Phenomenal Anglo-Saxons: Perception, Adaptation, and the Poetic Imagination

by

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Abstract

This dissertation articulates a theory of adaptation for the Anglo-Saxon literature in which metaphors of embodiment mediate the reception of poetic works: when we read, our bodies get in the way. Central to my work is the understanding that the embodied situatedness of poets adapting materials from other sources informs the literature that they produce. I explore the material and textual conditions through which the writings of the period reveal themselves and seek to understand how these contexts shaped the reception of earlier writings. Poetic texts filled with sensory detail provide a framework for their own reception. My approach to textual phenomena is informed by reading in the phenomenological tradition of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, as expressed by the work of philosophers such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Gaston Bachelard, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Jean-Luc Marion.

Chapter One argues for a parallel relationship between the flesh of Christ and the medieval book in the reception of Prudentius. Their shared flesh allows the Word to appear in the world by taking on the animal nature of a life characterized by suffering.
Chapter Two considers the suffering of the saints in Aldhelm’s *Carmen de virginitate*. This suffering constitutes a form of affective piety that provides a framework for the desirous reception of holy bodies and also of the textual corpora of early authors.

Chapter Three argues that in Felix’s *Vita Guthlac*, eating and reading reveal the body’s permeability. Guthlac’s ingestion of hallucinogenic mold and Felix’s reception of Aldhelm appear as a demonic attack that imbricates saint and hagiographer in the textualized landscape of the fen.

Chapter Four analyzes the role of visual perception in the ekphrastic presentation of the phoenix as it appears in Lactantius’s Latin poem and its Old English translation. The interrelation of ekphrasis and translation as modes of perception grants the phoenix both literary and material forms.

Chapter Five argues that crossing the Red Sea in *Exodus* embodies the theory of textual interpretation explicated by Moses in which the keys of the spirit reveal hidden truths. The crossing becomes a fusion of horizons, as the waters lower to reveal old foundations.
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Introduction
Towards a Poetics of Revelation

_The world is not what I think, but what I live through. I am open to the world, I have no doubt that I am in communication with it, but I do not possess it; it is inexhaustible._¹

My dissertation articulates a theory of adaptation for the Anglo-Saxon literature in which metaphors of embodiment mediate the reception of poetic works: when we read, our bodies get in the way. The forms of the literature—both the material forms of manuscripts with the attending issues of textual layout, illustrations, and use of interlinear glosses and also the poetic forms associated with rhetorical devices, intertextual echoes, and metrical stylistics—serve to engage the reader in an imaginative space that allows literary texts to manifest themselves through their form upon the horizon of the reader’s body. In making this argument I assert continuity between myself as a reader and the Anglo-Saxons. I am motivated by a belief not that the differences between medieval and modern readers are insignificant, but that those differences are rather a manifestation of the gulf that separates all readers in any period. One of the wonders of literature is that a single text is able to lay claim to a multitude of interpretations. It does not produce meaning in isolation, but is embedded in a world with which it continually interacts in order to make itself appear. It always exists in relation to others—readers, writers, editors, scribes—and becomes a means of interacting with a larger world, a world not unbound by space and time but one whose boundaries are permeable and allow for crossings.

The written documents of the past occupy a prominent place in the Anglo-Saxon poetic tradition. Many of the vernacular poems were translations or adaptations of Latin texts which

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¹ Merleau-Ponty, _Phenomenology of Perception_, xviii–xix.
included specific references to the ways in which people interact with textual remains, and Anglo-Latin literature owed to Aldhelm a certain intertextual exuberance that clearly demonstrated the truth of the dictum that all writing is rewriting. The writings of the past were a tool by which authors reveal things, but writings also reveal themselves in their own right, the difference between what wise men “on gewritum cyþað,” reveal in writings, and what “gewritu cyþað,” writings reveal. An antiquarian impulse led to the cultivation of a body of literature that engaged both explicitly with notions of hermeneutics and that also provided poetic images that allowed for metaphorical interpretations of written tradition. Works like Exodus or Aldhelm’s Carmen de virginitate provide explicit models of textual interpretation while implicitly adapting old texts to new purposes. When we read Anglo-Saxon poetry, we are continually confronted by poets whose writing process foregrounds their reading experiences. How they perceive the texts through their being-in-the-world becomes encoded in their writing and reflects their own state of being in the world.

As Linda Hutcheon has said, “Neither the product nor the process of adaptation exists in a vacuum: they all have a context--a time and a place, a society and a culture.” The process of adaptation, however, should not be defined purely by its product, as the work of re-interpretation and re-creation that is foundational to adaptation appears as readily in the performance of literature within the embodied mind of the reader. We make sense of the past by interpreting it through the lens of the present and creating it anew for ourselves, discovering new meanings and new ways of using it. Hans-Georg Gadamer writes, “We are always affected, in hope and fear, by what is nearest to us, and hence we approach the testimony of the past under its influence. ...There is no more an isolated horizon of the present than there are historical horizons

2 The Phoenix, 30b and 332b.
3 Hutcheon, A Theory of Adaptation, xvi.
which have to be acquired. *Rather, understanding is always the fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves.*”⁴ This fusion of horizons finds a product in the work of adaptation that allows us to evaluate what influence an Anglo-Saxon present had on its reading of the past and also calls attention to the factors that inform our own readings of medieval texts.

Mindful of how our own practices of reading Anglo-Saxon texts occur within a historical horizon, I focus on how the Anglo-Saxons themselves respond to their textual tradition through poetic adaptation and translation. Poetry often tends to be omitted from studies of translation, and thus as recently as 2002 Robert Stanton could claim to have written the first monograph on Anglo-Saxon translation, one that manages the curious feat of omitting discussion of poetry as straying too far from source texts and also concluding that translation was narrowly understood due to how close it stayed to source texts.⁵ Since then Janie Steen’s impressive work on the adaptation of Latin rhetoric in Old English verse has contributed substantially to meeting the obvious gap left in Stanton’s treatment of translation; however, Steen’s work, *Verse and Virtuosity*, reveals a tendency common in Anglo-Saxon studies of treating Latin and vernacular verse as easily separable elements of literary culture, with discussion of Latin texts subordinate to and dependent on their Old English reflections.⁶ Thus, important early Christian and Anglo-Latin works which did not directly impact the vernacular poetic culture have scant reference in Steen’s work, even though it is self-evident that the adaptation of Latin rhetoric in the Anglo-

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⁵ Stanton, *The Culture of Translation in Anglo-Saxon England*. Stanton begins: “Treating the poetry as ‘translation’ would demand an even broader definition of translation than the one I employ. In other words, any English text based on some Latin original would be called ‘translation,’ and the use of the term would be vague and watery in the extreme,” 5. He concludes, “Much twentieth-century translation theory has tended towards subversion of the text ... and a frequent willingness to change the original and create something entirely new. Anglo-Saxon writers neither intended nor desired to do this. Actual translations from this period were never overtly described as anything but equivalents of their originals. Whatever subversiveness Old English translations engender is a result not of conscious intent but of the very nature of the translation process,” 173.
⁶ Thus, Steen, *Verse and Virtuosity*, consists of chapters on *The Phoenix*, *Judgment Day II*, Exeter riddles 35 and 40, and Cynewulf, along with two much more general chapters discussing the learning of rhetoric in the period.
Latin literature of the period is as important to the style of Anglo-Saxon literature as its adaptation in the vernacular.

In both cases Steen’s and Stanton’s works limit their scope by privileging translation from one language to another over adaptation from one cultural context to another. Limiting discussion to prose translation allows Stanton to focus on explicitly stated theories of translation in the period, such as a comparison of word-for-word and sense-for-sense translations, while limiting discussion to verse translation has the benefit for Steen of subordinating larger discussions about cultural context to a single feature: linguistic difference. By contrast, in order to account for adaptation in a poetic culture that does not simply move from one language to another, but encompasses movements across and within languages and adaptation across not only whole works but also smaller units like sentences and phrases, I take metaphor as the central element of analysis. Metaphor mediates the work of adaptation. Within a work, metaphor allows a word from one context to stand in for another, but metaphors also present special challenges to adapters, who must not only perceive the relationship between contexts within a work, but re-present them in a way that makes sense to new readers. Accomplishing this task depends not simply on understanding metaphor as a single word, but on understanding how the whole of a literary work is intended in the expression of a single word or image. Meaning is not constructed in isolation, but, as Paul Ricoeur says, “There is no language, then, that does not bestow meaning on that which first created tension in the mind. Sometimes a whole poem is needed for the mind to invent or find a meaning; but the mind always makes connections.”\footnote{Ricoeur, The Rule of Metaphor, 82.}

This dissertation will explore five case studies that illustrate how metaphors illuminate our understanding of what it means to read early medieval literature and demonstrate the importance of the world of perception to the poetic imagination. The primary texts treated in the
chapters are: Prudentius’s *Psychomachia*, Aldhelm’s *Carmen de virginitate*, Felix’s *Vita Sancti Guthlac*, *The Phoenix*, and *Exodus*. While the *Psychomachia* is not an Anglo-Saxon text, it was read widely in the period as evidenced both by a sizeable manuscript tradition and by its use as source material in a variety of Anglo-Latin texts.\(^8\) The *Vita Guthlac* stands out as the only prose text in the list, owing its place to its adaptation of poetic source material in the description of the swamp-monsters who attack the saint. The ordering of material does not represent chronology, which would not be desirable even if it were not rendered problematic by the difficulties of dating vernacular poetry. As Linda Hutcheon has noted, chronological order has little meaning for the reader of adaptation, who may encounter works in a different order than the one in which they were written.\(^9\) This point is especially relevant in a manuscript culture in which each material witness represents a different version of a text. Rather, the ordering represents a thematic shift from Latinate poetry into the vernacular.

My methods of talking about these texts are, on the one hand, very familiar to scholars of Anglo-Saxon poetry, as they depend primarily upon a series of close readings of key passages from the poems. However, in clarifying the poetic images which I use as metaphors for interpretation, I draw from something more unfamiliar: phenomenology, a branch of philosophy that seeks to understand how our experience of the world is organized according to the manifestation of phenomena, what Heidegger defines as “that which shows itself in itself.”\(^{10}\) Phenomenology’s common tool is the phenomenological reduction, also known as *epoché* or bracketing, which was employed by Husserl as a means of setting aside the known world to

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\(^8\) Lapidge, *The Anglo-Saxon Library*, 330–1 provides evidence of Anglo-Saxon manuscripts of Prudentius, while 185 and 224 provide evidence, respectively, for Aldhelm and Bede’s use of Prudentius.


\(^{10}\) Heidegger, *Being and Time*, H 28.
focus the mind more closely on how specific phenomena reveal themselves to the individual consciousness.

This universal depriving of acceptance, this “inhibiting” or “putting out of play” of all positions taken toward the already-given Objective world and, in the first place, all existential positions … —or, as it is also called, this “phenomenological epoché” and “parenthesizing” of the Objective world—therefore does not leave us confronting nothing. On the contrary, we gain possession of something by it; and what we (or, to speak more precisely, what I, the one who is meditating) acquire by it is my pure living, with all the pure subjective processes making this up, and everything meant in them, purely as meant in them: the universe of phenomena in the (particular and also the wider) phenomenological sense. The epoché can also be said to be the radical and universal method by which I apprehend myself purely: as Ego, and with my own pure conscious life, in and by which the entire Objective world exists for me and is precisely as it is for me.¹¹

By putting the world out of play at the start, Husserl began by meditating upon what it means to be revealed to oneself in order to inaugurate phenomenology as a descriptive science. As he concludes the *Cartesian Meditations*, “I must lose the world by epoché, in order to regain it by a universal self-examination.”¹² Husserl begins with the individual ego, but in beginning with Prudentius, an author prior to the Anglo-Saxon world whose poems would become a part of the canon of Christian poets read in Anglo-Saxon England, I begin with the flesh, of which Jean-Luc Marion writes: “I am first and definitively bound—*alligatus*—to my feeling body. The *ego* gives

¹¹ Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, 20–21.
itself as flesh.” An awareness of the role of flesh as what makes the world available to a subject characterizes Prudentius’s approach to Christ as the Word made flesh, which I will propose provides a metaphorical framework for reading the words on flesh of the medieval codex as like feeling bodies in ways that parallel Christ’s body.

Having employed the phenomenological reduction to first understand his own relation to the world, Husserl then was able to proceed to explore all the phenomena that exist in terms of how they reveal themselves to consciousness through the stance assumed toward them. This had the effect of eliminating concern with the reality of external existence, approaching it always through the appearance of things. As Dermot Moran writes,

A crucial aspect of the reduction, as Husserl applies it, is that all features of conscious experience must be taken as they appear, without our attempting to categorise them as ‘false’, ‘illusory’, and so on, without assessing their ‘validity’ (Geltung) as such. The reduction removes reference to the real world of existent entities, and all appearances are taken as genuine in their own right. … Experiences can be examined with regard to their evidence, regardless of whether they are experiences of perception or fantasy. Indeed, in phenomenology as in the eidetic sciences in general … factual experience has no claim to priority. Memory, fantasy, and other forms of attention can disclose as many acts of perception as factual experience. Although Husserl began with nothing but an exploration of the self, he opens up an infinite world capable of being explored through the reduction capable of being understood authentically as they reveal themselves to perception. In the world of the reduction, the perception of an image

14 Moran, Introduction to Phenomenology, 152.
of the phoenix is taken to be as authentic as if it were a bird actually existing. The reduction serves as the starting point in a continual process, the primary tool through which all the phenomenological approaches which subsequently followed were united. Heidegger contracted the sphere of phenomenological exploration to the question of being, posing it as the first problem of philosophy in general and phenomenology in particular, but Husserl’s other intellectual descendants reclaimed Husserl’s original vision of a phenomenology that could be used to explore a broad range of phenomena.

With the reduction as its starting point, phenomenology appears as a method that is always incomplete, awaiting new insights as new minds take up its task of self-reflection. It is not a task of discovering what is already existing but of making existent new experiences. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty puts it:

> The phenomenological world is not the bringing to explicit expression of a pre-existing being, but the laying down of being. Philosophy is not the reflection of a pre-existing truth, but, like art, the act of bringing truth into being. One may well ask how this creation is possible, and if it does not recapture in things a pre-existing Reason. The answer is that the only pre-existent Logos is the world itself, and that the philosophy which brings it into visible existence does not begin by being possible; it is actual or real like the world of which it is a part, and no explanatory hypothesis is clearer than the act whereby we take up this unfinished world in an effort to complete and conceive it.  

Merleau-Ponty reframes Husserl’s rigorous science as a creative act, akin to art. This world reveals itself to our perceptions and we conceive of it through them in an effort to complete it which is never fully accomplished. Though Merleau-Ponty speaks of the world more generally,

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this conception of taking up an unfinished world gains special resonance when we conceive of the world of books, which we conceive every time we read. That we collaborate in conception of the world of books is a general truth, but in particular cases it can also take on special meaning. Junius 11, the manuscript containing *Exodus*, for example, contains space for a sequence of illustrations that were only partially completed, and the incompleteness of the book presents itself upon every reading as space that requires the imagination of the reader to fill it.

However, when we think of books we do not primarily conceive of their material context or of the pictures they present or the imaginative potential of their blank spaces; we think of them as objects which make available linguistic codes that we interpret, and which influence our perceptions of the worlds they make available to us. Hans-Georg Gadamer used phenomenological methods in hermeneutics, taking up the world of the past and discovering that what structures our relationship to the world is the cultural horizon provided by language:

> [L]anguage maintains a kind of independent life vis-à-vis the individual member of a linguistic community; and as he grows into it, it introduces him to a particular orientation and relationship to the world as well. But the ground of this statement is more important, namely that language has no independent life apart from the world that comes to language within it. Not only is the world world only insofar as it comes into language, but language, too, has its real being only in the fact that the world is presented in it. Thus, that language is originarily human means at the same time that man’s being-in-the-world is primordially linguistic.\(^{16}\) Gadamer recognizes the inseparability of language and world to the individual who has pursued the phenomenological reduction, and for whom all knowledge of the world is filtered by language, and that language comes to the individual through the world. The issues I am

\(^{16}\) Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 440.
concerned with throughout are matters of language, of words that have their own history and inflect the Anglo-Saxon authors’ perception of their world. The world of Guthlac’s swamp is a Mercian fen; but it comes to us through Felix’s words, and the space they create is textured by their history.

While Husserl instituted the phenomenological method by bracketing the world from consideration, Merleau-Ponty and Gadamer show how the world is regained, as something structured by the individual, who takes it up as it appears. More recent philosophical trends in the study of objects and things have critiqued phenomenology as a philosophy of access, whose preoccupation with the appearance of the world to the individual hampers it from understanding the interaction of objects outside the sphere of the individual’s perception. However, reading is an act which is fundamentally about access, and this points to the benefit of reading with a phenomenological perspective. The world of books appears to the reader as something incomplete, which takes on its form as it reveals itself through the performance of the text. The phenomenological reduction becomes a means of revitalizing close reading practices, which in their New Critical manifestation presented the text as a complete object held up for aesthetic evaluation. Bracketing the text becomes a means not of excluding context, but of regaining it through a focus upon the ways in which it gives itself through language to the reader. The benefit of phenomenology, and why I employ it as a means of strengthening my close reading practices, is the fact that it does not impose an artificial separation between subject and the object of historical research, but instead is open to the ways in which objects give themselves over to our perception, even as the texts of the Anglo-Saxon poetic tradition gave themselves over to the poets working within them.
The problem of reading phenomenologically then becomes exploring the nature of how texts reveal themselves to us, and in the case of poetic texts how the image of a poem is able to be conveyed through language to the mind of the reader. Gaston Bachelard depicts this as the central problem of poetry, writing:

[H]ow can an image, at times very unusual, appear to be a concentration of the entire psyche? How—with no preparation—can this singular, short-lived event constituted by the appearance of an unusual poetic image, react on other minds, and in other hearts, despite all the barriers of common sense, all the disciplined schools of thought, content in their immobility?

