend itself against.

Penance with/against sexuality

We have seen how Wit's brief romance began to move against the account of penance offered by the Friars, an account that isolated the penitent from the surrounding world, elided the difficult predicaments of sentience, and organized the times of penance according to the cyclical rhythms of losing and regaining mastery over one's self and one's body (each understood, paradigmatically, as inert matter). Wit's narrative, on the contrary, discovered in the penitent an erotic sensibility and multiply determined principle of animacy that made soul and body alike remain continually on the lookout for something that might enter from the outside to overwhelm and penetrate them. This does not necessarily entail that penance is free of a conservative aim, nor does this mean repetition is no longer at issue—on the contrary, and as we shall see, that "activity of perpetual supplication" that characterizes penance can itself become stuck in any number of repetitious loops. But these are no longer just the empty circuits of mechanical repetition that are entirely evacuated from desire: on the contrary, penitential desire, and its relationship to repetition, has become an issue precisely because sentience and sexuality have also entered the discursive terrain of the poem. Wit is well aware of this problem, too, for it is the

flesh itself—the castle *Caro*—with its interior recesses, its paranoid guardians, and its desire-laden lady Anima, that now help Wit make sense of what it might mean to sin or go astray: by sullying the interior of oneself, for example, making one's soul "lich the devel" (IX, 62); or seeking outside oneself that source of "reste" that cannot help but be always reflected in the "liknesse" of another (IX 56, 66). The paranoid underbelly of the romance narrative remains in place, in other words, which suggests that these tropes are doing too much work. Romance is providing Wit with a framework within which experience is given a penitential form, but it is also making visible the "association" between suffering and sin that penance seeks to undo. This ambiguity starts to make Wit level penance both with and against sexuality, leading him to stage increasingly dramatic withdrawals from the very structures of desire and sociability that on his own grounds are nested in the forms of penitential subjectivity itself.

The problem is that sexuality cannot be simply moralized away, precisely because sexuality itself functions for Wit as a kind of allegorical vehicle for understanding not just penitential activity, but the activity of God more generally. In an early interruption, Will asks Wit to elaborate on the nature of "Kynde," this allegorical figure who Wit says has the power to keep or take Anima away. Wit offers the following characterization: Kynde is creator, father, and former of everything that "evere was maked" (IX, 27); he lacks beginnings (IX, 27); he is "lord of lif and of light, of lisse and of peyne" (IX, 29). Whereas earlier we saw how the entrance of Kynde made the romance narrative collapse in on itself, here it is worth emphasizing that Kynde himself, as maker and former, can only be made legible by himself becoming materialized through the topos of the tower. But whereas the castle Caro is defined principally in terms of its capacity for sentience, the tower that belongs to Kynde is mainly defined in terms of its overwhelming power and creativity—which to say, through its formidable power to materialize

language. It is through Kynde's spoken word, after all, that "waxen forth beestes" (IX, 32)—a turn of phrase that points to a far earlier moment in the poem, when pilgrims rush out excitedly in search of Truth's tower "as beestes over baches and hilles" (V, 514). That verbal echo should further remind us that ever since the Prologue, Truth has been pictured as inhabiting a secluded, otherworldly tower whose metaphorical elaboration in Passus VI led to a description of a chilling, extraordinary architecture—a room with pillars made of "penaunce" whose access was only allowed to the beast-like pilgrims on condition they declare: "I parfourned the penaunce that the preest me enjoyned / And am full sorry of my synnes" (V 598-9). In that earlier Passus, Truth, rather than Anima, sat in the interior recesses of the castle, and the poem's depiction of that Godly figure seemed to make him not so much sentient as statuesque: "in thyn herte / In a Cheyne of charite" (V 606-7). Now, however, God-as-Kynde reverses the penitential movement of the pilgrims towards the castle with a burst of unrestrained creativity: the beasts that "waxen forth" in Wit's account seem to be rushing outwards, following the direction of the world-making speech that moves from inside to outside, and from sense to suffering, as God himself proclaims "*Faciamus*" (IX, 35). Kynde's use of a pen to give his words the "myghte" to enact what is already present in his thought is a vivid portrayal of the awesome power of his creativity; and it also suggests a phallic pun—further echoes, perhaps, of the Romance of the Rose. Meanwhile, the beasts will emerge again much later in *Piers Plowman*, this time linked to heathenness and the wild, unrestrained proliferation of life (XV, 459-60). Kynde's capacity to make—with words and with works, as Wit insists repeatedly, but also with and through a sexual drive that itself creates new subjects only by overspilling its boundaries—is part of what allows Wit to simultaneously think of human activity as mirroring and completing the activity of the divine, just to the degree that the human creature's work of reproducing itself, making artifacts,

giving names to things, and writing continues the creative making of Kynde himself. But this intense mirroring also poses an incipient threat: not just the threat that creaturely activity might usurp the creative power of Kynde, though that is certainly part of it, but also the threat that in splitting off power from embodied sentience the underlying paradigm leaves no room for any form of sentience *other* than painful excitation. Worse yet, it is precisely to the degree that human activity takes the form of beastly reproduction that the nobility of Kynde's creation can no longer be sustained—as evidenced, again in that earlier moment of the poem, by the collapse of the Half-Acre that these excited penitents had hoped to create.

No wonder then that sexuality complicates Wit's analysis so much, opening out as it does to the question of the maintenance and reproduction of a social world understood as an expression—but also a potential betrayal—of Kynde's world-making activity. The rising anxiety in Wit's discourse is especially visible as the romance of the lady Anima and the castle *Caro* winds down: it is a horrific thing, Wit says, to misrule one's Inwit, to serve Satan, and to deform the inner likeness of God that we hold within us. But just as one thinks Wit is about to go on a Jeremiad on the topic of perverse desire, attacking the "Fooles that fauten Inwit" by equating them to beasts without reason, or castles without a Lady Anima to direct them, Wit changes tack. What he is really after, he says, is a social arrangement that would provide for the needy and take care of those that for one reason or another are "fooles." Holy Church, in a kind of motherly role, ought to offer a full-fledged system of support to those who "lakken Inwit," understood now by Wit not as vicious, but as "helpless" (IX, 70). Increasingly, Wit seems to imagine such helplessness not as a characteristic of the disadvantaged— the fatherless children, widows, and mentally ill that are scattered through his brief sermon—but as a stage that is baked into creaturely life itself. For the image that seems to be pressing on him most strongly is that of the

child, a “litel barn” (IX, 78), whose dependency on other people is constitutively tied to the very way in which it enters the world. The imagery of the castle is no longer explicit, but it is there nonetheless, operative as a kind of unconscious image structuring the scene: to this child, after all, who begins life as a bundle of pure sentience, in need of both a name and physical sustenance; and it is those whom it depends upon that operate as embodiments of Kynde, towering presences in their own right with the capacity to make and unmake institutions (like Holy Church itself) which allows such children to gain entry to the social world. The reversals here extend to the reader of the text: if we ourselves, earlier, were gazing out from the inside of the castle, looking with Anima at the horizon, Wit’s description of a “litel barn” places us with the godparents in that figurative landscape onto which the child looks out—and it is we, who gaze upon that figure, who are now alternately capable of acting like Kynde or like the Princeps Huius Mundi. The predicament Wit puts forward is therefore exemplary and generic, nested in the particular kind of creature we are: “should no Cristene creature cryen at the yate / Ne faille payn ne potage, and prelates dide as thei sholden” (IX, 80-1). Uneven asymmetries between sentience-as-pain and sentience as a power to impose sense are not just characteristic of the gap between creaturely life and the magnificent power of the creator—they are, on the contrary, constitutive of human relationality as such. Or, to return to the now discarded romance motif, it is essential to the reproduction of creaturely life as such, and not just to the erotics of romance, that human creatures stand to one another *not* as an inert and self-sufficient castle does to an equally inert and self-sufficient castle, but rather as the expectant Anima stands with respect to its outside, and also, and at the same time, as the vulnerable child stands with respect to the mother, or the godparent, or the Church that offers it surcease from suffering in the form of “payne” and “potage.”

Although there is nothing simple or stable about these doubled relations, one thing that is clear is that for Wit shutting oneself off to the creaturely cry of another is perhaps the paradigmatic instance of ethical failure—precisely because it is an attempt to disengage from the difficult, uneven asymmetries and oscillations that are nested in the very fact of relating to another fleshy subjectivity. Wit clearly suspects that there is a temptation to flee from other people, which is why he insists so strongly that godparents take care, since withdrawing from their responsibilities to their wards will make them receive "penaunce in purgatorie" (IX, 77). In this suddenly harsh light, penance is what one appeals to when the sentimental ethics of the child crying at the gate no longer does its work: the specter of penance is deployed to oil the gears of the social machine, tightening social bonds and offering protection to the vulnerable, precisely by distinguishing those who do well from those who do evil, and therefore stand in need of correction. This discourse suddenly seems familiar: not only does it reiterate, in case we had forgotten, that penance is most characteristically set to disciplinary ends, it also puts us back in a kind of Friarish sensibility, one that orients itself by way of the fantasy that to do well is to align oneself with the maintenance of a social order we already belong to—the only real question being how to manage the repeated and inevitable failures that make one fall short of always being able to do well. The only difference between Wit and the Friars would seem to be that the poem has now added an ideological layer, using the awe-inspiring, metaphysically loaded presence of Kynde to support his own account of a social world that can only ever reproduce its own conditions. But it is worth emphasizing, too, that the threat of purgatory radicalizes the split between sense and mere sentience: Wit articulates the verbal prohibition that separates the good from the bad, while the faithless godparents are condemned to mere pain. That is, the godparents having fallen into the position of heathenly beasts by ignoring the cry of the child, Wit assumes

the overwhelming, frightening power of creating, in language, an enclosure in which those who have acted poorly will encounter the pain that the child or the beggar felt when their calls for help went unanswered. The very meaning of penance has shifted: no longer embedded in the desiring activity that is a part of creaturely life, it now appears to be a technique that asymmetrically apportions forms of sensibility, separating those who have voices, but not bodies, from those with bodies and no voice.[9]

A different poem might end simply with this simultaneously sentimental and disciplinary invocation of the child at the gate. What is surprising, however, is that Wit, precisely in response to the threat of covetousness, anti-sociality and moral failure—not among godparents now, but among those who would withhold silver from beggars—begins to argue that to do well is *not* after all to act in any positive way at all, but rather entails an ethics of *withdrawal*: that doing best, in fact, involves retracting from other people, withdrawing "by daye and by nyghte"; and perhaps most notably of all, refusing to in any way "spille speche" (IX, 96-102). This refusal—and the contempt, shame, and anger that seems lodged therein—suggest that along the sequence that goes from the description of Anima locked in her fleshy castle to the description of a motherly and caring Holy Church, something somewhere has gotten stuck in a way that neither Wit nor the poem is quite sure how to make sense of—but that the threatening presence of the covetous (as so often in *Piers Plowman*) has suddenly drawn out. To do good, the poem was certain, was to mirror Kynde's own generous overspilling of boundaries, his making and his "waxing forth." But it is as though, when the covetous enter the picture, it is no longer the withholding of wealth that seems troublesome, but increasingly Wit's taking upon himself the disembodied, awesome power of Kynde to force the world into proper shape, which is the mirror

[9] See, again, Scarry's *Body and Pain*. Relevant also is Jacques Ranciere's concept "the distribution of the sensible."

image of that generative overspilling. Wit's refusal to talk is therefore an inversion, and a return of the repressed forms of mute sentience that were only moments ago apportioned to the godparents. More strongly, however, and more unsettlingly, the affective force with which Wit retreats from the world seems to mirror the excessive might that was evident in Kynde's creative activity, even as it does so precisely by embodying within itself the mute sentience that in this part of the poem is so often associated with the beast. Wit, in other words, withdraws from creation entirely: from sexuality and the social sphere of reproduction; from other people and their untrustworthy subjectivities; and not least of all, from language itself, the "spilling" of which seems to Wit himself to have become grotesquely sexual. But in articulating that fantasy of perfect enclosure as an *ethic*, Wit seems suddenly to be swept up in a different fantasy—namely, the fantasy of being "closed craftily withal," which was how the poem had once before described Anima, locked in her castle by her senses-cum-guardians. And as we saw in that earlier stage of the discussion, a secluded maiden is not a figure that adequately describes the life that Anima leads or ought to lead.

As is evident, Wit's furious but ultimately ridiculous withdrawal is paradigmatic of a certain kind of penitential fantasy—though we are no longer in the utopian version of the same, as we were when thinking our way with through Wit's romance narrative. This time, it is not messianic expectation so much as the negativity and the punishing affects that maintain the penitential mood in Wit's speech—it is the side of penance that Gratian and Aquinas characterized as "a vengeance always punishing in oneself what one grieves," where the focus falls less on the punished object than on the messianic fulfilment of the suffering one feels. That being said, Wit's withdrawal differs markedly from any standard penitential account, and especially from one that moves from contrition to confession to satisfaction. A few of these divergences can be

briefly summed up: first of all, it is clear that Wit is articulating a full-fledged ethics of withdrawal in response not to his own sinfulness, but to the sinfulness that saturates the social field. This means, secondly, that whatever fantasy of redemption that withdrawal from other people and from language beckons towards, it is one that seeks not a change in Wit, but a change in the social world of which Wit is a part—that is, the desire his withdrawal embodies is a desire for a world without the covetous, where Holy Church takes care of the needy and the desperate. This is, in other words, a perverse sort of penitential impulse: one that seeks to inflict silence and alienation upon one's self, over something one feels grief about, but where the lost or sinful object is no part of oneself but is rather a placeholder indexing the loss of a fantasy of a world marked by kinship and generosity. The perversion is located in the swapping of objects: it is because the vengeance that one inflicts upon one's self is nevertheless *for the sake of* the sinful others, that the "vengeance always punishing in oneself what one grieves" becomes separable from the transformations that would count, for the penitent, as "satisfaction" for the wrongness of what the penitent has done. If this makes for a certain deviant style of penance—one that in effect delaminates sin from penance—it also suggests that this desire *to do* penance encodes a perverse desire to recover the created world after all. In other words, even the purely negative version of a penitential drive is torquing itself back towards the public, shared world that the ethics of withdrawal was precisely meant to have left behind.

Cain and Noah: Penance and the Unmaking of the World

Cain is in many ways the limit case for the questions Wit asks about how to make ethics interact with political and historical valences of penitential structures. Cain is the very image of sinfulness in this text, but he is also a figure that stands in for the consequences of sinfulness, and in particular, for the open-ended wandering and seclusion that creates further suffering as the

consequence of an initial and dramatic fall. But because Cain is also beyond redemption—and not just him, but his progeny also—his appearance in this poem puts further pressure on the forms of penitential experience, and on the genres through which suffering is made intelligible in terms of a moral arc. The poem itself, in fact, suggests that Cain's badness is associated with penitential time: Adam is said to have had sex in an "evil tyme"—which, following popular legend, means Cain was conceived at a time meant to be devoted to penance (Vance Smith, 135). An inquiry that has circled around the unsettledness of what it means to be constantly thrown outside oneself is shifting here into a different register: towards the disciplinary structure of a world whose maintenance is secured through the management of time—in particular, of those cycles of penitential time which Wit seems to assume are natural and coherent. But Wit's thought here cannot make much progress, since the tale of Cain, which Wit offers in the place of the tale of Adam's fall, as a kind of origin story for the emergence of sinfulness—presupposes the cycles of sin and penance that the story is meant to explain. What looked to be a way of salvaging the goodness and stability of Kynde by surreptitiously displacing the account of the origins of sin away from Eden, and towards a more historical and contingent narrative, ends up creating a bind at the level of Kynde or nature itself—precisely because the contingency and arbitrariness of the supposed failure makes Cain. Cain, in other words, and especially his descendants, slip into a world where procreation, continuity, and the everyday work of sustaining the world are all themselves just forms of continually reproducing sinfulness and suffering, even though there is no way, really, of parsing what, exactly, makes Cain's generativity bad, beyond an unsettled sense that someone, somewhere in the past, acted outside the normative

arrangements of social time.[10] This is true even if, as Vance Smith has suggested, Cain is the figure of a bad beginning whose unceasing productivity threatens to taint, and even undo, the normative forms of social and sexual reproduction; after all, the point to Vance Smith's argument is that beginnings themselves are uncanny and conflicting, and cannot fulfill the promise they make to the present of once and for all solving the question of genealogy.

Wit, in effect, seems to see no way out of the impasse posed by Cain and his progeny—they are, in everything but origin, presumably identical, so only a prohibition that distinguishes "kynde" from "kynde" seems capable of creating separation between the descendants of Cain and Seth. But that is a way of saying that the curse that falls upon the progeny of Cain has no actual content, or no content that Wit can make sense of. On the contrary, the curse is merely a token or sign that creates the very distinction between good and bad it claims to be tracking. For Wit, the badness of Cain is absolute: there is no place for redemption or reconciliation, nothing left even at the level of historical narrative but forms of schizoid splitting and new fantasies of compartmentalization in which a new enclosure is raised—not only marking inside from outside, but naturalizing that distinction. After all, it is through that division that the endogamous and "good" subgroup (the kin and kynde of Seth) can be distinguished from the constitutively evil outside (the kin and kynde of Cain). And yet one might read the tale of Cain differently, too: the kith of Cain are those whose sin cannot be redeemed—they are the ones whose sin sticks to them, no matter what they do, or how many generations pass—but for that very reason, they are also bearers of what we might think of as the purest version of penitential subjectivity—subject to repeated and unceasing punishment, and captured by forms of longing that cannot even in

[10] Vance Smith's brief account, in the *Book of the Incipit,* of the problems posed by Cain is an extraordinary rendition of the power of Cain to serve as a figure of evil *because* of his power to initiate alternate beginnings (c.f. Vance Smith 133-9). I am deeply indebted to his readings of Cain in this entire part of the discussion.

principle be met. "In a wide sense, penance is the detestation of something past"—so says Aquinas: but Seth's children detest nothing in the past, they live in a Friarly world of doing well and correcting their actions when they fail to do well: the only past they detest is the past represented, in their present, by Cain's progeny. The enclosure that separates Seth from Cain, in other words, from one point of view seems like a division between those who are still capable of sinning and repairing the effects of their sin—the kith of Seth, for whom all sin seems venial, and penance the kind of thing that one does in order to continue doing well and living well—and those others, the kith of Cain, whose stuckness in sin is also a stuckness in a kind of dead world which echoes the penitential landscapes of the wandering castle *Caro*, but without the hope of their remorse bringing such wandering to an end.

Like other such porous and unstable boundaries in the poem, however, the enclosure organized around these splits in kynde cannot maintain its coherence, and it is in this failure to cohere that penance again becomes an issue. Indeed, it is here that Langland articulates what is perhaps the most terrifying and world-encompassing version of penitential withdrawal in the entire poem. For the main example of penance as it emerges in Wit's discourse is in fact nothing that pertains to any one individual, but is rather God's own repentance at having made creation in the first place: "*Penitet me fecisse hominem*" (IX, 130). God's holding back and turning away from his creation is a response to Cain's "ymaking"—to the bad reproduction, disorganized sexuality, and the confusion of inside and outside that fuse Cain's descendants with those of Seth, bringing the entire human species together in a single shared and "corsed blood" (IX, 136). Registered first as atmosphere—as a feeling of deadness permeating the world, from the "dales and hulles" to "the fowles" and "the beestes" (139-40)—the curse of a world gone wrong feels different than anything that has come before, inverting temporal form with the messianic

expectation of Anima in her castle or the lovelorn wandering of the Castle *Caro* as it seeks the place of rest it already carries with it. This curse that descends over the world stages not so much the fantasy of a rupture as the pervasive feeling that some dramatic ending has already occurred—indeed, that no new beginning would count as a beginning, since no form of making or procreating would be able to put off the fate that hangs over every creature, human and not. No beginning, that is, other than God's own: for God's penitential turning away from creation, and his own retraction of his earlier *faciamus*, still takes the form of *activity*, and specifically, vengeful and violent activity—a rushing forth of torrential floods which enact, in their own kind of dramatic "overspilling," the form of God's withdrawal. There is no reversing time even for God: the unmaking of the world itself, in a significant way, has the same logical form as making, and is an expression of the same underlying "myghte."

Another way of saying this, though, is that in this moment of apocalyptic penance, suffering remains an index of God's world-making activity, and that which realizes and substantializes his overwhelming power. That was also something that Wit had pointed to, obliquely, from the start of the Passus: when Wit said, in that introductory moment, that Kynde was "lord of lif and of light, of lisse and of peyne," the semantic and alliterative break in the line was already putting the stress on the idea that it is pain, too, that Kynde produces, even as Kynde makes a world of light and of bliss. If pain is woven into creation, however, it is woven into it in opaque ways; and part of that opacity consists in the fact that pain is produced in and through the natural and the normative cycles in which both Cain and Seth participate, and which God's wrath negates. One might, in this sense, recall the Jamesonian line—"history is that which hurts"—not because history is painful for Cain or for Noah (which it is), but because history produces pain in and through the very structures that were built to defend against the suffering of mere creaturely

existence. In this context, Noah's ark emerges as a kind of negation of the negation: a suspension of God's repentance—a withholding, as it were, of God's withholding—where God's repentance is the vengeful obliteration of a world hitherto stitched together according to historical logics and temporalities which sustain the reproduction of life, but have become mired in corruption and bad repetition.

In a curious way, we have arrived back at the Friars' exemplum about the boat in Passus VIII—but penance has shifted its valence entirely, in part because the story of Noah's Ark locates the emergence of a penitential imaginary in a world that is now profoundly marked by history. This means more than just the fact that the tale has its original location in Biblical narrative, although that is part of it. Rather, in Wit's narration of the scene, part of what is historical about the tale of the Ark is how it works to undo the ease with which one might imagine oneself participating in the structured forms that organize the normative production and reproduction of life. Initially registered in the atmospherics of an accursed world, the tale assumes that pain and sin move in and across history, alternately creating, traversing, and undoing social forms in ways that cannot be specified in advance. This makes the endless expanse of water one might see from Noah's ark, too, something like a *historical* substance—at once the metaphoric expression of Cain's bad blood as it covers the world and the visible manifestation of God's negation of that badness:

> Thyself and thi sons thre and sithen youre wyves,
> Busketh yow to that boot and bideth ye therinne
> Til fourty daies be fulfild, that flood have ywasshen
> Clene awey the corsed blood that Cay hath ymaked (IX 131-6).

Noah and his family's "biding" in the ark is already a response to the twinned histories of making and unmaking that tether the human creature to the ongoing activity of its creator—even their biding, their withdrawal into the ark, is in part legible as a form of outward-facing

activity—part of the temporally elongated work of cleansing and unmaking a world gone wrong. The tale of Noah's ark also feels historical, then, because it undoes any direct relation between sin and suffering, or suffering and repentance. Cain sins, yet it is the creaturely world as a whole that suffers; and those who suffer are not those who live to see the flood recede. For this reason, penance itself is a fractured, overburdened, and contradictory category: it is tethered to the normative logics and temporalities that organize the production and reproduction of life; it is God's turning away from creation ("*Penitent me fecisse hominem*"); it is God's vengeful overspilling of "myghte"; it is the accursed deadness and suffering of the world; it is a form of unmaking; it is the working and wandering in a space of exteriority that has no specified endpoint; and it is also the holding fantasy whereby one conserves what is worth saving about the past in order to begin anew. But this is also to say that, at least in this stretch of the poem, the fantasies that cluster around penance are insistently social, emerging in and out of the pressures of being made vulnerable to a world saturated with the presence of other people and their sins, just as much as with the sins one carries oneself.