It seemed to me, then, that this transsubjectivity of the image could not be understood, in its essence, through the habits of subjective reference. Only phenomenology—that is to say, consideration of the onset of the image in an individual consciousness—can help us to restore the subjectivity of images and to measure their fullness, their strength and their transsubjectivity. 17

Bachelard’s use of the epoché to bracket the onset of the image points to an understanding of texts not as subservient simply to an author’s intentions or a reader’s responses, but as something of power existing in its own right, which crosses over into the mind of the reader. The onset of the poetic image is my theme throughout the dissertation.

However, the danger of the phenomenological reduction as a means of close reading is that it potentially blinds us to the immediacy of the poetic image achieved in the embodiment of the reader. Readers of poems are not concerned with reducing the poem to a prop for philosophical explication. However, this is all too common a practice among philosophers, whose interest in the work of art is not in its particularity but in its ordinariness. This can be seen

17 Bachelard, The Poetics of Space, xviii–xix.
in Jean-Luc Marion’s pursuit of the beautiful in the work of art, in which he dismisses its material nature:

What, in the case of the painting, is marked by the frame (materialized in wood or marked by the edge of the canvas)? Framing marks the fact that the visible furnished by the painting no longer belongs to the space of visibility of ready-to-hand and finalized objects, that is to say, to the world of objects subsisting and above all ready-to-hand. Thanks to the frame, protector of extra-territoriality, this caution is tacitly inscribed: “This is not a ready-to-hand”—this colored space is not a collection of colors really available here as an object; it is rather the visibility of what appears without however being objectified.18

What Marion’s comments miss out on is that the frame—in the case of the literary work of art, the physical book—may often be a work of art in its own right, which would naturally raise the question of where does the beauty of the frame reside? What protects its extra-territoriality? What are we to make of works of art where the framing is a part of the work of art itself? At what point does the work of art become located elsewhere, and at what point is it located here, and are they ever intertwined?

That Marion is indifferent to these questions becomes swiftly apparent, as he proceeds from a consideration of visual art to a consideration of books, writing:

To see a book as a book, for example, therefore to apprehend it as having to be read, I must see it not as thing (what the bibliophile and the illiterate do in barely distinguishable ways), but as meaning: “This is precisely what I am not focused on. I see what is thingly about it insofar as it appears to me, but ‘I live in the sense comprehending it.’” … This can easily be applied to the painting: to see it as a

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18 Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, 44.
painting, in its own phenomenality of the beautiful, I must of course apprehend it as a thing (subsisting, ready-to-hand), but it is precisely not this that opens it to me as beautiful; it is that I “live” its meaning, namely its beautiful appearing, which has nothing thinglike to it, since it cannot be described as the property of a thing, demonstrated by reasons, or hardly even be said.\textsuperscript{19}

By pursuing the reduction of the work of art to the appearance of the beautiful, Marion is led to dismiss its physical form and refuse to distinguish the bibliophile from the illiterate. However, in Marion’s own phenomenology of givenness, it should be possible to pursue the question of how the thingly matter in which the work of art or book subsists gives itself, both on its own and in concert with the appearance of the beautiful. And what are we to make of books that contain physical beauty in their manner of appearing? The illustrated copies of the \textit{Psychomachia} contain art that was not a part of Prudentius’s poem. Do the illustrations and the text create beauty in isolation, each one completely independent of the other and taking the reader to a lived experience that is not intertwined by their appearing together within a single manuscript opening? There is a tension inherent in the work of literature, allowing it to be something here with us at the same time that it is somewhere else, such that the physical object becomes a talisman for the transsubjectivity of the poetic image.

This tension leads to the importance of metaphor as a way of bridging the two states. In his study of metaphor, Paul Ricoeur concludes: “[T]he ‘place’ of metaphor, its most intimate and ultimate abode, is neither the name, nor the sentence, nor even discourse, but the copula of the verb \textit{to be}. The metaphorical ‘is’ at once signifies both ‘is not’ and ‘is like.’ If this is really so, we are allowed to speak of metaphorical truth, but in an equally ‘tensive’ sense of the word

\textsuperscript{19} Marion, \textit{Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness}, 46. Marion Quotes Husserl, \textit{Ideen II}, §56, Hua. IV, 236, [English trans. 248].
This understanding of metaphor as something in tension between ‘is-like’ and ‘is not’ provides a model for thinking through the relation of poetic image and poetic presentation. The subject of a poem influences the way that we think of it, and its mode of presentation becomes like the image it presents, even as we know that it is not identical to that image. The presentation of these two elements is interlinked in the same way that language and world are interlinked in Gadamer, such that his statement could be reframed: Not only is the poetic image a poetic image only insofar as it comes into the presentation of the poem, but the presentation of the poem, too, has its real being only in the fact that the poetic image is presented in it.

That this was true of the language of the poem was recognized by Ricoeur:

Language takes on the thickness of a material or a medium. The sensible, sensual plenitude of the poem is like that of painted or sculptured forms. The combination of sensual and logical ensures that expression and impression coalesce within the poetic thing. Poetic signification fused thus with its sensible vehicle becomes that particular and ‘thingy’ reality we call a poem. However, Ricoeur errs in limiting the plenitude of the poem to painted or sculptured forms. These are important parts of the traits that language may take on in a poetic medium, but they do not capture the full vibrancy of the poetic image, whose range is limited only by the imagination. The image of the phoenix takes on the appearance of a crafted form, but there are also elements of natural beauty in its creation, and in Aldhelm’s hands the appearance of Christ to the saints is that of a kiss felt across time.

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20 Ricoeur, The Rule of Metaphor, 7.
21 I am using the locution “poetic presentation” as a means of containing both the material mode of its presentation and the combination of words that make it up.
22 Ricoeur, The Rule of Metaphor, 225.
George Lakoff and Mark Johnson drew on Ricoeur’s ideas about metaphor and Continental traditions concerning embodiment in order to provide an understanding of how metaphors shape perception:

The concepts that govern our thought are not just matters of the intellect. They also govern our everyday functioning, down to the most mundane details. Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people. Our conceptual system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities. … [T]he way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor.23

These concepts are not innate in language, but develop in it over time as conceptual metaphors take on new meaning through a familial likeness, and Lakoff and Johnson’s method of observation is linguistic, gathering the traces of how metaphors appear in the way people talk and write.

However, conceptual metaphors change over time, and what are guiding metaphors in our own time are not likely to be the same as those in the Anglo-Saxon period, as Leslie Lockett has shown in her analysis of how Anglo-Saxon notions of the embodiment of emotion differs from the Augustinian/Cartesian framework of mind-body dualism that characterizes modern Western attitudes.24 Moreover, the implications of Lakoff and Johnson’s theory would suggest that the conceptual metaphors that guide Anglo-Saxonists’ perceptions of poetic tradition would derive from the canon of poems used to teach the language, largely consisting of heroic, lyric, elegiac, and riddlic verse. This is a part of a general system of privileging what is perceived to be oral verse at the expense of verse that, explicitly or implicitly, engages with the rich textual tradition.

23 Lakoff and Johnson, Metaphors We Live By, 3.
24 Lockett, Anglo-Saxon Psychologies in the Vernacular and Latin Traditions.
of verse in both Latin and Old English. That this is the case has been most recently made evident by Stephen Harris, who in his contribution to *A Handbook of Anglo-Saxon Studies*, felt it necessary to remind readers that “Aldhelm’s Anglo-Latin poetry is Anglo-Saxon poetry,” a statement that would seem absurdly obvious if we were making it of the Beowulf-poet. Many of the texts that I will consider in the following work are characterized as difficult, but my interest in them derives from the fact that their difficulty has prevented them from being integrated into our understanding of the metaphors that shaped Anglo-Saxons’ perceptions of the written word. Their difficulty represents not just a challenge to our understanding of the texts, but to our way of thinking about textual tradition in Anglo-Saxon poetry.

My methods depend upon close reading informed by the phenomenological reduction, where the intention is to clarify the poetic image presented by the various texts and use it as a means of imaginatively exploring how the metaphorical structure it provides shapes the perception of the presentation of the poem itself in both its material and linguistic manifestations. To put it in Ricoeur’s terms, my intention is to explore how the poem is-likes its poetic image, even though we know it is not identical to that image. I draw throughout on authors participating in the phenomenological tradition, principally those already discussed in this introduction, whose works offer particular resonances with the particularities of the texts I am engaging. Though their interests are disparate, they are connected by the through-line of *epoché*, which provides the starting point for their work and unites them in method. My interest in their insights is not to pose them as if commenting directly upon the issues of Anglo-Saxon poetics, but to present them as clarifying issues that emerge through our own pursuit of metaphorical images given to perception by the poems. The approaches of phenomenology that I draw on are united in the presentation of the poem, which necessitates a consideration of a world of books and images.

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25 Harris, “Race and Ethnicity,” 175.
language and tradition, present and past, presence and absence, all fused in a single entity: the poem.

Having presented the methodological approach of this work, I now consider the outline of what is to come. Chapter one analyzes the relationship between the gift of the work of art and the animal materiality of the word made flesh. This image takes on a special significance in manuscript culture, in which words are written on flesh. This creates a consciousness of the materiality of the word as a physical entity that allows for Christ’s assumption of the flesh to take on the appearance of the writing of words on animal skins, an image that gains special importance in the work of Prudentius. The *Psychomachia*, a poem which depicts the enfleshment of the virtues and vices battling each other, begins with an account of Abraham’s sacrifice of a worthy gift to God. Called upon to sacrifice his son, Abraham instead is able to sacrifice a ram, which God reveals to him at the critical moment hiding in a bush, an image that appears in the tradition of illustrated copies of the *Psychomachia* as represented by CCCC MS 23. The flesh on which the medieval book is written gives material form to works of literature and gives it over to an experience of the world, in parallel with the human experience of flesh. Through a consideration of flesh as depicted in the *Psychomachia* and the *Apotheosis* of Prudentius, I argue that Marion’s analysis of flesh allows for an understanding of the reception of medieval manuscripts that grants them agency. The passivity of flesh, represented in the sacrifice of animal nature, allows for the radical agency of the material form of the book, subject to the experience of the world but also acting upon it.

Chapter two uses the queer historical idea of the touch across time to analyze the reception of virgin martyrs as a metaphor for the reception of classical and antique verse. Aldhelm mediated between the verse of the early medieval period and Anglo-Saxon literary
culture. His verse extensively reflected his own reading, as he recycled phrases from other authors and even his own work, creating tissues of intertextual reference and confecting new images by the manipulation of received material. The examples of the virgin martyrs emphasize the importance of bodily integrity and the desire to receive the touch of Christ, memorably depicted as a kiss in lines that recycle an image of the *Epithalamium Laurentii* of Pseudo-Claudian:

Non, sicut cecinit sponsali carmine vatis,
Mellea tunc roseis haerescunt labra labellis,
Dulcia sed Christi lentescunt labra labellis.\(^\text{26}\)

Aldhelm’s method of poetic citation presents an image of desiring to live with the past that accords with Carolyn Dinshaw’s presentation of a queer historical impulse characterized by the desire for the touch across time. As the saints desire the touch of Christ’s lips upon their own, so too does Aldhelm press his own lips to the words of the poets. The sanctification of this touch manifests in a metaphor of upward growth, which takes root in the ground. Aldhelm’s desire to live within the words of the poets leads him to seek to lead the Muse’s from the mountain, sanctifying them anew for his own purposes.

Chapter three explores the imaginative potential of intimate spaces, the corners where we hide from the world and find ourselves most open to it. Saint Guthlac sought a home in a remote portion of the Mercian fen, subsisting on scant food. Tucked away from the rest of human society and eating potentially ergotic bread, Guthlac received visions of demons who attacked him and invaded his home, a scene described with especially florid diction derived in part from Felix’s reading of Aldhelm. This scene allows for an analysis of how space and food have powerful effects on the imaginative life both of Guthlac and Felix as the receiver of extensive verse and hagiographic traditions. Drawing upon Gaston Bachelard’s analysis in *The Poetics of*  

\(^{26}\) Aldhelm, *Carmen de virginitate*, 1158–60; the modified line is: “mellea tunc roseis haerescent basia labris,” 80.
Space and Jane Bennett’s discussion of food, I argue that Guthlac lives in an intertextual fen which lacerates his body in the same way that the recondite vocabulary of Felix’s demons assaults the reader. The swamp and the text project themselves upon the one negotiating their brambles, and in doing so highlight our embodied experience of the world, with our homes becoming a means of expressing identity.

Chapter four examines the role of the visual imagination in translation and reading. Michael Roberts and Elizabeth Tyler have demonstrated the importance of ornamentation and jeweled styles in early Christian and Anglo-Saxon poetry, a conjunction of influence that is especially evident in Lactantius’ Carmen de ave phoenice and its vernacular adaptation, the OE Phoenix.27 I argue that the ekphrastic description of the bird in Lactantius’ poem presents a challenge to the adapter, leading to an adaptation highlighting different norms of visual culture and the interrelation of ekphrasis, translation, and allegoresis as modes of reading. Drawing on Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of how the visible world reveals itself to our senses in The Visible and the Invisible, I show how the two poems emerge as entities always standing in for something else and existing on their own terms, intertwining the senses of sight and sound into a synaesthetic constellation. The two poems pay tribute to the paradox of the phoenix, which retains a singular identity even as it gives birth to itself in new forms.

Chapter five elaborates a theory of textual interpretation rooted in poetic practice. The Old English Exodus speaks of the Gastes cægon, the keys of the spirit, capable of revealing the mysteries contained in the written works of the past.28 However, Exodus does not simply explain how texts are interpreted; it uses the crossing of the Red Sea as a model for how the mysteries of the past are revealed. As the obscuring waters part, the works of the past are revealed to the

27 Roberts, The Jeweled Style; Tyler, Old English Poetics.
28 Exodus, 526.
Israelites, providing a metaphorical framework that illustrates Gadamer’s hermeneutic theory of understanding as a perpetual fusion of past and present horizons. Understanding, then, depends upon a mediator or translator, in Old English, a *wealhstod*, who stands on the boundary of past and present. The Junius 11 manuscript, with its blank spaces in the text of *Exodus* intended for never-completed illustrations, becomes a textual sea whose surface presents mysterious depths, which are revealed to the reader equipped with the keys of the spirit.
Chapter 1

The Givenness of the Flesh: Prudentius, Christ, and the Form of the Book

Literature comes as a gift. The poet Robert Duncan, whose intense admiration for the modernist H. D. led to his great critical endeavor, *The H. D. Book*, wrote of his first encounter with one of H. D.’s poems in a high school classroom:

> Inside, in a room that was hers [his teacher’s] and an hour that was hers—for each period in the schedule of my school day still in those years would become a realm of expectancy for me—the poem came as an offering. It may have been a diversion or a reward after duties in our course of instruction. She had presented it as something more, a personal communication. “I have brought a poem today, not as part of your required reading,” did she say? or “not belonging to English Literature, but to my own world, a confidence, a gift, or share?”

What distinguished H. D.’s poetry for Duncan was its capacity to reveal itself as a gift. His teacher, Miss Keough, did not write the poem, but it belonged to her because it had given itself over entirely to her, disclosing itself and becoming a part of her, as she gave herself over to it in turn. Thus, the poem became a part of her that she was able to share, in the hopes that students would give themselves over to the poem and allow it to give itself back. Its purpose was not to instruct, to provide required knowledge that would make the students better able to navigate the world. Rather, it was to establish a common ground of fellowship, building up a common identity rooted in the revelations of poetic imagery.

As H. D.’s words appeared to Duncan as a gift and common ground, so too do the works of the Anglo-Saxons come down to us, passed down on the skins of animals which provide a

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material embodiment of the word made flesh. The flesh gives forms to the words, as our own bodies give us form, and grant material existence in the world. The gift of the word made flesh characterizes our own reception of Anglo-Saxon works and also the reception of the earliest Christian poets within the Anglo-Saxon period. For these poets the image of the word made flesh could be powerfully employed to show the textualization of human bodies and the enfleshment of immaterial words. In this chapter I will discuss the use of the word made flesh in the works of Prudentius and argue that it demonstrates how subjectivity is given by the materiality of the flesh, allowing both the reading individual and the read book a form through which to act upon the world.

Raby has called Prudentius “[t]he first great Christian poet,” and he composed a number of poems on Christian themes in the late fourth century. Along with Virgil, Juvenecus, Sedulius, and Arator, he was a part of the poetic curriculum in Anglo-Saxon England, as evinced by the numerous extant manuscripts of his work, some with extensive glossing, such as Cambridge, Corpus Christi College (CCCC) MS 23. Both Bede and Aldhelm display knowledge of multiple poems through borrowed phrasing. His oeuvre includes poetic treatments of Christian doctrine (Apotheosis, Contra Symmachum, and Hamartigenia); hymns (Liber cathermerinon); hagiography (Liber peristephanon); and allegory (Psychomachia). As Martha Malamud has shown, Prudentius was linguistically playful, with an awareness of a multitude of ways in which meaning could be both hidden and disclosed in poetic texts. Recent work on Prudentius has

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2 Raby, A History of Christian Latin Poetry, 44.
4 Lapidge, The Anglo-Saxon Library, 185 (for Aldhelm) and 224 (for Bede).
focused on his concerns with gender and embodiment as well as the expression of space and place in poetic texts.\(^6\)

Prudentius reveals a fascination with Christ as “the one phenomenon that allows the soul of a human being to know God.”\(^7\) Prudentius explores Christ’s taking on the flesh in both the *Apotheosis* and *Psychomachia*, and I will argue in this chapter that Prudentius plays with the concept of the word made flesh as a figurative conflation of the flesh of Christ’s body with the animal materiality of manuscripts and frames it within the context of sacrificial gifts. These ideas come together in the opening lines of the *Psychomachia* in an account of Abraham’s intended sacrifice of Isaac, who is saved by the appearance of a ram who takes his place, an offering that powerfully prefigures Christ’s own sacrifice enabled by taking upon himself the animal nature of the flesh. In articulating a framework for understanding gifts, I draw on the work of Jean-Luc Marion, whose *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness* and *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena* argue that our interactions with the world are characterized by the act of being given, that everything we perceive gives itself over to our perceptions and that we are given to ourselves by our flesh, upon which we are acted upon by the world and through which we act in the world.

In order to understand the phenomenality of Prudentius’s texts in Anglo-Saxon England, my study will not only draw on formal analysis of Prudentius’s poems but will explore their material context through a case study of the illustrated copy of Prudentius’s *Psychomachia* contained in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College MS 23. I will use it to concretize my assertions about how the materiality of the book is implicated in the materiality of Christ as the Word made


\(^7\) Mastrangelo, *The Roman Self in Late Antiquity*, 87.
flesh. The manuscript has a murky past, and scholars are divided over its intended use. Gernot Wieland has argued that the extensive glossing in the manuscript would make it suitable for use in a monastic classroom, while Ray Page and Catherine Karkov argue that the lavishness of its decorations suggest ownership by a “wealthy secular patron.” Wieland has demonstrated that the manuscript, which contains the fullest cycle of Prudentius illustrations in Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, had an unillustrated manuscript as its exemplar, leading to the presence of empty spaces in the manuscript. These spaces were intended to be filled in with illustrations, but the scribe left too many, based upon chapter headings throughout the manuscript. When the illustrator later filled in the spaces, there were several with no analogue to existing illustrations in the Prudentius cycle. Rather than arguing, as Wieland, that “His failure to [fill in the empty spaces] betrays a lack of originality,” I will argue that the subjectivity granted to the text by taking on the flesh allows it to act as an agent. The network of human and non-human agents involved in the production and consumption of Anglo-Saxon manuscripts was a complex and unpredictable network, and rather than representing a failure on the part of the scribe, I will argue that the blank spaces in the manuscript become a representation of the vibrancy of matter and its capacity to resist conforming to human expectations.

While the chapter begins and ends with a consideration of the manuscript context of the illustrated Psychomachia, it pursues a close reading of two other texts to explore the nature of flesh that informs my analysis. With the discussion of Christ taking up the use of the flesh in the


10 For this argument, I will draw on Jane Bennett’s work on networks of human and non-human agents in Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things.
Psychomachia as a point of flight, the chapter moves to a consideration of the Apotheosis, which more fully presents Prudentius’s views about Christ’s flesh. While the Apotheosis does not appear within CCCC 23, it provides context which enhances my reading of how the animal materiality of the manuscript, as the means of presentation of Prudentius’s work, is fused with the subject of Christ’s assumption of the flesh and the gift of flesh, initially intended to be human and then animal, Abraham makes to begin the Psychomachia. In particular, the Apotheosis 1) depicts Christ as the visible word of God, which has a hidden, oral source (78–81); 2) depicts the page of the divine book as unable to speak falsely about the word made flesh (107–9); and 3) characterizes the human flesh that Christ takes up as animal in nature (159–66). From these I propose a reading of Prudentius that calls for the means of presentation, words written upon flesh, to be metaphorically approached according to the figure of the Word made flesh. This leads to a reading of Exeter Riddle 26, which depicts the process of the creation of a book through the spoken words of the book itself. The book undergoes the suffering of flesh, in order to stand as an entity capable of acting for salvific purposes on behalf of Christ. These two texts strengthen my reading of books receiving subjectivity as a result of the experience of the flesh, and more specifically, words taking up the use of the flesh.

Abraham and Being Given

Marion’s phenomenology of givenness begins with the idea that everything that appears, appears as a gift: “For nothing appears except by giving itself to pure seeing, and therefore the concept of the phenomenon is exactly equal to that of a self-givenness in person. The staging of the phenomenon is played out as the handing over of a gift.” In Marion’s terminology, Prudentius’s poems appear because they hand themselves over to their readers as a gift. While it

11 Marion, Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness, 27. Further, Marion writes, “The equivalence of showing itself and giving itself is not an opinion, option, wish, or even a doctrine—but something theoretically compulsory, or rather, dare it be said, a given,” 119.
is true to some degree that Prudentius and the intervening traditions of scribes, illustrators, editors, and publishers are links in a chain that result in the reception of his texts by readers medieval and modern, the text only appears to readers in the act of reading itself, in which they both give themselves over to the text and the text gives itself over to them.

The language of givenness is suitable to a discussion of Prudentius, who begins the *Psychomachia* with an account of a gift:

> Senex fidelis prima credendi via
> Abram, beati seminis serus pater,
> adiecta cuius nomen auxit syllaba,
> Abram parenti dictus Abraham deo,
> senile pignus qui dicauit uictimae
> docens ad aram cum litare quis uelit
> quod dulce cordi quod pium quod unicum
> deo libenter offerendum credito,
> pugnare nosmet cum profanis gentibus
> suasit suasor exemplum dedit
> nec ante prolem coniugalem gignere
> deo placentem, matre uirtute editam
> quam strage multa bellicosus spiritus
> portenta cordis seruientis uicerit.¹²

This sprawling sentence uses Abraham’s intended sacrifice of Isaac as an example demonstrating how to assure the acceptability of offerings to God. The language of givenness pervades the passage. Abraham’s name itself pays testimony to a gift, as it increased when a syllable was added onto it (*adiecta*...*auxit*), a gift not derived from his parents, but God. Abraham then dedicates a sacrifice (*dicauit*), which is offered at the altar (*ad aram*...*litare*), giving only that

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¹² Prudentius, *Psychomachia*, Praefatio, 1–14. “The old man faithful with the first way of believing, Abram, the late father of the blessed seed, whose name grew with an added syllable, called Abram by his father and Abraham by God—who consecrated the offering of his old age as a sacrifice, teaching that when one wishes to make a sacrifice at the altar, what is dear to the heart, what is holy, what is singular is to be freely offered to God in good faith—has urged us to fight against the pagan peoples and the urger has given his own example, that he may not produce offspring of marriage pleasing to God, born by the mother Virtue, until the bellicose spirit with great struggling has conquered the monsters of the enslaved heart.”
which is fitting (offerendum). By doing all of these things, Abraham gives us an example (exemplum dedit).\(^\text{13}\)

The passage requires an implicit understanding that Abraham’s gift is brought about first by God’s gift to him, the birth of a son in his old age. Although Isaac is not mentioned by name in the passage, manuscripts often provide supplementary information that makes the biblical intertext explicit. Folio 1v of CCCC 23 contains an illustration depicting the moment at which God interrupts the sacrifice to provide a ram. The Old English title above the illustration reads: “Her godes swyðra forbead abrahame þæt he his sunu ne ofsloge swa him beboden wæs ac funde him anne ram gode to geoffrigenne.”\(^\text{14}\) The illustration itself shows Abraham standing above Isaac with sword raised. Isaac is facing the altar on the right side of the page, while Abraham looks up and to the left, where the hand of God appears to him. A ram is mired in a bush in the bottom left. The illustration does not parallel the text but provides information not present there, offering another option for reading the manuscript.

Unlike other illustrations in the CCCC 23 manuscript, this illustration lacks a Latin title that serves as the basis for the Old English. However, Cotton Cleopatra MS C.VIII, another Anglo-Saxon illustrated Psychomachia, provides both a Latin title and an Old English title that clearly derives from the Latin. The Latin reads, “Abraham exemplum fideliter credentium fuit,” and the Old English, “Her Abraham bysene onstælde geleaffullum, þa he wolde his agen bearn acwellan, swa him seo stefen bead of heofonum.”\(^\text{15}\) This Latin title accords well with the

\(^{13}\) Orchard, “Conspicuous Heroism: Abraham, Prudentius, and the Old English Verse Genesis,” finds further connections between the poetry of Latin and vernacular traditions, locating in Prudentius “a useful analogue for the way in which a poet steeped in heroic tradition can interpret and elaborate a promising piece of scripture,” 130.

\(^{14}\) The transcription of the title is my own, but a full transcription of the English titles can also be found in Zupitza, “Englisches aus Prudentiushandschriften,” 36–45. “Here God’s right hand forbade Abraham from killing his son, as he was commanded, and found him a ram to offer God.”

\(^{15}\) Zupitza, “Englisches aus Prudentiushandschriften,” 36. The Latin reads: “Abraham faithful gave an example of believing”; the Old English reads: “Here Abraham gave an example of believing, when he wanted to kill his own son, as the voice commanded him from the heavens.”
tendency of the poem’s text to elide Isaac’s presence in the sacrifice, and relates the scene depicted in the illustration to the *Psychomachia* without substantively commenting upon how Abraham was an example of faith. The Old English translation in the Cleopatra manuscript deals with the discrepancy between illustration, title, and poem by first translating the Latin, but appending to it a descriptive statement about how the sacrifice reflects Abraham’s faith. The absence of the Latin title in the Corpus manuscript allows the illustration to reveal itself to the reader without the mediation of an authoritative interpretation, and one particular reader codified this revelation in the Old English title, allowing the ram to emerge from the bushes he is hidden in and occupy a central place in the sacrificial drama alluded to in the *Psychomachia* due to the enfleshment of the text.

Along with the illustrations, the text appears accompanied by an elaborate array of glossed material. Glossing of Prudentius manuscripts is a topic that has received considerable scholarly interest, especially given his importance within the poetic curriculum of Anglo-Saxon England.16 Substantial interrelationships existed between different manuscripts of the same glossed text, as Gernot Wieland shows in his analysis of the first few glosses on Prudentius in CUL Gg.5.35, BL Cotton Cleopatra C.viii, and CCCC 23; however, Wieland goes on to note that “glosses can change substantially from manuscript to manuscript.”17 Glosses could serve multiple functions in a manuscript and could occur in multiple places on the page, such that the different types were distinguished by function rather than form. In his work on the Cambridge Songs manuscript, Wieland notes five different types of glosses: 1) glosses on prosody, consisting of accentual marks and glosses of syllable length and poetic technique; 2) lexical

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glosses, in which an approximately equivalent word is used to explain another word; 3) grammatical glosses, predominantly concerning morphology; 4) syntactical glosses that explain the relationship between words in a sentence; 5) commentary glosses.\(^\text{18}\) In CCCC 23 I am primarily interested in lexical and commentary glosses, but it is important to keep in mind that these glosses do not exist in isolation and are a part of the larger educational curriculum of the period. These glosses, which circulated amongst manuscripts but could also vary considerably, offer an opportunity to practice a form of close reading attuned to the demands of a particular, embodied experience.

Folio 2r presents the entirety of the first fourteen lines, and explanatory glossing occupies the head of the page and a substantial portion of the right margin. These glosses explain the significance of both the title of the poem as well as presenting more discursive analysis of the meaning of the poem. The interlinear glossing appearing throughout the page generally provides succinct information enabling precise interpretation of grammatical and linguistic interpretation. For example, glosses beginning *id est* provide guides to word meaning by the presentation of synonyms, as in the gloss for *auxit*, “id est addidit uel multiplicauit,” or *ad aram*, “ad altare.” Glosses beginning *scilicet* identify grammatical information that should be understood by the reader, as with the gloss for *dedit*, “scilicet nobis.” These systems of glossing give substantial paratextual support for the illustration’s clarification of the story of Abraham and Isaac, and explain Isaac’s typological relationship to Christ. Following a discussion of the Greek title of the poem, the header gloss explains why Abraham is described as *serus* (2), and brings Christ into the discussion: “Abram interpretatur pater excelsus. Abraham pater multarum gentium. uel omnium. Serus id est tardus. quia in senectute isaac genuit. ex cuius progenie Christe erat

\(^{18}\) Wieland, *The Latin Glosses on Arator and Prudentius*. For glosses on prosody, see 16–25; lexical glosses, 26–46; grammatical glosses, 47–97; syntactical glosses, 98–146; commentary glosses, 147–90.
In explaining the second line of the *Psychomachia*, the heading clarifies the typological relationship between Isaac and Christ, the two most significant of Abraham’s progeny. An interlinear gloss above *beati seminis* in line 2 reading, “id est Christe uel Isaac;” provides further support to a reading of the passage that sees Christ’s sacrifice as the typological fulfillment of Abraham’s intended sacrifice of Isaac.

While the readings provided by the glossing explicitly introduce Christ and foreground Isaac in relation to him, modern readings of the poem have down-played Christ’s significance as the fulfillment of Isaac in the passage. Jean-Louis Charlet writes: “Mais ici, ce n’est pas la typologie traditionnelle qu’exprime Prudence (Isaac comme «type» du Christ), mais l’enseignement spirituel que les chrétiens peuvent en tirer dans l’exercice quotidien de leur foi (quel sacrifice doit-on offrir à Dieu?): la poésie de Prudence est tournée vers une pratique de la foi.”

In a similar vein, Macklin Smith focuses on the typological relationship not between Isaac and Christ, but between Abraham and Christ, and argues that the hexameter portion of the poem is the fulfillment of the preface:

In fact, not until we reach the hexameter narrative do certain striking parallels show themselves. Abraham is the first to show the way of believing. Who is the second? Certainly Christ. “Abram is the first name mentioned in the “Praefatio” and “Christ” is the first word in the main hexameter section. So begins a detailed structural plan of typological fulfillment of the “Praefatio” by the hexameter section. ... Abraham has the first *psychomachia* of sacred history to be resolved completely in favor of God; thus his obedient willingness to sacrifice his son

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19 All transcriptions from the manuscript are my own. “Abram is interpreted as the high father. Abraham was the father of many peoples, or of all. He is *serus*, that is, late, because in his old age he bore Isaac, from whose progeny Christ was to be born.”

Isaac. The allusion (5–8) is understated and non-dramatic, probably for the same reason that the sacrifice of Isaac is not treated in the later narrative paraphrase.²¹ Both critics downplay Isaac’s importance as an integral figure to Abraham’s spiritual practice. Charlet sees the importance of the passage not as a typological fulfillment, but as an expression of the daily exercise of faith, while Smith’s structural analysis of the poem promotes a reading that accomplishes a similar end by deferring the interpretation of the preface to a reading of the main body of the poem, twinning the typology of Abraham and Christ with the typology of preface and poem.

However, the material context in which the poem appears would argue against the attempts by these critics to limit the plenitude of meaning available to readers of the poem. Whereas “striking parallels” do not emerge until reaching the main body of the text for Smith, for medieval readers the parallels are abundantly clear on a first reading, and were quite possibly even more clear than the poem for some medieval readers, given the extensive grammatical glossing of the text and the difficulty of Prudentius’s syntax. Before reading the first line a reader would likely examine the illustration of Isaac on the facing page of the manuscript, whose Old English title makes the context clear even for a reader with minimal Latin, and then the introductory gloss brings Christ into the picture long before readers make it to the hexameters. However, these different systems do not directly correlate with each other. Smith’s and Charlet’s readings accurately reflect the oblique way in which Isaac figures into the text of the poem, but they close down alternative avenues for interpretation that the material context not only leaves open, but introduces.²² A multitude of reading strategies could conceivably produce different

²¹ Smith, Prudentius’s Psychomachia: A Reexamination, 208–9.
²² For another example of how paratextual materials provide alternative methods of interpreting manuscripts, see Catherine Karkov’s discussion of the illustrations in Junius 11 in her book Text and Picture in Anglo-Saxon England and also chapter five of this work.
interpretations of the text, calling to mind Ricoeur’s analysis of the production of meaning as a function of maximizing possible interpretations within the limitations of what are allowable. Ricoeur phrases his principle of plenitude as, “All the connotations that can ‘go with’ the rest of the context must be attributed to the poem. ... [P]oetic reading, as opposed to that involved with scientific or technical discourse, is not obliged to choose between two meanings that are equally admissible in the context; what would be ambiguity in the one is honoured as the plenitude of the other.”