This is why it matters that the ark contains not the solitary pilot struggling to maintain a position of mastery over his boat, but a family working to survive, where the very activity of surviving together, and even thriving, is understood as a way of cleansing the world of the structured undeadness that pervades a sinful lifeworld. In this sense, of course, the tale of Noah, like the romance fantasy with which Wit's discourse began, is also a narrative kernel that functions as an ideologeme, in part through the way that it first opposes the social forms of couple and family to a cursed exteriority, and then emplots that opposition in the shape of a redemptive narrative. But Wit knows, to the end, that idealizing the couple or the family, all by itself, does not actually resolve the underlying troubles around sexuality and relationality that he

himself has done so much to diagnose, and that are the precondition for any thought about penance's social role to get off the ground. This is why, all the way through to the end of the Passus, Wit continues to think in difficult ways about how to articulate a picture of social life that both legislates over and is responsive to the pressures of Kynde or nature. More elaborately, if Wit is trying to move outside the cursed repetitions of Cain, he does so by stabilizing the problems around asymmetrical distributions of power and sentience by mapping sexual relations onto property relations: marriage, for Wit, is consensual, equitable, and free of the precariousness and oscillations of desire, a relation of two mirrored towers, one might say, where each appears to the other under the sign of the good—"for goode should marry goode, though thei no goode have," says Wit—and together "werche and wynne and the world sustene" (IX, 108, 160). None of which is to say that Wit's desire for mutuality and consensual affectivity is wrong-headed—just that in this picture of stable and workmanlike social reproduction directed towards doing well, any further analysis or even condemnation of the pricking desires of the flesh is replaced with the anxieties about class mobility, expressed here in the condemnation of "coveitise of catel." In this sense, equal property relations among marrying partners paper over the unsettling imbalances that Wit himself earlier located intrinsically, in the very "kynde" of the human creature insofar as it is an enfleshed soul repeatedly open to an unsettling exteriority. Like the enclosures of the flesh, though, or the enclosures of kynde that seek to split off Seth's progeny from Cain's, the enclosures of wealth and social class will themselves produce their own kinds of exteriority, and their own apocalyptic fantasies. And penance, which in Wit's final account of marriage seems to again become reduced to the disciplinary regulation of the rhythms of normative intercourse, will once again return to mark the site of withdrawal, incoherence, and transformation that haunts the poem's figurations of a better world.

Epilogue: Clergie and Lyf Under Holy Church

I want to end this chapter by briefly looking ahead to a different part of the poem—a moment in Passus X, where the figure of the boat in the water returns, demonstrating in this way how far and how little the poem has moved from the opening gambit of the Friars to the social and the utopian strivings that we saw emerge at the end of Wit's discourse. By the time Clergie enters the space of the poem—silently, slipping into a dialogue that the reader believed was meant for someone else—enough work has been done to prepare the ground for the emergence of explicitly political desires: there is again talk of a "commune"—which we had not heard invoked in the poem since Passus VII; and the poem itself has also done much to try to build up a faith, however tenuous, in the power of learning and belief to break out of the enclosures of kin, wealth, and class with which Wit had concluded his discourse. In this spirit, Clergie offers a revised account of Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest, quoting a brief description that he claims to have encountered in Gregory:

> Whan fishes faillen the flood or the fresshe water,
> Thei deyen for droughte, whan thei drie ligge;
> Right so religion roleth and sterveth
> That out of covent and cloister coveiten to libbe (X, 295-8).

That description inverts the Friar's model: the natural site of life is not isolated from the world, alone on a boat in the middle of a storm, but is rather within it—assuming, of course, that the world is one organized according to the dictates of Holy Church. It is not, after all, drowning that kills, but the "drought"—the solitary air in which the fish drowns; or, in this miniature fable, where the monk breathes the air outside the cloister. Within the cloister, "all is buxomness there, and books," and even pedagogical structures are symmetrical, and less authoritarian: "ech of hem lereth oother" (X, 304), which is to say, each monk depends upon and judges his brethren,

allowing correction and penance to become entwined within the ordinary forms of relationality that make for virtuous collective living.

And yet even Clergie's fantasy of a world finally organized around the dictates of Holy Church remains troubled and inconsistent, despite the tremendous attempt at articulation carried through not just by Clergie, or by Wit, but by all the intermediate figures that span the gap between Passus VIII and X. In the first place, the convent and the cloister in Gregory's short description suggests that the model of the social world survives only because of the walls that cut this little world off from the corrupt dynamics of the larger world. As though pointing to historical fact, Clergie claims that "Religion [is] a rydere, a romere by the stretes… A prikere upon a palfrey from manere to manere" (X, 305-7). This is the language of Wit and the prikere of France—but this already suggests a return to the language of enclosure and withdrawal that we saw collapse with Lady Anima, and take on a terrifying form in the separation of the descendants of Seth from the descendants of Cain. More strongly, the monk-like prikere suggests a second source of trouble: if the individual and the social whole are as closely linked as Clergie wants to imagine they are, then the failure of even monks to remain in their cloister suggests that the entangled world of practice and belief has always been revealed to be corrupt, the corruption emanating from the monks themselves, and permeating everything in a way that starts to push Clergie towards yet another apocalyptic fantasy of radical cleansing.

In another rendition of the apocalyptic fantasy we have examined before, "a king" takes the reins of power (X, 316), punishes "Gregories godchildren" for having "yvele despended" (X, 324), and inflicts upon the "Abbot of Abyngdoun" "an incurable wound" (X, 326). This version of divine judgment, like the ones that preceded it, replaces the smaller withdrawals and subtle dialectics of everyday sinfulness with an image of the entire social world collapsing under the

weight of an ethical pressure it can no longer sustain. This king will "putten" the world to penance, says Clergie— "ad pristinum statum ire," he will "return them to their first state" (X, 319). What that entails is not specified by Langland, but it is clear that the poem is retreating once more from utopian fantasies organized around Dowel, as the penitential mood starts again saturating the poem's thought. No wonder, then, that Will, at the end of the Passus, is alienated and despairing—and not only that, but that his despair leads the poem back to the tale of Noah's Ark. As Will tells the story, a group of workmen helped build the ship, thereby helping to save Noah and his extended family; but the workmen themselves were not saved—rather, they drowned (X, 397-403). However equivocally, that twist on the Noah story registers something: it suggests that Will is aware of the possibility that the social whole might again become split into opposing enclosures, split again between those who feel, but cannot speak, and those who speak, but do not feel. It suggests that Will is still concerned to articulate possibilities of solidarity and mutual support, even if he sees no way of depicting what is powerful about this social fantasy in the terms even Clergie has laid out in such limited form. Will's description of the ark, in fact, suggests that the existence of enclosures of different kinds, and with them, the existence of various asymmetries between inside and outside, are unavoidable features of the commune—and that to ignore them is to always potentially place oneself outside the normative world, on the wrong side of a judgment that is no less strong for falling upon the backs of the majority of people in the commune. How to articulate a vision for the social that moves more carefully through the negativity and sites of exclusion raised in the poem—how to restructure the social by appealing to penance not just as a force of apocalyptic destructivity, but as a mode of ongoing activity, is a problem that will be left to later chapters.

Chapter Three:

Suffering and Enjoyment at the Court of Conscience in Passus XIII-XIV

Bad Penitents, Ugly Feelings

This chapter continues the investigation into the workings of penance in the Late Middle Ages. Whereas the earlier part of the dissertation focused on the strange fluidity of penitential bodies and the difficulties sexuality posed to a penitential framework, this chapter seeks to develop some further thoughts about the vexed position of suffering in penitential narratives. Penitential suffering was already at issue in the previous chapter: there, however, following the trail of romance genres in *Piers Plowman* and taking up the conceptual insight Nicolette Zeeman brought to the poem, suffering was repeatedly associated with an objectless, and open-ended style of longing.[1] For that reason, the penitents that played a key role in that chapter were outsiders and outcasts, and much of the discussion of that chapter centered on the dialectics of desire—focusing, in particular, on the play of inclusion and exclusion, interiority and exteriority, and the extimate character of belief. This chapter, while also taking *Piers Plowman* as its object, seeks to fold the concept of suffering back into a more overtly theological register. It does so, first, by thinking more deeply about *sinful* suffering, and the way such suffering becomes an occasion for what Sianne Ngai has characterized, in a different context, as "ugly feelings."[2] In

[1] See the previous chapter of this dissertation. As I argued there, Nicolette Zeeman's *Piers Plowman and the Medieval Discourse of Desire* argues for a basic identity between sin and suffering, an identity that allows her to conceptualize penitential longing as an instance of objectless, open-ended desire. But collapsing these categories into one another threatens to underemphasize both the sheer viciousness sin is capable of, and the stubbornness with which it refuses to fit into a progressive arc leading back towards God. In addition, that conceptual collapse de-emphasizes the place of social structure in the organization of penitential drives that are themselves often layered with viciousness, violence and antisociality. One way of reading this chapter, then, is as an attempt to think further about the ways the cleavage between sinful and penitential suffering, while contingent and perpetually renegotiated, force one to confront the uglier dimensions of sin *and* the uglier dimensions of penance.

[2] Sianne Ngai's *Ugly Feelings* helps render visible some of the questions at stake in this chapter. The domain of Ngai's inquiry is the 19th and 20th century, but it is worth or Ngai ugly feelings are "explicitly *a*moral and "noncathartic" (Ngai, 6)—a characterization that seems to raise difficulties for a reading of "ugly feelings" as they emerge in a literature that is not only "explicitly" moral, but that is often committed to some version of (penitential)

Passus XIII, suffering is laden with anger, covetousness, and envy; it creates alienation and dysphoria; and it is marked by the violent desire to undo the enjoyment of others. But secondly, and precisely because this chapter follows the trail of these uglier forms of suffering—even as it also keeps in view Zeeman's claim that sinful suffering is entangled with penitential suffering—penance will be bound to seem less hopeful and utopian than it seemed earlier. More strongly, as I hope to show, it is not merely the case that sin alone traps the sinner in bad affects from which penance then offers a release. Rather, the very penitential urges that are meant to restore and heal the sinner introduce "affective gaps and illegibilities, dysphoric feelings, and other sites of emotional negativity" into the psychic life of the penitent (Ngai, 1). Penitential suffering, then, is neither free nor objectless, nor is it a space of withdrawal from the social—though escaping from a corrupted social world is part of the promise of penitential fantasies generally. Rather, the suffering the penitent feels—and associates with sin—is often produced by the very social forms and structures whose aim is to offer a reprieve from sin. Such a shift in the conceptual terrain tracks a change in the figural movement of *Piers Plowman*, as open oceans and romance landscapes give way to the claustrophobic halls of the Court of Conscience; but it marks a shift within this dissertation, too, as the analysis of the poem turns towards philosophical, theological, and even economic modes of inquiry, in order to reveal the impossible weight carried by the penitential system of the late Middle Ages.

Another way of marking the gap between this chapter and the ones that have come before is that this chapter is more committed to thinking about penance as an ideological structure, one that gets its grip on the penitent through fantasies and figures of thought that, for all their disciplinary rigor, operate on the penitent in surprising and unpredictable ways. As I have argued

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catharsis. The point here is to trace, within the cathartic and moral feelings privileged by penitential literature, the presence of amoral and non-cathartic forms of sensibility.

in prior chapters, no fantasies are stronger, from the penitential point of view, than those that cluster around suffering: suffering is both the sign of the sinner and the proof of the penitent; it is a reminder of our proximity to the suffering Christ, but also that which reveals our continued separation from the divine. Above all, what distinguishes penitential suffering is that it takes suffering itself as its object: suffering, says Gregory the Great, is an *effect* of sin that works providentially to undo the sources of sin—a convoluted aim, to say the least, and one which makes the boundary between sin and penance seem increasingly porous and unstable.[3] This is one reason why institutions and social forms play such important roles in penitential contexts, and why penitential literature works so hard to try to establish clear boundaries between the suffering that drags one back into sin and the suffering that pulls one ever closer to God.[4] Such distinctions can be tempting: it is hard to *avoid* thinking of penitential suffering as a clear and distinct structure of feeling, capable of being demarcated—whether through a deeper self-awareness, an abiding faith in God, a heartfelt desire to do well, or a genuine feeling of remorse—from the suffering that characterizes the lives of sinners and bad penitents alike.[5] But

[3] Gregory says, for example: "We suffer sorrow, torture, and death in it [the flesh] daily, so that by a marvelous dispensation the Lord might convert the cause of sin into the means of punishment; so that the severity of punishment might arise from the same source as sin" (a quotation from the *Moralia*, cited in Shaw, Carol. "Gregory's Moral Theology," in *A Companion to Gregory the Great*, p. 193).

[4] Augustine's *Confessions* are the classic account of how sin and the desire for God are entangled in such a way that the movements of the soul that push one away from God and the ones that draw one towards God may be impossible to separate from one another, perhaps especially in the moment when they register *as* suffering. See, for example, Augustine's description of what it felt like to survive the death of a friend: "I became a great puzzle to myself, and asked my soul why she was so sad, and why she so exceedingly disquieted me; but she knew not what to answer me. And if I said, 'Hope in God,' she very properly obeyed me not; because that most dear friend whom she had lost was, being man, both truer and better than that phantasm she was bid to hope in. Naught but tears were sweet to me" (*Confessions*, IV, chapter 9). That such a loss nevertheless impels Augustine to Carthage, and hence, slowly, towards conversion, is part of the puzzle Augustine is trying to think through.

[5] The problem of parsing "true" from "false" penance is most explicitly addressed in a popular treatise by pseudo-Augustine, *De Vera et Falsa Poenitentia*, but the discussion is everywhere in penitential literature, and often touches on how to define and think about properly penitential feeling (though internal states of feeling are by no means the only criteria penitential thinkers are interested in). Ambrose, for example, defines "true penance" as "the heart's grief and the soul's bitterness for the evil deeds it has committed" (quoted in Gratian, Distinction 1, p. 25). Distinctions between true and false penance often open out onto questions of feeling in debates over whether confession to a priest is necessary for penance to be effective, or whether it is enough for contrition alone to do such work. Gratian, again channeling Ambrose, asks "since no remission is granted by God for false repentance, how did

medieval thinkers themselves were highly aware that the idealization of such forms of ethical suffering is liable to breed ambivalence, anxiety, and resistance: penitential suffering and its attendant fantasies were therefore always acknowledged to be deeply vulnerable to the insidious creep of sin. But on a stronger view, as we shall see, it is *because* penance promises to remove the burden of sin from the sinner, and makes that promise through an appeal to a heroic and self-abnegating form of suffering, that penitential fantasies carry with them, as their double, the ugly feelings and narcissistic pressures that are also symptomatic expressions of sin.[6]

Langland is deeply attuned to such paradoxes and antinomies, and much of what drives the poem, here as elsewhere, is a desire to excavate the ambivalence nested in penitential structures of feeling and their motivating fantasies. It is therefore unsurprising that Passus XIII is so relentlessly focused on the bad penitents—the hypocrites, the refuseniks, and the melancholics—that offer Langland the literary resources to conduct a richly philosophical inquiry into the nature of penitential suffering. For it is in and through such figures, and the scenes in which they participate, that the poem interrogates how such suffering is structured, expressed, shared, or ignored; what affects become nested within such suffering; and under what conditions this suffering becomes legible *as* penitential suffering within the symbolic economy of penance. To outline the theme and setting of this chapter in further detail: the central object of analysis will be

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he deserve to hear from the prophet, *Your sin has been forgiven*, if he did not have true contrition of the heart"? (Gratian, Distinction 2, 125). Similar questions are repeatedly addressed in Lombard's Distinctions and in Peter Abelard's ethical writings.

[6] I take the argument that I will be developing in this chapter to be part of a larger family of arguments that seek to undercut the idea that redemptive fantasies inevitably move the penitent towards the good. Mark Miller's forthcoming work on the "anti-redemptive" Middle Ages has been profoundly influential for this account, in method as much as in aims. See also Vance Smith's "Negative Langland," A. O. Fradenburg's *Sacrifice Your Love*," and Andrew Cole's *The Birth of Theory*, which grapple with the ways in which theology, chivalric ethos, and dialectics, respectively, are invested in complex structures of thought and feeling that refuse the fantasy of a progressive march towards goodness. Another text that has been influential for me is Candace Vogler's *Reasonably Vicious*, which is clear-headed about the ways viciousness can be nested in perfectly rational forms. Another article by Vogler, co-written with Patchen Markell—"Violence, Redemption, and the Liberal Imagination"—asks questions about redemptive violence that I have found useful in my own ways of phrasing the issue, above.

the feast at the Court of Conscience, a scene that takes up the first half of Passus XIII. In this scene, Langland figures the interpellation of the penitent by the penitential apparatus as a feast in which Will is served a bitter food made out of congealed suffering and prayer, even as a second diner, the Master of Divinity, is offered sumptuous meats. Will's relationship to his penitential bread at once echoes and is unsettled by the Master's sin-laden enjoyment, which suggests that Langland is interested in the ways penitential structures of feeling are haunted by the very sin and viciousness they seek to keep at bay. The need to extricate Will and his bitter food from what increasingly looks like a site of ugly feelings and bad affects will itself be a site of interest to the poem, for the scene requests that Will become penitential by acquiescing to the loss of his personal commitments; in other words, Will may only encounter sustenance and enjoyment in the increasingly codified and abstracted *forms* of penance themselves, as these forms are congealed within the *matter* of his penitential loaf. Paradoxically, then, the fantasy of this penitential bread will be shown to postulate, as both source and endpoint, a contentless and abstracted remorse—which is to say, a suffering beyond the reach of suffering itself.[7] But what the poem itself seems to figure as the *prima materia* of penance itself—a suffering that is at once so deeply felt and so rigidly formalized that it is no longer tainted by sin—can neither be perceived nor made intelligible by Will, even as the fantasy of its continuing presence creates in the Court of Conscience a quasi-gothic atmosphere of unheard voices and congealed laments.

Langland, however, is not merely committed to a negative critique of penance and its institutions—or, rather, to the degree that his project is a negative one, it is because it negates

[7] Carole Straw—referencing the depiction of Job in the *Moralia*— describes Gregory as affirming that "God recompenses suffering that is in excess of the debt owed for sin" (Straw, 197). This excess of suffering with respect to what be (quite literally) accounted for, given the legal and economic imaginary that makes sin legible as a form of "debt," is one way of describing how penitential suffering both participates in and seeks to transcend the structure that makes it legible as penitential in the first place.

itself by repeatedly testing and interrogating the relationships between penance, suffering, and social structure.[8] This is why, as I will argue in the last section of this chapter, the quasi-Aristotelian antinomy between form and matter that so marks the Court of Conscience opens out onto a slightly different reading of the relationship between sin and penance. Even on an Aristotelian schema, after all, the form/matter split does not lead inevitably to a hylomorphic impasse, though such an impasse is an ongoing possibility whenever such terms are deployed. Rather, matter is always *proximate* matter: it is, as it were, always matter *with respect to* some form, the way bronze—itself a formal arrangement of matter—is the matter *for* a bronze sphere.[9] The figural logic of the Court of Conscience, and especially the positioning within that scene of the grotesque Master of Divinity, will offer a means towards such a reconceptualization of the loaf's underlying matter: on this second reading, the attempt to be or to become penitential depends on engagement with the messy forms of suffering that are *already* nested in a life understood to be marked by sin. Sinful suffering is therefore the proximate matter, as it were, for the formal operations of penance—a formulation that may seem overly indebted to Scholastic reasoning, but that will help make visible a rising preoccupation within the poem regarding the practical orientations of the penitent. The penitential loaf, by this account, is central to the thought of this Passus because it allows Langland to think about the strange ontology of penitential suffering itself. Some concluding remarks will point the way to some Aristotelian and Thomistic thoughts about how one might continue to describe philosophically the problems that

[8] For a powerful account of how the general structure of Piers Plowman can be read as continually negating the claims it brings to bear upon the world, see Vance Smith's "Negative Langland."
[9] See *Metaphysics* VII, 1033b. For a profound picture of how Aristotle's *Metaphysics* is structured, and what kind of problems it seeks to address, see Ariel Kosman's *The Activity of Being.* This chapter's own structure of argumentation is deeply indebted to Kosman's portrayal of how Aristotle moves from reified descriptions of form and matter into an analysis of different modes of activity.

the literary and figural logic of the poem has revealed; in doing so, I hope to prepare the grounds for the analysis of activity that will take up the subsequent chapter.

The Court of Conscience

The Court of Conscience that appears at the beginning of Passus XIII, after Will has once again fallen asleep, is a particularly uncanny location within the poem. Marked by unpredictable hierarchies and saturated with an almost oneiric excess of significance, its very strangeness is central to the Langlandian interrogation into the nature, function, and quality of penitential suffering. The setting suggests some degree of readerly familiarity with a standard trope from the history of penance, the *forum conscientiae* or *forum poenitentiale*, which was frequently cited by canonists and theologians, and has precedents that go as far back as Gregory the Great.[10] In canon law, the forum of conscience is imagined as the interior region over which the Church has the authority to bind and unbind sinners from even their most secret and hidden sins. It does so, notoriously, by making interiority a jurisdictional space subject to the operations of ecclesiastical power, and making the sinner an active participant in a dramatized scene of judgment where he

[10] This quotation is from the Moralia, and is quoted in Carole Strawe's "Gregory's Moral Theology." Her longer description is helpful: "The Sinner replicates the procedures of a criminal court… Convicted, the sinner allies himself with God to punish the guilty" (Strawe, 201). Abigail Firey carefully accounts for the way the functioning of public courts in the Carolingian period made the Court of Conscience a heightened space of legal and jursdictional fantasy in her essay "Blushing before the judge and physician: Moral Arbitration in the Carolingian Empire," in *A New History of Penance*. For a more elaborate discussion of Carolingian penitential ideologies and their juridical undertones, see Firey's A *Contrite Heart: Prosecution and Redemption in the Carolingian Empire*. It is a central part of Firey's arguments that the court of Conscience, as a rhetorical figure, created around itself a host of difficult problems concerning the law, jurisdictional space, evidentiary procedures, and the status of truth-telling. What is perhaps most relevant to my own account is that the Court of Conscience, for Firey, is less important for what it *represents* than for what it *does* at a particular historical moment. This is not to say that problems of representation are not embedded within this figure of speech—they are—it is that what the Court of Conscience represents is not straightforwardly *just* the interiority of the sinner, nor are the aims of summoning such a trope always pedagogical and pastoral (rather than, say, public and political). Firey says, for example, that what was enacted in the Court of Conscience was "a religious mimesis of a judicial process," one in which the repentant Christian assumed "the positions of the wounded, the guilty, the prosecuted, and the redeemed" (Contrite Heart, 232). While Langland is writing in a different context, the thought that penitential figures of thought are rich and contradictory sites of identification, where the penitent is interpellated from multiple directions at once, is crucial for the argument staged in this chapter.

or she plays the role of both accuser and accused.[11] This may suggest that the *forum conscientiae* therefore refers invariably to a specifically confessional scene, but that does not seem to have historically been the case.[12] On Gregory's own account, "conscience accuses, reason judges, fear binds him fast, and pain tortures him."[13] The description of these terrifying proceedings plays with the fantasy of a linear progression in which sin is followed by judgment and judgment is followed by punishment—but since, on Gregory's own account, the judgment only ever falls on the side of guilt, the exercise of moral judgment and the excruciating effects that follow are not linked causally, but are each a one-sided description of a specifically Christian way of moving through the world. The judging part, on this account, identifies itself with the demanding and relentless activity of a fearsome God, while the sinning part suffers, continually and patiently—and in so doing, is ever so slowly transformed, rising up to meet the divine part that continually assails and punishes it.[14] In a way that is characteristic of penitential structures of thought, such a process tends asymptotically towards a fantasy of reconciliation, but it approximates such an end only to the degree that the splits between accuser and accused, judger and judged, and torturer and tortured are not only maintained, but continually exacerbated. Penance, after all, is in a

[11] Most famously, that claim is the centerpiece of the argument conducted by Michel Foucault in the *History of Sexuality*. For more historicized articulations and contestations of that claim, see the volume *A New History of Penance*, ed. Abigail Firey. The arguments are analyzed in further detail in the introduction to this dissertation.
[12] Wolfgang Müller has stressed that the Court of Conscience is not coterminous with what came to be known as the *internal forum*—the more strictly *confessional* trope in which the penitent turns inward, disclosing the secret sins (the *occulta*) to which only the sinner has access. See "The Internal Forum of the Later Middle Ages. A Modern Myth?" For an opposing view, which also sums up the stakes of the question and the available literature on this internal forum, see Joseph Goering's "The Internal Forum and the Literature of Penance and Confession." Abigail Firey's *A Contrite Heart* argues that appeals to the Court of Conscience were political and legal, too, and were not in any way constrained to the confessional register. Her case studies demonstrate that, as Müller puts it, "prior to the 1500s… canonist and (pastoral) theologians had been unable to recognize the dichotomy between publicity and secrecy as constitutive of what separated the two fora [internal and external] from one another" (Müller, 888). In other words, appeals to the Court of Conscience could function as public interventions, referring not just to secret and invisible sins, but more generally to events or circumstances for which there was no evidence beyond the first-person acknowledgment of the persons involved.
[13] Cited in Strawe, "Gregory's Moral Theology," p. 201.
[14] *Patientia* is the specific term Gregory uses to describe Job's suffering the *Moralia*. At times, "patience" is coterminous for Gregory with suffering itself (c.f. Strawe, "Gregory's Moral Theology," 197).

practical sense unbounded—or, as the canonists described it, it is "a vengeance always punishing in oneself what one grieves to have committed."[15] The imaginative work of sustaining the fictive space of the Court of Conscience is therefore part of what it means to be engaged in penitential activity *tout court*—a way, that is, of continually splitting the penitent, and exposing said penitent to regions of opacity and estrangement in the soul that are the signs of the excess of penitential "vengeance" over what one can, at any given moment, say "one grieves to have committed."

What is so intriguing about the deployment of this trope in the poem, however, is that rather than metaphorizing Will's introspective withdrawal into an interior region of the self where he might confront his secret sins, the Court of Conscience is characterized by sociability and hospitality. In the opening lines of the Passus, *before* the Court opens its doors to him, Will is assailed by old age and betrayed by fortune; the poem describes him as isolated and cut off from anyone and everyone—awake and "witless," wandering in despair, dressed "in a manere of a mendynaunt" (c.f. XIII 1-6).[16] The slip back into Will's dreamscape also stages the return of the social world into the poem: the Court of Conscience is not, in the first instance, a place where Will is to be *judged*, whether by himself or others; it is, rather, a place where he is invited to *dine*—even if, as is evident, this banquet scene is already a scene of penitential interpellation. The setting is meticulously framed, with particular attention devoted to the forms of decorum and courtesy that organize the encounters among the guests. These guests—Conscience,

[15] The definition was attributed to Augustine, but it comes from the psedo-Augustinian *De Vera et Falsa Poenitentia*. See Gratian, Distinction 3, Tractatus de Poenitentia, p. 163.

[16] Debatably, Will begins the Passus in the position of the public penitent, which in the previous chapter I associated with the figurations of romance narrative. To this degree, the opening of Passus XIII stages a movement *from* public to private penance, and does so by abandoning the romance figuration of Will as a "witlees" wanderer. The forms of public penance will not disappear entirely from the poem—they return again with Hawkyn, who is the subject of the later portions of this chapter. In this sense, part of the work of this Passus is to interrogate the very demarcation of public and private penance. For a longer account of what is at stake in debates about private and public penance, see the essays in *A New History of Penance*, Firey ed.

Scripture, and the Master of Divinity—all "wesshen and wipeden" before going to dinner (XIII, 28); the Master of Divinity makes a low bow to Scripture (XIII, 26); and the stranger, Patience, dressed in pilgrim's robes, is told to "go and wassh" before being seated (XIII, 32). Insofar as the Court of Conscience is a dream fulfillment of Will's waking desire to escape from his solitude, there is something utopian about this entry into a richly textured world, so marked by the meaningful gesture and the art of small differences. Because an associative chain connects washing to baptism in penitential texts more generally, this scene is legible, allegorically, as one in which the entry into the dining hall constitutes the entry into the specific forms of sociality—and the promise of salvation—offered by Christianity. Even at a more literal level, however, the invitation to eat, the arrangement of seats at the table, the elaborate preparation of food, and the promise of educated conversation speak to fantasies of order—not just a fantasy of ordering the space through the arrangement of guests or dishes, though this is part of it, but a fantasy of ordering time itself. This is especially true because the Passus immediately preceding this one foregrounded the pain of old age and the collapse of good fortune. In contrast, the endless parade of "sondry metes" and courteous conversation offers the promise of a frictionless style of being in the world, one in which the jagged relations between past, present, and future might be smoothed out, and time itself might again turn into an ally and a source of pleasure.

But if the Court of Conscience promises a kind of release from solitude and anxiety through the temporal and spatial ordering of the banquet, it also restages, through the very return of that textured sociality, the imposition of rigid lines of hierarchy, together with the various pressures of social, moral, and aesthetic judgment.[17] Patience and Will are told to sit at the "side borde"

[17] For an account of the normative hierarchies that structure the scene of being at the table, see the introductory chapter to Sarah Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology*. On her account, how and where one is placed at the family table is crucial to understanding how one orients oneself, and in particular, to the possibility of something like a queer orientation which registers within that scene as "willful" or "out of place" (characterizations that insistently attach

rather than the main table, and the meal they are served is not the same sumptuous food given to the Master of Divinity. Soon, the social structure of the feast feels so exclusionary to Will, that he feels a murderous rage that makes him wish "molten leed" were in the Master's "mawe" (XIII, 83) .[18] This is a moment that will be analyzed in detail further on, but already, the placement of things and persons makes the feast increasingly look like a hieratic tableau in which the pressures of seeing and being seen, from multiple angles and by multiple participants, assails the would-be diner with shame, contempt, and aggression, and disrupts the smooth flow of happy consumption. If the Court of Conscience is a social space, then, it is also social in the sense that it is a heightened site of aggression and bad feeling in which any given participant is liable to become ensnared in wrongdoing, perhaps *especially* when the awareness of such wrongdoing incites moral outrage and corrective action. This does not mean it is a scene of moral judgment gone wrong: Will is right to judge the Master of Divinity, a pedant who preaches the need for abstinence and penance even as he enjoys luxurious dishes (see, e.g., XIII 65-70). But the visceral rage with which Will does so suggests that the scene is overdetermined with respect to its cause, and that however justified the anger at the Master's hypocritical style of inhabiting (and profiting from) penitential structures of thought and feeling, the interest of the poem lies in Will, rather than in the Master. In a strange way, even the basic features of the scene—the magnified authority of the Master, the very sumptuousness of the meal, the arbitrary division between the main table and sideboard—seem already to be enacting a strange dream logic, one in which Will's fantasies have spread out, thickened, and made themselves tangible in

themselves to both Will and Hawkyn in the critical literature). See also Jacques Derrida's account of the long "patrimony" of scenes involving the "séance of the table" in *Specters of Marx*.

[18] In Passus V, Langland has the allegorical figure, Envy, describe how difficult it is to swallow "Envye and evil wylle," and expresses a desire for something—anything—that will "schrape [his] mawe" (V, 123). That earlier scene sets up the system of associations and tropes that makes Will legible in this scene as already tangled up in sin.

the basic lineaments of the scene itself. What such fantasies are, in what sense they can be said to be "penitential," and how they grapple with the problem of pleasure and enjoyment, is a problem that will take up the following section of this chapter.

Sinful Food: Fantasy and Enjoyment

The most unsettling element of Conscience's banquet is the meal itself—the food at the center of that pleasure-laden scene of sociality and shared consumption from which Will feels himself to be excluded. Already, something is amiss when the "sondry metes manye" that Scripture first serves Clergie and the Master of Divinity are revealed to be made of biblical texts and their glosses: "Of Austyn, of Ambrose, of alle the foure Evaungelistes" (XIII 39-40). Once again, the allegorical point is evocative, linking the pleasures of dining together to the pleasures of absorbing Christian teaching, but the juxtaposition is unsettling: whereas glossing and interpreting depend on practices of attention to the meaning-making powers of language, the conceit of "metes" made out of Biblical and Patristic textuality points to the materiality of the signifier—or, quite literally, to the way language can come to feel like (or be consumed as) dead meat. In such a meal, the distinction between the Evangelists and their commentators dissolves, and the variety and art of difference promised by the hermeneutics of interpretation collapses into a monotonous parade of signifiers masquerading as culinary dishes—as though the potentially endless accretion of mere names were already in the process of dissolving the flavors of a dish dense with signification. Nor does the quotation from the Bible that follows this line, "edentes et bibentes que apud eos sunt" ("eating and drinking such things as they have") help the poem recover the sense of free play and expenditure the banquet scene seemed to promise. On the contrary, the very fantasy of eating these names produces a threat of empty glossing and endless signification—and yet it is *Scripture* who serves her guests these teachings in the form of

"sondry metes," even as their assumption of edible form undoes both their capacity to produce meaning and their capacity to spark pleasure. At best, the textual food makes Biblical teaching and exegesis a matter of basic sustenance, just as it suggests that sensory appearance ought to be dispensed with by those who seek deeper nourishment. But it does not take much to see that, beneath that moralistic veneer, the poem is profoundly troubled by the question of how to maintain a circuit of pleasure and enjoyment running through this flavorless meal—a question that seems especially relevant given that the incorporation of Will into the scene has been shown to depend so strongly upon the lure of sociability and cultivated pleasures.

The question of where and how enjoyment is to be found at this banquet is therefore not only a problem for the critic—it emerges within the diegetic space of the poem. Will himself is aware that the food served at the Court of Conscience has a doubled, contradictory nature, an ontological gap that disrupts the ability of the "metes" at this banquet to function as objects of consumption. Will sees this gap elsewhere, too, even in food that is not obviously Scriptural or penitential, like the meal that the Master of Divinity finally consumes. The description of the scene of this Master seated at the table is in fact so pregnant with signification and ambivalence that even making sense of what is happening requires elaborate analysis of the poem's increasingly strange account of materiality and substance:

> Ac this maister ne his man no maner flessh eten,
> Ac thei eten mete of moore cost, mortrews and potages:
> Of that men myswonne thei made hem wel at ese.
> Ac hir sauce was over sour and unsavourly grounde
> In a morter, *Post mortem*, of many bitter peyne—
> But if thei synge for tho soules and wepe salte teris:
> Vos qui pectate hominum comeditis, nisi pro eis lacrimas et
> oraciones effuderitis, ea que in deliciis comeditis, in tormentis
> evometis (XIII, 40-45c)

The Master does not consume Scriptural food after all—he instead avoids that "flessh," and begins to eat food of "moore cost." With that avoidance of textual meats, the fantasy that the feast as a whole might be able to allegorically enact the coming together of a harmonious Christian community bound together through baptism and penance is already falling apart. But what is astonishing in this scene is that these costly foods are as ontologically unstable as the textual meats. In a flat and obvious sense, what the Master and his unnamed "man" eat is mere food: "mortrews and potages." But what they eat is also directly the product of an entire system of unequal production and distribution of goods from which the Master makes a profit; and that congealed injustice seems to be the secret substance of the food itself. This means that Langland is asking questions of enjoyment by way of a set of compressed thoughts about the production and consumption of value: the "cost" that makes the "mortrews" and "potages" feel luxurious—what, to the Master, manifests itself as taste—is the objective correlative of a whole system of profit-making and "mis-winning." But even that picture is not enough to make sense of the strangeness and subtlety of the "sour" and "unsavoury" sauce—one which has a tangible presence, yet which is also immaterial, made as it is out of "bitter peyne." That bitter pain is not—or is not just—the pain of those from whom the Master is making profit, even if the poem, significantly, encourages the slippage. To whom do these "many" pains belong—to the Master or to the people he harms—and to what temporal register—to the past or to the future? The mortar grinds them all up, and as it grinds, it produces that most strange and singular substance: a sauce that is the Master's *own* pain, a pain he has not yet felt, and will not feel until after he dies (the mortar is called "*Post Mortem*"), but which is nevertheless, in the here and now, poured upon his dishes, and is therefore, impossibly, a sauce that is consumed in the present.

In this sense, the distortions of temporality that are congealed within the food at the Court of Conscience are also crucial to the structuring of particularly knotted forms of enjoyment in which past and futural pains emerge as barriers and incitements to further pleasures. Such temporal strains dematerialize and transform the meal itself, to such a point that the "mortrews" and "potages" become undone entirely. In a grammatically awkward conditional sentence, the text affirms that the sauce was made of bitter pains *but if* they "sing for their souls" and "weep salt tears." The Latin quotation that ends the passage further elaborates the point: "You who feast upon men's sins," reads the translation, "*unless* you pour out tears and prayers for them, you will vomit forth in torment what you eat with pleasure." At stake here are the temporally distended circuits of the Christian penitential economy in which transformations of substance vertiginously follow one another: the sins of strangers are congealed as food; the Master's consumption introjects such sins; and the Latin passage promises yet a new set of conversions—of pleasure into suffering; of edible matter into vomit. In this sense, while the profit economy functions by making luxury goods out of labor and suffering—creating "mortrews" and "potages" out of "mis-winning"—the penitential circuits that crisscross the scene dematerialize those same goods by moving proleptically into the future, towards the excruciating pain that is a mirror image of the suffering already nested within the food. If even ordinary consumption is in this sense a site of anticipated pain, in this penitential economy pain might be said to be the consumption of consumption itself—the fantasmatic site where the transformation of moral and economic value threatens to finally grind to a halt, leaving in its wake voided bodies and abjected substance. Staving off such a moment of pure expenditure, the conjunctions "but" and "unless" defer that cathartic endpoint, prolonging and restarting the penitential circuit by replacing one kind of

pain—excruciating torment—with another—penitential suffering; and one kind of substance—the mortrews and potages—with another—salt tears and immaterial prayers.

These penitential circuits are familiar to any reader of medieval texts, but what is remarkable in this poem is the way Langland's ekphrastic work allows these multiple stages of production and consumption, suffering and enjoyment, to coexist and overlap in a single, over-determined moment of almost unbearable tension and ambivalence. The scene of the Master's consumption of food is in this sense a dialectical image—one that not only captures in a frozen moment the essence of an entire ideological structure, but that allows a range of ambivalent affects, desires, and attachments around penance to become visible.[19] Take, again, that same Latin quotation, which so neatly sums up the fearful set of relays that move from sin to torment, and from torment to tears. Despite the force and clarity with which the quotation interpellates its subject—"vos qui pectate homine comedis"—the poem places the quotation in an ambiguous position:

[19] Although Walter Benjamin's concept of the "dialectical image" has its home in a specifically materialist conception of history, I have found it useful for thinking about the uses of figures and images in *Piers Plowman*. Particularly illuminating for me in clarifying what Benjamin has in view has been Mark Pensky's essay, "Method and Time: Benjamin's Dialectical Images," in the *Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*. The claim here is double: on the one hand, the penitential imaginary itself, which works from what Theodor Adorno called "the standpoint of redemption" (Adorno, 247), has an intrinsic capacity to bring together past and present in ways that register as jarring and unexpected—at least from the point of view of those who, like the Master of Divinity, remain committed to what an Augustinian might describe as the temporal logics of the Earthly City. But the scene of the Court of Conscience functions as a dialectical image in a much stronger sense too—undoing the coherence not just of the Master of Divinity's profit-oriented, secular time, but also the time of smooth teleologies and developmental fantasies that the penitential apparatus itself is invested in. This, too, then, is a form of "dialectics at a standstill": the inexorable rhythms by which sin moves towards punishment and penance are momentarily brought to a vivid halt, in virtue of the way the different times of penance collapse into a single, pregnant image.
If Benjamin is helpful in understanding the kind of work images can perform in Langlandian poetics, it is nevertheless overly simple to think the work of such images need be invariably utopian—especially if Langland himself has no clear commitments about what such images might tend *towards*. Therefore, a different, but related, account that guides the analysis in this and the following paragraph can be found in WJT Mitchell's *Picture Theory*, which locates in the use of ekphrasis itself a deep-seated ambivalence—a desire, at one and the same time, to create through ekphrasis a lull or standstill within language; a desire to attack and undo the frozenness of that same image; and a desire to remain indifferent to ekphrasis as such (c.f. Mitchell, 154). Such ambivalent affects are located, for the poem, in Will, who moves successively through each of these affective stages, as he first longs for this meal to capture this pain and suffering; then becomes fearful that this condensation will be successful, and all he will ever eat is bitter bread; and finally, indifference, as he looks away from his food back to the Master's meal. In this way, Mitchell helps makes visible the ways in which what he describes as "ekphrastic hope," "ekphrastic fear" and "ekphrastic indifference" are being mobilized by Langland in the service of an analysis of the affective double-binds of the penitent.

juxtaposed, grammatically, to the bitter sauce, it is possible to read it not just as an overview of the circuits of penance that the scene as a whole seeks to represent, but also as an element that participates *within* that very scene. That is, this quotation can be read as an ingredient of that bitter sauce the Master of Divinity consumes, in much the same way Augustine, Ambrose, and the Evangelists constituted the substance of the earlier "sondry metes." To that degree, the quotation itself *is* the bitter lesson that the Master of Divinity will learn when he is finally tortured in the painful moment that finally awaits him, even as it is also a lesson he is learning now, through the pleasurable consumption of his sumptuous meal. That split between the lesson as he learns it now, and the lesson as he will learn it then, is a reminder that the split between signifier and signified is what allows penitential language in this scene to function as meat—as something eaten and metabolized (in Latin, no less), rather than cognized and understood (in vernacular speech). But not just as meat: *qua* signifying speech, this quotation is also and at the same time the putative lesson that might *prevent* that descent into torment, were the Master of Divinity able to see past the concrete, sensory appearances presented to him—not just past the congealed food that appears on the plate, but past the Latin too, that impedes and blocks access to its own meaning, and past the desire for profit that makes him peddle such language outside the Church of Saint Paul's rather than taking it to heart. Read in this way, as subordinate to the conditional clause that begins the previous line, it is a *warning*, and as a warning, it is also an *expression* of a penitential subjectivity that offers prayers and tears to a fearful God—perhaps by reciting quotations like these, which announce to other would-be sinners the terrible torments to come.[20] The poem's ekphrastic work allows for these and other interpretive possibilities—which

[20] It is worth recalling, however, that for Thomas Aquinas (or the followers that compiled the Supplement to the *Summa*) there was no contradiction in the thought that the blessed might rejoice in the unhappiness of the damned. As the Supplement to the *Summa* claims, the saints are not merely allowed to *see* the sufferings of the damned, in order that their own happiness "be more delightful to them" (ST Suppl., q94, a1); they are also allowed to *rejoice* in

is to say that the condensation of penitential stages and temporalities into the sumptuous materiality of the Master's food makes every element within the scene capable of acting in different registers at once, thereby throwing the pressure of the poem back onto the ambivalent feelings of the spectator caught within the scene, Will himself.[21]

In this way, Langland's ekphrastic strategies demonstrate how the elaborate penitential circuits that move from sin to suffering are not merely theologically informed descriptions of a sequence of stages, but are also vehicles of fantasy and unconscious projection. On Langland's account, penitential structures whose function it is to ward off sin are by that very fact sites of intense longing and ambivalence, and therefore *also* festering grounds for anger, envy, anxiety and alienation. It should therefore not be surprising that one such fantasy that insistently emerges out of this tangled penitential structure of feeling is that of trying to straighten things out again, to restore in this entangled affective landscape a sense of coherence and teleological movement. This matters to our reading of the poem: to reiterate a point made earlier, it is Will, sitting at the side-board, who filters much of what we see here; and what the Passus as a whole is interested in is in the last instance *not* the sinfulness of the Master of Divinity, but the interpretive work Will is doing around the spectacle of his grotesque consumption of food. The Master of Divinity is *for*

such suffering, insofar as the suffering of the damned is a sign of the justice of God (ST Suppl. q94 a3). That is itself reason to think that sinful and penitential affects are proximate to one another—there is a lot of maneuvering in the Supplement to demonstrate that such pleasure in the suffering of others *cannot* count as hatred, despite how much viciousness this fantasy entails. More to the point, this means that the Latin quotation that Langland is mobilizing here can be read in yet another register, as the expression of a penitential sensibility that *delights* in the suffering of sinners, rather than one that is trying to stave such suffering off.

[21] In *The Birth of Theory*, Andrew Cole performs an exegesis of Hegel in which he argues that ""what any given proposition says is less important than how it moves, goes out from itself to propose *something else*, and returns to itself having gone through its opposition: it returns, modified, only to repeat this process again" (Cole, 57). Or, more succinctly, "any proposition, even this one, *moves*, and for that reason, propositions are never static and end up doing dialectical things like wending their way to their opposite" (Cole, 10). Figures set propositions in motion—this is another way of describing what is dialectical about the scene of the Master of Divinity: by embedding a standard description of the circuits of penance into the figural logic of the Court of Conscience, Langland sets into motion the proposition that sinners will eventually be punished, making it legible in opposing and contradictory ways—and in that sense, putting into question the penitential logics that this proposition describes.

Will a particularly vexed point of inquiry, and what is most vexed for him is precisely the status of the Master of Divinity's ongoing enjoyment. It is not just that the Master's pleasures are necessary for the circuits of penance to get off the ground—his pleasure being the motor, as we have seen, for the transformations of substance that inexorably tend towards pain—it is that the obviousness and immediacy of his pleasure is itself a threat to the fantasy that sinful enjoyment is a disguised form of past or futural suffering. Consider the continuous offering of dishes presented to the Master of Divinity, in what amounts to a perverse kind of potlach: "sondry metes, mortrews and puddynges, / Womb cloutes and wilde brawen and egges [with grece yfryed]" (XIII 62-3).[22] The Master's enjoyment in his meat is obvious, even as it also remains, from the point of view of the penitential relays that Will is invested in, profoundly enigmatic. At the level of fantasy, after all, the penitential circuits have *already* stripped the feast of its substantiality and ability to produce pleasure, precisely by proleptically turning this pleasure into pain. But that only makes Will's voyeuristic positioning in the scene harder to bear, because if sinners and penitents alike are part of a penitential circuit that ultimately ends in either torment or penitential suffering, then the difference between the side-table, where Will sits, and the main one, where the Master of Divinity does, is that the latter at least gets to *experience* his pleasure. Will's rising anger at the Master of Divinity is therefore not merely an expression of envy or selfishness: if Will wishes for the Master's food to be transformed into "molten leed in his mawe," or that "Mahoun" (or the Devil) himself inhabit the Master's belly (XIII, 83), this is also

[22] The word "potlach" itself means to "to nourish" or "consume" (Mauss, 62). The social structure within which the Master of Divinity is entangled is, of course, not the same as that of the Polynesian cultures Mauss describes—Scripture is the gift-giver who lays out these sumptuous meats, for example, but the competition and rivalry in the scene is rather between the Master of Divinity and Will himself. Nevertheless, the form of the potlach helps to see how Will's desire to accelerate the penitential circuits to the point that enjoyment itself becomes vacated is itself a way of participating in Master's structure of enjoyment. The even stranger thought that the potlach fantasy makes available, however, is that whereas the Court of Conscience is easier to think of, as a trope, as one in which forms of subjectivity are *produced*, precisely through the production of speech, it is a curious fact about Langland's portrayal of it that it is, in the first instance, the space where the consumption of sin is what is at issue.

a way of propping up the penitential apparatus by trying to get rid of an enjoyment that refuses to disappear—indeed, one that suddenly seems to permeate everything and everyone: the Master of Divinity's contented expression, the sumptuous food, even the servile gestures of the allegorical figures who silently acquiesce to the Master of Divinity's gluttony.[23] Will himself finds himself entangled in this enjoyment—he cannot bring himself to look away from the main table— but if this is evidence that Will is not exactly free of sin, it is *for Will* also a sign that the penitential conversion of pleasure into suffering is not secured: either the transformations of the penitential apparatus are too slow, or the bitter sauce is not bitter enough—or, more disturbingly, perhaps the food does not taste bitter at all, despite what Will may want or need to believe. Whatever enjoyment the Master feels, on this account, it will still be too much; and however bitter the Master's food, it will never be bitter enough. If Will's desire that the Master's food turn into molten lead is therefore its own form of sinful acting out, it also the expression of penitential fantasy, in that it embodies Will's desire to desubstantialize the sin-laden, sumptuous "metes" by realizing the suffering that lies beneath them, thus securing the coherence of a penitential apparatus that is everywhere haunted by the stubborn traces of enjoyment.[24]

Penitential Food & The Dream of a Penitential Commons

Such fantasies, however much they may seek to buttress the penitential apparatus and patch up its incoherence, are recognizable to the poem *as* violent and profoundly sadistic, as they should be to us. But the poem is not done thinking about penitential fantasy. If Will desires that

[23] See Slavoj Žižek on the impossible, terrifying jouissance of "the subject supposed to enjoy" (Žižek 212). The overall discussion of the developing tension between Will and the Master of Divinity is profoundly indebted to that Žižekian account. See also Andrew Cole's account of the disappearance of the commodity in the act of its consumption (Cole 96).