What is accomplished by the paratextual foregrounding of Isaac? It helps to elucidate what is admittedly one of the most elliptical passages of the text (5–8), and one could argue that it is in fact not because of Isaac’s importance to the text but his relative absence from it that explains the presence of the glossing, although not the illustration. Isaac’s prominence in the paratextual materials call attention to his status as the sacrifice Abraham makes to God. The interlinear glossing to line 5 goes to extraordinary lengths to make it clear what is being sacrificed and who is doing the sacrificing, with the glosses for individual words running on at such length that the glosses run one into the other and stretch long past the five words of the line into the right margin: “filium quem in senectute genuit. scilicet Abraham. id est consecrauit uel immolauit. quoquantum fuit in se; eum deo sacrificium obtulit.” What Prudentius implies the glossator fills in, and a passage that focuses on Abraham’s conduct becomes one about the acceptability of Abraham’s gift to God. The gift reveals itself to the one giving because it is that which is dulce cordi, “id est amabile” according to the glossator, that which is pium and unicum. The gift reveals itself to the giver, and by giving himself over entirely to his father, Isaac

23 Ricoeur, The Rule of Metaphor, 111.
24 “The son whom he bore in his old age. Namely Abraham. That is consecrated or sacrificed. However much there was in him; he offered him as a sacrifice to God.”
25 “That is capable of being loved.”
reveals himself as that which is dear to Abraham’s heart, a fitting sacrifice. It is in Isaac’s appearance as a gift that he typologically anticipates Christ’s sacrifice according to his own love for his father.

Marion characterizes the appearance of the gift as its givability:

Thus the gift does not consist in a transferred object, but in its givability. By givability, I mean a determination of the gift given as well as of the giver. (a) Givability characterizes certain phenomena in certain circumstances of appearing not as a passive potential (this phenomenon susceptible, by its value and its availability, to being chosen from among other comparable ones to become the gift), but as a positive potentiality: this phenomenon appears in such a way that it demands, of itself, passing to the state of gift, of giving itself. Givability does not merely permit the gift to give itself; it demands it—the gift as (the) about-to-be-given.  

Marion’s statement of the gift operating as a gerundive accords well with Prudentius’s account of what constitutes a sacrifice for God. That which is to be offered (offerendum, 8) reveals itself to the giver. It is not simply enough for the faithful old man to choose something he loves, but he must fight “aduersus principatus et potestates huius seculi et cetera spiritalia uitia” as the header gloss to the poem phrases it. By conducting the spiritual warfare of the Psychomachia in the exercise of faith, the gift is capable of revealing itself as that which is both capable of being given by Abraham and of being accepted by God. It is not something which can be decided upon; the gift decides itself, without even being aware that it does so, as Isaac gives himself over to his father without being aware of what his intentions are. As Marion puts it, “The debate does

26 Marion, Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness, 107.
not take place between my neutral free will and the neutral object, but between my gaze seeing the phenomenon given and the receivability of its appearing.”

**The Animal Materiality of Flesh**

At the critical moment of the sacrifice God intervenes, not in the text of Prudentius’s poem, where the details of the sacrifice are elided, but in the manuscript itself. God’s hand appears not above the altar at which Abraham is preparing to sacrifice his son but above a ram obscured by the bushes. The ram reveals itself to Abraham’s sight (and ours) in such a way that indicates its acceptability as a sacrifice, and further cements the typological relationship between Isaac and Christ, the lamb of God. However, this revelation is not accessible to a reader working with an unillustrated copy of the text, nor can it be attributed to poetic design. Instead, it highlights something that Prudentius plays with throughout his poems, the material text as the typological fulfillment of the oral poem, the word literally made flesh. The appearance of the ram *goed to geoffrigene* becomes meaningful to the interpretation of the poem when it takes on its form against the backdrop of the animal materiality of the medieval manuscript.

Bruce Holsinger has recently made several propositions about the place of animals within medieval manuscript culture that serve as a useful starting place for discussion:

- In parchment cultures, the animal never is simply the object of representation but constitutes the material substance of the literary object.
- Medieval literature is, in the most rigorously literal sense, nothing but millions of stains on animal parts.
- The dead animal is the “con-text” of medieval literary production in the most immediate way: that with which writing is joined or woven inseparably together in and as text.
- To be a medievalist is to be hopelessly implicated in and to constantly witness the mass deaths of countless sheep, lambs, calves, and goats for the means of literary transmission.

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27 Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, 110.
For us as scholars of medieval writing, the survival of our primary object of study depends on the myriad animals whose hides have given medieval literature the morbid life it continues to share with those who consume it.”

Holsinger’s call for an awareness of our own implication in the production and consumption of medieval manuscripts contains within it the path toward a transhistorical path towards the reception of medieval texts. This has profound implications for both our own reception of medieval texts but also the reception of medieval readers, for whom the animal nature of the codex is everywhere evident, as not only the material of the book itself but the ink and quills and other elements that make up the codex derive from the animals and plants of the natural world. The representation of the animal sacrifice on f. 1v takes its material substance from the animal flesh made out of parchment, an animal which would in its own turn have been sacrificed both to provide the means for literary transmission of Prudentius’s work and to meet other needs in communities consuming the animal in more ways than one. As readers, we are called to be witnesses to the deaths of both the ram in Abraham and Isaac’s story and the fulfillment of the ram’s sacrifice in the form of the book.

Prudentius’s interest in the incarnation of the word pays further testimony to Holsinger’s second and third propositions. Prudentius describes Christ’s incarnation as follows:

Verbum quippe caro factum non destitit esse
quod fuerat, uerbum, dum carnis glutinat usum,
maiestate quidem non degenerante per usum carnis sed miseris ad nobiliora trahente.
Ille manet quod semper erat, quod non erat esse incipiens; nos quod fuimus iam non sumus, aucti nascendo in melius. Mihi contulit et sibi mansit.
Nec deus ex nostris minuit sua, sed sua nostris dum tribuit nosmet dona ad caelestia uexit.

29 Prudentius, Psychomachia, 78–86. “Indeed, the word made flesh did not cease to be what it had been, the word, while fixing itself to the use of the flesh, not decreasing in glory through the use of the flesh but drawing the wretched on to nobler things. He remains what he ever was, beginning to be what he was not; now we are not what
In this account of the incarnation, the presence of the word is not diluted by taking on flesh. Rather, it works metonymically, expressing the fullness of its divine power in corporeal form.

Prudentius plays with repetition to contrast the relative states of Christ and man, figures masked as the word and flesh. The glossing of the passage makes the dichotomy between flesh and divinity even clearer: caro “id est homo” [that is man] (78); dum carnis glutinat usum “id est assumat et adiungit diuinitati” [that is assuming and joining it to divinity] (79); maiestate “id est diuinitate” [that is divinity] (80); miseros “scilicet homines” [understand men] (81); ad nobili “id est ad celestia” [that is toward the heavens]; ille “scilicet Christus” [understand Christ] (82); erat “scilicet deus” [understand God]; non erat “id est homo” [that is man]; incipiens “per incarnationem” [through the incarnation] (83); fuimus “id est peccatores” [that is sinners]; aucti “scilicet sumus. id est multiplicati” [understand we are. that is multiplied]; nascendo “id est per baptismum renascend[o]” [that is reborn through baptism] (84); contulit “scilicet diuinitatem suam se ipsum” [understand his own divinity, he himself]; mansit “scilicet integre” [understand wholly]; ex nostris “id est nostra humanitate” [that is our own humanity] (85); sua “id est diuinitate” [that is divinity]; nostris “scilicet usibus” [understand uses].

The glosses seek to clarify the passage by explicitly identifying the traits that are characteristic of Christ’s divinity and man’s flesh. However, they also illustrate the manner in which forms flow one into the other. Christ’s incarnation is put in a parallel with man’s rebirth through baptism; however, the metonymic effect of these rebirths are not parallel. While Christ’s majesty expressed through the use of the flesh allows him to remain what he ever was, *integre,*

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30 Throughout these glossing I have translated *scilicet* as *understand,* although it could equally be translated *namely.* It simply refers to knowledge understood by the reader according to their knowledge of Latin and context within the passage.
we are drawn upwards from the flesh, toward noble things, to the heavens. The allegory seeks to sublimate the experience of the flesh in favor of the spiritual interpretation. However, the animal materiality of the flesh becomes a site of resistance for this allegorizing tendency, illustrating Holsinger’s point that, “in medieval allegorical thinking as in contemporary commentary, the literal sense elaborated through allegory subsists remarkably often at the animal level.” When the word became flesh, it did not cease to be what it was, while it, literally glutinat, glued itself to the use of the flesh, or as the gloss would have it, assumed the use of the flesh and joined it to divinity. The language Prudentius uses here, as well as the glossator, when read while keeping in mind Holsinger’s reminder that the animal is that to which writing joins itself, provides an avenue for thinking of the word made flesh as a poetic image that influences the perception of words joined to actual flesh. This relation between Christ and the form of the book simultaneously sublimates and concretizes the materiality of the book that provides the context through which Prudentius’s words are transmitted.

The passage uses shifts in tense to highlight the typological fulfillment of Christ’s incarnation in mankind’s rebirth, a rebirth occasioned by sacrifice and whose fulfillment is marked by the reception of celestial gifts. The language of the passage and the view of history it presents accords with Prudentius’s historical method. As Marc Mastrangelo argues,

[B]ecause salvation history is conceived of by Prudentius and his readers as synchronic, encompassing a God’s eye view of the past, present and future, the present or future act/event, with respect to the narrative whole, actually determines that past act or event. How Prudentius interprets or encourages the reader to interpret, a present or future event, determines which past events survive in a synchronically conceived salvation history. ... Hence, Prudentius has

employed a literary trope, typology, as the connective means for identity and access to the divine.\textsuperscript{32}

The compressed account of Christ’s incarnation compresses the account of salvation history into a set of contrasts between Christ’s state and mankind’s, and the contrasting states metonymically suggest the teleological nature of salvation. The motion of the typological trope is ineluctable, with Christ drawing the flesh forward even as celestial gifts reveal themselves to man’s sight as God bears him on.

In addition to his writings about Christ’s incarnation in the \textit{Psychomachia}, Prudentius writes extensively on the subject in another of his poems, the \textit{Apotheosis}. In a series of passages in the portion of the text titled “Contra heresim quae patrem adfirmat,” Prudentius lays out the essential ineffableness of God, while emphasizing that the way that we know him is through Christ. These passages further develop the idea of Christ’s incarnation as an assumption of the animal materiality of the flesh and uses language with dual reference to Christ and the form of the book. In the following passage, Prudentius elaborates a central point of this portion of the \textit{Apotheosis}, that “the figure of Christ is understood as the only means for humans, who recognize him through faith, to gain access to the Father—i.e. the Word, which is not seen as it is, but issuing from the Father, and seen in the form of a human.”\textsuperscript{33}

\begin{quote}
Ergo nihil uisum nisi quod sub carne uidendum.
Lumen imago dei, uerbum deus, et deus ignis qui sentum nostri peccamen corporis inplet.

Nam lucis genitor, uerbi sator, auctor et ignis creditur extra oculos, ut apostolus edocet auctor, qui negat intuitu fontem deitatis adiri.

Credite, nemo deum uidit, mihi credite, nemo.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{32} Mastrangelo, \textit{The Roman Self in Late Antiquity}, 49.

\textsuperscript{33} Mastrangelo, \textit{The Roman Self in Late Antiquity}, 87.
The passage is rich in rhetorical figures that Prudentius employs to highlight the paradoxical relationship between God who we are incapable of seeing and Christ, who is both God and in the form of the flesh. The tension reveals itself in line 71 as between the past participle and the gerundive, giving the reader a sense of past and future expressed in a present that contains all time. Line 72 presents God in three aspects indicative of an incorporeal nature: light, the word, and fire. The first aspect, light, is not described as God himself, but as the image of God, an intriguing notion, in that light serves to illumine other things and allows them to be seen. These three traits are repeated two lines later (74), although *lumen* has changed to *lux*, and each word in the genitive is paired with a different agentive noun. The rhetorical effect is of a cascade, the fountain the poem builds up to in lines 76 and 78. *Deus* serves as the headwater of this fountain, and his traits cascade down, building up in sets of three that highlight the mystery of the Trinity. Lines 77 through 80 make heavy use of repetition to bind lines together artfully to suggest the interpenetration of paradoxical concepts. The imperative, *credite*, that occurs twice (77), each time followed by the word *nemo*, but before calling upon the reader to believe that nobody has seen God, it first asks that the reader believe. The periods bracket important ideas through repetition, and while 77 fits the space of a single line, the following two brackets occupy

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34 Prudentius, *Apotheosis*, 71–83. “Therefore, nothing has been seen but what is to be seen in the flesh. Light is the image of God, God the word, and God the fire, which burns up the sin of the thornbush of our body. For the father of light, the sower of the word, and the founder of fire is believed to be beyond the eyes, as the founding apostle taught, who denies that the fountain of deity is apprehended with sight. Believe, no one sees God, believe me, no one. The God who comes from the fountain is visible, but the fountain itself of God is not visible; he who was born may be seen, but he who is unborn is not able to be seen. The mouth of the father is hidden whence came the God who once made himself visible, creating a form so that suffering, which needs a body, followed.”

35 I am mindful of T. S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*. 
the space of a line plus an additional foot, such that the repeated terms occupy identical metrical positions within their respective lines, and the intervening words use the rhetorical trope of polyptoton, reusing words with different inflectional endings, in order to suggest a shifting frame of reference. At the center of these periods is *non*, a word which to emphasize an eternal present mediating between the typologically separated conceptions of divinity, although rather than the God of the fountainhead appearing first, it is the God who emerges from the fountain whom we first see, he who is born, not he who was not born. However, even the terms used within this perceptive bracket blend into one another, for while *innatus* here is meant as a negative contrast to *nascitum*, it could also be read as the participle of *innascor*, born into something, the ambiguity highlighting the interpenetration of God the father and God the son even as their differences are maintained.

The passage finally explains the difference between the God who is not visible and the God who is visible in lines 82 and 83. The mouth of the father remains hidden, even as it sends forth the God who furnishes himself to us as something visible. The distinction of the God who hides himself and the God who gives himself are in fact two sides of the same coin, for as Marion notes it is impossible to give a gift without also retreating from it. God gave his son over into the flesh, but in doing so God retreated from the gift. It is this retreat that allows for the presence of the *non* mediating between the two Gods. The mouth of the Father remains hidden precisely because it is what furnishes the gift, for the gift works to conceal the giver. Furthermore, in giving himself over to the flesh, the God who gives is given over to himself by the use of the flesh, that is, he is given over to subjectivity. For, as Marion has argued, contra Descartes, “I am first and definitively bound—*alligatus*—to my feeling body. The *ego* gives
itself as flesh, even if one wants to hide it.” In furnishing himself to us as a visible body, Christ takes on the flesh that allows him the experience of himself, an experience that enables him not only to appear to us as a body, but to make appear the world around him.

Although the terms of the discussion thus far have focused upon the spiritual dimension of the *Apotheosis*, I would like to return to a consideration of the material text. The passage applies equally well to the reception of written texts, both the reception of Late Antique texts in Anglo-Saxon England and the reception of Anglo-Saxon texts for contemporary readers. The knowledge of the poetry of earlier times depends entirely upon seeing things in the flesh, a turn of phrase that takes on a literal meaning when we are talking about medieval texts, which, as Holsinger put it, are “nothing but millions of stains on animal parts.” In spite of modern desires to recover an authentic oral performance of medieval verse, we are only able to access the poem through what is to be seen in the flesh, as the mouth that spoke it is hidden away from us. The flesh of the manuscript gives the words to us, but it also gives the words to themselves, allowing them to experience the material world. The mouth that first gave the words hides itself away from us precisely as a function of the fact that the words give themselves over to flesh. The codicological form the words take eclipses the spoken form of the word, and as we have already seen, this material form makes appear other things, specifically glosses and illustrations, that provide new interpretations unavailable to the spoken word.

What does it mean that the flesh gives the word over to subjectivity? How does giving the word over to the experience of itself and of the world manifest for both Christ and the form of the book? Furthermore, what is flesh? Prudentius writes as follows concerning Christ’s experience of the flesh:

> His affecta caro est hominis, quam femina praegnans

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enixa est sub lege uteri, sine lege mariti. Ille famem patitur, fel potat et haurit acetum; ille pauet mortis faciem, tremit ille dolorem.

Dicite, sacrilegi doctores, qui patre summo desertum iacuisse thronum contenditis illo tempore, quo fragiles deus est inlapsus in artus, ergo pater passus? (quid non malus audeat error?)

Ipse puellari conceptus sanguine creuit? Ipse uerecundae distendit uirginis aluum?

Est inuisibilis donum patris edere natum uisibilem, per quem ualeat pater ipse uideri.

Prudentius has just completed an explanation of the fact that God the Father is incapable of feeling pain, an argument against the Patripassian heresy. Prudentius begins by emphasizing that Mary brought Christ forth under the law of the womb, but without the law of marriage, a duality that reminds the reader of the law of the Old Testament and of the New. The poem then moves on to a catalogue of Christ’s suffering.