[24] Klaus Theweleit's *Male Fantasies* has helped me see the violence inherent in this desire to evacuate enjoyment from other people, and from the world itself.

the food at the Court of Conscience reveal its underlying substance as one composed of suffering and bitterness, that wish is finally enacted through Will's encounter with a food that, unlike the Master's, is *explicitly* penitential and wears its bitterness on its sleeve. This meal, like the others, begins simply enough: Will and Patience are served a "sour loof"—over which Scripture pronounces "*Agite penitentiam,*" or "do penance"—and a "drynke"—over which Scripture says "*Dia perseverans*," or "long perseverant" (XIII, 48-9). Loosely mirroring the transubstantiation of bread and wine that occurs in mass, Scripture's ceremonial invocation of penance begins to reveal a double nature in this sour bread and drink, too. On the one hand, this is food that insists on its own status as *mere* food: it explicitly lacks the capacity to incite gustatory pleasure in Will, and for that very reason, it also refuses to be subsumed into the system of signification that is central to the Master of Divinity's pleasures. The sour loaf, in other words, stands out from the endless parade of dishes precisely insofar as it lacks sauces or adornments, as though it were insisting on its own stubborn presence as "loaf." In a Barthesian twist, however, the very lack that excludes it from the spectacle of surplus makes the sour loaf itself function powerfully as a penitential signifier, as though the "loaf" itself stood in for abstention and self-negation.[25] In this way, the distinctive "breadness" of the loaf—and its tangible bitterness—is both summoned and evacuated from the sensory register of the poem. Scripture's quasi-performative speech act goes further, dematerializing the loaf's substance by replacing it with the enigmatic command, "*agite penitentiam*." In doing so, Scripture also calls attention to a more unstable materiality, since the Latin, as before, draws attention to the signifying stuff of language itself, and to the way such language can be consumed without being understood. But here the quotation also does more than

[25] See Roland Barthes' discussion of Flaubert's metronome in "The Reality Effect." Realism, as such, is not Langland's concern here, but the sour loaf impinges upon the sensory register of the poem in a way that is sharper than anything in the Master's meal—a result of the sour loaf breaking (scandalously, Barthes would say) with the structure of signification set up by the description of the Master's dishes.

it did during the first serving of "sondry metes," because the imperative mood summons a disembodied voice that figures as a new and uncanny presence in the silent halls. The second Latin phrase, "*dia perseverans*," again seems to perform work that should by now be familiar, undercutting the concreteness of the congealed, penitential substance by showing it to be a condensation of penitential time. This means Will's meal does not quite operate like the Master of Divinity's is supposed to function, in Will's own penitential fantasy, for the futurity nested in *this* "drynke" depends not on the transformation of substance, but on the fantasy of its persistent sameness. To fully metabolize such a "drynke," on such an account, would entail patiently remaining in the "perseverant" activity of doing penance—an activity that remains unfinished for as long as the penitent is bound by temporality itself. But in a curious way, the insistence on the drink's sameness over time is a mirror version of how the Master of Divinity's food seems *in fact* to be working in the scene, when instead of dissolving into tears and prayers, it "persists" as repetitive and stubbornly visible enjoyment.

Will's penitential meal in this way both echoes and starts to displace, in the penitential imaginary of the poem, the enjoyment-laden dishes that were earlier offered to the Master of Divinity. And in the same way that the enjoyment of the Master seemed to seep out, saturating not just the "mortrews" and "potages," but Court of Conscience as a whole, so does the matter of this bitter loaf and "drynke" start to invade the dining hall and the language of the poem itself:

> And he [Scripture] brought us of *Beati quorum* of *Beatus virres* making,
> And thane he brought us forth a mees of other mete, of
> *Miserere mei, Deus,*
> *Et quorum tecta sunt peccata*
> In a dissh of derne shrift, *Dixi* and *Confitebor tibi*.
> 'Bryng Patience some pitaunce,' pryveliche quod Conscience;
> And thane hadde Pacience a pitaunce, *Pro hac orabit*
> *Omnis sanctus in tempore oportuno*.
> And Conscience comforted us, and carped us manye tales:

Cor contritum et humiliatum, Deus, non despicies (XIII, 52-58b).

On the surface, at least, nothing could be farther from the sensory overload of the Master of Divinity's elaborate dishes: *these* dishes are not grounded in the play of the senses; their only substance is that of language itself, which makes them feel immediately haunted by the uncanny presence of disembodied voices; and the rigid and formalized content through which such voices speak gives them an opaque authority that is all by itself enough to drain pleasure from the scene. Indeed, what starts to emerge, in and through these penitential dishes, is the penitential symbolic itself: a set of generic phrases, instructions, and ritual fragments that organize the processes of mourning and sorrow as these follow from the command to do penance (*agite penitentiam*). On the one hand, these quotations function as the organizing principle that gives each sorrow-laden "dissh" a spectral form—each Latin phrase being an *incipit* or a portion of one of the penitential psalms. But more significantly, these Latin phrases are also the underlying *matter* of the various dishes—and as such, they threaten to bleed into one another and become indiscernible, as though everything on the table had been made from the same (speaking) substance. In this way, the "mees" of "mete" points to the psalms as a potentially interminable web of citations which no single "dissh" can contain—which is one reason why it is hard to imagine what it would mean for Will to finish (or even begin) eating this penitential food. Boundaries are hard to maintain in this scene: it is difficult to differentiate what is seen from what is heard, what can be consumed from what remains insistently alien and incorporeal. In the last few lines of the quotation above, not only the boundary between individual psalms or "dishes," but even the boundaries that separate Latinate, ritualized language from everyday vernacular speech start to collapse, as the "manye tales" Conscience tells are shown to be composed of yet further penitential formulas. If one can imagine Scripture endlessly bringing further dishes to the side-board, so, too, can one

imagine Conscience producing further and further penitential stories, each pointing back to the alienating, impersonal presence of a penitential apparatus which is only visible in the form of these fragmented bits of language. Clergie's attempt to "comfort" Will and Patience with these tales therefore feels unnerving: not just because it directly points to the *dis*comfort and alienation Will feels, though that is part of it, but because it seems to suggest that only further engagement with penance can provide comfort from the alienated feelings this penitential structure itself produces.

But Clergie may not be entirely wrongheaded, either, in trying to offer Will comfort in "tales" of contrition and humiliation of the heart. Thus far, I have argued that the penitential structure that Will finds himself caught within is not, through sheer dint of being penitential, a source of good feelings, redemptive transformation, or hopeful utopianism. Quite the contrary: it generally produces in Will a strange amalgam of selfishness and anger, envy and alienation—and this, not in spite of the promises that are nested in the penitential imaginary, but precisely because of them. But if the poem suggests that ambivalence and ugly feelings are inextricable from the redemptive logic of penance, this penitential food nevertheless maintains a utopian valence—one that is felt through the haunting presence of a collective voice that is also lodged within the food. We have seen how the progressions of substance at the side-board shifted from the insistent materiality of the loaf to the underlying "matter," which in the first instance appears to be the symbolic system indexed by these penitential quotations. But the quotations from the psalms point to a proximate matter of their own, so to speak: the sorrow and penitential labor visible in and through the quotations. "*Miserere mei, Deus*," says the "mees of other mete": have mercy on me, Lord. "*Beati quorum remissae sunt iniquitates, et quorum tecta sunt peccata*," quotes another: "Blessed are they whose sins are forgiven, and whose sins are covered over." If one way

of reading the erasure of food and the appearance of textuality is through the appeal to an underlying penitential symbolic, it is possible to also hear beneath those same Latin quotations the fantasmatic presence not just of the ecclesiastically authorized and enforced rituals of penance, but of something like the collective expression of penitential sorrow itself. Given the long tradition of not merely reciting the penitential psalms, but of singing them, one could say that these quotations at once invoke and are haunted by the presence of music, and that it is in the texture of this inaudible song that this penitential sorrow is finally located. That reading is not meant to track what anybody within the poem actually hears or thinks: the food is presented at the side table with little fanfare, and Will's main reaction to it is merely to mourn over the Master's more sumptuous metes. Rather than taking Will's penitential "metes" as speaking or singing within the diegetic space of the poem, the suggestion here is that in the inaudible music that haunts these quotations there is lodged the promise that the penitent may yet find surcease and become integrated into some humbler and less aggression-laden version of a penitential community—not by eliminating the sorrow that is a constitutive part of sinful life (and thus, part of life as a whole), but by aestheticizing it and sharing it.[26] On such an account, the opacity that confronts Will in his bitter loaf is one that can finally be overcome, since the obstacle is lodged not in the penitential affects themselves, but the penitential bread—that shadowy anticipation of a world in which the choral, disembodied voices that are temporarily congealed in material form are finally set free of the grubby and opaque movement of the appetites.

[26] In a recent review of Anne Boyer's *The Undying*, Lauren Berlant describes Boyer as imagining and insisting upon "the commons of suffering," one which refuses the logics of redemption or resilience. To think of a penitential commons, on the contrary, is to think of suffering as ultimately capable of taking a redemptive form. Nevertheless, as the argument makes clear, even the redemptive thinker is forced to confront the opacity and resistance of suffering with respect to such forms. See also Berlant's essay "The Subject of True Feeling: Pain, Privacy, and the Law" for an account of how fantasies of "true" suffering and pain acquire political valence.

Patience's Transvaluation of Value

Even if one reads that loaf of bread as a promissory note for a penitential world to come, however, it is still clear that, as it stands, the figure of that penitential loaf does heavy ideological lifting, deploying sentimentality to knot together a fantasy of social wholeness. This will feel especially true to the degree that one takes the poem to have no further thoughts about what it means to share or aestheticize sorrow, or how exactly sorrow is supposed to be conducive to the creation of a penitential commons. That is, the loaf continues to require further interpretive work, regardless of whether one takes a paranoid or reparative attitude towards the fantasies that we have seen mobilized in the scene.[27] For even if one ends up believing that the loaf does, in fact, operate within the scene as an ideological suturing point, that thought is not sufficient to fully understand the imagined resolution this Passus is invested in. For the sake of comparison, and to bracket Will for just a moment, consider the more stridently utopian version of this redemptive drive offered by Patience, as he tries to bring into being a commons that bypasses the tensions and contradictions of penitential suffering entirely. Throughout the feast, Patience insists on the possibility of changing the valence (and the value) of suffering itself: while Will expresses doubt and anger at the penitential meal Scripture serves him, Patience insists that "here is propre service," and that "there fareth no prince better" (XIII, 50); while Will mourns over his sour loaf, Patience makes "murthe with his mete" (XIII, 60); and while Will sees in the Master's gluttony a personal affront to both Patience and to him, Patience sees in the Master a laughable bumbler whose enjoyment poses no threat to either Will or to anyone else (XIII, 83-96). Patience's discourse may be grounded in theological texts whose rhetorical force hinges on such affective reversals, but given the complex structures of ambivalence we have seen emerging throughout

[27] See Eve Sedgwick's "Paranoid and Reparative Reading," in *Touching Feeling*.

the banquet scenes, Patience's transvaluation of suffering seems entirely too simple, depending as it does on the idea that joy and suffering can remain unmixed and uncontaminated by each other.[28] On Patience's view, after all, the sour loaf and the penitential "metes" are in no way different from the Master's sumptuous food: the problem is neither with sumptuousness nor with pleasure *per se*; it is, rather, that Will and the Master of Divinity are simply wrong—not just about where to find pleasure or suffering, but in their conception of what sorrow or pleasure even are. With a proper understanding, so the story goes, the diners would understand that pleasure *is* suffering, notwithstanding the obvious enjoyment of the Master of Divinity; just as they would see that eating that sour loaf just *is* pleasure, notwithstanding the fact that the loaf is, definitionally, made up of suffering and pain.

Patience's counterintuitive phenomenology is part of a larger project: he wants to imagine that a refigured commons can bootstrap off of secular social forms by *replacing* worldly pleasure with religious devotion. But because this project keeps these social forms stable while swapping out their content, Patience is attached to the same hierarchies and forms of alienation that structure the scenes of consumption at the Court of Conscience. Nowhere is this more evident, perhaps, than at the end of Passus XIII, where Patience imagines a world of courtly banqueting and entertainment in which courtly music is replaced with sermons and preaching, and "kynges minstrals" are replaced with beggars whom Patience describes as "Goddes minstrales" (XIII, 440). Patience wants the replacement of musicians for beggars to feel shocking to his listeners, and in a way it is, but this reversal does not so much undo as reify social hierarchies, making

[28] Emily Steiner sums up a vast amount of scholarship on this section of the Passus in *Reading Piers Plowman*: her commentary on this moment in the Passus traces the rhetorical inversion Langland here performs back to Vincent of Beauvais' description of poverty as an *odibile bonum*, a "hateful good in disguise" (Steiner, 153). One might say that Patience's fantasy here is one of finally being able to discard the disguise—to think that the "good" here will remain a "good" even absent its *integumentum*.

them increasingly illegible. The beggars, presumably, participate in these feasts and revels out of necessity—only so do they maintain their character as beggars, with the ethical value that Patience now seeks to attribute to them. In insisting that they are also minstrels, the beggar's lack is recoded as aesthetic surplus—a surplus which is imagined as necessary to the salvation of the rich man's soul (XIII, 440-50). Patience is aware that he is playing with powerful paradoxes: at the deathbed of the rich man, on his account, the sound of a blind man or a bedridden woman function analogously to the way music or the presence of jesters do at the feasts of insouciant lords; but on Patience's account, whereas fools and flatterers lead those that love them "to Luciferes feste," the beggars *qua* minstrels bring the rich man to laughter and feelings of solace, turning wanhope into "welhope" (XIII, 454). This dream of affective transformation is polemically driven—Patience is seeking to respond to the predicament of another "minstral," Hawkyn, whose peculiar style of alienated penance will be addressed in the following chapter. What I want to stress here, however, is how the paradoxes and reversals of this scene, however shocking, maintain and enforce strict lines of difference and hierarchy, precisely through their attempt to undo the ambivalence around penitential suffering that is everywhere present in the Court of Conscience. In other words, if music and feasting emerge at the very end of Passus XIII as a node of fantasy through which to imagine a world in which sin has released its grasp, in Patience's figuration that change is made possible by the simultaneous invocation and erasure of the beggar: a beggar who not only suffers in place of the rich man, but aestheticizes that same suffering, in order for the rich man to finally, unambivalently, arrive at "welhope." There is a troubling logic at stake in that argument—Patience's logic depends on notions of need and sacrifice that make vicious actions seem completely distinct from virtuous ones, thereby falsifying the penitent's relationship to the moral law, making the utopian longing of the poem

double down on the cruelty of punishment and discipline.[29] Worse, in simply transvaluing suffering, Patience dreams a world that has no place for *penitential* suffering at all—the loaf of bitter bread would at that point no longer be distinguishable from the sumptuous meats of the Master of Divinity, leaving the poem without a way of confronting the complex problem posed by the entanglements of sin and penance.

Doubled Suffering (I): History & Abstraction

There is more to say about Patience's attempts to think about the relationship between penance and wealth, but if anything, that final dream of a world reconfigured around the rich man's salvation throws into sharper relief the critical difficulty of making sense of what it might look like for a penitential commons to figure as an alternative to Patience's hierarchically enforced vision of reconciliation. That requires again thinking about sorrow and ambivalence, which means returning to the silent music and uncanny atmospherics of the suffering-laden food that is earlier served to Will. I want to suggest two extended readings that try make sense of that penitential food whose substance, we have seen, harkens back to the penitential psalms, but which causes in Will only further mourning. In the light of what I will here describe as the first reading—one whose basic lineaments have already started to become apparent—what holds together the imagined penitential community whose silent voices are congealed in the food at the banqueting hall is something like suffering in-itself: a suffering that calls out from beneath or beyond the social forms within which that suffering is expressed. Such an account tracks the way suffering is pictured as the secret substance lodged within Latin quotations, which are themselves hidden in the outward appearance of sour loafs, drinks, and dishes. To deploy a Scholastic

[29] For a complex reading of the way figures of need and necessity enforce a sacrificial logic by delimiting what pertains to the law from what exists outside of it, see L.O. Fradenburg's "Needful Things," in *Medieval Crime and Social Control*, edited by Barbara Hanawalt and David Wallace.

terminology that feels amenable to the scene's obsessive concern with the metaphysics of substance and the uncanny matter of penitential food, one can picture the suffering that is lodged within the food at the Court of Conscience as something like a *prima materia,* a featureless substance which can be postulated in theory, but cannot be made visible (or audible) without the formal structure given to it by these penitential formulae. On this account, the disembodied formalism of the penitential symbolic system has, as its double, the fantasy that there is a pure form of suffering—contentless, abstract, universal—lying beneath every instance of penance. Pressing the musical analogy further, one might think of Arthur Schopenhauer's dictum that music "of its essence can never be representation" (WWR I, 257); in similar ways, the underlying "matter" of the loaf—suffering itself—can neither be specified further nor given a more concrete form, under pain of undercutting its ability to serve as that which is common to any form of penitential activity whatsoever. It is, as it were, the pure form of the (penitential) will, whose suffering is constitutively tied to the experience of duration itself.[30] But of course, what Will eats is not the substratum alone, but the entire bread—and so, on this account, penitential structures of feeling, as Will experiences them, will contain a hauntological dimension: the atemporal, ceaseless suffering of the ideal penitent will be marked by history, which is also to say, by the envious, frustrated impulses that we have seen overcome Will time

[30] Schopenhauer was himself deeply troubled by the contradiction of trying to philosophically represent what was outside of representation itself. I am not interested in pressing the passage into service on behalf of a philosophical account of music that starts to seem rather distant from the poem, but it is a strange fact about the allegorical maneuvers of the poem that it is, after all, *Will* who confronts the bitter loaf, and is being forced to encounter in this bread the abstract suffering that is beneath the surface of things. For a powerful medieval account of the uncanny valence of music and its capacity to do work beneath and beyond the meaning-making capacity of religious language, see Augustine's *Confessions*. There, he says of the melody in which the psalms are set to music that "the several affections of our spirit, by a sweet variety, have their own proper measures in the voice and singing, by some hidden correspondence wherewith they are stirred up. But this contentment of the flesh, to which the soul must not be given over to be enervated, doth oft beguile me, the sense not so waiting upon reason, as patiently to follow her; but having been admitted merely for her sake, it strives even to run before her, and lead her… hen it befalls me to be more moved with the voice than the words sung, I confess to have sinned penally, and then had rather not hear music" (IX, Chap xxxiii).

and time again in this chapter; even as, conversely, any particular instance of penance will be marked by the fantasy of this perfect sorrow moving through the very embodied activity that also keeps that true sorrow from ever being fully realized. [31]

Is that the picture that Langland wishes us to take away from the scene of the Court of Conscience? That phrasing the issue would preserve the fantasy that penitential feelings, even if continually split and doubled, are nevertheless in some important sense untouched by sin. For even if history exerts a pressure on the idealized form of such feelings, the entanglements of sin and penance are contingent, and not a matter of strictly logical necessity. That fantasmatic penitential suffering that beckons within the activity of the penitent, in particular, would remain unsullied—a permanent horizon towards which the penitent moves as they grow disattached from the sinful objects and styles of enjoyment that in this chapter have emerged in paradigmatic form in the figure of the Master of Divinity.[32] At the figural register, that fantasy is supported by

[31] "Hauntology" is the term used by Jacques Derrida in *Spectres of Marx* to describe the disjointedness which haunts the present/presence, and which applies to the creation of concepts as such. As he puts it: "It affects and bereaves in advance, like the ghost it will become, but this is precisely where haunting begins. And its time, and the untimeliness of its present, of its being 'out of joint.' To haunt does not mean to be present, and it is necessary to introduce haunting into the very construction of a concept. Of every concept, beginning with the concepts of being and time. That is what we would be calling here a hauntology" (xxx). But there is a multiplicity invested in the term itself, which is perhaps an object of further discussion. I am here interested in the way any specific instance of penitential suffering is haunted by the suffering that is in excess of what can be redeemed by any penitent. But there is another sense of haunting here too—the sense in which it is the disembodied, abstract suffering that is itself haunted by other sins, other pasts, that are no longer accessible except insofar as they are already lost, their histories subsumed already into a penitential form whose work it is to delaminate suffering from sin. Such an account would take the discussion of haunting rather closer to one of the source texts for Derrida's account, Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's *The Wolf Man's Magic Word*, and to a rather different description of haunting—haunting as transgenerational haunting, where the traumas of past generations press in upon the living, *especially* when the causes of such suffering are unknown. On that reading, this abstract suffering in the Halls of Conscience *encrypts* within it other pasts and voices, and it is the fact that those pasts are only ever heard through and in the abstract bread that gives the Court of Conscience its gothic atmospherics.

[32] In the *Summa Theologica*, there is a fascinating excursus on the difference between penance as sacrament and penance as virtue. In arguing that penance is indeed a virtue, Aquinas distinguishes between two kinds of suffering. The relevant quotation is the following: "To repent is to deplore something one has done. Now it has been stated above that sorrow or sadness is twofold. First, it denotes a passion of the sensitive appetite, and in this sense penance is not a virtue, but a passion. Secondly, it denotes an act of the will, and in this way it implies choice, and if this be right, it must, of necessity, be an act of virtue" (ST III a1). As the discussion progresses, Aquinas uses the distinction in these two types of sorrow to distinguish sharply between penance and shame: shame is a passion, whereas penance has a deeply rational component. But what is more startling, and relevant, to the discussion here, is that Aquinas then makes the distinction depend on two different modes of attachment to sin, which also means two

the division of sinful food from penitential food: in seeking remorse *within* the bread, the poem is already suggesting that Will can enjoy his pain without having to think particularly hard about where this pain comes from, or what the Master of Divinity and his enjoyment have to do with the pain he is himself being asked to eat. But this fantasy of secluding a kernel of penitential feeling from the pressures of sin and history is precisely what makes the penitential symbolic so abstract and alienating to Will: even after traversing the barriers of Latinity and formalized language, penitential sorrow *itself* is what Will cannot feel, in part because no part of the scene at the Court of Conscience makes any appeal to the specific sins Will himself has (or has not) committed. There is no reference, for example, to Will's falling in with *Concupiscencia Carnis* or *Coveitis of Eyen* in Passus XI, nor does this part of the poem make any reference to the collapse of his trust in Fortune, in that earlier Passus; nor is there any appeal to Will's moral breakdowns elsewhere in the poem. But on this view, Will's specific sins do not actually matter, because it is only penitential suffering in the abstract, stripped away from any particular content, that can fold Will back into a penitential commons. This is why it is so important to keep in mind that, if the Court of Conscience is a literary device that Langland uses to explore the underlying structures that make penance function both as an ideology and as a social form, this does not mean that this Court is *representational* of anything in particular—much less of an internalized process through which a single consciousness comes to terms with its own past failings. Rather,

different structures of temporality that bind past to present: "[Penance] is a virtue, according as it includes a right choice on the part of the will; which, however, applies to penance rather than to shame. Because *shame regards the evil deed as present, whereas penance regards the evil deed as past*. Now it is contrary to the perfection of virtue that one should have an evil deed actually present, of which one ought to be ashamed" (ST III a1, emphasis mine). This description supports the thought that penitential suffering tends towards an abstract form that delaminates suffering from sin entirely, but does so by creating clear and stable distinctions where no such distinctions can be maintained. Aquinas' discussion, furthermore, offers a way to think more deeply about what exactly it means to think of penitential structures of feeling as haunted by the past: to separate penance from shame as Aquinas does is to remove this haunted dimension from penance—and to do so by finally putting to rest a past that continually threatens to become overly proximate to the present.

as it emerges on this account, the Court of Conscience is a fictional site where the hitherto isolated penitent slowly lets go of the particular content of suffering—one's personal history and past failings—in order to allow the formalism of the penitential symbolic and its attendant fantasy of contentless and universalizable suffering to suture one to the community of fellow penitents.

Doubled Suffering (II): Antinomies of Form and Matter

As we have seen, Will's disdain for his penitential meal is a demonstration of how difficult it is to so much as make this abstract form of suffering intelligible, given that the only access to it is through social forms made to help the penitent *express* a suffering that is, in itself, resistant to any concrete specification. Curiously, the fantasy that suffering is prior to its assumption into social form makes suffering begin to function not just as an *end-point*, but as a point of *origin*: to be able to feel (or to fantasize oneself as feeling) intense suffering, and to feel it beyond what can be expressed or contained in any public articulation of it, including any articulation that might properly be called "penitential," becomes the condition of entry to this community of sufferers and mourners.[33] But on this picture of penance, the penitent is left stranded between different abstractions, each of which emerges from the different valences suffering has in this way of conceptualizing penance. The fantasy of a commons finally bound together through the shared expression of contentless suffering supposes that penitential social forms are, as it were, form without matter, empty structures that leave out what we might think of as the *haeccitas*, the

[33] We saw earlier that this suffering beyond the scope of penitential suffering is what Gregory seemed to describe as "suffering that is in excess of the debt owed for sin" (see footnote 6, from the introduction). The point is that the very postulation of such a suffering *in excess* of its relationship to sin creates the fantasy of an endpoint towards which such suffering ought to move.

"thisness" that gives suffering its phenomenological weight.[34] That side of the dilemma is counterposed, on this same view, by something like the fantasmatic lure of matter without form: mute suffering without *quidditas* or "whatness"—a suffering that offers the penitent the lure of finding self-certainty in a common and universalizable feeling, but that leaves the penitent incapable of gaining traction within the structures in which that feeling has to find its articulation. Will is not so much on one side or the other; rather, he is trapped within this antinomy. For all his desire to see the circuits of penance undo and transform the Master of Divinity's sin-laden mortrews and potages, the sorrow-laden bread that the poem itself poses as an alternative substance to that meal is another source of alienation—and this because, on this account, penitential suffering itself has been so simplified and evacuated of content that the impossible pressure of inhabiting that penitential sensibility only produces in Will a more intense desire for the meats of the Master.