Christ suffers (patitur) hunger, drinks bile and vinegar. He is frightened by the face of death and trembles in fear. These instances of suffering emphasize how Christ’s body makes him a passive figure experiencing physical privations. Pain causes his body to tremble, and the death he fears is physical. However, through his passive suffering, Christ is able to act and affect the

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37 Prudentius, *Apotheosis*, 97–109, 123–4: “The flesh of man has been affected with these things, which the pregnant woman has brought forth under the law of the uterus, without the law of marriage. He suffers hunger, swallows gall, and drinks vinegar; he fears the face of death, he trembles at pain. Say, you sacrilegious teachers, who contend that the throne lay deserted by the high father at that time when God slipped into fragile limbs, did the father therefore suffer? What would their wicked error not dare? Did he come forth conceived by maiden blood? Did he stretch the womb of the modest virgin? And does the page of the divine book speak falsely? It says that the word had flowed into the figure of the flesh, but it is not the father of the word who is held to have been made flesh. … It is the gift of the invisible father to bring forth a visible son, through whom the father himself may be seen.”

world. The passage presents a contrast between Christ, *ille*, and God, *ipse*, but by phrasing the discussion of God as rhetorical questions expecting negative answers, due to the misapplication of the son’s traits to the father, Prudentius allows both to, in effect, describe Christ. By taking up fragile limbs (*fragiles artus*), the son and not the father suffers and in turn acts in the world. Christ grows and stretches the virgin’s womb. Christ’s flesh functions as human flesh, about which Jean-Luc Marion writes: “The flesh is defined as the identity of what touches with the medium where this touching takes place (Aristotle), therefore of the felt with what feels (Husserl), but also of the seen and the seeing or the heard and the hearing—in short, of the affected with the affecting.” In the *Apotheosis* Christ is not made (*factus est*), his flesh has been affected (*affecta est*). His flesh allows Christ both to be affected by the world and also to affect the world.

It is within this context that Prudentius plays with the materiality of the word made flesh. As evidence for his position, Prudentius sets the advocates of the Patripassian heresy against the Bible, asking if the page of the divine book is *falsiloqua*, speaking falsely. The material of the written text is not only a passive object acted upon, but it acts in the world, taking on human characteristics through the assumption of the flesh. This playfulness becomes more explicit in the subsequent line, *quae uerbum in carnis loquitur fluxisse figuram*. The page of the divine book says that the word has flowed into the form of the flesh, but the page is the word made flesh—both figuratively and literally—as is Christ, creating a network of possible substitutions inducing a metonymic vertigo in which the word always substitutes for itself in affirming its experience of the flesh. The page is composed of words that have flowed onto animal flesh from a pen, and Christ was written into Mary’s flesh by God’s pen. The flesh speaks through Christ, and Christ through the flesh.

Prudentius comments on the separation—essential in arguing that the Father did not suffer—between Christ and God in lines 123–4, contrasting the invisible father with the visible son, through whom the father is able to be seen, although it is also the medium through which Christ himself is able to be seen. Commenting on this phenomenon of the flesh, however, Marion notes:

My flesh is distinguished from every object of the world, therefore from every body, in such a way that before even being able to perceive itself as a possible external object in the world, it perceives; before even making itself be felt, it allows one to feel; in short, before making itself be seen and appearing, it makes me feel (myself) and appear. In effect: “If I reduce other humans to their peculiarities, I specifically reach physical bodies (Körper); but if I reduce myself as a human, I reach my flesh (Leib) and (thus) my soul or psychosomatic unity, I reach my personal I, who acts in this flesh and through its intermediary in the outside world, and I suffer from it” (Husserl). The essential property of my flesh has to do with its suffering, its passivity, and its receptivity, which are not of the world, but without which nothing of the world would ever appear.”

Christ’s flesh allows God to be seen, but it also allows Christ to be seen, to see, and to feel, giving him over to a world of experience characterized by suffering. However, this passivity, as Marion calls it, allows the world to appear to Christ. Marion’s statement takes on special relevance here, given that the word made flesh derives from the opening of John, which says, “omnia per ipsum [verbum] facta sunt.” Christ’s flesh lets him be felt, but it also lets him feel, allowing the world to give itself to him. However, his flesh demonstrates how, in a primordial

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40 Marion, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, 87. The references to Husserl are to *Cartesian Meditations*, 97.
41 John 1:3. “All things have been made through the word.”
way, nothing of the world would ever appear. Everything in the world appears because of the word, but it is not until the word has flowed into the flesh that it may be felt and recognized as that through which all things have been made.

Prudentius continues his account of Christ’s assumption of the flesh, writing:

Semper in auxilium sermo patris omnipotensis descendit seruando homini; mortalia semper admiscenda sibi proprio curauit amore, ut socianda caro dominoque inplenda perenni degenerem uitam, quae tunc animalis agebat, exemplo mutaret eri similesque per actus cernere consortem terreni adsuesceret oris participemque suum uisu uelut obside nosse et consanguineo paulatim accedere Christo.

Ergo animalis homo quondam; nunc spiritus illum transtulit ad superi naturam seminis, ipsum infundendo deum mortalia uiuificantem.

Nunc noua materies, solidata intercute flatu, materies sed nostra tamen de uirgine tracta, exuit antiquae corrupta exordia uitae, inmortale bonum proprio spiramine sumens.

Christ, the word, appears as the *sermo patris*, which descends and takes on flesh. The flesh takes on a life which is animal, *animalis*, but *socianda* and *inplenda*, allied with and filled by, the Lord. The animal materiality of the flesh is explicit, and by assuming the flesh Christ does not represent a separation between spiritual and material identities but an alliance between them, an identity that reduces to his psychosomatic unity acting in and through the flesh. The *verbum* and *sermo* of the father is not perceptible until it takes on a material form, and by assuming a body

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42 Prudentius, *Apotheosis*, 155–70. ”Ever has the word of the almighty father descended in aid for saving man; ever did he cause mortal things to be mixed with his own being for love, so that the flesh to be allied with and filled by the everlasting lord might change the degenerate life, which it then led as an animal, by the example of the master and learn to see him through the similarity of limbs as the sharer of an earthly face and to know him as a sharer of his own self with sight as a pledge and to approach little-by-little our blood-relative Christ. Therefore, man was once animal; now the spirit has translated him to the nature of a higher birth, by pouring out God himself who vivifies mortal things. Now new matter, strengthened under the skin by the breath, but our matter nevertheless, drawn from the virgin, has cast off the corrupt beginnings of the old life, taking up the immortal gift with its own breath.”
with *similes artus*, similar parts, he reveals himself to our sight. Sight acts as the guarantor (*uisu uelut obside*) of our perceptions of him, and through the shared experiences of the flesh we recognize Christ as sharing the same blood (*consanguineo*). However, we recognize the word of God in the flesh by reading the word of God on the flesh. The medieval book presents a mirror which calls on us as witnesses to its animal nature and reflects our own animal nature back to us through its enacting of a material alliance between flesh and speech. Sight acts as the guarantor of the fact that Christ partakes in our nature, but Christ’s flesh is not seen by us. Instead, we have the word made flesh as a book, which gives itself over to our sight and depends on an animal giving up its life. The form of the book enables intersubjective knowledge, in and through which we recognize not only Christ, but also ourselves.

The passage closes with a series of contrasts. Once man was animal, but now the spirit has born it towards a higher parentage; now the matter is new, but it is still ours; we have exchanged corrupt beginnings for an immortal good. These contrasts seemingly highlight a temporal change that contrasts the materiality of flesh before and after Christ’s assumption of the flesh, but the recognition of Christ’s material form allows for a more primordial temporality, one continuously expressed in our every interaction with the world. The flesh gives the word over to itself and allows it to act in the world, making it a body that also gives itself to others, who, though recognizing it for the first time, recognize it as the means through which all other things take on their material form, as something present *in principio*. The contrast between *tunc* and *nunc* is marked by the givenness of the word made flesh, the recognition of which comes not at once but *paulatim*, little by little. Flesh’s matter is simultaneously new and old, changed because we intend it in new ways, ready to use it for new purposes. The familiar matter, what still is ours, becomes strange when animated by a new spirit, a word whose etymological origin as breath
Prudentius plays with by linking *spiritus* with *flatus* and *spiramen*. The spirit is not separable from the new matter; it is articulated through it.

These depictions of Christ’s incarnation in the *Psychomachia* and *Apotheosis* demonstrate Prudentius’s codicological consciousness, an awareness that the articulation of the word made flesh conveys a double meaning in medieval manuscript culture that had begun to develop in the first centuries of Christianity’s existence. The word made flesh refers at once to Christ and the written text of the Bible, and Prudentius enriches his explication of incarnational theology with codicological flourishes. However, the association works both ways, and in Christ’s incarnation we may derive a model for understanding the reception of the Bible specifically and all books generally as material manifestations of the word made flesh. This model involves recognizing not only the connection between Christ and the book, but also of ourselves and the book, whose form as the inseparable union of animal matter and the immaterial word creates a body which we perceive as similar to our own. The old becomes new again and the familiar strange; old texts reveal themselves to us in new forms, able to be appropriated in new ways and for new contexts through their assumption of a material form, which acts as the visible guarantor for works not available to our ears.

**The Book as Flesh in Anglo-Saxon England**

At this point I would like to return to the word made flesh in the form of the Anglo-Saxon book and draw on two examples in order to apply the model of reception derived from a reading of Prudentius’s explication of the word made flesh. Riddle 26 of the Exeter Book—the Bible riddle, itself an expansion of a riddle on the same topic by Tatwine—depicts the construction and use of the book, allowing it to act with and as Christ in order to bring about the salvation of readers. This riddle re-enacts the resurrection of the body and shows how the union of word and
flesh allows the flesh to act together with humans for salutary purpose. I will then close by returning to the illustrated Prudentius manuscript discussed earlier in the chapter. Through the process of taking on a material form, this manuscript gained an ability to act, not solely according to human intentions, but in ways that exceed expectations, producing effects on readers that were unintended by its makers and pointing towards an aesthetics of vital materialism expressed in the surprising possibilities that reveal themselves when the work gives itself over to our gaze.

The animal materiality of the book takes on a powerful form in Exeter Riddle 26, a riddle whose subject has been suggested to be the making of a Bible. As Dieter Bitterli notes, the making of books could provide powerful material for metaphorical readings: “[T]he notion of the book as body suggested itself in the very physicality of the codex and the organic materials employed in its production: the animal skin turned into parchment; the quill of a bird cut into a pen; the animal horn serving as an inkpot.”

Riddle 26 reads:

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Mec feonda sum feore besnyþede, 1
woruldstrenga binom, wætte siþþan,
dyðe on wætre, dyde eft þonan,
sette on sunnan, þær ic swiþe beleas
herum þam þe ic hæfde. Heard mec siþþan
snað seaxses ecg, sindrum begrunden;
fingras feoldan, ond mec fugles wyn
geondsprengde speddropum spyrede geneahhe,
ofer brunne brerd, beamtelge swealg,
streames daele, stop eft on mec,
siþade sweartlast. Mec siþþan wrah
hæleð hleobordum, hyde bependede,
gierede mec mid golde; forþon me gliwedon
wrætic weorc smiþa, wire bifongen.

Nu þa gereno ond se reada telg 15
ond þa wuldorgesteald wide mære
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The riddle begins by describing the process of medieval book production, with early emphasis on the violence endured by the animal skin. The book maker is an enemy (feonda sum) who slaughters the animal—in the early medieval period likely a sheep, goat, or cow—from which the hide derives its ability to act in the world (woruldstrenga). It is dunked in water and depilated, then cut with a knife. At this point the tone of the riddle shifts away from a language of painful torture to one of ornamentation. The quill that spreads drops of ink which are a bird’s joy (fugles wyn) and still acts as a living being which swallows (swealg) the ink, is itself described in terms of its natural origin from trees. The artful alliteration on d and p in geondsprengde speddropum spyrede combines with the metrical alliteration on s to create the

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45 “Riddle 26,” The Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry, 303–4. “A certain enemy deprived me of life, took away my world-strength, then wet me, dipped me in water, then did it again, set me in the sun where I soon lost the hairs which I had. Then the hard edge of a knife cut me, ground away imperfections; fingers folded me, and the joy of a bird sprinkled swift drops, made frequent tracks, over the brown surface, swallowed tree-dye, a portion of liquid, stepped again on me, wandered a black trail. Then a man covered me with protective boards, stretched hide, adorned me with gold; the wondrous work of smiths sang on me, wound with wire. Now let these ornaments and the red dye and these glorious possessions proclaim widely the people’s protector, and let no fool reproach. If the children of men wish to enjoy me, they will be safer and more victorious, bolder in heart and happier in mind, wiser in spirit, have more friends, more beloved and kindred ones, more true and good ones, true and good ones, who will gladly increase their honor and happiness and mercifully envelop them with good will and clap them fast with embraces of love. Ask what I am called, useful to men. My name is famous, and I beneficial to men and holy myself.”

46 On the types of animals used in early medieval book production, see Bitterli, Say What I Am Called, 174; McKitterick, Carolingians and the Written Word, 138–41; Bischoff, Latin Palaeography, 8–11; Hamel, Scribes and Illuminators, 8–16.
aural impression of a continuous stream of drops spilling upon the page in rapid succession. The flesh then receives protective boards and a new skin, adorned with gold wire.

The transformation of animal flesh into a purified form in the first half of the riddle enacts the resurrection of the body. In its animal form the flesh is given over to suffering, undergoing torments that take place on the flesh. However, it is through this suffering that the book takes on the ability to act, an ability that parallels Christ’s subjectivity granted by his own assumption of the flesh. The book makes Christ known, the *dryhtfolca helm* (protector of the people-host), but before it can do that it must first make itself known as a fleshly body. There is a tension between the book as tool and the book as subject that never resolves. When we see the book as a tool, it becomes the product of human technology, a prosthetic through which we articulate our own identity and which we use to gain knowledge of distant events. The book as tool recedes from our vision at the same time that it gives itself over entirely to it, allowing us the experience of a world removed from our own and giving knowledge of Christ who intercedes on our behalf, who acts as the protector of all peoples. However, the book also presents itself in its own form, and the flesh of the book constantly calls us back to the materiality of the present time and place, and the animal nature of the book reminds us that it is related to us, something both familiar and alien, whose subjectivity is like our own, a radically passive experience of the flesh that allows it not only to be acted upon but to act. The form of the book calls attention to worlds beyond itself, but in order to do so it must first call attention to itself through the codicological features discussed in the riddle like the protective boards, golden ornamentation, and carefully ruled trails of ink.

The subjectivity granted by the experience of the flesh to both the reader and the book depends on Marion’s insight on being made an object: we are not the givers but the given,
experiencing the world because our flesh makes us able to know ourselves. This common experience of the flesh shared by readers, the book, and Christ refigures the intersubjective encounter. If we are subjects acting in the world and revealing ourselves one to another, we do so only because our flesh must first reveal us to ourselves. This commonality of experience allows for the book not only to show Christ as the *dryhtfolca helm*, but to become the *dryhtfolca helm* itself. The resurrection experienced by the animal materiality of the book allows for a double vision, and when we recognize it as possessing a body animated by the word, then it becomes a metonym for Christ. The book and Christ cohabit with each other and acting in concord bring about the salvific effects of the second half of the riddle, which presents a series of comparisons between the old life and new of the people who *brucan willað*, wish to use and enjoy, among them the speaker of the riddle.

Viewing the book as consanguineous with the reader, possessing a similar animal body allied to the word, allows for a model of agency that parallels our own, and allows the book to act with us for human purposes, fulfilling the purposes intended for it through its production in which the foreign is made more familiar in the process of grinding out impurities. However, books do not always act in the way that we intend them. Ink may degrade over time or become effaced through abrasion. Small imperfections in the skin of animals may manifest as holes that need to be either hidden in the gutter of the book or written around. The manuscript may burn, obscuring key readings or altering the appearance of folios. In all these ways the form of the book depends on the ability to act not subordinate to or in concord with human intention, but to act independent of it. The animal materiality of the book resists the incarnation of the word in ways that suggest what Jane Bennett has proposed as the vital materialism of nonhuman bodies. Bennett writes, “I was struck by what Stephen Jay Gould called the “excruciating complexity
and intractability” of nonhuman bodies, but, in being struck, I realized that the capacity of those bodies was not restricted to a passive “intractability,” but also included the ability to make things happen, to produce effects.”47 With the complexity and intractability of matter as a starting place, Bennett takes as her project refuting the “habit of parsing the world into dull matter (it, things) and vibrant life (us beings).”48 In spite of attempts to subordinate nonhuman matter for human purposes, the nonhuman nevertheless acts in ways that have the capacity to surprise and captivate us by exceeding our intentions.

In demonstrating the vital materialism of the medieval book, I turn again to CCCC 23. The manuscript contains eighty-nine-illustrations, but there are also seven spaces left for illustrations that were never filled in.49 In order to explain the gaps, Gernot Wieland compares the illustrated manuscript with unillustrated manuscripts, noting:

[W]herever CCCC 23 has an empty space for an illustration, CCCC 223 begins a new paragraph with a somewhat larger capital and a chapter-heading. ... It is possible to recognize in these chapter headings of the non-illustrated manuscripts the captions to the illustrations in the illustrated manuscripts. This allows the following conclusion: the scribe of CCCC 23 copied from a non-illustrated manuscript similar to CCCC 223 ... and was instructed to leave a space for an

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49 The gaps occur before lines 28, 42, 197, 203, 267, 502, and 851 of the *Psychomachia*. The rubricated headings in the copy of the *Psychomachia* in CCCC 223 read as follows (formatted as line after rubrication, rubricated chapter heading, page number in manuscript): 27, “iii Cultura deorum,” p. 126; 42, “iii Pudicitia,” p. 142; 197, “xxvi Humilitas,” p. 131; 203, “xxvii Superbia iterum,” p. 132; 267, “xxx Humilitas iterum,” p. 134; 502, “lviii Ratio,” p. 141; 851, “lxxxviii De gemmis,” p. 152. The sparseness of these chapter headings, while not those that would have been available to the scribe or illustrator of CCCC 23, give an idea of how little guidance there was for an illustrator working without images.
illustration wherever his exemplar had a chapter-heading, since, or so it was thought, the chapter-headings corresponded to illustrations.50 Producing the illustrated manuscript was a time-consuming process dependent on a network of human actors and nonhuman materials. A compiler would have had to expect the future availability of an exemplar of the illustrations as well as of an illustrator and have a scribe begin the task of copying the text in preparation. He would also have to know enough about the text to reasonably expect that the headings in the poem corresponded with specific illustrations, which was generally the case. Either the expense of starting over or the limited availability of either illustrated exemplar or illustrator precluded redoing the project, giving us a manuscript whose form does not accord with the intentions of the people who created it.