But if that is so, Will's fascination with the banquet being served at the main table may be more than just a refusal to feel sorrow or remorse—it may, itself, be a sign that whatever sorrow or remorse the scene is invested in, it is not one that can be finally be contained within this penitential loaf. I argued, above, that I had two readings in mind, in thinking through the antinomies that ripple through the Court of Conscience. The second reading begins, therefore, with the thought that, while it is correct to think that alienated forms of abstraction are constitutive of the fantasies that attach to penitential structures generally, it is wrong to think that this is the central takeaway of the Court of Conscience scene as a whole. Penitential suffering *is* indeed a doubly articulated structure of feeling, but that double articulation does not correspond to a naive hylomorphic version of the form/matter split—and much less to a simple division

[34] In accordance with Aquinas' characterization of shame and penance—as discussed in footnote 91, above—one might describe this description of contentless penitential suffering as a fantasy of penance without shame.

between abstract, featureless suffering, on the one hand, and the formalism of the penitential symbolic, on the other.[35] Once again, these dilemmas may be present at particular moments or in the minds of particular sinners—and they are certainly present in many of the penitential fantasies operating in this Passus—but this is true only as a derivative phenomenon. Instead, on this reading, the secret of the Court of Conscience lies in the way the fantasies and anxieties that cluster around the Master of Divinity's sumptuous meal mirror those that surround Will's penitential loaf; or the way the Master's endless consumption of food seems to itself be a "perseverant" form of activity, one that models, for the poem, how Will is supposed to approach his own penitential food. These parallels suggest that suffering and enjoyment share unexpectedly similar forms—they are recursive and repetitive, and seek to extend themselves indefinitely into the future; when interrupted, they are liable to produce similar forms of envy, disappointment, and aggression; and for all these reasons, what seems at one moment to be a form of active enjoyment can, at a later moment, or from a different point of view, seem to be a paradigmatic form of suffering. But that does not mean that the two are identical or substitutable, the way they are in Patience's dream of a utopian community where beggars are minstrels and suffering is already a form of joy. Rather, the existence of sin, as such, presupposes that there is *already* a tangled relationship between the forms of experience that are here labeled "suffering" and "enjoyment," and that this entangled structure of feeling opens the sinner up to a varied range of temporal, cognitive, and affective dislocations—where "penance" is the name for one such possible dislocation caused by sin. In that sense, one way of pithily describing penance is as the particular dislocation of the subject that circles insistently around the fantasy of being able to

[35] Aryeh Kosman's *The Activity of Being* has taught me to think about the Aristotelian antinomies that pervade the *Metaphysics* as stages in a developing argument, rather than as part of a putatively hylomorphic argument in which form and matter are separate and isolatable concepts that must then be stitched together.

repair that which sin has first undone or rent asunder—and if that sinful break is only possible for a complex creature whose enjoyments are not in principle separable from its forms of suffering, then penance, too, will entail complex structures of feeling that are irreducible to either simple suffering or simple enjoyment. More strongly, this means that the penitent, insofar as she is caught up in the circuits of penance, will by that very fact remain open to the fantasies, styles of ambivalence, and patterns of dissociation from which she seeks to create distance. In this sense, it is no surprise that ugly feelings are embedded in the fantasies that make penance the kind of thing that it is: while not all penitents are made alike, the bad penitent is for all that as much a native inhabitant of the penitential landscape as the good one.

The split between form and matter that cuts through the food at the Court of Conscience is therefore helpful to the movement of Langland's thought not because it reifies its objects of analysis—though the ongoing possibility of such reification is a crucial element of the picture the poem is drawing up—but rather because the distinction helps characterize complex structures of suffering and enjoyment that mark the lives of penitent and sinner alike. In light of this second extended reading of the scene, a contentless, ahistorical, and in this sense, fundamentally *innocent* form of suffering cannot be the *prima materia* for the formal operations of penance, because there *is* no such prime matter outside of the abstract postulations of thought: there is no penitential suffering that can be isolated from the everyday histories that throw a person into sin, and in doing so, also throw her into penance. Rather, the historically dense forms of activity that the penitential system comes to see *as* suffering are the *proximate matter* for the formal operations of penance. That is, the "matter" that makes up the substance of the sour loaf is not, after all, the formless and featureless matter of suffering as such—it is instead the suffering lodged in the spectacle of the Master of Divinity's consumption of "mortrews and potages," with

all its attendant pleasures and stubborn fantasies. Not only does this mean that the loaf is not contained in itself—that to think of the loaf is already to think of it as in some sense made from the fantasy-laden foods that sit on the main table. It means that the mortrews and potages themselves do not hold within themselves any simple affect or feeling we may think of as "suffering," because what makes their consumption legible *as* suffering is precisely the way they stand, as it were, as proximate matter *with respect to* the penitential loaf. Such claims are still in their infant stages—the last section of this dissertation will extend and elaborate them by way of a detailed analysis of the way form and matter unfolds into a dialectic between different forms of activity. But it is possible to see, already, that the shift from thinking about the *prima materia* of the penitential loaf to the *proximate matter* of that same loaf is already to shift one's site of inquiry away from the innate character of penitential feeling (or the penitent) and towards the work penance does in shaping and giving form to a life that has come to be understood as a life marked by suffering. In this respect, the practical orientation of the penitent is part of what is ultimately at stake in this scene: if form and matter distinctions are useful to thinking about penitential structures of feeling, it is perhaps because the would-be penitent stands in an analogous position to the way the Aristotelian maker of a bronze sphere stands with respect to the bronze which will *be* the matter of the sphere once the sphere is made.[36] But such analogies,

[36] The bronze sphere is a site of repeated inquiry for Aristotle, and is most famously addressed in *Metaphysics* VII, 1033b. He there says that even though bronze has its own independent existence, what makes it operate as *matter* is the way in which it is related to some *form*: in this sense, he suggests that it is only when the bronze is described as "bronzen" (e.g., as a "bronzen sphere," or a "bronzen statue) that it can be understood as matter. The same is true for form, as Kosman makes clear: "Form for Aristotle is always specific to a thing under a particular description, that is, qua a certain being. Every instance of being determines a form, and determines a form relative to its description as that being. Any particular individual thing, as subject to many different (true) descriptions, is the subject of many different beings and so will have as many forms, each form relative to the thing under that description, or as we say in an older idiom, qua that being" (Kosman, 96).
Using this insight to think about Langland's allegorical strategies in the poem as a whole is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is a curious feature of his writing that the endless parade of sinners that move through *Piers Plowman* are always in relation to an allegorical figure like Reason or Repentance, Conscience or Patience, *before whom* what they do counts as "sinning" or "suffering." Sinners may abound—but it is the law, as St. Paul puts it, that makes sin visible *as* sin. This Passus is an exemplary case, in this respect, for thinking about how figural representations of the

while helpful, are also troubled, because what it means to give shape to a life is not after all the same as what it means to give shape to inert stuff. Aquinas himself, in the *Summa*, points to both the power and the opacity of this kind of analogical reasoning, when he suggests that "in the sacrament of Penance, human acts take the place of matter" (ST III a1).[37] Penance, that is to say, is an activity whose shaping work takes as proximate matter human activity itself. This suggests a new terrain of penitential fantasy: the fantasy of penitential activity as a form of *making* or *shaping* a life by articulating it *as* a life of suffering, in order to give suffering itself a redemptive form. What new antinomies are produced in and through that fantasy, and what new forms of ambivalence emerge as a consequence, is a topic that will emerge again in the concluding chapter of this dissertation.

Conclusion: An Excursus on Pleasure and Suffering

It may seem strange that it is Aristotelian ontological categories that have emerged in the analysis of this Passus, rather than the strictly ethical categories that are foundational to the Aristotelian conception of virtue and vice. As a way of conclusion, therefore, and in preparation of the discussion that will follow in the last chapter, I wish to provide a sketch of the ways that one might reread some of the work of this chapter in terms of Aristotelian ethics and action theory, just as much as through the lens of Aristotelian metaphysics or ontology. Consider what is perhaps the most sophisticated account of pleasure in medieval thought—that which was put

tension between form and matter offer allegory a philosophical structure within which to interrogate questions of ethics and morality.

[37] Although the formulation is odd to a modern ear, this is a pregnant thought, and one that is amenable to becoming integrated into contemporary academic inquiries into the nature of action and value. See, for example, debates over the theory of value in anthropology, and in particular, David Graeber's argument that questions of value are most properly to be thought as questions about the value of action, rather than things. On Graeber's account, indeed, value just is "the way people represent the importance of their own actions to themselves" (Graeber, 45)—a point of view that would suggest that penance is not merely a form of activity, but a form of activity whose particular function is to valorize human activity *qua* activity.

forward by Aristotle in the *Nichomachean Ethics* and then taken up by commentators like Aquinas. The Aristotelian polemic is directed against a conception of pleasure as an end-in-itself: it *cannot* function as such an end, for Aristotle, not because pleasure is not worthwhile, but because such an account offers little grounds for choosing what to do: pleasure is a feature of any form of unimpeded activity as such—it is equally found in eating, seeing, praying, or contemplating the nature of being. To this degree, to speak of pleasure as an end is simply to beg the question as to *what* pleasures one considers good, which in turn depends on what it is one considers the good for a creature organized in the specific ways we are organized (which is to say: as animals bearing the capacity for reason, language, and political activity). But it is important to see one thing that this argument does *not* entail—for a quite different argument against the notion of pleasure as an end-in-itself, and one which Aristotle is at pains to argue with, is in the background. In Plato's *Philebus*, pleasure is discarded as a final good because pleasure is always a means towards something else. This "genesis view of pleasure," as Verity Harte calls it, uses restorative pleasures as a paradigmatic case—eating when we are hungry, drinking when we are thirsty, and so on.[38] It is not, on Plato's picture, eating *itself* that gives us pleasure: what gives us pleasure is being happily restored to a natural and harmonious state of being, which is determined independently from the fact of eating or drinking itself. Plato can therefore discard pleasure as a proper end, because the nature of pleasure is to point beyond itself to something else; but he will have trouble, Aristotle thinks, in trying to describe the life of a creature who is already in a more or less harmonious state, and who finds pleasure in the exertion of its virtuous or higher-order capacities. Restorative pleasures may indeed be pleasurable, even

[38] Verity Harte's essay "The *Nichomachean Ethics* on Pleasure," in *The Cambridge Companion to the* Nichomachean Ethics, has been especially instructive in clarifying the Platonist picture that Aristotle is arguing against. Also deeply helpful in clarifying the Aristotelian picture are Sarah Brodie's introduction to the *Nichomachean Ethics* and Kosman's *The Activity of Being*.

on Aristotle's account, but they are pleasurable only incidentally—which is to say, they are pleasurable *to* someone in a particular state, but they are not a good model for pleasure as such: their status as pleasurable, on the contrary, can be explained by a more all-encompassing model of pleasure, in which pleasure is associated with the distinctive activity of living (or thinking) creatures.

At stake is a question about what model is best-suited to think about pleasure—allowing that pleasure as such is not a viable candidate for thinking about the good-in-itself. But what interests me here, in this final excursus, is a specific detail of the *way* Aristotle argues against taking the restorative pleasures as an overarching paradigm for pleasure as such. The logical form of pleasure, Aristotle thinks, is *not* that of a "coming-to-be" or of "becoming." To take up the paradigmatic example of "becoming" in Aristotle's work, pleasure is not the *kind* of activity that building a house is, where the value of building is given by the finished object, and where the activity of building *qua* building must cease to exist in order for the "house" to come into being. Rather, if pleasure is associated with activity, this is because it is living, as such, that is pleasurable; the most basic model of pleasure is therefore not that of struggling to *become* something (it is not a form of *kinesis* or movement), but the ongoing activity of *being* the thing that one is (*energeia*, or "being at work being oneself")—what Aryeh Kosman refers to as "the activity of being."[39] As Aristotle puts it, pleasures "are not comings-to-be, nor do they all even involve coming-to-be, but they are activities (energeiai) and constitute an end; nor do they result from our coming to be something, but from our exercising our capacities" (NE VII, 1153a7-15). Because of this, pleasure itself, phenomenologically, has a particular kind of *wholeness* or perfection to it, which is why Aristotle often thinks of the paradigmatic forms of pleasure as

[39] The translation of *Energeia* as "being at work being oneself" is taken from Kosman's *The Activity of Being*.

those that supervene upon seeing or thinking, rather than upon eating or drinking. Seeing, for example, is an activity that is complete in itself, in the sense that it is what it is at every instant—one sees or one does not see (this is true even if one's seeing is deficient in some way); even if *what* we see is blocked or opaque, the activity of seeing as such cannot be improved or changed, nor is it, *qua* seeing, lacking in anything. Pleasure is like this, Aristotle thinks, "since it is a whole, and at no time can one find a pleasure such that, if it comes to be for a longer time, its form will become complete" (NE X, 1174a-19).

One way of rephrasing the question that has been driving the argument of this chapter is therefore what the nature of suffering might be, on a medieval account in which the activity of being the kind of creature we are entails not just characteristic forms of pleasure, but forms of suffering that are paradigmatic of the highest forms of ethical activity. Is suffering baked into the exercise of our most ethical and god-like capacities? Or does suffering necessarily take the form of a "coming-to-be," the way pleasure does on the Platonist model? The latter has immediate phenomenological appeal—suffering is a state of being that almost definitionally wants to escape its condition, in a way pleasure does not. Theologically, moreover, there is a long tradition of thinking of the suffering that pertains to sin restoratively—as evidenced, for example, by the many descriptions of suffering and sin as a disease, and Christ as the good physician. But suffering *qua* exercise of a noble and ennobling activity, which is temporally open-ended and expressive of the being one is, is a model that is harder to dispense with than it might seem. First, because, if contemplation is for the Aristotelian the highest good available to the human creature, for Gregory, as for other penitential thinkers, to experience oneself as sinful and lacking is itself an ethical activity that ought to be cultivated and sustained, and is therefore itself as much the

expression of a distinctly human capacity as seeing or thinking are.[40] Second, while such suffering may, as a matter of logical necessity, contain the possibility of being released from suffering, the suffering that interests the penitential thinker has a distinctively unbound temporal form—"penance," we will recall, is for the canonists "a vengeance *always* punishing in oneself what one grieves to have committed" (emphasis mine). This means that suffering necessarily takes the form of an ongoing *practice*, and is cultivated because it is tethered to fantasies of the good life—a good life oriented around virtues like humility, which are cultivated in and through penitential suffering. Third, to the degree that what one grieves or punishes in oneself is pleasure, and that pleasure has an open-ended temporal form, grief itself will partake in that temporal form through the fact that it takes pleasure as its object. Again, on a Gregorian account, suffering will be redeemed *as* pleasure, just as it is the nature of pleasure to become suffering: such conversions are only possible because of that shared form. But, more simply, it will be hard to distinguish penitential grief *from* pleasure, precisely because grief is itself an activity—one whose distinctive pleasures might be in competition with other pleasures, for example, or from which other pleasures might distract one. The very fact that one might feel anger and frustration when interrupted in one's (penitential) grief, for example, speaks to the distinctive pleasure grief takes in continuing to grieve.[41]

On such an account, the scenes from *Piers Plowman* analyzed so far can be further explicated by attending to the tension between the restorative and the perfected accounts of pleasure and/or

[40] Gregory's defense of pastoral commitments, as I understand them, are partly a defense of an ethical model that strongly disrupts the Aristotelian account by setting at the center of ethical activity not contemplation, but a tension between contemplation and pastoral activity which is intrinsically irresolvable, or can at best only be tenuously balanced. See Straw, especially pp.185-6.

[41] For an analysis of the way the pleasure associated with one activity can interrupt the pleasures associated with another, see Book X, chapter 5 of the *Nichomachean Ethics*. That interruptions to one's grieving can be felt in exactly the same way seems to be an indirect proof of the deep relationship binding suffering and enjoyment. See, for example, the discussion of the *Book of the Duchess* in A.O. Fradenburg's *Sacrifice Your Love*, and especially her discussion of Chaucer's *The Book of the Duchess*.

suffering. When the Master of Divinity consumes his endless parade of food, the scene foregrounds his self-satisfied pleasure, and the way his delight takes a frozen, atemporal form, as though delighting in the sheer repetition of dishes. Will's desire in that scene can be read, from the perspective of this excursus, as trying to force the Master of Divinity's pleasure into a restorative form—to turn the "exercise of a capacity," so to speak, into a "coming-to-be," where what "comes to be" *from* the Master's pleasure is pain and penitential suffering. This is what it means to try to think of pleasure as participating in the circuits of a penitential economy: it is to think of it as an activity that is always on its way *towards* something else—and what will become troublesome for such an account is therefore the fantasmatic wholeness and completion pleasure seems to manifest, which is also to say, its resistance to being anything other than it is. But although suffering is thereby imagined as an end-point in the penitential circuits here being described, suffering will be subject to similar dilemmas. We saw how Will's "drynke," made of "dia perserverans," imagined penitential suffering as an ongoing activity that had no further end beyond itself. But the thought that suffering might in this way be a complete or perfected activity (in the specific Aristotelian sense), is also unbearable to Will, as we saw, offering as it does little prospect of comfort or release. The same is true for the penitential loaf, on the first extended reading offered above: if the underlying suffering it contains is untethered from any specifiable cause, there is equally no cause that might bring such penitential feeling to an end. This is registered in the poem in the way the loaf is not pictured as something that one eats a single time, in order to then get back to more pleasurable fare. Instead, the scene imagines that, were Will to be properly ethical, this would become his habitual food and his source of sustenance. The pressure of such a thought is in the way it imagines suffering to be an ordinary activity, one performed for no further reason than for itself, in the same way and for the same reasons that the

Master receives pleasure from the act of eating as such. Taken to its logical endpoint, such a paradigm produces Patience's account of a world in which suffering is equivalent to pleasure—in the sense that it is pictured as the unimpeded exercise of an ethical activity—and in which social forms cluster around suffering in much the same way they ordinarily do around pleasure-making. But the uncanny presence of the beggar in Patience's utopian dreams, like the haunting voices in the loaf, or Will's inability to simply eat his food, suggest that such a view of suffering as a perfected or complete activity is extraordinarily difficult to countenance. In this sense, the second extended reading of the penitential loaf, as outlined above, was not after all *just* a claim about the complex structure of penitential feeling, though that was certainly one key feature of the argument. It was that such a split structure emerges from the conceptual pressure to imagine that suffering must at one and the same time name a form of activity that is characterized by its completion and extended duration *and* name an activity that tends *towards* something or does work *upon* something. In this sense, to think of suffering as a form of "coming-to-be," rather than as a complete and self-sufficient activity, is also to begin interrogating in what sense suffering, in the penitential imaginary, can be pictured as a form of *work*—and to ask what it is that it works *upon*, and what it works towards.

Chapter Four:

Work, Labor, Activity: Articulations of Penance in Passus XIV and XV

Hawkyn and Patience: Restaging the Dialectic

If, as Anne Middleton argued, the episodic structure of William Langland's *Piers Plowman* is built around the oppositional tension between an authority figure and a named second figure, whose first-personal experience cannot be integrated or made legible by the first, then one central interpretive crux of Passus XIII and XIV is how to make sense of the tension between Patience and Hawkyn.[1] Patience is the allegorical figure whose authoritative presence gives the Passus a pedagogical structure; Hawkyn is the contrasting figure whose embodied, incoherent, and socially embedded life makes him a representative of what the poem often wants to think of as "experience." The opposition between authority and experience has led critical exploration of this section of the poem to a set of mirrored claims. On the one hand, critics have endorsed Patience's wholesale attack on the moral turpitude of the middling good, the so-called *mediocriter boni*. On such an account, sinfulness saturates the lives of the average, upwardly striving Christians embedded in late medieval familial, social and commercial circuits of production and reproduction; and it is Hawkyn, as a representative of the "active life"—which is implicitly collapsed into "experience"—who most clearly embodies this nascent, grubby style of sinfulness and self-seeking individuality, one that is incapable of arriving at anything like a virtuous life, at least on its own merits.[2] A countering argument, articulated by critics like Nicholas Watson and Emily Huber, reads Hawkyn's inability to profit from Patience's speech

[1] This argument is articulated in Anne Middleton, "Piers Plowman and the Invention of Experience"—perhaps the single most influential piece of literary criticism in the reading of Langland.
[2] See David Aers' *Community, Gender, and Individual Identity* and John Alford's "The Scriptural Self," in *The Bible in the Middle Ages: Its Influence on Literature and Art*, ed. Bernard S. Levy.

differently. Rather than merely reflecting the material conditions of late medieval England and the limits such conditions place on virtuous behavior—though, on any account of the poem, this is part of what is at stake here—they also take Hawkyn's penitential crisis as emerging from a Langlandian critique of Patience's Franciscan paeans to poverty.[3] In particular, Huber and Watson argue that the burden of the episodes centering on Patience and Hawkyn is to reveal the harsh and demanding moralism lodged in Patience's perfectionist ideals, and the inability of such an ideal to gain traction in a stubbornly commodified world. Langland's critique of Patience's discourse, on this reading, would be part of a larger argument by which the poem demonstrates the lack of fit between a bloated penitential system and changing economic and material realities on the ground; or, in a more sophisticated way, undercuts the idea of a pastoral theology driven from above, defending instead a pastoral theology that emerges "from below."

Alternately idealized and criticized, Patience and Hawkyn would therefore occupy positions that might be mapped according to several familiar binaries: selflessness against self-interest, moral perfectionism against habituated sinfulness, knowledge against ignorance, authority against experience, and pastoral theology from above against pastoral theology from below. But overemphasizing the rigidity with which Hawkyn and Patience embody these polarities threatens to flatten out the aesthetics of a poem whose main aim is to complicate its own allegorical procedures, creating associative chains that cut through and across the very figures supposed to organize and stabilize such oppositions. In other words, an overly neat account of how *conceptual* splits align with the poem's *figural* logic reifies the very terms of analysis that make sense of the relevant oppositions: Patience will inevitably be theological, demanding,

[3] See Emily Rebekah Huber, "Langland's Confessional Distance: Wanhope in *Piers Plowman* B" and Nicholas Watson, "Piers Plowman, Pastoral Theology, and Spiritual Perfectionism: Hawkyn's Cloak and Patience's *Pater Noster*."

moralistic—something that could be said of any number of authority figures in the poem. Hawkyn, like Will, will inevitably appear to be secular, willful, and worldly. "Experience" and "profit" will end up one side of the balance; authority and religion on the other. But even at the figural register of the poem, however, there are reasons to think that Langland is thinking across such a division. It is an oft-noted fact, for example, that Hawkyn and Patience mirror one another in the sartorial attention the poem devotes to them, in their shared marginalization from courtly spaces, and in the caretaker role that makes them each providers of material or spiritual bread. But without a robust conceptual apparatus to make sense of the play of sameness and difference cutting across these figures, such observations will merely collapse back into a framework—Patience's, of course—in which Hawkyn appears as the deficient version of a Christian ideal that remains autonomous and coherent, however poorly that ideal may fit what the poem diagnoses as the conditions of its historical present.

This chapter will seek to both extend and contest some of these accounts of Hawkyn and Patience, and it will do so by attempting to think more carefully about the underlying problem that shapes the movement of this Passus. The crucial claim here is that underlying the problem of *how to be a good penitent* is the problem of *how to conceptualize a form of human activity*—namely, penitential activity: one that is characterized by its distinctive self-referentiality, but that is for all that subject to the philosophical questioning that attends to the *Vita Activa* more generally. In other words, on this account, Langland is committed to analyzing various antinomies that emerge *both* for the forms of secular and/or sinful activity that Hawkyn participates in *and* for the forms of penitential activity that Patience and Conscience call him to. Such antinomies are best characterized as *temporal* antinomies: on the one hand, Langland suggests that enjoyment and the desire for repetition inhere within creaturely activity as such,

distorting the relationship between means and ends in a way that constantly renders both sinner and penitent heteronomous with respect to themselves, and entangled in compulsive forms of activity from which it is difficult to find an escape. On the other hand, acting in the world—again, whether sinfully or penitentially—requires that the relationship between means and ends be stabilized in some way, allowing the human creature to produce something outside of itself, or more strongly yet, to transform both itself and its world, thereby escaping from the endless cycles of empty repetition into which activity as such tends to throw it. Such antinomies produce an impasse for both the sinner and the penitent—a desire to linger in whatever form of activity one is engaged in, simply because it is in the nature of activity to both seek its continuation and to exhibit the contrary desire to bring activity as such to a rest. The mirrored logic of these claims is therefore a way of advancing the argument that in the Middle Ages, the spiritual and the secular terrain are not radically separate, but on the contrary, are mutually articulated, staging many of the same problems and offering each other fantasmatic solutions.