Wieland views the blank space as a failure by the producers of the manuscript: “One might think that a good artist could easily fill in the empty spaces. His failure to do so betrays his lack of originality.”51 Wieland’s response aestheticizes the blank space of the manuscript, even if in a negative way. He finds himself imagining what could be there, and wonders why another individual, the illustrator, was not capable of doing the same.52 It is worth pointing out that Wieland does not do the same with other blank space that is a necessary feature of written texts, providing margins and space between letters and words, providing the horizon against which the words of the text reveal themselves. The blank space left for illustrations does not serve the purpose of calling attention to the text; it calls attention to itself, suggesting through absence an intended presence, and calls attention to the materiality of the book itself, which otherwise

52 Whether or not the illustrator was incapable of this cannot be ascertained, and other explanations also present themselves. It could have been the decision of the compiler of the manuscript not to create new illustrations, or they may have been other, more immediate tasks that would not have allowed for the time spent creating new illustrations that would accord with the text which the illustrator may or may not have been intimately familiar with himself.
recedes onto the horizon. Wieland’s response shows the extent to which, when books give themselves to us, we also give ourselves over to them. However, in viewing the blank space as a failure of the imagination, Wieland in essence sees the matter that makes up the book as dull, in contrast to the vibrancy that it could only attain through the intervention of human agency.

Approaching the blank space in the manuscript through the lens of Bennett’s vital materialism challenges this reading; rather than making the blank space the product of human failure, the blank space is revealed as a natural consequence of the complexity and intractability of nonhuman objects. The blankness surprises our expectations and calls attention to the processes that led to the production of the manuscript, and although it may represent a failure to achieve the intentions of the manuscript’s producers, it provides a space on which readers may project their own intentions, giving itself over to the imagination of the reader who may form visual responses to the words surrounding the blank space. Rather than being dull, the blank space is vibrant, surprising the reader with the consequences of material agency that allow for an individual aesthetic response of a visual nature supplementing the illustrations already provided in the medieval book.

Conclusion

In focusing on the givenness of the medieval manuscript, as exemplified by CCCC 23, I want to confront a tendency to take manuscripts not only as given, but also for granted. It is seductive to imagine that manuscripts point beyond themselves to a world of experience that we do not belong to, and which we can remain objective about, but as a condition of revealing the medieval world, the manuscript must first reveal itself and implicate us as actors participating in a transhistorical network. The medieval manuscript reveals itself as something at once familiar and strange, emerging from the past to be made sense of in the present, and even as it makes
clear the words, it conceals the mouth that speaks them. It reveals itself as a gift, given entirely through itself, and calling for readers to give of themselves in interpretation, finding new meaning as we project ourselves upon the book and the book projects itself upon us. This reciprocity is a condition of reading. The more the book gives itself to us, the more we find we have given to it.

The opening pages of the illustrated *Psychomachia*, filled with paratextual elements like glossing, illustrations, and ornamented letters, reveal a multiplicity of ways to read the text. Abraham’s desire to find a worthy offering for God gives itself to the reader through the words of the poem, the explanatory glosses, and the illustration of the ram revealed in the bushes as a fitting sacrifice. The ram who will lose his life as Abraham’s offering calls attention to the animal materiality of the manuscript itself, which takes form as words made flesh, dependent upon the death of animals. The animal materiality of the manuscript allows it to be implicated within a metaphorical framework for understanding the incarnation of Christ and our own experience of the body as characterized by a radical passivity, that is both receptive to the world and able to act within it. Through its own incarnation, the book acts as a guarantor of intersubjective knowledge, revealing itself as consanguineous with humanity in its conjoining of spirit and flesh. However, its animal materiality is also profoundly nonhuman; the materials of the book impose limits on human intentions, and may even act to thwart them in surprising ways. Reading medieval literature always depends on a complex network of human and nonhuman actors, and part of the pleasure of reading is the capacity for this network continually to surprise and captivate the reader, and the task of the critic is not to delimit the acceptable boundaries for pleasure, but to find new things to delight in, such as the unexplored possibility of felicitously blank space.
Chapter 2

Touching the Past and Untouched Bodies: Aldhelm’s *Carmen de virginitate*

What is the role of love in the reception of the past? How does love manifest itself? In his collection that won the Yale Younger Poets Award, Richard Siken describes the way in which love prevents objective narrative:

> I want to tell you this story without having to confess anything, without having to say that I ran out into the street to prove something, that he didn’t love me, that I wanted to be thrown over, possessed.
>
> I want to tell you this story without having to say that I ran out into the street to prove something, that he chased after me and threw me into the gravel.
>
> but he covered my body with his body.¹

Siken’s poem, “The Torn-Up Road,” depicts a love overwhelming, capable of subverting the desire to maintain narrative objectivity and bodily integrity. His litany of unfulfilled wishes reinforces the inability to resist love’s touch and mounts to a climax when—thrown over, possessed, in the gravel of the road—one body covers another. The depiction of love in the poem recalls another experience of love overwhelming, Saul’s conversion on the road to Damascus. Saul was thrown to the ground and blinded by his experience of God, changed internally, and like Abraham, granted a new name as an external marker of internal changes. Love manifests itself in a bodily experience, changing an individual in profound ways.

This desire to be the recipient of an overwhelming touch appears in Aldhelm of Malmesbury’s *Carmen de virginitate*, a verse treatise cataloguing virgin martyrs and one of the earliest Anglo-Latin verse compositions, where love manifests itself as a desire to touch—and be touched by—the past. This touch manifests as a kiss in Aldhelm’s account of the virgin

¹ Siken, “The Torn-Up Road,” *Crush.*
Chrysanthus, who desired to have Christ’s lips tarry upon his own, even as Aldhelm’s lips match those of a late Antique poet whose wedding song he quotes and then adapts in the passage. The way in which bodies both textual and physical touch in the passage, played out upon the body of the saint, recalls Carolyn Dinshaw’s discussion of Roland Barthes’ queer relation to Jules Michelet in the introduction of Getting Medieval:

The Text is open, a collection of fragments, but fragments that do not remain unsituated in time or space; in our reading, taking up and “receiving from the text a kind of fantasmatic order” we “spea[k] this text,” cite it, and such citation theatricalizes our lives in turn, empties them of the impossible function of mere expressivity (of a soul, of a depth) and renders them capable of further touching—other lives, other texts.²

This living with other bodies through writing provides a powerful way of figuring the dual reception of virginal piety and poetic practice as queer desire at the very beginning of literary culture in Anglo-Saxon England.

The importance of embodied, affective relations to the past in this period has been overlooked by scholars working on the history of medieval sexuality, possibly due to a tendency in the field at large to ignore early Anglo-Latinity. David Lampe writes, “Old English (or, if you prefer, Anglo-Saxon) seems to show very little interest in sex,” seemingly unaware that the Old English language only accounts for a part of the literary culture of the Anglo-Saxons.³ Christine Fell writes, “neither sex nor marriage is central to Old English literature,” and Conor McCarthy notes that, as far as sex and marriage is concerned, “evidence offered in passing by Old English

² Dinshaw, Getting Medieval, 48–9. Dinshaw’s quotation of Barthes comes from Sade, Fourier, Loyola, 8 [13].
poems such as *Beowulf* and *The Wanderer* can be illuminating on topics that are not their central concern. Taking note of this tendency, Lara Farina writes:

The monastic archive of Anglo-Saxon England has been repeatedly judged barren of any erotic language (and, indeed, of much “sexual” imagery at all), especially when viewed against the spectacularly sensual, affective productions of the later Middle Ages. Yet it boasts at least one text, *Christ I* which illuminates how eroticism functioned in the service of collective, Christocentric devotion before the era of Cistercian reform.  

Farina’s work focuses primarily on vernacular piety, but this very focus makes the boast seem rather anemic, considering that the hagiographic tradition from Aldhelm to Goscelin of Canterbury is replete with examples of virgins whose *vitae* make use of erotic language to emphasize the affective relationship of the virgins to Christ and employed within communities for whom hagiographies were an integral part of communal devotion. Even where scholars do pay attention to the Anglo-Latin tradition, they tend to do so in ways that reify its alterity in Anglo-Saxon culture. Thus, in *Double Agents: Women and Clerical Culture in Anglo-Saxon England*, Claire Lees and Gillian Overing tend to cite Aldhelm’s writing in Lapidge and Rosier’s English translation while presenting Ælfric’s in Old English.  

Aldhelm of Malmesbury wrote lengthy works in both verse and prose in the late seventh century, developing a distinctive style, characterized by a love of wordplay and highly allusive tendencies. He was an author of wide reading, and served as a significant figure in the dissemination of knowledge about Latin poetry in Anglo-Saxon England. His works often take on a didactic cast. Thus, his first major poetic work, the *Enigmata*, or riddles, formed a part of a

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lengthy treatise on verse forms sent to King Aldfrith of Northumbria. The *Enigmata* were meant to provide examples of versification according to the principles of the two metrical guidebooks in the treatise, *De arte metrica* and *De pedum regulis*. The prose version of the *De virginitate* is his longest prose work, and he addressed it to Abbess Hildelith and the nuns of Barking Abbey. The prose text contains extremely complex Latin, and would later form a part of the educational curriculum in Anglo-Saxon England, attracting numerous glosses for Aldhelm’s recondite vocabulary. Patrizia Lendinara suggests that the 20,000 words in the text attracted around 60,000 glosses.\(^7\) Aldhelm promised the nuns that he would recast the prose text in verse, and although the *Carmen de virginitate* does not explicitly address Hildelith and the other nuns, references in the text to the earlier prose version make it clear that this is the promised recasting.

Critical attention to Aldhelm for most of the twentieth century has suffered, in spite of Ehwald’s recognition that Aldhelm “omnia Germanicae stirpis hominum primus litteras attigit,” first of all the men of the Germanic race attained letters. Michael Lapidge’s assessment of Aldhelm was that he was, “a very tedious, dull, and monotonous poet.”\(^8\) This orthodoxy, however, was challenged by Andy Orchard, who responded, “[S]uch a statement scarcely does justice to Aldhelm’s conscious striving for aural and rhythmical effects…For Aldhelm, almost alone of Anglo-Latin poets, was possessed of a truly poetic imagination.”\(^9\) In the years since Orchard’s study Aldhelm’s position within the Anglo-Latin poetic canon has been strengthened by the work of scholars like Emily Thornbury, Janie Steen, and Scott Gwara, but he continues to languish beside the outsize importance of the other first English poet, Cædmon, whose oeuvre consists of a single, short poem, and Bede, the historian who records Cædmon’s story.

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This chapter argues that Aldhelm’s verse treatise on virginity employs a reception of classical and late antique verse models and also of the virginal piety of martyred saints characterized by a queer desire for the past, like that of Barthes for Michelet, mediated by the experience of the body moving from the ground up toward heaven. The argument breaks down into three main parts. In the first section, the chapter explores the reception of the Muses in Aldhelm’s work and argues that Aldhelm’s depiction of himself as a figure leading the Muses down from the mountain is an act of bringing them to earth, removing from them the vestiges of pagan ideology and allowing them to act as the ground of Anglo-Latin verse. The second section explores the elaborate metaphorical framework that Aldhelm develops for depicting virginity as emerging from the base materials of the earth and striving upwards toward heavenly heights. This framework takes on hagiographic form in Aldhelm’s account of Paul, prostrate in the road, blinded by a light from the heavens. The final section explores the desire of the saints to touch Christ, figured variously as a kiss upon the lips or an internal touch, and argues that this desire characterizes a queer reception of saintly example that likewise characterizes Aldhelm’s own desire to live with the words of past authors through his heavily citational poetic style.

Before moving on to elaborate these readings, I should evaluate the usefulness of describing the relationships at work in the *Carmen de virginitate* as queer. Mark Jordan, in a response to Dinshaw’s work, argues that the Catholic church already contains within it a presentation of a transhistorical touch across time, one which would overwhelm the presentation of a queer touch. He describes the working of this touch as follows:

> When a medieval Christian woman touches Jesus, speaks to his mother Mary, or is counseled or scolded by his Apostles, she moves within that transhistorical system of identities that is called the assembly, *ecclesia*, church—the body of
Christ. If she herself were later “raised to the altars,” canonized, she would become a point of touch for all later believers, a declared member of the communion of saints.\(^\text{10}\)

This construction of ecclesiastical community created through affective piety is a significant part of the framework motivating Aldhelm’s poem, and Jordan’s resistance to allowing an overlap between *ecclesia* and a queer community lies in the role of the Catholic church in abjecting individuals with sexual practices it considers deviant. However, part of the power of Dinshaw’s project of queering historiography is that it allows connections to be made even though the types of community expressed across time are different. In a response to Jordan, Dinshaw writes:

> I can agree with Jordan’s tracing of the ecclesiastical genealogy of sexual abjection and his assertion of the transhistorical continuity of church communities while disagreeing that they will inevitably overwhelm a queer touch (and that therefore “the touch of the queer medievalist must be protected … from assertions of much stronger trans-historical continuity within church communities”).\(^\text{11}\)

A refusal to consider how the overwhelming love and the overwhelming love of the queer touch overlap impoverishes the project of queer history, as it artificially imposes a boundary that cannot be surpassed, in a project that seeks to find ways around the boundaries imposed by historical time.

In Aldhelm I identify two queer desires. The first is the desire to touch Christ and the bodies of saints, a desire which is first the desire to touch them as a part of the body of the church, a touch across time sanctioned by the Catholic church and held up as a norm of behavior for the religious. However, the means of expressing this desire, played out as an eroticization of

\(^{10}\) Jordan, “Touching and Acting, *or* The Closet of Abjection,” 181.

\(^{11}\) Dinshaw, “Got Medieval?” 211.
the touch and the abjection experience by the saints expressing this desire points to an element of queerness operating within the ideology of the church. Dinshaw discusses a similar example of two nuns in the later medieval period, and how they may be a part of the community forged by queer history:

[R]ather, queerness emerges from the evidently tortured disjunction between body and soul that they both enact, and from their singular status in their surroundings. These elements of incommensurability are what we would focus on in making a relation with them now and putting them in our queer history. … Undoubtedly they are different, given all that has intervened and given the indeterminacy of cultural phenomena to begin with; but the analytical power of “queer” makes manifest (and forges links between) differing kinds of relations—and differing kinds of communities—in a given time as well as across time.12

Identifying them as queer is not an attempt to supplant the ecclesiastical interpretation of the touch, but to articulate the fact that there is already something queer about it, in the way that this touch plays out as an eroticization of the flesh at the same time that it denies it.

The second type of queer desire I identify in Aldhelm, and which is much more important to me as a means of building a community of which I identify myself as a part, is in the poetics of citation he employs, whereby he allows the kiss of the words of the past to linger upon his lips. Aldhelm’s practice of speaking through the words of other poets to depict the image of a transhistorical touch played out across the bodies of saints is a part of a difficult poetic style, which sings together with other voices in a community of poetry. Aldhelm’s own abjection within poetic tradition lies in the features of his verse that make it appear derivative and difficult.

12 Dinshaw, “Got Medieval?” 205.
My own desire to forge community with Aldhelm lies not in his depictions of the tortured bodies of saints, but in his own desire to live amongst the words of others and speak through them.

**Down from the Heavens**

Recent research by Emily Thornbury and Janie Steen has examined how Aldhelm positions himself within the culture of Classical knowledge, focusing in particular on Aldhelm’s rejection of the influence of the Muses. Thornbury’s masterful study argues that Aldhelm rejected the Muses as a source of divine inspiration while allowing their use as markers of technical competence, drawing on parallels in late Antique and Germanic literature. Thornbury concludes,

> Aldhelm, therefore, began his work in a milieu in which adopting or perhaps even understanding the Classical idea of divine inspiration was impossible on two counts—in that as a Christian he could not expect God to provide him with *new* subject-matter, and as a participant in a Germanic culture he would have believed skill to be more important in any case. We can comprehend, therefore, why he perceived the Muses to be legendary distributors of technical competence, whose interference was unnecessary but certainly no threat to a Christian’s loyalty.\(^{13}\)

In a similar vein, focused solely on the *Enigmata*, Steen notes, “[T]he chief rhetorical device of the *Enigmata*, prosopopoeia, originates from the Bible. So classical figures in Aldhelm’s verse are mainly ornaments of elegant Latin poetic diction whose Christian meaning must be scrutinized.”\(^{14}\) Both scholars suggest ways in which Aldhelm rejects the Muses, while simultaneously authorizing them for use in a Christian context.