This is why, although in the critical examples that open this chapter penance is imagined as a release from the bad repetitions of grubby, proto-bourgeois life—whether because penance idealistically hovers over a world that can no longer respond adequately to its demands, or because penance summons the mercantile world into a form of ethical behavior that remains a live possibility—the claim in this chapter is instead that penance is a privileged site to examine the antinomies that pervade the sphere of the *Vita Activa*. In the previous two chapters the central topic was the peculiar quality of penitential suffering; if there is one claim that emerged from that discussion, it is that penance valorizes human suffering and seeks to give it a penitential form, even as it also declares its aim to be the release of the penitent from that selfsame suffering. This antinomy is central to penance, giving it a distinctive form of self-reflexivity

which this dissertation has tried to approach by deploying Aristotelian categories. Penitential activity, as Aquinas puts it, takes "human acts" as its "matter," and so the Aristotelian cleavage between form and matter becomes a way of conceptualizing the double binds of penitential suffering by imagining that one type of suffering activity—penance—acts upon the suffering that pervades everyday life in a way analogous to the way the maker of bronze spheres acts upon bronze, or the house-maker acts upon bricks. As we saw in the discussion of Will's bitter loaf, such an account suggests that the suffering of the penitent is *not*, for all its strictures, an independently defined, abstract, contentless, or ahistorical affect—suffering is neither an empty formalism nor a *prima materia*, even if both of these are operative fantasies that inevitably attach to the penitential imaginary. But whereas in earlier chapters the problem was staged by the poem itself as a problem of the *substance* of suffering, in this chapter, the language of form and matter will give way to more dynamic terms—capacity, activity, labor, and work. After all, if the activity of doing penance consists of forming or giving shape to human acts, and these acts can be said to be the proximate matter *for* the activity of the penitent, then no easy split between form and matter, understood along the model of the wooden threshold or the bronzen sphere, will provide an adequate explanation for the antinomies that concern us.

Rather, one might start to see that penitential activity operates in several stages, the first of which is the recognition that suffering permeates human activity, and is lodged even within activities that are intuitively recognized as deeply pleasurable. Such suffering is only legible *as* suffering, therefore, *from* the point of view of the penitent who is already attempting to give his activity a redemptive form, and does so by making suffering do a certain kind of work—or better yet, by making suffering become legible *as* work, where that work consists of unmaking both the causes and the effects of suffering itself. Suffering, if it is to function penitentially, must have the

power to transform itself through its negation—to be, in this sense, a form of "coming-to-be" rather than the expression of a capacity; and therefore, an activity with an end outside of itself, the way house-building is an activity that does not eternally seek to be building, but rather pursues its own disappearance through the construction of the house. But to the degree that suffering is also, inevitably, an activity in its own right, and one that is celebrated as an end-in-itself by theologians and preachers ranging from Gregory the Great to Peter Lombard, penitential suffering will inevitably be haunted by the very stubborn, fruitless, non-productive, and repetitive forms of suffering that the penitent might think of as properly associated with sin, or with "bad" or "unfruitful" penance. How to understand the relationship between fruitful and unfruitful penance—what will increasingly become legible as a split, within penance itself, between suffering conceived of as (fruitful) work, and suffering conceived of as (fruitless) labor—is the question that concerns us. As we shall see, this will entail not just a shift in conceptual terrain, but also a shift in the scale of the inquiry, as Langland tries to derive insights about penitential activity from an interrogation into human activity as such—what is described in the poem as *Vita Activa* in general—and then uses those insights to make larger claims about the component urges that give rise to the penitential drive and organize its imaginary resolutions.

The Problem of Idleness

In the previous chapter, it remained an unsettled question how the poem conceives of the "human acts" that might register as the "matter" for the formalizing activities of penance, in accordance with the Aquinean argument that "in the sacrament of Penance, human acts take the place of matter" (ST III a1). Consider, in this respect, the way Hawkyn first makes his appearance, midway through Passus XIII. Introduced as a "mynstral," Hawkyn claims the title of "wafrer" and gives his name as "Activa Vita," though he also declares himself to be "Hawkyn."

This proliferation of names and titles already threatens this figure with incoherence, but Hawkyn's discourse gains a certain unity from its polemical thrust: what Hawkyn hates most, he says, is "ydlelnesse," and those who most represent idleness to him are other minstrels.[4] As this invective starts to gain steam, we get a sense of what Hawkyn takes idleness to mean:

> Couthe I lye and do men laughe, thanne lacchen I sholde
> Outher mantel or moneie amonges lordes mynstrals.
> Ac for I kan neither taboure ne trompe ne telle no gestes,
> Farten ne fithelen at festes, ne harpen,
> Jape ne jogele ne gentilliche pipe,
> Ne neither saille ne saute ne synge with the gyterne,
> I have no goode giftes of thise grete lordes
> For no breed that I brynge forth (XIII, 229-36).

Minstrels are representatives of a world that does not change, however much frenetic activity ripples through it—fiddling, playing harps, making japes, juggling, playing the guitar, or even farting. In stark contrast to bread-making, these activities produce no durable, material *thing*—and because they are putatively immaterial, they are also, on such a view, strangely commensurable. Fiddling is not essentially any different than farting, an equivalence Hawkyn supports by pointing to an economy in which minstrels are paid in "goode giftes" and money, but from which Hawkyn's own "bringing forth" of bread is excluded. Payment does powerful work in this ideological attack on idleness, since Hawkyn's complaint against the idle is predicated on the idea that the minstrels' activities have no proper end beyond the extrinsic (and therefore unpredictable) aim of making lords laugh (XIII, 229). The lack of an intrinsic or natural end leads Hawkyn to engage in some rhetorical sleight of hand: after all, fiddling, harping, japing and so on *are* goal-directed in some way, but on a standard Aristotelian account, the *enjoyment* that is

[4] Michael Uebel and Kellie Robertson cite Thomas Aquinas on the fourfould ends of labor: "First and principally, to obtain food… Secondly, it is directed to the removal of idleness… Thirdly, it is directed to the curbing of concupiscence… Fourthly, it is directed to almsgiving" (in *CL*, 4). This characterization already points to the ways in which Hawkyn will be characterized by Langland in such a way as to invoke and trouble distinctions between labor and work.

produced by such activities is in principle interminable.[5] Collapsing these activities with the pleasure they produce, Hawkyn's argument implies that what is troublesome about idle forms of activity is that it is in their nature to seek their own continuation, which is how they are legible as idleness *rather than* as work. The laughter of the lords, the exchange of gifts, and the promise of "moneie" all bring such activities to a temporary resting point; but such ends, which are extrinsic to the pursuit of pleasure that makes these activities be what they are, merely underscore the overall insubstantiality and vacuity of courtly pursuits—and by extension, the vacuity of the secular world more generally.

Hawkyn's rant against idleness may be read as evidence of his falsehood and hypocrisy: after all, the poem will linger in detail on all the ways in which Hawkyn is not merely idle, false-tongued, and deceitful, but also entangled in an economic milieu in which he obsessively seeks to make profit. But I believe we ought to take seriously the anxiety that seems to press in on Hawkyn—an anxiety that is polemicized as "idleness," but that presses in on vaguer difficulties about how to turn processes that remain invisible and immaterial into something tangible, or again, how to bring closure to forms of activity that seem capable of stretching indefinitely into the future. This anxiety is particularly legible in the register of commodified entertainment and exchange, but it is more than that, too. For Hawkyn, making bread is a sign of moral goodness and other-directed feeling; and this is partly because, unlike fiddling, "bringing forth" bread is an activity with an intrinsic and determinate end, one that is both socially necessary (the people of

[5] See Aristotle's Nichomachean Ethics VII 1153a7-15, for his characterization of pleasure as the unimpeded activity of a natural state. Candace Vogler's *Reasonably Vicious* has helped me see in what sense pleasure can give an agent "interminable" reasons for acting. On her account, "you can have a further goal in view [when you act], or you can have in view… how the end fits with an established pattern of some sort, or you can have in view what you are here and now doing, not primarily with a view towards the future, but just because what you are here and now doing is delightful or satisfying" (Vogler, 42-3). Pleasure-centered reasons for acting seek merely to extend their own activity. See also Aryeh Kosman's *The Activity of Being* for a rather different defense of Aristotelian intuitions about activity, including the "unimpeded activity" of the unmoved mover itself.

London, says Hawkyn, depend on him for their sustenance) and dictated by natural necessity (people must eat, somehow). Because bread-making is end-directed, it can be both defined against and differentiated from pleasure-seeking activities whose distinctive marker is precisely to lack a definite end; for the same reason, it can also be separated from the purchasing or consumption of that same bread—consumption being an activity from which Hawkyn especially wants to distance himself. After all, consumption is, in Hawkyn's view, a site of pleasure, whereas the production of commodities is the support for deeply-held fantasies of ethical suffering: "For ere I have breed of mele, ofte moot I swete," he says, "And er the commune have corn ynough many a cold morwenyng; / So, er my wafres be ywrought, muche wo I tholye" (XIII 261-3). Such a description is a marker of a post-Lapsarian cluster of assumptions about labor: labor is marked by "wo" and suffering; such suffering is justified through labor; and vice versa, suffering renders laboring an ethically salutary activity, in contrast to the pleasure-seeking activities of the idle and the wealthy. But Hawkyn's descriptions of his own bread-making suggest that, in addition to these familiar Christian claims, other assumptions are also at play, which sit uncomfortably next to the earlier ones. Namely: that in a world of idleness, work that is ethically defensible must have a clear and specifiable end; that such work is praiseworthy when directed towards the production of goods; that productive activity can be sharply distinguished from the activity of consumption; and, finally, that such work has the felicitous outcome of objectifying and transforming "woe" in the making of a public and externally subsisting commodity, the "wafres."

The Ends of Profit and the Unraveling of Sovereignty

When Hawkyn seeks to justify himself to the allegorical figures that have crossed his path, his opening gambit therefore consists in idealizing his own productive activity, on the basis of its

resistance to the abstract, vapid, and pleasure-laden forms of activity he thinks of as "idleness." Hawkyn's account of himself as ethical bread-maker almost immediately falls apart under the moralizing gaze of Conscience, Patience, and Will—it is unclear, by the end of the Passus, that bread-making is even the best way of describing Hawkyn's way of earning his livelihood—but the underlying assumptions about activity and idleness continue to structure some of Langland's deepest thoughts about penance in this Passus. That argument, however, requires a more granular account of Hawkyn's moral collapse, because it is in and through this collapse that the boundary between activity and idleness is increasingly destabilized within the poem. Thus, when we first encounter Hawkyn, he is a figure consumed with fantasies of autonomy: he is alone and above others, "inobedient," "singular by himself" (XIII 282-3). The dream of sovereign subjectivity is all-encompassing—it spans social, moral, and aesthetic domains, there being "noon so holy as he ne of life clennere, / Of feirest of features, of forme and of shafte" (XIII, 297). But this hygienic and aestheticized account of a "clennere" life, fair in "forme," occludes and legitimizes a wide array of troubled desires, affects and behaviors, which Hawkyn comes to understand as expressions of an overwhelming drive for money and mastery. Bread-making is not safe from this developing critique—Hawkyn adulterates and sells his bread using false measures (XIII, 362). But even bread-making starts to fade into the background, as Hawkyn describes the ever-widening vortex of activity within which he is enmeshed. In addition to making "wafres," Hawkyn works the plow, lends out money, and sends servants to Prussia to make profit from unequal exchange rates. Increasingly, the proliferation of incommensurable styles of working and living makes it difficult to distinguish means and ends, what is intrinsic to a given activity from what is extrinsic to it, or what counts as sinful idleness from what counts as productive work. This indeterminacy becomes even more insidious as abstraction begins to invade

Hawkyn's own language, and the bread and wafers are slowly replaced with more fungible terms: "werkes" (XIII, 351), "marchaundise" (XII, 362), "*an* hyne, or *any* beest ellis" (XIII, 364, itallics mine), "good" (as in "goods," XIII, 372), and chaffare (XIII, 380). Hawkyn speaks about his neighbors—the people whom he cheats and steals from—but here, too, he does so by generalizing to *any* neighbor whatsoever, and these instances are frequently phrased as conditionals: "*if* my neighbor had an hyne…" (XIII, 364); "*if* I yede to the plowgh… of my nexte neghebore" (XIII, 370-2), "whose chepped my chaffare…" (XIII, 380). The world that emerges for Hawkyn is at once cluttered and vacant: it is a space where Hawkyn is continually projecting his desire outwards—towards other people's fields, their clothing, their bodies—but where the objects upon which his desire fixates are weirdly absent, ready at any moment to become generic or hypothetical.

There is a material and economic dimension to the problems the poem is addressing, but it is not *just* that Hawkyn inhabits a world where a burgeoning profit economy makes everything that is solid melt into air. What is at stake for Langland, rather, is a deeper breakdown in the logical form of action itself: the activities Hawkyn is embarked upon, which on his own account are increasingly independent of their objects, also stretch beyond their natural ends; and this makes the boundaries between different types of action difficult to parse. Not even the profit motive offers Hawkyn a conceptual anchor: he cheats, lies, and has sex during Lent; he gossips and takes pleasure in his neighbors' troubles; and he actively avoids going to church (XIII, 356-96). Only intermittently do such behaviors remain tethered, however loosely, to money: just as often, Hawkyn's frenetic activity derives its enjoyment from its own unceasing movement, which is

also to say, from the refusal to subordinate itself to any particular end at all.[6] This is why the obverse side of Hawkyn's manic and enjoyment-laden activity is "malencolie," understood here as the experience in which the fantasy of sovereign action and end-oriented activity dissolves into the processual relays of everyday life.[7] At the local level, Hawkyn continues to use his "gile" to get what he wants—he picks purses and unpicks locks (XIII, 368); he adds to his farmland (XIII, 372); he sells his "chaffare" (XIII, 382)—but even the success of such endeavors seems to reveal the underlying vacuity of action itself. No particular end or activity sticks to Hawkyn. Instead, his endless pursuits underscore his dependence on a world that is so incoherent and unstructured that even time itself loses its shape ("all tymes [were] yliche," says the poem, at XIII, 350). Generalizing to the allegorical register, the poem suggests that, despite working frantically to secure fantasies of autonomy, the *Activa Vita* cannot rule itself in such a way as to attain mastery over its conditions or the world it inhabits. Articulations of means and ends are necessary to Hawkyn's being able to live in the world; so is Hawkyn's understanding of himself as an agent. But the one thing that Hawkyn's activity cannot do is lead to a cessation of acting itself—and because activity is what continually throws Hawkyn outside of himself and past any particular end which might serve as a resting-point, his life is continually rendered heteronomous through the very engagement with the world that creates within him the desire for autonomy in the first place. Nor is such a breakdown in the form of action as such characteristic of virtuous activity alone—it also threatens the coherence of specific instances of evil-doing, like lock-picking or stealing. In each such case, although it feels like a revelation for Hawkyn to

[6] The intuition moving through such an account is indebted to psychoanalytic theories of the drive, but the concluding thoughts of the previous chapter suggest that at stake here is also an Aristotelian derivation of pleasure in terms of constant and unceasing activity. Such an idea is most forcefully articulated in the *Metaphysics*, Book XII.
[7] For contemporary investigations of the close ties between melancholy and frantic activity, see Sianne Ngai's discussions of the "zany" in *Our Aesthetic Categories* and Ann Cvetovich's *Depression: A Public Feeling*.

understand that vicious and self-serving ends are structuring his fantasies of a virtuous self, the deeper issue remains untouched: vicious ends are no more capable of organizing and containing Hawkyn's life within stable limits than are the virtuous ones to which he had initially laid claim.

Although the antinomies the poem describes apply to action in general, regardless of its virtuous or vicious orientation, there is another and more profound moralism baked into this account of how the category of activity becomes increasingly undone. If the entropic tendency of the active life leads Hawkyn to confront the dissolution of what is "fair" in "forme," formlessness typifies a style of moral failure that is not reducible to acting for the wrong ends or with the wrong reasons. As we have seen, it is the dissolution of the *form* of action itself that Hawkyn at once confronts and disavows, castigating as "idleness" that which he *feels*, from the inside, as "malencolie."[8] But formlessness threatens Hawkyn in yet another sense: the frenetic and disorganized activity that characterizes his labor also marks his discourse, making the introspective activity of self-analysis that is meant to redeem his life legible as yet another instance of enjoyment-laden and melancholic repetition. Such a paradox will be examined in detail in the following section of the chapter; for now, it is worth emphasizing how the threat posed by the loss of a well-formed life leads, paradoxically, to a retrenchment of the fantasies of sovereignty that are both a symptom of this dissolution in form and an attempt to defend the active life against such a threat. Hawkyn's speech surely enacts a desire to succumb once and for all to wanhope—a condition we might describe here as a desire to abandon the fantasies of sovereignty *tout court* and to give oneself over completely to the rhythms of ordinary life, no

[8] The great antagonists in *Piers Plowman*—"mesureless" Mede from Passus II, the grotesquely embodied Sins from Passus V, and the Antichrist who in "mannes forme" seeks to unmake the institutions of Holy Church in Passus XX—are all in some way figures that threaten the poem with formlessness. This in contrast to God, for example, who is repeatedly associated in the poem with forming and shaping. See, for example, Passus XVII: "So is the Fader a ful God, formour and shappere— / *Tu fabricator omnium*… / And al the might myd hym is in the makynge of thynges" (XVII, 168-70).

matter how corrupted. But the poem also makes such wanhope the obverse side of the retrenchment of the desire for sovereignty: to surrender to despair, on this account, is to preserve the fantasy of a self-contained and sovereign subjectivity that is available in some other scene, for some other subject, so long as it is not oneself.[9] Such a fantasy, we shall see, is condensed in Hawkyn's aesthetically charged coat, which interpellates Hawkyn by summoning for him a vision of the virtuous life from which he is irrevocably excluded.

On the other hand, although the poem shows how wanhope captures Hawkyn into acquiescing to the catastrophic collapse of action, the poem remains invested in the potential and promise nested in the evacuation of these fantasies of a clean and well-formed life. There is for Langland a degree of optimism lodged in the unraveling of action; which is to also to say, in undercutting the strict divide between producer and consumer, worker and idler, sufferer and pleasure-seeker, just as there is hope lodged in the abandonment of Hawkyn's desire to be "an ordre by hymselve" (XIII, 285). In this sense, even though Hawkyn is one of the paradigmatic sinners in *Piers Plowman*, the same collapse that leads him to wanhope also allows the poem to stage the rich backdrop of attachments against which creaturely activity in general takes place. Hawkyn's is a world that cannot help but be laden with promise, even if this promise emerges in the form of the bad and incoherent desires that draw him back towards despair. If the scene therefore makes visible the pull of the world upon the *Vita Activa*, the stickiness of these attachments is also evidence of the pleasures invested in the work of repeatedly and heroically renouncing that world; and this suggests that moral energy is produced in and through the collapse of these fantasies—a masochistic excitation that is heightened precisely because the poem has done so

[9] See Patchen Markell, *Bound by Recognition*, esp. Chap 4, "The Abdication of Independence," pp. 90-124. Mark Miller's discussion of the Miller's Tale, in *Philosophical Chaucer*, has also been influential in my reading of the complex dialectic between sovereignty and abjection.

much to demonstrate the depth and power of the entanglements that bind Hawkyn to the world, even when such ties are only legible to him in the form of wanhope itself.[10] This is not to say that the only thing Hawkyn is doing in this Passus is recouping the shards of lost sovereignty into yet another reiteration of a fantasy of the "well-formed life." Rather, Hawkyn dramatizes a structural ambivalence that emerges for the sort of creature for whom being is necessarily to be *in activity,* revealing how it is action itself that erodes the fantasies of sovereignty upon which the agent nevertheless depends.[11] If the slow unmaking of the rigidified image of virtuous living threatens to submerge Hawkyn in melancholy—or idleness, or sloth—such a process is also, at least *in potentia,* an ethical attainment, and part of what the poem wants to think of as incipiently penitential activity. More tentatively, and following the trail of the previous chapter's examination of form and matter distinctions, Hawkyn's unraveling offers its own fantasmatic lure: namely, the idea that the breakdown of Hawkyn's fantasies of sovereignty are a precondition for the active life as such to be subsumed *as* proximate matter for the form-inducing activity of penance, whatever that form of activity may entail.

Weak and Strong Penance: "Making Sorrow," Feeling Shame

That Hawkyn never arrives at a successful way of giving shape, in speech or in action, to this life eroded by the presence of sin and suffering, is why he is a figure of such interest to the poem.[12] More so even than the other figures from *Piers Plowman* examined in earlier chapters,

[10] A.O. Fradenburg's *Sacrifice your Love* has diagnosed such a dialectic of sovereignty and melancholy under the rubric of "sacrifice."
[11] See Aryeh Kosman, *The Activity of Being,* for a vast expansion of the underlying argument that to be, for the living being, is to be in activity.
[12] In "Genre Flailing," an essay published in *Capacious*: *Journal for Emerging Affect Inquiry (12),* Lauren Berlant has described "genre flailing" as a response to a crisis that shakes the subject's confidence in how to move through the world, and has argued that such a response can be "fabulously unimaginative" as often as it can be "wildly inventive." The category is a useful one for thinking about how and why "bad penitents" like Hawkyn are such a topic of interest for Langland.

Hawkyn is a bad penitent—in part because, unlike Will or the Master of Divinity, he at least intermittently tries to be a good one. Such an account, however, requires a more granular description of how "penance" can be said to be operative in this stretch of the poem, and in particular, what makes Hawkyn's speech legible *as* penitential speech. After all, in giving an account of his life, Hawkyn boasts and preens in ways that are indistinguishable from confessional self-accounting, and there is pleasure invested in these accounts of the suffering he causes to others and the suffering he himself feels. His speech circles obsessively around the first person: "There is no lif that I lovye… I cache the crampe…. Goddes word gaf me nevere boote…" (XIII, 332 -39). As we have started to see, this suggests that Hawkyn is narcissistically caught in a never-ending litany of offences, extracting pleasure from the repeated undoing of the fantasies of the "well-formed life."[13] But that still does little to show how ambivalence structures the peculiar forms of penitential activity in this poem; and much depends on how one reads the tone, rather than the articulable content, of what Hawkyn says. When he claims, for example, not just that "the worste withinne was," but that such badness was a matter of "greet wit," (XIII, 363), the poem keeps open various interpretive possibilities: namely, that this is a case of perverse boasting, that Hawkyn is consumed with shame, *and also* that Hawkyn is merely describing the conditions that have led him to become the person he is. Such tonal ambiguity is important to the Passus: it matters, conceptually speaking, that the desire to do penance—which is to say, the desire to give shape to a life understood as ravaged by sin—is in the first instance made up of a diversity of component drives, some of which seek to linger in melancholic

[13] Huber again is a representative example: "His delay in performing penance and works of mercy results from a refusal to engage with the emotional commitments of spiritual reform: mourning and making sorrow. This avoidance behaviour compounds his spiritual ill-health, as anger usurps contrition's rightful place" (95). Watson, similarly, says "But we have known since B.5 that the sacrament of confession, though vital, does not of itself transform penitents, but merely readies them for a life of virtue" (112).

rumination; others which seek to escape suffering entirely; others which enact the narcissistic urge to recover, rather than dispense with, the fantasy of a clean and fair-formed life.[14] The characteristic mark of penance in the full sense, on this account, would be its ability to give such disassembled drives an order and direction, articulating these forms of sensibility into something recognizable as *penitential* longing, which would then guide Hawkyn towards the purgation of sin.

The problem this Passus reveals, however, is that the dissolution of the boundaries between idleness and activity make any such penitential project hard to consolidate; and that dissolution, as we have seen, is predicated on the incoherence of the category of action itself.-To see how this insight inflects standard readings of the poem, consider once more the argument with which this chapter began: namely, that the episodic form of *Piers Plowman* allows Langland to analyze splits between (religious) authority and (secular) experience by mapping categories onto specific figures. That general reading would suggest that, in this Passus, allegorical figures aligned with theological and pastoral authority—Patience and Conscience—attempt to give shape to Hawkyn's fragmented experiences and inchoate strivings. In contrast, Hawkyn would be allegorizing the messy world of experience, suffering, and unregulated desire, one which requires the intervention of Conscience and Patience in order to be legible *as* the expression of a univocal penitential drive. Hawkyn's affects and experiences would in this sense be the underlying matter upon which penance does its work, and the figural logic of the poem would be staging a specifically penitential version of the dialectic that operates elsewhere in the poem under the names "authority" and "experience."[15] Such a picture would capture important

[14] See Sigmund Freud's description of component or partial drives in the essay on Infantile Sexuality in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, especially pp. 191-3. The idea that there is a set of diverse, anarchic, polymorphous instincts that are ordered by the penitent entering into *penitential* life is the main intuition here.
[15] See Middleton, "Narration and the Invention of Experience," pp. 100-1.

elements of this Passus: Hawkyn *does* give voice to a breathless rush towards what we might think of as "experience," picturing in language a world whose lineaments can only be made intelligible through first-person descriptions of "what I suffrede and seigh and somtymes hadde, / What I kouthe and knew, and what kyn I com of" (XIII 310-1). But this is also a troubled distinction, as witnessed by the continuing presence of Will—elsewhere in the poem a figure for "experience," but here someone who walks in the company of Patience and Conscience. Slippages in narrative perspective further undercut the ease with which one can map these concepts to this episode: Will, Conscience and Patience are the observers who see in Hawkyn's tattered appearance the sins that organize and disorganize Hawkyn's life, but Hawkyn is himself well aware of what he looks like, "bihynde and before" (XIII 316). Most significantly, Hawkyn's speech enacts the confused phenomenology of sin in the same moment that it also seeks to taxonomize the several permutations of moral failure. Rather than reifying "experience" in opposition to "authority," then, Hawkyn's inability to give penitential form to his narrative draws attention to the strangeness of the category of experience as such—and, in particular, to the intractable difficulties Hawkyn confronts as he searches for a way to create limits and boundaries around the viciousness that everywhere seems to mark his encounters with the world.

Consider the brief discussion of lechery that emerges in this Passus. The poem begins by invoking a visceral sense of revulsion and disgust that is lodged in the concrete sensations of the body: Hawkyn, Langland says, "began taste / Aboute the mouth or binethe bigynneth to grope" every "maide that he mette" (XIII 345-7). Bodies are disarticulated—mouths move independently from their owners, boundaries are overruled, tasting and groping become indiscernible. In the ugliness of the phrase "began taste," in particular, the poem starts to approximate a singular event of grotesque sexuality that even in this gestural sketch feels

unpleasant to the point of being unbearable. But at the same time, in the disjunctive logic of tasting *or* groping the poem already starts to shift attention away from the description of any particular event of lechery, getting caught up instead in the attempt to capture the general form of lecherous activity as it extends beyond any single action. The poem's rhetorical strategies foreground habitual patterns of behavior—hence the fungibility and anonymity of the women, the narrative restlessness that both summons and discards individual anecdotes, and the repeated use of hypotheticals. These strategies depend on an underlying logic of exemplarity, but paradoxically, they also make it increasingly difficult for that logic to function adequately, as each episode loses its consistency and the narrative as a whole becomes permeated with abstraction. There is in the poem's account of Hawkyn neither an Edenic fall nor a primal scene reminiscent of the Augustinian stealing of pears—no singular event that might help either Hawkyn or his interlocutors locate an origin point and clarifying instance through which to analyze the interplay of intention and action that gives rise to sin. Nor is there, for all the attention to the rhetoric of sinfulness, any deep thought about moral psychology that might show how different sins might become mutually imbricated. Hawkyn's anecdotes are instead erratic and meandering, appealing to the particular even as they flee from any deeper engagement with these scenes of moral failure. Hawkyn does not follow penitential formulae; he makes no attempt to articulate how different categories of sin are related to one another, and he generally avoids giving *reasons* for action. From the strong penitential view, Hawkyn's confessional speech therefore appears stubbornly infelicitous, drawing attention not to any particular sinful action, but rather to the ongoing *capacity* to sin that seems to pervade the entire sphere of activity within which Hawkyn lives his life. Indeed, Hawkyn seems endlessly fascinated with this capacity—his awareness of it is what makes his speech seesaw so wildly between sorrow and boastfulness—

even as this capacity is evidently what is driving the *production* of this very same infelicitous speech. On Hawkyn's own reading, his life of sin is significant only insofar as it reveals the bottomless capacity to sin that drives Hawkyn's activity; as such, that capacity becomes increasingly legible within the poem as that which no amount of penitential remorse can destroy or undo.

If Hawkyn can therefore be read as embarked upon a style of weakly penitential retrospection, this is not because Hawkyn feels a minor or qualified version of the suffering and remorse that assails more successful penitents. On the contrary, Hawkyn (like the Deadly Sins before him) is often swamped by difficult emotions; and calling what he does "weak penance" is meant to suggest merely that the ugly feelings that sin produces in him, and which in some alternate world might help him embark on the path to successful penance, are stubbornly resistant to becoming subsumed into the teleological forms of penance proper.[16] We have started to see why this might be so: Hawkyn's incipiently penitential activity can make no clear distinctions between possessing the capacity to sin and being engaged in the activity of sinning, or indeed, between acting in the world at all; as a consequence, the line between sinning and penance is also continuously eroded. Although the missing supplement in Hawkyn's ruminations is often taken by the allegorical figures in this Passus to be some missing element in an endless taxonomy of sins—some hitherto ignored instance of covetousness or pride—Hawkyn's confessionalism can only ever confirm his badness, making his affects and his actions increasingly illegible to the penitential apparatus that produces his confessional display. These antinomies are visible in one of the more frequently cited passages in the Passus—a virtuosic speech about sloth and sin that is

[16] The term "ugly feelings" comes from Sianne Ngai's *Ugly Feelings*—her Introduction and Chapter 3, on envy, have proven particularly relevant to the discussion of penance in this chapter. Also helpful is Theresa Brennan's *The Transmission of Affect*—in particular, Chapter 5, where Brennan seeks to describe sins in terms of the affects.

spoken in the authorial voice, at the end of the long verbal exchange between Hawkyn and his allegorical interlocutors:

> Ac whiche ben the braunches that bryngen a man to sleuthe?
> Is whan a man moorneth nought for hise mysdedes, ne maketh no sorwe,
> Ac penaunce that the preest enjoyneth parfourneth yvele,
> Dooth non almsdede, dred hym of no synne,
> Lyveth ayein the bileve and no lawe holdeth…
> Thise been the braunches, beth war! That bryngen a man to wanhope (XIII 410-14).

Such a structure is purely formal: it is a generic "man" whose "mysdedes" (in the plural, and irrespective of qualitative differences between them) ought to be mourned with one and the same generic "sorrow." Only so does private remorse aspire to the condition of a public affect, and become penitential in any full sense—which is also to say, only in becoming formalized does mourning become legible as the kind of fruitful or productive work that leaves sin behind; and more strongly, only so does suffering become legible as "making sorrow." But at that moment, the rhetorical trap has snapped shut: to the degree that "a man"—Hawkyn, say—does not participate in the social forms as they are here described and prescribed, that "man" is taken to neither mourn "ne maketh no sorwe" at all. Hawkyn, on this strong penitential reading, does not feel the right affects *because* he does not express his feelings within the properly penitential social forms; and as a corollary, whatever Hawkyn *does* feel, it cannot be penitential feeling, because whatever remains illegible to the penitential apparatus does not attain the condition of mourning or sorrow at all. Such a maneuver does not merely blot out Hawkyn's interior life: it also simplifies the penitential urge as such, stripping it of its complex inner articulations and reducing the work of sorrow to the expression of a monolithic and purely negative drive that need not grapple with its own ambivalent ties to sin.[17] What is lost is the slipperiness of

[17] This is not to say that the penitential drives do not finally negate the subject—there is very clearly a death drive lodged within any penitential activity at all, and that finally characterizes it *as* penitential. This is evident in the language theologians from Paul to Gratian use, for example, to speak of penance as a kind of return to life that slays

Hawkyn's own first-person descriptions of sinfulness—the way sin refuses to be contained within the boundaries one would want to impose upon it, threatening to absorb in its maw the very activity of the penitent who would separate themself from sin.

This is why, in contrast to the strong penitential reading, this chapter suggests that Hawkyn's confessionalism is penitential in a weak sense, where the thought is that he does feel both sorrow and remorse, but that he cannot finally delaminate the repetitions of sin from the repetitions of penance. In the previous chapter we saw how, for a figure like Will, the impossibility of entering into the penitential symbolic is a source of alienation and resentment, and forecloses any first-person account of where Will might have gone wrong; here, in contrast, Hawkyn's mourning is everywhere marked by shame, where shame does not name something secretive and interior so much as it does a way of coping with the past that is set against normative styles of "making sorrow."[18] It is worth quoting, in this respect, a statement from Aquinas on the difference between penance and shame:

> Penance is a virtue, according as it includes a right choice on the part of the will; which, however, applies to penance rather than to shame. Because shame regards the evil deed as present, whereas penance regards the evil deed as past. Now it is contrary to the perfection of virtue that one should have an evil deed actually present, of which one ought to be ashamed" (ST III a1).

The argument that the "evil deed" ought to dissolve into the past is one way of making sense of how Hawkyn's mourning and sorrow fail to attain the condition of Aquinean penitential virtue.

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the deathly existence one had been living before. Rather the point here is that the negativity of the penitential drive, like the death drive itself, is better inferred than observed, precisely because it is embedded in a network of attachments and desires that cannot be simply bracketed in order to access the pure negativity of the drive.

[18] A standard reference, in this respect, is Eve Sedgwick's use of Silvan Tomkins' definition of shame as interrupted interest. In a passage from *Shame and Its Sisters* that Aquinas would perhaps find useful—precisely in the way it provides a contrast to the penitential "virtue" Aquinas is interested in—Tomkins suggests that shame "operates only after interest or enjoyment has been activated, and inhibits one or the other or both. The innate activator of shame is the *incomplete* reduction of interest or joy" (*Shame*, 135, emphasis mine). For a discussion of a different scene in the poem where "shame" marks Will's response to Dame Studie, see Spencer Strubb, "Learning from Shame," *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 32 (2018): 37-75.

Hawkyn's verbal slippages between the particular and the generic, and between activity and potentiality, prevent his attachments from being fully negated; or again, Hawkyn's "evil deeds" continue to interpellate him in the "actual present" from which he speaks. In fact, Aquinas' account anticipates the mention of "shame" at the end of Passus XIV, where, incapable of extracting himself from the penitential antinomies we have been analyzing, Hawkyn renounces his clothing "save for shame one / to covere my careyne" (XIV, 350-1). Shame is on Hawkyn's final account the layer of cloth that finally points back to an always unfinished form of reckoning in which the past cannot ever register simply as past. But more than asking whether the "evil deed" is past or present, the question throughout this Passus is how to make an "evil deed" independent enough from the surrounding matrix of activity for it to be imagined, in the singular, as *deed*, and thereby, for it to be legible as a *past* deed. Without that reification of activity, Hawkyn will by necessity have to repent of his entire life, a life that is so permeated with abstraction, repetition, and the confusing intertwining of means and ends that its sinfulness starts to seem equivalent to activity as such.

"Weak penance," to sum up the thrust of the argument so far, does not elide or avoid whatever theologically powerful affects (like regret, or mourning, or guilt) inhere in what has been described as "strong" penance. The relevant difference is not one of sincerity or depth of emotion—on the contrary, the *in*ability to make an evil deed recede into the past may only intensify feelings of regret—nor is the distinction legible in terms of what Aquinas calls "a right choice on the part of the will." The problem posed by this Passus is instead about the temporal form actions and speech must have in order for the will to so much as be able to "regard" the evil deed as past in the first place. We have seen how penance in the full sense, as imagined by Conscience and Patience, is meant to finally displace and render invisible the inner tensions of

Hawkyn's "weak" penitential activity; and that it does so by substituting the cyclical and seemingly endless labor of melancholic suffering with the formalized work of penance, pinning the "evil deed" into the past by regimenting time according to the authoritative distinctions of contrition, confession and satisfaction (XIV 16-34). But if Conscience and Patience imagine Hawkyn's remorse as in some sense a *preamble* to a teleological account of penitential activity which for them is characteristic of penance as such, the contradiction staged by this Passus is not less difficult to navigate, since Hawkyn's melancholic suffering is marked by the inability to partition the present from the past, sin from penance, or the singular "evil deed" from the wider terrain of activity within which creaturely life takes place. The point is not that Conscience and Patience's project is misguided: on the contrary, a demand for further (penitential) articulation is everywhere expressed in Hawkyn's own complaints, and not merely in the content of what he says, but in the very fact that the anecdotes he chooses to tell are already exemplary cases of suffering and "dedly synne" (XIII, 388). What binds together Hawkyn's anecdotes is the fantasy that all these anecdotes involve suffering or causing suffering in another—but absent a richer account of sin, such anecdotes are liable to become mere elements in a list of moral badness, where what binds all of them together, in the last instance, is Hawkyn's bottomless capacity for (abstract) sin.[19] If that abstract and featureless capacity is all that links together lechery, greed, or covetousness, Conscience and Patience's probing interrogation will forever keep Hawkyn frantically producing speech *for* Conscience and Patience, under the assumption that speaking in this way will finally allow weak penance to give way to penance in the strong sense. But such a process, as it emerges in this Passus, has no intrinsic limits at all: Hawkyn will instead be caught

[19] The thought that a blinkered focus on particularity is itself an abstract form of sensibility comes from Hegel, but one might also, in the specifically moral terrain, think of Bernard Williams' focus on thick vs thin ethical concepts. For a defense of such thick concepts, see Bernard Williams' *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy.*

in an alienating form of activity, one in which he is subject to a struggle for recognition—starting and stopping not on the basis of his own ends, but at the whim and pleasure of the interlocutors upon whose continued acknowledgment his speech depends.[20] Lacking an internal sense of when or where to bring his confessional narration to a halt, Hawkyn's sorrow-laden speech will therefore circle endlessly upon itself, tracking the ordinary transformations of one kind of sin into another without finding a resting-point or a stable end that might allow him to escape the entanglements of sin and suffering.

Penitential Activity as Work and/or Labor (An Excursus on Arendt)

Remarkably, the discussion has circled back to the antinomies Hawkyn first described upon coming onto the scene, though these were earlier taken to be constitutive not of penance, but of the enjoyment-laden forms of activity found everywhere in the courts of secular lords. Hawkyn used the term "idleness" to describe such activities, appealing to what he took to be their interminable and processual character; their lack of an intrinsic end; their immateriality; their inability to produce any externally subsisting thing; their fungibility and substitutability; and their reliance on the whims of authority figures to bring such activities to a temporary resting point (whether through laughter or through some form of gift or payment). Endlessly repeatable, these forms of idleness were also quintessentially pleasurable, though from a different point of view, the very features that made such activities pleasurable also made them exemplary of the repetition that is characteristic of sin and suffering. What now seems clear is that what Hawkyn *describes* as idle activity in the economic and secular sphere, and what Hawkyn *produces* as

[20] Markell's *Bound By Recognition* has taught me much about the interminable, fruitless pursuit of recognition and the way "recognition" mobilizes fantasies of sovereignty that evade the very problem that "recognition" is meant to address. These are Hegelian themes, although on Markell's account, "recognition" is an object of critique within Hegel's own work.

confessional speech in the pastoral or theological one, are deeply related to one another—which suggests that, for Langland, the urge to introspect and narrativize one's life is permeated with the same endless and repetitive enjoyment and suffering that marks the life of the "mynstrals" at the feasts of secular lords. If the *Vita Activa*, as we saw before, therefore contains a tendency to disrupt the ends and limits it sets for itself, the *penitential* life is constructed around a kernel of equally unruly activity, precisely because penance is also a (strange and paradoxical) form of action. This means that the penitential production of speech extends beyond the limits of even spiritual profit or ethical self-mastery, in much the same way that Hawkyn's worldly activity insistently moves beyond the ends of economic profit and the pursuit of "maestrie." Or again, that the activity of introspecting and ruminating—a precondition for penance proper—courts formlessness in ways that hearken back to the *Vita Activa*'s latent tendency to dissipate itself in idleness. From the point of the view of the strong penitent, such an account recognizes that no amount of rumination amounts to penance proper: quite the contrary, weak penance will intuitively be legible as idleness, since merely acknowledging *that* one's life is marked by suffering and sin is not, on its own, fruitful penance; and the frantic pursuit of recognition, absent the structuring work of the penitential apparatus, will be merely part of the struggle of the fallen creature as it makes its way through the suffering-laden repetitions that give shape to worldly life in general. But if Hawkyn's recursive forms of sorrowful activity are, on Patience and Conscience's account, a preamble or precondition for penance proper, Hawkyn's impasse suggests that the loss of form and the trespassing of limits may be baked into penitential activity proper, precisely to the degree that it is also constitutive of the *Vita Activa* generally.

If it is possible to read Hawkyn's penitential activity as produced by the same restless movement that Hawkyn associates with idleness, melancholy, and wanhope, it nevertheless does

not follow that all Hawkyn is doing is reproducing, through penance, sinful habits that remain unchanged and unquestioned. The form/matter distinction that has been structuring this discussion is one way of articulating the shape of the problem: Hawkyn's life, articulated once *as* a life of suffering, is not, after all, merely one that has lost its sense of its form, although that is part of it. It is also, and at the same time, a life that is being given a form in and through Hawkyn's particular way of making sorrow. We might describe such a rearticulation of a life *as* a life of suffering a penitential *entelechia*—one that continues to seem, from the point of view of the more rigid structures of reasoning within which that suffering is articulated as fully or properly penitential, as both lacking in form and laden with potentiality.[21] In this sense, appealing to form and matter distinctions is helpful not because such distinctions resolve the question of what Hawkyn is doing when he embarks on his confessional production of speech, but because these distinctions help bring into visibility a set of underlying penitential antinomies. To briefly recapitulate: the advantage of Aristotle's framing, and Aquinas' deployment of this distinction in the penitential context, was that form and matter are mutually imbricated in any particular instance of penitential activity. On any such account, there is no form without matter; and whatever counts as "matter" in a specific instance, it will itself be a "formal" arrangement of underlying stuff (as the wooden beam, which serves as the proximate matter for the threshold of a door, can itself be understood as a formal arrangement of vegetable cells).[22] The form/matter paradigm clarifies how Hawkyn's never-ending introspective activity can be read at once as the sinful substratum for the formal operations of penance proper *and* as a form of incipiently (or

[21] "Entelechia" is the Aristotelian term for the first actualization of substance that allows for further modes of activity; in other words, that which distinguishes the particular being *as* the being that it is, with all its capacities and modes of activity. To take one of Aristotle's prize examples: in the same way as acquiring the capacity to speak a language, for example, is a precondition for actualizing that capacity in the act of speaking, so does the ability to conceive one's life as shaped by suffering seem to be something like a precondition for penitential activity to take place at all.
[22] C.f. *Metaphysics* VIII.1043a

"weak") penitential activity in its own right. But because the problem this chapter is concerned with is not finally that of Aristotelian substance, but rather that of describing that specific form of human activity that—as Aquinas puts it—takes "human acts" as its underlying "matter," it is no longer enough to simply appeal to form and matter as though it is clear what such terms mean. Put in another way, to speak about form and matter *simpliciter* threatens to foreclose the critical account of how and why the penitential fantasies of the poem collapse when trying to map penitential activity to incommensurable forms of temporality. Having argued that Hawkyn is an exemplary figure in the poem *not* because of his successful resolution of any such temporal antinomies, but on the contrary, because of his evident failure to reconcile them under the sign of successful penance, it will therefore be tempting to replace the Aristotelian problems with the distinction between "fruitless" and "fruitful" forms of penitential activity—a distinction that has emerged in this chapter already, and that has the merit of appearing everywhere in the literature on penance. But that would suggest that "fruitless penance" is categorically different from fruitful penance—and worse, not a "true" instance of penance at all—while the "fruitfulness" of penance will inevitably be cashed out through an appeal to the Christian formalism that defines good penance as whatever the penitential apparatus recognizes as such.[23] Evidently, this style of strictly demarcating true from false penance is what this chapter has sought to undermine. What the case of Hawkyn has started to point to, instead, is the idea that that there is a fruitless style of penitential activity that is intrinsic to penitential activity in the strong sense; and that the problem posed by this Passus is therefore that of articulating the peculiar entanglement of fruitless and fruitful penance, or true and false penance, or, more generally, forms of activity that can be

[23] C.f. Luke 3:8, "produce fruit in keeping with repentance," for the paradigmatic description of "fruitful" penance. Also relevant is John 12:24-6, where it is argued that the kernel of wheat must die in order to bring about new life, and 1 Corinthians 15:37, where St. Paul speaks of the emergence of the "heavenly man" from the "earthly man" in analogy with the grain that dies to produce a living plant. See also Gratian's *Tractatus de Poenitentia*.

characterized as penitential labor and forms of fruitful activity that can be acknowledged as penitential work—distinctions that, for Langland, seem to be internal not just to penance, but to any overarching conception of the *Vita Activa*, as figured by Hawkyn himself.

Redescribing the Aristotelian cleavage of matter and form that has guided the discussion so far by appealing to the antinomy between labor and work will prove particularly helpful, in that it ties the discussion of idleness and "weak penance" to a larger topic of conversation among medievalists. Closely following Hannah Arendt's framing of the problem in *The Human Condition*, Michael Uebel and Kelly Robertson have argued that there is much to be thought about how medieval authors thought about labor, its various internal distinctions (creative labor, intellectual labor, affective labor, penitential labor), and its complex relationship to what they take to be the closely related category of "work." Work, they suggest, is a category that simultaneously refers to the process of making and to the object made; as such, it calls into visibility the mark made by human activity upon the material world. Labor, on the other hand, has *subjective* connotations—it is associated with "pain, labor and fatigue," and it describes the human creature's attempt to grapple with its subjection to necessity (MW, 4). Echoing Arendt's descriptions of the status of labor in Classical Antiquity, Uebel and Robertson argue that labor has historically been an object of contempt, associated with the lives of slaves and animals: "laboring was viewed [in the Middle Ages] as a cheerless necessity, a constant, if not masochistic, reminder of the Fall and the degraded state of mankind" (MW, 7). These associations depend upon "labor" having a more or less stable referent—it is, of course, the embodied and material experience of laboring that allows any further analogies to take hold—but Robertson and Uebel are insistent that, precisely because labor was so profoundly linked to pain and suffering, labor, in particular, was often an exemplary model for how to think about penance

in the Middle Ages. So, for example, "Allan de Lille equates laboring (*laborare*) with repenting (*poenitere*) and the condition of suffering (*patientem esse… id est fui patiens*)" (MW, 7). The very power of this invocation of penitential labor begs the further question—whether there are grounds to also think of penance as a form of work—but Uebel and Rowlandson invoke the Arendtian schema largely in order to make the labor/penance equivalence, pivoting their discussion towards Jacques Le Goff and other historians who do not in fact take the cleavage between work and labor as central to their project. But the developing argument of this chapter shows how and why it may be worth lingering with the Arendtian distinctions with which Uebel and Robertson begin their discussion: it is not, on this account, that penance can loosely be thought of as one type of labor among many; rather, it is that penance, a distinctive kind of activity whose form is constitutively self-reflexive, is *threatened* by its proximity to that the form of activity that Arendt conceptualizes as "labor" and that Hawkyn disavows as "idleness" or "melancholie." After all, while laboring activity may indeed be a paradigmatic form of suffering, and thereby, exemplary for penitential activity generally, labor is also tethered to necessity, caught up in repetition, and captured within metabolic cycles that evacuate the material world of significance. As Rowlandson and Uebel put it: "labor is "antimemorial and antimaterial"; it leaves "'no trace, no monument, no great work worthy of remembrance'" (MW, 5); or again, to cite Patchen Markell's work on "The Architecture of *The Human Condition*," the rhythms of labor are "repetitive, bound to the cycles of biological life; [labor] is therefore not linear but processual, and it produces no lasting object as its result" (Markell 22). To think about penance as an never-ending process, bound to what was characterized by Uebel and Rowlandson as "cheerless necessity," is to take seriously the thought that spiritual life can itself be subject to cyclical movements of rising and falling intensity; that it, too, can become trapped by repetition;

and that, for this reason, penance can fail to produce anything of material or spiritual value, notwithstanding the effort and the longing it entails.