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\(^{13}\) Thornbury, “Aldhelm’s Rejection of the Muses,” 89.

\(^{14}\) Steen, *Verse and Virtuosity*, 90.
I would like to extend this point further in order to demonstrate how Aldhelm both rejects and embraces the Muses in ways analogous to the discourses of virginity he depicts, as well as to suggest that the Muses also serve as metonyms for a Classical culture which Aldhelm desires to touch. Aldhelm’s rejection of the Muses in the *Carmen* takes the following form:  

\begin{quote}
Non rogo ruricolas versus et commata Musas
Nec peto Castalidas metrorum cantica nimphas,
Quas dicunt Elicona iugum servare supernum,
Nec precor, ut Phoebus linguam sermone loquacem
Dedat, quem Delo peperit Latona creatrix;
Versibus infandis non umquam dicere dignor,
Ut quondam argutus fertur dixisse poeta:
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
‘Pandite nunc Elicona, deae, cantusque monete!’
\end{quote}

This passage begins with a threefold rejection of the Muses. Aldhelm states *Non rogo...Nec peto...nec precor*, “I do not ask ...and I do not seek...and I do not pray” for the intervention of the Muses. The clauses are linked through this variation on terms of petitioning, and each clause demonstrates increasing knowledge about the Muses, such that the passage serves as an example of *tricolon abundans*. The first clause speaks of the “rustic Muses,” while the second invokes the “Castalian nymphs” who keep to the heights of Helicon. The final rejection refers to Phoebus, whom Latona bore upon Mount Delos. Next Aldhelm distances himself from Vergil, both by

\begin{quote}
15 Thornbury, “Aldhelm’s Rejection of the Muses,” does an excellent job of comparing Aldhelm’s rejection of the Muses in the *Carmen* with the rejection employed in the preface to the *Enigmata*.

16 Aldhelm, *Carmen de virginitate*, 23–35. “I do not ask for verses and commata from the rustic Muses, and I do not seek metrical songs from the Castalian nymphs, who, people say, keep the high peak of Helicon, and I do not pray that Phoebus, whom his mother Latona bore on Delos, grant me a tongue skilled in speech; never do I deign to say unspeakable verses, as once that melodious poet is reported to have said: ‘Lay open Helicon now, oh goddesses, and guide my songs!’ But I will strive rather to strike the Thunderer with prayers, who confers the oracles of the placid word on us; I seek the word from the word: the Psalmist sang of this word, born from the heart of the father; that which is his only offspring, through which the omnipotent father created all the things throughout the world,”
\end{quote}
stating that he does not wish to invoke the Muses as he does, but also by distancing himself from Vergil with the phrase, *fertur dixisse*, “is reported to have said.” Aldhelm, unlike Vergil, will never ask the goddesses to open Helicon to him. While the *tricolon abundans* serves to emphasize the force of his rejection, the increasingly evident knowledge about classical culture simultaneously serves to emphasize its importance. In defining his work against the classical norm, Aldhelm implicates it in the structures of classical inspiration, establishing classical culture as a presence moving in and through his own work.

The passage ends with a tour de force deployment of alliteration. The sound *p* pulses throughout in the words *potius, precibus, pulsare, placidi, peto, psalmista* (a visual play), *patris, proles, pater*, and *omnipotens*. These insistent soundings strike upon the ear of the reader in a parallel fashion to the way in which Aldhelm’s prayers strike upon the ears of the Thunderer, an epithet for God that itself reflects the effect of alliteration. This alliteration, which calls attention to the intertwining of form and content, foregrounds the polyptoton—repetition of a word in different grammatical cases—of the word, *verbum*. This device allows a single word to be viewed in multiple aspects, and here the repetition of the word also allows its different meanings to be shown, separate but intertwined through rhetorical skill. God furnishes us with the word, his son, but also with the gift of speech, and so Aldhelm asks for the gift of the word of divine inspiration from the word already given to us. This vertiginous play highlights the role of Christ as a mediating metaphor for reception of poetic thought, and the lesser alliteration on *c* throughout the passage highlights in particular the connection between singing, *canebat*, and creating, *creavit*, which are acts linked together by the one who is, *constat*, the son born out of the father’s heart, *corde*.

Aldhelm’s alliterative play with *p* and *c* appears elsewhere in the work. He writes:
In providing a framework for understanding how the desire for virginity is instigated and sustained and bears fruit, Aldhelm relies upon the language of paradox. The concern for modesty, *cura pudoris*, burns and enflames virgins, phrasing that appropriates language associated with sexual licentiousness to a desire for virginity. Aldhelm creates a further paradox in the next line, describing virgins as “quorum integritatis amor praecordia pungit,” those whose hearts a love of integrity punctures or pricks. The desire for bodily integrity is playfully subverted by the assertion that this desire comes about through a break in the integrity of the heart, and this subversion is highlighted by the alliteration on the letter *p* in *praecordia pungit*, emphasizing both the thing pricked and the action of pricking. The interlineal alliteration with *pudoris* in the previous line provides the missing element, the thing which pricks. The entire passage, with its talk of flaming, pricking, and conjoining flesh, demonstrates how Aldhelm plays with language across his work, highlighting the relationship between words and the body.

In his rejection of the Muses in the *Carmen*, Aldhelm invokes Vergil as a negative example, an act which he approaches in a slightly different way at the end of the *Epistola ad Acircium*, the title given to the work Aldhelm sent to King Aldfrith containing, *inter alia*, metrical treatises and the *Enigmata*. Aldhelm takes a moment to revel in his accomplishments, obviously aware of his position as the first English writer to give extended consideration to metered verse.

Non enim hoc proferendo horrendis superciliorum iaculis me vulnerandum arbitror neque dirissima elationis turgidae falarica confixum perhorresco, si paulisper de gratuita divini muneris gratia, quae singulis quibusque non

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17 “Wherefore let all, whom the concern of modesty enflames and whose hearts the love of integrity punctures, join together a pact of spirit and chaste flesh.”
meritorum praecurrentium praerogativa, sed caelestis beneficii munificentia
confertur, fretus domino glorier, siquidem illustris ille, qui dicebat

Primus ego in patriam mecum, modo vita supersit,  Georgics III.11–13
Aonio rediens deducam vertice Musas;
Primus Idumaeas referam tibi, Mantua, palmas

(et longiusculce idem poeta et infra prosequitur:

iuvat, inquit, ire iugis, qua nulla priorum  Georgics III.292–3
Castaliam molli devertitur orbita clivo)

hoc, inquam, ille versificans significari voluit, nullum ante se Latinorum georgica
Romulidis scriptisse, quamvis Hesiodus et Homerus et ceteri Graeci disertitudinis
facundia freti et Argolicae urbanitatis privilegio praediti quadrifariam
agriculturam lingua Pelasga deprompserint.18

First of all, it is worth noting that Aldhelm rejects the notion that his own writing is turgid as he
lingers for a moment on his position within England as regards Latinity. Searching for a model
for his accomplishment, he looks to Vergil, who writes in the Georgics of himself as the “first in
my country...to lead the Muses down from the Aonian peak,” or Mount Helicon, and writes
about his sojourning upon the Castalian heights. Reading this passage in conjunction with his
rejection of the Muses gives a more nuanced understanding of Aldhelm’s relationship with
Classical culture, especially in light of the fact that Aldhelm makes use of Vergil’s work more
than any other writer.19

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18 Aldhelm, De metris, 202.10–24. “For I do not believe that I am to be wounded by the fearful
darts of the haughty for putting forth this work [collection containing De arte metrica and De pedum regulis] and I do not fear that I have
been pierced by the most awful spear of swollen elation, if for a brief time, while relying on the Lord, I glory over
the free grace of a divine gift, which is conferred upon each, and not as the prerogative of their previous merits, but
as the gift of heavenly kindness, since that illustrious one, who said, “I will be the first in my country, should life
remain to me, to lead the Muses from the Aonian peak (Helicon); I will be the first to bring back to you, Mantua, the
palms of Idumaea” and a bit further on the same poet continues, “It is delightful to travel along the ridges, where no
tracks of people gone before are bent down the gentle slope to Castalia. I say that poet wished this to be signified,
that no one before himself among the Latins had written georgics for the descendants of Romulus, although Hesiod
and Homer and other Greeks relying on the skill of their eloquence and provided with the gift of Argive urbanity
brought forth four-fold agriculture in the Pelasgian tongue.” The source of the Latin is Vergil, Georgics, III.11–13,
and 292–3.

19 Lapidge, Anglo-Saxon Library, 188–90. See also Orchard, Poetic Art of Aldhelm, 132–5.
Considering these two uses of Vergil in conjunction provides a model for thinking about Aldhelm’s appropriation, not only of classical culture, but more generally of his use of Latin verse. Rather than asking the Muses to open Helicon to him, Aldhelm seeks to lead them down from the mountain, bringing them to ground. Aldhelm achieves the rarefied, Castalian heights through his wide reading, especially of Vergil, but his accomplishment lies in the Earth. For Vergil, bringing the Muses to ground takes on its form in the agricultural setting of the Georgics. However, in the Epistola Aldhelm is not writing on rural or agricultural themes, and the rusticity he is evoking is in fact the distance, both geographic and temporal, between himself and his models. Leading the Muses down from the mountain is the act of appropriating them for use in his own culture, with the concomitant stripping of pagan reference. However, Aldhelm is not ambivalent about the Muses, but he desires to touch them and make them a part of his own production. As the twentieth-century poet Robert Duncan writes of the Muses, “But we are drawn to them, as if in the beginning we were of their kind, kin of Poetry with them.” Only by bringing them to earth can Aldhelm sanctify them for use, writing through the words of the past in order to glorify God, and making them a part of his own textual corpus.

Up from the Earth

Aldhelm structures the Carmen de virginitate around an orientational metaphor that associates a downward direction with the earth, the place of base flesh, and an upward direction with heaven. This metaphor conditions the manner in which both the saints and the words of the past reveal themselves in his work. As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson have noted, “Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people. Our conceptual system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities.”

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20 Duncan, The H. D. Book, 70.
21 Lakoff and Johnson, Metaphors We Live By, 3.
Thus, not only does this metaphor structure the work, but it structures Aldhelm’s relationship with the past. Lakoff and Johnson introduce the idea of orientational metaphors as follows:

But there is another kind of metaphorical concept, one that does not structure one concept in terms of another but instead organizes a whole system of concepts with respect to one another. We will call these orientational metaphors, since most of them have to do with spatial orientation... These spatial orientations arise from the fact that we have bodies of the sort we have and that they function as they do in our physical environment... Such metaphorical orientations are not arbitrary. They have a basis in our physical and cultural experience.\(^{22}\)

In other words, Aldhelm’s orientational metaphor emerges out of the spatial orientation of his own body as well as his embodiment within a specific cultural milieu, in this case one combined of his wide reading in Latin poetry and his geographic and temporal situation in Anglo-Saxon England.

The orientational metaphor that governs the *Carmen* receives its fullest and most explicit treatment in lines 153–76, in which Aldhelm spells out the directional metaphor of sanctification.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Virginitas fulget lucens ut gemma coronae,} \\
\text{Quae caput aeterni praecingit stemmate regis;} \\
\text{Haec calcat pedibus spurcae consortia vitae} \\
\text{Funditus exstirpans petulantis gaudia carnis.} \\
\text{Auri materiem fulvi obrizumque metallum,} \\
\text{Ex quibus ornatur praesentis machina mundi,} \\
\text{Glarea de gremio producit sordida terrae:} \\
\text{Sic casta integritas, auri flaventis imago,} \\
\text{Gignitur e spurca terreni carne parentis.} \\
\text{Ut rosa puniceo tincturas murice cunctas} \\
\text{Coccineosque simul praecel lit rubra colores;} \\
\text{Pallida purpureas ut gignit glarea gemmas,} \\
\text{Pulverulenta tegit quas spurci glebula ruris;}
\end{align*}
\]

\(^{22}\) Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 14.
The opening lines demonstrate the orientational metaphor that conditions how virginity reveals itself, a mechanism parallel to Aldhelm’s reception of the Muses. Virginity begins on high, a light flashing like the gem of a crown. This light is untouched, and yet it soon returns to earth, trampling \((calcat)\) and weeding \((exstirpans)\); however, this action of pushing into the ground and tearing up new growth, while directed at the base things of the flesh, also leads to the paradox that virginity then comes up from the earth. Michael Lapidge notes, “The sense of aggression associated with virginity is matched by the vocabulary of filth and foulness associated with the flesh.” Like the Muses, virginity occupies the heights, but must also attain the heights through the medium of the earth. The earth appears as gravel, \(glarea\), not a solid mass but an amalgamation of chunks, described as \(sordida\) (159), dirty, and then later \(pallida\) (164), pale.

This dirty, pale gravel is a place of abjection, a realm where all that is impure is crushed into the

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23 Aldhelm, *Carmen de virginitate*, 153–76. “Shining virginity glitters as the gem of a crown, which encircles the head of the eternal king with a garland; it tramples with its feet the fellowship of a foul life, utterly uprooting the joys of the licentious flesh. The dirty gravel of the earth produces from its womb the material of yellow gold and refined metal, with which the machine of the present world is adorned: so chaste purity, the image of yellow gold, is produced out of the foul flesh of its earthly parent. Just as the red rose excels all dyes in purple cloth and at the same time scarlet colours; just as pale gravel bears purple gems, which the dusty clod of the base countryside touched; just as the brightening flower climbs from the bark of the cherry tree in the spring time, while the ground pushes out sprouts; just as the sweet date is pushed out from the leafy peak of the palm and furnishes offspring from the dry post; just as a shining pearl is born from the common conch of the sea and exceeds its mother in its own honor; as the squalid soil below the grass of the scorned countryside produces golden threads of yellow metal—so that I may end the six examples with two verses—: so sacred virginity, pleasing to the residents of the heavens, receives the beginnings of life from foul body.”

ground. But this pressure has transformative properties as well, and as in Richard Siken’s poem, when bodies are pushed to the ground, they tend to cover one another.

At a lexical level the passage is noteworthy for the repetition of the adjective *spurcus*, which appears four times. *Spurcus* appears as follows: in line 155, *spurcae vitae*, base life; in line 161, *spurca carne*, base flesh; in line 165, *spurci ruris*, base countryside; and line 176, *corpore spurco*, base body. The word occurs thirty-one times in Aldhelm’s corpus, but in no other place is there a similar concentration of occurrences. Twenty occurrences are from the *Carmen de virginitate*, five from the *Prosa*, three from the *Enigmata*, two from the *Epistola ad Acircium*, and one from the *Epistola ad Wihtfridum*. While the word itself does not have especially poetic connotations, within Aldhelm’s oeuvre it takes on special relevance in the *Carmen de virginitate*, and in this passage especially. Aldhelm is here developing a relationship between flesh, earth, and the body as a base element, in which pressure is exerted, bodies touch and cover each other, and ultimately, something of great value emerges into the air, untouched and untouchable.

The idea of the untouched and untouchable product of the pressure exerted by the base elements of the earth appear as a series of six paradigmatic similes, which I have edited to appear as a series of distichs, which conclude with a final distich in lines 175–6 and set off by the narrative aside in 174 that explains the structural features of Aldhelm’s extended figurative art. The six paradigms of virginity are: the red rose; purple gems; the flower of a cherry tree; the fruit of the date tree; the pearl of a conch; and golden threads. These paradigms consist of three examples each of organic and inorganic matter, plants and precious jewels and metals whose

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25 The occurrences of *spurcus* are as follows in Aldhelm’s corpus: *Carmen de virginitate* 77, 94, 117, 155, 161, 165, 176, 768, 1054, 1090, 1177, 1330, 1727, 1760, 1865, 1939, 1969, 2225, 2234, 2500; *Prosa de virginitate* 253.14, 292.15, 296.20, 299.5, 306.21; *Enigmata* 22.3, 34.7, 79.1; *Epistola ad Acircium* 64.13, 68.7; *Epistola ad Wihtfridum* 479.13.
colors contrast with the surroundings they derive from. In each paradigm the visual sense is privileged; these examples reveal themselves as something to be looked at, whose colors and shimmering beauty draw the gaze upward. Virginity becomes something that is witnessed by the fact of its pristine state, of its untouchability.