What the alternative to such laboring activity might be, within the sphere of penance itself, is therefore a question that the poem is posing in particularly sharp terms, in and through its interrogation of the *Vita Activa*. So far, we have seen the poem offer a secular answer to an equally secular staging of the problem by way of Hawkyn's self-serving defense of the ethics of bread-making—a fantasy not of labor but of work, in which "woe" and suffering give way to the production of a concrete social good. We have seen the poem critique that answer by showing how Hawkyn's dream of a fair and well-formed life depends upon his own fantasmatic exclusion from circuits of exchange and consumption in which he nevertheless participates. At this point, however, it is worth asking whether some version of Hawkyn's fantasy of productivity has not been displaced into the penitential sphere. The missing term, in other words, necessary to start characterizing "fruitful" as against "fruitless" penance, may be what Arendt thinks of as "work"—understood as the form of human activity that defines itself, through the *linear* process of "making" or of "reification" (synonyms, for Arendt) *against* the repetitive, ever-recurring cycles of human life in which consumption and production follow each other so closely that no stability, durability, or memory are possible. As we shall see, such distinctions will require fine-tuning, but the attempt to think through this possibility is a way of taking seriously Arendt's argument that in the *Vita Activa*—the guiding topic of *The Human Condition*—"the distinction between productive and unproductive labor contains, albeit in a prejudicial manner, the more fundamental distinction between work and labor" (HC 87). In this sense, returning to Hawkyn's fantasy of ethical work may provide an avenue for theorizing the internal splits within penitential activity as they emerge in this Passus: fruitful *penance*, like bread-making, will therefore be

productive and ethical just to the degree that it is end-directed, rather than limitless; that penance produce something *out* of the sin and suffering it confronts, allowing the penitent to rise above these cyclical cycles of suffering; and that penance take the form of a "coming-to-be" in the Aristotelian sense examined at the end of the previous chapter—where whatever it is that comes to be is something separate from the suffering itself, in the same way that the making of bread must cease in order for the commodity (the wafer) to be; or the way a house can only emerge when house-building ceases to be.[24] Indeed, one might imagine that if bread-making, together with all other dimensions of secular life, ends up trapped within the endless cycles of production and consumption that characterize postlapsarian forms of laboring activity, penance—understood now as work rather than as labor—might be the form of activity that redeems merely worldly forms of human activity by finding within the *Vita Activa* itself (insofar as penance is also a form of activity) the possibility of real progression and/or transformation. If so, then the fantasies that led Hawkyn, earlier, to postulate bread-making as ethical and productive activity might finally be understood as finding their home in a theological or pastoral register; indeed, on this account, theology would have been the proper receptacle for these fantasies all along.[25]

Before shifting away from the analysis of penance as laboring activity, I want to forestall a pair of objections to this characterization of Hawkyn's penitential impasse as produced by the dissolution of the boundaries between penance, suffering, and labor. Ever since the opening scene, where Hawkyn addresses the fun-loving "mynstrals," it has been clear the equation of

[24] See Kosman's *The Activity of Being* for an interrogation of this distinction, especially chapters 1 and 2.
[25] Arendt uses the language of redemption—not only between people, but also between different modalities of human activity—in the opening to the famous statement on forgiveness: "The redemption of life, which is sustained by labor, is worldliness, which is sustained by fabrication. We saw furthermore that *homo faber* could be redeemed from his predicament… only through the interrelated faculties of action and speech, which produce meaningful stories as naturally as fabrication produces useful objects" (HC, 236). One way of characterizing the argument at this stage is as an analysis of how penance, imagined as labor, begins to postulate the fantasy of penance as "work" and "worldliness" in order to *redeem* the repetition and cyclicality that marks everyday life.

labor and suffering is not reducible to anything phenomenological: if laboring activity entails being caught up in cyclical and worldless forms of activity, the inhabitation of such cycles is in this poem also figured as a paradigmatic site of pleasure. There is a standardly theological way of responding to the objection: the "degraded state of mankind," as Uebel and Robertson put it, means the "cheerless necessity" of worldly activity contains within it a deadly and repetitive enjoyment. Not only does this mean that there is pleasure to be found in the forms of activity that make one suffer, but more strongly, it is the very repetition that makes laboring a site of "suffering" that also makes such activity figure as a site of enjoyment. [26] As enjoyment, as we saw earlier, cyclical activity becomes recognizable within the poem as "idleness"; as suffering, it can be perceived as "melancholie" or "making sorrow." But the thought that suffering and enjoyment are closely bound to one another can be cashed out psychoanalytically as well. L.O. Fradenburg, for example, has argued that to be exacting about the difference between necessity and surplus is already to partake in an economy of sacrifice in which what is strictly needful becomes invested with obscene and excessive enjoyment.[27] To the degree that the question of labor, as framed by Uebel and Robertson, is not just a question about "cheerlessness," then, but also a question about the boundaries of *necessity*, the contamination of enjoyment and suffering follow the dynamic that Fradenburg describes.[28] For the poem, however, enjoyment and

[26] Arendt also describes a particular form of pleasure that pertains to labor: "the 'blessing or the joy' of labor is the human way to experience the sheer bliss of being alive which we share"; this means that "the human condition is such that pain and effort are not just symptoms which can be removed without changing life itself; they are rather the modes in which life itself, together with the necessity to which it is bound, makes itself felt. For mortals, the 'easy life of the gods' would be a lifeless life" (HC 120). In other words, for Arendt the suffering of labor is linked to the specific "vitality" and "liveliness" of human existence. The argument in this chapter is rather different: not only is it is that the "easy life of the gods" would be lifeless for the Gods, too; it is that this "blessing of joy" is no different than what, from a different point of view, is legible as the curse of suffering.

[27] See L.O. Fradenburg's "Needful Things," in *Medieval Crime and Social Control*, ed. Barbara Hanawalt and David Wallace.

[28] Arendt repeatedly emphasizes that labor is the sphere of *necessity*, whereas action (and, arguably, work, at least in the paradigmatic form of the work of art) is the domain of *freedom*. See the introduction to *The Human Condition*, but also Markell's "The Architecture of the Human Condition."

suffering are not symmetrical. Rather, sorrow and suffering appear to be the deeper phenomenon: not, however, because laboring activity necessarily *feels* like any one thing, but because, on this account, the structure of empty repetition that defines laboring as such is ultimately unbearable, however much pleasure may inevitably be nested therein.[29]

A second complication for the Arendtian account, at least as drawn up so far, concerns the conflicted position of memory in penitential activity insofar as the latter is understood as labor. After all, if the laborer looks something like a farmer (or a plowman)—or even the dancer from the secular courts Hawkyn so despises—then Uebel and Robertson's description of labor as "antimemorial and antimaterial" (MW, 5) may feel intuitive. But Hawkyn is nothing if not obsessive about memory, as he compiles anecdotes, constructs miniature narratives about the past, mulls over his mistakes, and describes how rooted sin has become in his life. On the one hand, then, it is worth stressing the way no shard of the past seems to *stick* to Hawkyn—there is real effort in the compiling such memories, but Hawkyn's activity is legible as *labor* because it is committed to compilation as an end in itself: nothing is built out of these memories; there is no deep scaffolding to place them on or to analyze them with; no memory singled out as more important than any other; and nothing seems to be finally produced from the act of remembrance. Arendt is helpful when she says that, without a world to share, we are "driven back" towards "our own subjective experience" (HC, xiii); and perhaps more helpful yet when she suggests that for such subjective experience to become legible, even to ourselves, "deeds and facts and events… must first be seen, heard, and remembered and then transformed, reified, as it were, into

[29] C.f. *Eccleciastes* 7:4, "The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure." The passage suggests both a certain equivalence between the two houses, and an ultimate asymmetry, since it is the house of mourning that is the truer one. Similar thoughts can be found in Boethius' discussion of Fortuna and Lady Philosophy—only bad Fortune reveals the true nature of things—but *Eccleciastes* is especially interesting in this context because it is the centerpiece of a long discussion in Arendt on the unbearable character of worldlessness (HC, 204).

things" (HC, 95). Absent such worlding, it would appear, by analogy, that Hawkyn's trawling through the past is "antimaterial and antimemorial," precisely insofar as such memories are consumed in the very moment of their production. Hawkyn, in other words, seems to repeatedly return to his memories *not* because he believes any single memory is in any way significant, or is capable of assisting him in the project of becoming something other than he is, but rather because he wishes to obliterate his capacity for sinning by exercising to the point of exhaustion his capacity to remember and to speak. But if, for that reason, Hawkyn's acts of remembrance seem compulsive and "antimemorial"—and therefore, paradigmatic instances of laboring activity—it remains the case that memory is indispensable to Hawkyn's "weak" penance in a way that it is not to other laboring contexts (like plowing or dancing). This is so strongly the case that one might argue that the presence of memory is, as it were, the *differentia specifica* that makes penitential labor legible as *penitential*. But that suggests that penitential labor cannot be *reduced* to labor in the Arendtian sense; that, no matter how fruitless Hawkyn's confessional speech may appear, some further articulation of memory is already presupposed in and through Hawkyn's trawling of the past. The question is then what it means for such isolated, immaterial and fleeting memories to become externalized, reified, or shared; what temporal form becomes possible for penitential activity in and through such externalization; and what the possibility of such materialization tells us about the inner splits within penitential activity more generally.

Reification and the Coat of Christendom

Under this light, the function and character of Patience and Conscience's questioning of Hawkyn looks different than it did at the beginning of this chapter. These allegorical figures continually prod Hawkyn to keep talking, even as they also seek to give Hawkyn a formal scaffolding that will make his confessionalism amount to something more than mere suffering

activity. But it is their strategy that is important, at this stage in the argument—for it is they who draw attention, repeatedly, to another of those Langlandian objects laden with metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties: Hawkyn's threadbare coat.[30] This coat is first described as "coat of Cristendom as Holy Kirke bileveth" (XIII, 274)—a description that reveals the coat's ideological function as being visible proof that the active life is reconcilable, in some idealized way, with the dictates of Christian belief. In this sense, what strikes one immediately about the coat itself is its *publicity*—the way it reads belief as something visible and external—and its *univocity*—Holy Church is taken to believe a single, coherent thing. But as the poem lingers over the coat, returning to it repeatedly, the garment itself starts to become strange, as though it were not reducible to stable, public and impersonal beliefs after all, but were instead in the process of becoming composed and decomposed by the chaotic sins whose aim was to undo the stability of this fantasmatic form:

> It was bidropped with wrathe and wikkede wille,
> With envye and yvel speche entisynge to fighte,
> Lying and lakkynge and leve tonge to chide;
> Al that he wiste wikked by any wight, tellen it,
> And blame men bihyde hir back and bidden hem meschaunce (XIII, 321-5)

The strongly alliterative language and the proliferation of moral language start to hide the coat, and the sins themselves seem to acquire an agentic power that stretch the capacity of the poem to treat the coat as a unified thing at all. Hawkyn recedes from view—the passive voice eliminates any subject—and all that can be seen, for a moment, are endless cycles of lying and being lied to, fighting and being fought with. But to say that is also to say that as the coat displays this array of sinfulness, it also protects and conceals its own ever-receding substance, the invisible cloth upon which this teeming multiplicity of sins is "bidropped." In hiding this inner substance, the poem

[30] Another such metaphysically subtle object, as we saw in the last chapter, was the food served to Will and Patience at the banquet halls of the court of Conscience.

wants to insist on the stability of the underlying fabric of "Christendom" itself—understood as the articulated set of practices and beliefs organized by Holy Church. In other words, the Church itself is abstracted and removed from the corrupting influence of the sins whose agonistic struggle amounts to little more than an endless recycling of negativity. Paradoxically, Hawkyn himself is also protected and concealed in and through the allegorization of his inner life—it is not *Hawkyn*, after all, but "envy, "evil speech," and wickedness in general that fight across the surface of the coat. The work of abstraction the coat performs therefore cuts in several directions, even as the tantalizing glimpse of the underlying and ever-receding substratum—of the material of the coat itself—continues to point back to an underlying referent: to Holy Church, first of all; but also, to Hawkyn. After all, it is *his* coat that the poem wants to think about; and because the coat sticks to Hawkyn, not so much like a garment as a second skin, the poem suggests that his soul is the secret substance that is at once revealed and hidden in the fabric of the coat. *Something* is becoming sullied in and through the rabid activity of the sins—that much is clear—but the act of sullying seems to change its meaning depending on whether one imagines the coat as exteriority (a coat of Christendom) or as interiority (a representation of Hawkyn's soul); or again, on whether one positions Hawkyn as the one actively sullying or the one being sullied, the one making/unmaking or the one becoming made/unmade.

In this sense, the coat of Christendom is reminiscent of the penitential bread at the court of Conscience: temptations, fantasies, and structures of identification and alienation are congealed in both bread and coat in a manner that suggests that penitential structures depend on a fetishistic logic to do their work. But there are grounds to mark a certain parallel between coat and bread—what Hawkyn wants to put *on*, as "belief," Will is obligated to incorporate into his body—the coat continually shifts its shape in accordance with what Hawkyn does or does not do, expressing

a hidden interiority that Hawkyn can only ever perceive from the outside. Hawkyn's activity is therefore continually split in yet another direction: even as he moves through the various cycles of everyday life, gaining or losing mastery or profit, inhabiting his own actions from the agential perspective of the first person, he is also and at every moment at work either preserving or unmaking a garment whose strange ontology reinforces the split between himself *qua* maker and himself *qua* object made. That split is the condition for him to feel that his worldly activity is not in vain: everything he does, however fleeting, is ultimately reified in the fantasmatic coat, and in fact, *only* the coat is being brought into existence in anything like a durable way—a predicament made all the more acute by the anterior reduction of the thingly world to "marchaundise" and "chaffare." In Arendt's terms, it is the coat, and the coat alone, that is legible to the poem as a thing that is "more permanent than the activity by which [it was] produced" (HC, 96), and therefore only the coat that offers Hawkyn the fantasy of being able to transform himself or meaningfully modify the world that surrounds him. In this way, the coat also offers the poem a way of escaping from the uncomfortable paradox through which the exercise of memory might appear to be "antimemorial": it is precisely the permanence of the coat that gives Hawkyn's recounting of the past the power to organize and shape a world, rather being merely the expression of a capacity condemned to cyclical rhythms of remembrance. More generally, it is through the coat that Hawkyn's ordinary activity comes to mean anything at all, and that the specific form of activity he is engaged upon in this Passus—the activity of "weak" penance—seems capable of transforming itself into something like penance in the full sense.

The entrance of the coat therefore points us towards what Arendt describes as the domain of work—that is, the sphere of human activity that grounds itself in and through the production of durable things. That the coat is, in the first instance, a metaphoric device rather than a material

object, does not falsify the argument: what is significant is that the poem crafts such a metaphor in the first place, and does so in order to maintain the fantasy that Hawkyn's impasse can be resolved by reifying his activity in the form of a durable thing. As I have already suggested, the coat can be read as a vehicle for displacement: Hawkyn's fantasies of sovereign and ethical activity move from the secular world to the transcendental register, even as, in doing so, they reinforce the very antinomies that the coat is meant to overcome. Because it is not just that the poem produces the coat in response to the cycles of idleness that seem to swallow up the active life; it is also *from* the point of view of the coat itself—which is to say, from the point of view of Patience and Conscience, who repeatedly call attention to the coat—that activities such as the accumulation of wealth, the stealing of one's neighbor's cattle, or the act of encroaching upon other people's land, look as insubstantial and fleeting as lying and berating and blaming men behind their back (XIII, 355-83). The pervasive sense that Hawkyn's life is an idle one is therefore at least in part produced by the fantasy of the other scene, in which Hawkyn's life is defined by the unceasing making or unmaking of the coat, just as the insubstantiality of worldly objects and artifacts can be read as the shadow image of the coat's fantasmatic sempiternity. In a more Arendtian register, one might say that in producing the coat of Christendom as something like a final *end* to human activity—one that is not itself subject to the collapse of means into ends, or of ends into means—the poem has already set the grounds for the depreciation of the *Vita Activa* generally, and for the reduction of all secular human activity to the domain of mere labor.

But the picture Langland is drawing up here is more complicated than it appears. First of all, it is worth emphasizing that one thing the poem has *not* done is produce a separate sphere of (religious) activity that can be neatly demarcated from the world within which Hawkyn goes

about his daily business. Rather, that worldly activity is itself what becomes legible as penitential work: that is, the coat allows the life Hawkyn is *already* embarked upon to acquire the form of work, on condition (a) that such a life be understood as a life of suffering and impermanence, which is to say, that its status as *labor* be fully assumed; and (b) that a durable object be imagined as that which is produced in and through that suffering—this object being a metonym for both the soul and for the Holy Church. The fact that the same worldly activity can now be read *both* as an instance of labor *and* as an instance of work, and more strongly, that it only be legible as the latter on condition of also being legible as the former, says something about the slipperiness of the temporal structures that the poem is trying to navigate, just as it calls attention to the disquieting ambivalence that emerges every time the poem confronts the problem of penitential suffering. It is not the case, after all, that in exteriorizing the sins onto the coat the poem releases Hawkyn from sin and suffering—on the contrary, as we have seen, the spectral image of the coat plunges him ever more deeply into despair, as it starts to appear that the only activity *not* foreclosed to him is that of further labor and suffering. Even worse, the coat itself proves incapable of maintaining its form when confronted with the pressure of Hawkyn's fruitless and repetitive lifeworld. The despondent reduction of the coat to a mere object of use, at the beginning of Passus XIV, can be read as an admission that no amount of fantasy is capable of preventing penance from collapsing back into the register of labor:

> 'I have but oon hater,' quod Hawkyn, 'I am the lasse to blame
> Though it be soiled and selde clene—I slepe therinne o nyghtes;
> And also I have an houswif, hewen and children—
> *Uxorem duxi, et ideo non possum venire*—
> That wollen bymolen it many tyme, maugree y chekes (XIV 1-4).

The tenuous dream of *making* or *repairing* the Coat of Christendom indirectly, through habitual patterns of everyday activity has been abandoned: now a mere garment, the coat is incapable of

functioning as a final end, precisely because, as it seeks to redeem the space of labor, it is itself increasingly legible as a mere object of use, and more even than that, as an object confined to the privative space of domestic life that is one of the classical scenes of laboring activity. Trapped in an endless alternation between being soiled and being cleaned, the coat is the index of a suffering that has, and can have, no definite end. Conscience will continue to press in upon Hawkyn the necessity of moving from contrition to confession to satisfaction, but the coat has lost its aura, and it is perhaps already evident that Hawkyn's penitential strivings will once again collapse into wanhope and empty confessionalism. [31]

Nor, arguably, should one *want* to endorse the teleological fantasies that Conscience holds onto with such vim. It is helpful, once more, to turn to Arendt, for what is perhaps the most repeated insight in the *Human Condition*: namely, that treating the domain of human activity as if were inert, passive matter—to be made or fashioned as one pleases—is to entrench a model of sovereignty that falsifies the nature of our relationship to others.[32] Arendt claims this falsification is especially noxious in the sphere of politics, since it is here, above all, the consequences of substituting "making" for "acting" become evident: the capacity of the human creature to *fabricate* a world is responsible for instrumental fantasies that split means and ends, and thinking and doing; and their net consequence is to isolate the would-be sovereign while placing the full burden of non-sovereignty upon others.[33] Such an analysis is, in its own way, quintessentially Aristotelian—for it is a mistake, on Aristotelian grounds, to think of, say, the relationship

[31] Patchen Markell's account of this problem in Arendt is deeply instructive: "The effort to put a stop to the vicious circle of means and ends by positing the existence of an end in itself, conceived of as separate from (and in need of protection against contamination by) the domain of mere means, is structurally analogous to the Greek effort to isolate a discrete domain of pure freedom that, on Arendt's account, had laid the groundwork for the neglect of the crucial difference between labor and work, and eventually for the collapse of all three basic activities into a single undifferentiated *vita activa*" (ACH, 30).
[32] See *The Human Condition*, p. 220.
[33] The larger argument is forcefully articulated in Markell's *Bound by Recognition*.

between bronze and a brazen sphere as paradigmatic of the relationship between form and matter *tout court*.[34] That particular example, and others like it, are meant to illuminate the concepts of form and matter, but only as a stage in a larger exploration into the nature of being—an investigation that for Aristotle entails moving away from antinomies of form and matter, at least as they are instantiated in inert objects, and towards deeper questions that hinge upon the relationship between potentiality and activity as they present themselves in living creatures. Arendt is focused on political questions; Aristotle is concerned with ontology. But in the section of the poem that concerns us here, we can see how the fantasy of *homo faber*—of the human *qua* fabricator—starts to create trouble for the penitential fantasies that circulate in Passus XIV and XV. Hawkyn is told—not merely by Conscience, but also by a number of critics—that it is a mistake to bring to bear his wife and children onto the question of penance; that speaking of his wife, or his children, or the immiserated conditions that have led him to have "but oon hater," are at best ways of avoiding responsibility for his sinful behavior. On such a model, Hawkyn is meant to act *as if* he alone is responsible for sullying the coat, for it is *his* coat that allows the world as a whole to become legible as something other than endless cycles of laboring activity. Whatever incipient vision of mutual dependence and non-sovereignty can be teased out of Hawkyn's description of a family sleeping together in a tattered coat, it is to be renounced—replaced instead with the monadic and solitary penitential effort to return the coat to pristine condition.[35] No wonder that Hawkyn ends the Passus in despair: if penance entails the final subsumption of the totality of human activity as "matter" for the formal operations of penance,

[34] See Kosman, *The Activity of Being*; this, in a nutshell, is how Kosman describes Aristotle's overall project in the *Metaphysics*.

[35] I have taken the term "monadic" from Thompson's essay "A Puzzle About Justice," where the term serves to characterize the kinds of ethical commitments that bind the individual to God, or the Tablets of the Law, rather than to another person; such commitments have a different *logical* form when they are "monadic" and when they are "bipolar.

and such subsumption is understood in a way analogous to the way the brazen sphere subsumes the bronze that makes up its matter, the penitent is bound to become trapped by the lure of a fantasy of all-encompassing sovereignty that is impossible to maintain. Nor will attempting to reduce the scope of the world for which one is held responsible solve the issue: Hawkyn's sorrowful declaration, that he will henceforth have no "maistrie over any man mo than of hymself" (XV, 328), seems to reiterate, in a different key, the insidious fantasy of constituting an order unto oneself with which Passus XIV began. But such a fantasy remains dependent on the possibility of clearly delimiting means and ends; more strongly, such a fantasy of sovereignty was precisely what the cry for penance was meant to undercut.

Concluding Remarks on Penance and Activity

It is worth emphasizing, in the form of a conclusion, that imagining a world where the fantasy of penitential *making* cannot take hold at all is also unbearable—and not a world in which penance can seemingly exist at all. This is what I take to be the burden of Patience's utopian vision, which is produced immediately after Hawkyn declares that his coat will be forever soiled. Patience offers Hawkyn what he takes to be an alternative to endless penitential despair: a world sustained by "leel bileve [true faith] and love" (XIV, 47), where God provides all necessities. We see the traces of such a world when we gaze at nature:

> First the wilde worm under weet erthe,
> Fissh to lyve in the flood, and in the fir the criket,
> The curlew by kynde of the eyr, moost clennest flessh of the brides,
> And bestes by gras and by greyn and by grene rootes,
> In meninge that alle mene myghte the same
> Lyve (XIV 42-7).

What is so striking about the natural landscape, as Patience describes it, is that it is a world entirely evacuated of human work—there is no world of *things*, in the Arendtian sense; no

politics; no opportunities for sin or for repentance. Indeed, the poem seems to actively despise properly *human* activity generally, and to gesture beyond life itself, to the end of all living activity: "Tharstow nevere care for corn ne lynnen cloth ne wollen, /Ne for drynke, ne deeth drede, but deye as God lyketh" (XV 56-7). The doubled character of penitential activity—its self-referentiality, the way it seeks to take human acts as its own "matter"—is dissolved, and all that is left is the flat, logically simple form of suffering that the poem associates with the worms and the fish.

Nevertheless, to imagine the end of all activity is also deeply baked into the penitential imaginary—we have seen versions of such a drive to annihilation in previous chapters, especially in the fantasy of Noah's Flood. But Patience's utopian landscape, paradoxically, is also a return to the world of labor, imagined this time in the form not of suffering, but of idyllic pleasure and gentle repetition. That such a fantasy will not withstand the pressure of self-reflection is something that the poem already intuits; it will not withstand the pressures of the social, either, although the desire for someone to share the coat with is itself part of the desire that is nested within Hawkyn's longing for a clean coat. In this sense, Patience punts on the extraordinary difficult question that the Passus has posed—and he punts, precisely because the Passus has sought to slowly break down the monololithic drive towards penance, revealing beneath it a set of pressures that move Hawkyn at once towards others and towards himself, towards the world of things and towards the transcendental register where everything will become transfigured. It is perhaps why, in the last instance, the aesthetic beauty of the coat—and its extraordinary ugliness—is more than merely incidental. Arendt's most important example of "making," after all, and the example that breaks apart the fantasies of "homo faber"—exposing human activity to the delights (rather than the strictures) of non-sovereignty—is the peculiar form of fabrication

that emerges in the making of the work of art. Such making reveals a dimension in the ordinary that goes beyond either sustenance or functional use, and in doing so, opens the sphere of human activity out to the realm of action proper. The coat, *qua* coat of Christendom, opens out onto such an unthought fantasy of collective action—and it does so precisely insofar as its aesthetic power, however deeply lodged in Hawkyn's melancholic confessionalism and the penitential imaginary of the poem, moves beyond the individual attribution of responsibility, and into the larger question of how to give form to the social whole.

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