However, the paradigms all emerge from the world of touch, of base earth. The earth is figured as a mother, not a virgin, as a producer of the paradigms, as represented by words like *gignit* (164), *promit* (167), *praestabit* (169), *nascitur* (171), and *depromit* (173). These verbs of production suggest the sense in which the earth is constantly productive, giving birth, drawing forth, and furnishing new wonders to our sight. This is a world of touch, of bodies intertwining. The organic paradigms—the rose, the cherry blossom, and the date—take root in the earth, and their fruits are pushed out at the top of the plants: the rose perched at the top of its stem, the cherry blossom climbing up the tree, the date pushed out from the top of the tree. The organic metaphor becomes a means of explaining the paradox, with the plant mediating between heaven and earth, so that the product may emerge from a world of touch and into a world of vision. The inorganic paradigms—the purple gems, the pearl, and the golden filament—create their untouchability through hardness. The perdurable membranes of precious jewels and metals allow clods of earth to stick or the flesh of a conch to enfold; however, they are a process of refinement. The pearl takes its form from bits of earth that become trapped within the mollusk, building up over time to create the visual appearance of an untouched unity, an association the name itself conjures. If these paradigms rise above, *praecellit* (163 and 171), the base association with the earth, they do it because they take their shape within and through the earth. The transcendental is always tied to the material, even when trying to escape it.
Aldhelm’s sound-play adds another dimension in which the senses intertwine. Alliteration is frequent in the passage and at times comes in pairs of alliterating sounds that create a balance within the lines. Thus, in “pallida purpureas ut gignit glarea gemmas, / pulverulentà tegit quas spurci glebula ruris” (164–5), the alliteration on p and g creates a balance between the two halves of the lines that emphasizes the balance created by the golden line in 164. This counterbalancing alliteration creates an intertwining aural effect, as the sounds remain separate and yet syntactically they intertwine, with pallida in agreement with glarea and purpureas in agreement with gemmas. This alliterative sound play takes on another form in 166, which reads, “Ut flos flavescens scandit de cortice corni.” Here the alliteration on f and c does not intertwine, but instead the sounds are used to depict movement. The flower’s ascent is marked by consonance in the final syllable of flavescens and the initial syllable of scandit, creating an aural repetition that mounts in the reader’s ear. Aural play then provides a space in which the movement upward from the world of touch into the world of vision may be mediated.

In depicting the structure of the paradigms as a movement from touch to vision, one paradigm, that of the date, presents considerable problems. Whereas other paradigms stand out for their visual excellence, the date appeals to another sense. Although it is pushed out from the top of the palm and announces itself to vision, this announcement is merely a prologue to another sensory interaction: taste. Aldhelm describes the date as sweet, dulcis (168), and this is a trait that is contrasted with the dryness of the surroundings that produce dates. The reason that the date proves the exception to the rule lies in the potential for a polysemous interpretation of the passage. The word for date, dactylus (here dactilus), derives from the Greek δάκτυλος, meaning finger, and in Latin could be used to refer to fruit, finger, or (metrical) foot of a long syllable
followed by two short. Fingering dactilus suggests the world of touch which is producing the
date and also hints at the possibility of the fruit to touch back. The allure is not simply a desire to
touch the fruit, but to have it touch you in return and reconstitute itself as a part of your body.
Before we can taste the sweetness of the fruit, we must first touch it. The associations with the
dactyl are even more explicit, given Aldhelm’s position as the first prominent metrist of Anglo-
Saxon England. Lines 168–9 show the most metrical uniformity of any of the distichs in the
passage, with not only a uniform metrical pattern (dactyls in the first and fifth feet of the line),
but also an identical mapping of feet onto words. That initial dactyl is pushed out from the
spondaic heaviness of Aldhelm’s hexameters. Part of the date’s delight lies in the way that it
calls forth a certain bodily reaction. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty has noted, “Words have a
physiognomy because we adopt towards them, as towards each person, a certain form of
behaviour which makes its complete appearance the moment each word is given.” A part of the
physiology of the dactylus is that whenever we say it, we produce its meaning, and when we
speak of the fruit, we do it with the rhythms of the metrical foot, which takes its meaning from
the joints of fingers, touching the untouchable through the act of reading.

What precisely does it mean to touch the untouchable? Maurice Merleau-Ponty locates
the untouchable in the act of touching oneself: “To touch and to touch oneself (to touch oneself =
touched-touching). They do not coincide in the body: the touching is never exactly the touched...
Something else than the body is needed for the junction to be made; it takes place in the
untouchable. That of the other which I will never touch.” When I touch myself, I occupy two

26 See the entry for “dactylus” in Lewis and Short and “δάκτυλος” in Liddell and Scott. The entry for “date” in the
OED indicates that “date” ultimately derives from a Semitic language, and in Greek was assimilated due to a folk
etymological association of the fruit with the shape of a finger. Similarly, the use in reference to the metrical foot
developed from an association with the length of joints in a finger.
27 Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, 274.
positions, the touched and the touching. When I touch something, I am interacting with something outside myself, and when I am touched, something outside myself interacts with me, but when I touch myself I find myself torn between these two identities. I become the other to my own touch, and this other continually draws away from me, such that when I touch it, I never do so completely. It withholds something of itself, something untouchable, and the self-touch demonstrates that this untouchable lies not in the body but in the junction that exists when bodies touch. This sense of the untouchable subtends the paradigms of untouched virginity. Born out of a world of touch, they pay testament to that of the other that arises through and withdraws from touch. Though clods of earth may adhere to the jewels dug up from the ground and sweet dates come apart in the mouth, still they retain something that resists touch.

Part of the untouchable’s allure lies in the pleasure it gives us. The paradigms of virginity are all examples of beauty as expressed through brilliant colors, particularly those that serve useful purposes in decorative arts like jewelry and dyes for cloth. They may be untouchable, but we nevertheless gain pleasure from touching them. Daniel Heller-Roazen, building on his reading of Merleau-Ponty, ends his book *The Inner Touch* by noting,

> Only the untouchable can be touched with pleasure. That is one joy reserved to beings of tender flesh, whose feeling surface is always “ready to come apart.” They are never so hardened as to be untouched by the untouchable in which they move, nor so thoughtless as to be indifferent to the sweetness they may fail to sense.²⁹

The readiness of flesh to come apart recalls the readiness of the base earth to come apart in Aldhelm’s paradigms, its ability to fragment. In a literal sense the paradigms of virginity can be quite easily touched, but this is because they are figurative concretizations of the untouchable.

The joy of virginity recognizes the fragility of life in the flesh, the readiness of flesh to come apart at a touch; and yet, even as it comes apart, it moves in sweetness that exists just outside our perception, and which Aldhelm illustrates with his verse similes. Virginity is born within the world of flesh, a world of touching, but what it most desires is the touch of the untouchable.

**Kissed Across Time**

The discussion so far has concentrated on the means in which earlier writers reveal themselves in Aldhelm’s work as well as the circumstances of how virginity reveals itself as the untouchable arising within a world of touch. However, these figurative frameworks are simply the pre-conditions for the disclosing of the martyrs’ virginity taking place within the space of Aldhelm’s verse. As noted at the beginning of the chapter, Carolyn Dinshaw’s work on the queer touch across time emphasizes how the desire to touch the past manifests as a desire to speak the past, to speak through other writers in an act of citation that reveals the readiness of texts to come apart—to borrow a characterization of flesh from Heller-Roazen—again and again, continually touching others and becoming a means of forming community across time.³⁰

Implicit in Dinshaw’s analysis of the queer touch is a spatialization of language, in which speaking functions as a space that allows for touch. However, it is important to recognize that this spatialization is in fact a fundamental part of our metaphorical framework for understanding language. As Lakoff and Johnson write:

> Since speaking is correlated with time and time is metaphorically conceptualized in terms of space, it is natural for us to conceptualize language metaphorically in terms of space. Our writing system reinforces this conceptualization. Writing a sentence down allows us to conceptualize it even more readily as a spatial object... Because we conceptualize linguistic form in spatial terms, it is possible

for certain spatial metaphors to apply directly to the form of a sentence, as we conceive of it spatially. This can provide automatic direct links between form and content, based on general metaphors in our conceptual system.\textsuperscript{31}

A part of how we touch across time is our ability to speak the words of the past. However, when we write them down, the words take on a spatial element such that what functions as a figurative way of speaking about touch appears concretized on the page, and scratched upon the flesh of a medieval book, stories about the flesh of martyrs takes on a special significance. In this section I will explore how Aldhelm’s depictions of virgin martyrs take advantage of this spatialization to participate in a kind of queer touch, a touch that desires to touch the untouchable and renders it capable of touching others, a touch that mirrors Aldhelm’s own desire to theatricalize his own writing by speaking through the words of the past.

One of the most powerful ways of depicting the touch across time was with a kiss, appropriating erotic discourses and using them to describe a relationship predicated not on conjoined flesh but on touching the past. One of the most powerful instances of this in the Carmen is Aldhelm’s account of the virgin Chrysanthus, who rather than have sex within the confines of marriage, convinced his bride to join him in a celibate life:

\begin{quote}
Sed tamen armatus Christi testudine tiro  
Oscula virgineis dispexit lubrica labris  
Nec penetrare sinit stuprorum spicula pectus,  
Sed procul excussit iaculatas fraude sagittas:  
Non, sicut cecinit sponsali carmine vatis,
\end{quote}

\textit{Mellea tunc roseis haerescunt} labra labellis,  
Dulcia sed Christi lentescunt labra labellis.\textsuperscript{32}

\begin{center}
1155  
1160
\end{center}

\textsuperscript{31} Lakoff and Johnson, \textit{Metaphors We Live By}, 126.  
\textsuperscript{32} Aldhelm, \textit{Carmen de virginitate}, 1154–60. “But nevertheless, the young warrior armed with the shield of Christ despised the dangerous kisses from maidenly lips, and did not allow the darts of dishonour to penetrate his heart, but rather shook off the arrows shot with deceit: then the honeyed lips do not, as the poet sang in a betrothal song, cling to his rosy lips, but the sweet lips of Christ tarry on his.”
Aldhelm describes him in particularly martial language as *armatus Christi testudine tiro*, a young warrior armed with the shield of Christ, suggesting in the alliteration between *testudine* and *tiro* the way in which the young man’s body itself is transformed into the shield of Christ out of the desire to maintain its integrity. The alliteration on *p* in line 1156 once again demonstrates the utility of sound-play to illustrate acts of penetration, and also serves to place Chrysanthus in the position not of penetrator, but penetrated. In order to describe Chrysanthus’s resistance to bodily temptations, Aldhelm draws on his knowledge of late Antique poetry, contrasting Chrysanthus’s conduct to that depicted in a poem composed on the occasion of a marriage.

The *Epithalamium dictum Laurentio* was a poem often attributed to the fourth century poet Claudian due to its collocation with his works in manuscripts. Its anonymous author is the figure Aldhelm invokes in line 1158 as the *vatis*, poet, who sang a *sponsali carmine*, a wedding song. In line 1159, Aldhelm adapts a line from the *Epithalamium*, which reads, “Mellea tunc roseis haerescant basia labris.” Aldhelm directly borrows the first four feet, but the last two, the poetic cadence, are altered, *basia labris* appearing as *labra labellis*. Furthermore, it is possible that Aldhelm’s alteration of the poetic cadence derives from another oral description derived from another late Antique poet, Dracontius, who in *De laudibus dei* describes the appearance of the lips: “dentibus adduntur rubicundo labra flabello.” Here Dracontius is playing with the near-consonance in *labra flabello* as well as the similarity between *flabellum* and another word for lip, *labellum*. That Aldhelm was familiar with Dracontius has been firmly established, and

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34 Dracontius, *De laudibus dei*, III.686. “The lips are brought to the teeth in a ruddy fan.”
the majority of Aldhelm’s lines that echo Dracontius do so within the poetic cadence, so the situation is certainly suggestive of Drancontian influence.35

The shift in the poetic cadence from *basia labris* to *labra labellis* serves to emphasize the mirrored image of lips pressing against lips in a kiss and suggest a union of touching and touched. In the subsequent line, Aldhelm repeats the cadence, while changing the identity of the figure kissing Chrysanthus from Daria, his bride, to Christ, whose lips tarry, *lentescunt*, upon Chrysanthus’s. *Lentescunt* contrasts sharply with the verb in the previous line, which falls into the same metrical position, *haerescunt*, adhere or attach to. While describing the action of kissing lips, the verbs also mark a development in the spatial meeting of words on the page of Aldhelm’s verse. In the first line, Aldhelm attaches the words of another author to his own, and then he allows himself to tarry upon the cadence, itself perhaps a rewriting of another author. By citing Pseudo-Claudian and writing through Dracontius, Aldhelm presses his own lips to the words of the past, and by speaking these words he allows their writing, in this repurposed form, to touch new readers. While the words on the page emphasize a literal touch, the act of speaking the words forms an affective relationship between past authors and present—whoever’s present it may be—readers, who find their lips tarrying with and upon the lips of the untouchable past.

The kiss as the manner in which the desire to touch the past reveals itself was such a powerful image that Aldhelm reused it in his depiction of Saint Eustochium, writing:

Aspidis ut morsum spernebat basia buccis,  
Dulcia sed Christi compressit labra labellis,  
Oscula dum supero defixit limpida sponso.36

35 On Aldhelm’s knowledge of Dracontius, see Orchard, *Poetic Art of Aldhelm*, 185–8. This tendency, as seen in Orchard’s identified parallels, to borrow from the closing feet of Dracontius’s lines is common for the use of both *De laudibus dei* and the *Satisfactio*, a short poem of Dracontius.
36 Aldhelm, *Carmen de virginitate*, 2136–8. “She spurned kisses on her cheeks as a snakebite, but pressed the sweet lips of Christ to her lips, while she fixed her pure kisses on her higher husband.”
The only alteration in the line is in the medial verb, compressit, which shows not only the desire to allow Christ’s lips to touch her own, as was the case with Chrysanthus, but also an active desire to press Christ’s lips to her own. This shift is also marked by a case shift for dulcia labra, which moves from the nominative to the accusative as Eustochium takes control. Aldhelm’s inter- and intra-textuality allows him to present words in new environments, changing how they take on meaning in a new space. What served before as a means of connecting form and content becomes repurposed to allow other touches to occur across time. The virgins not only touch Christ, but they present a surface whereby they may touch each other, and even allow Aldhelm to touch himself. The pleasure of the text becomes mediated by the language of the body, and these repetitions serve as Aldhelm’s own way of tarrying with others. Eustochium kisses Christ, but in her marriage she is made to theatricalize the words of Chrysanthus’s touch across time.

The kiss across time recurs again in the account of the virgin Cecilia, and again Aldhelm repeats his diction in the phrase dulcia Christi:

Porro Caeciliae vivacem condere laudem 1710
Quae valeat digne metrorum pagina versu?
Quae sponsum proprium convertit dogmate sancto
Mella carnalis contemnens ludica luxus,
Basia dum potius dilexit dulcia Christi
Candida praepulchris complectens colla lacertis.37 1715

Lines 1710–11 emphasize alliteration on v in vivacem, valeat, and versu, and this sound-play makes it easy to hear the echoes of vagina in the pagina on which Aldhelm is writing.

Alliteration emphasizes this pun and has the effect of presenting the material text as a gendered object, something especially susceptible to carnal games because of its consanguineous nature with the flesh of the virgin. A part of this carnality is the tendency of flesh to come apart, its

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37 Aldhelm, Carmen de virginitate, 1710–5. “What page of these meters in verse is able to establish a long-lived praise of Cecilia? She turned her own husband with holy doctrine, despising the honeyed games of carnal pleasure, while she loved rather the sweet kisses of Christ, embracing the shining neck with beautiful arms.”
susceptibility to intrusions, a susceptibility built into the nature of its appearing through the word *vagina*, sheath, itself. However, Cecilia resists coming apart, condemning the honeyed games of carnal delight. The use of *mellea* to describe the pleasures of the flesh mirrors its use in the account of Chrysanthus, and sets up the contrast in the subsequent line, in which Cecilia loved, *dilexit*, the sweet kisses of Christ. The desire to touch Christ is a loving one, a preference for the pleasures of the untouchable that surrounded her. The language of kissing quickly gives way to an embrace, a covering of one body with another, as Cecilia wraps her arms around Christ’s neck, which is described as *candida*, shining. This is a word linked with virginity much more often in verse than prose in Aldhelm’s writing, occurring twice as often in the *Carmen* as in the *Prosa de virginitate*.\(^{38}\) *Candidus*, with its meaning of “shining, dazzling white”\(^{39}\) becomes a descriptor for the untouched purity of virginity, and here marks Christ’s pristine state, untouched but also untouchable, even as he reveals himself to Cecilia through his kisses and his ability to be embraced. He is that of the other that always withdraws from us, protecting itself from touch, and which nevertheless becomes the only thing we can touch with pleasure. He is the sign of our own inability to be touched, revealing himself in recognition that something of ourselves is always of this other, a part which the things of the world cannot penetrate.

However, it is not for a lack of trying that virgin martyrs remain untouched, as is evident in one of the grislier accounts, that of Saint Lucia. A judge desired to marry Lucia, and when she spurned his advances he grew agitated in mind:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Tunc igitur morbo mentis cruciatus acerbo} & \quad 1830 \\
\text{Non tuit opprobrium iudex a virgine factum,} & \\
\text{Candida sed rigido violavit viscera ferro:} & \\
\end{align*}
\]

\(^{38}\) In the *Carmen*, *candidus* occurs at lines 494, 1654, 1715, 1832, 1878, 2156, 2171, 2443. In the *Prosa*, it occurs at 236.14, 246.12, 292.22, and 318.4.  
\(^{39}\) “candidus,” Lewis and Short.
Purpureus cruor extemplo de carne manavit.\textsuperscript{40}

Aldhelm describes the judge as tortured by mental illness as a result of the insult done him by the virgin, and the following two lines make clear the horror of the response. Clare Lees and Gillian Overing have written about the passage, noting the sexualization of Paschasius’s attack.\textsuperscript{41} In particular, they emphasize the connection between Lucia’s womb and her reproductive function. Their reading is primarily attuned to the reactions of a modern classroom to the violence of Aldhelm’s imagery, which, while providing some interesting readings of the text, is consequently skewed by the focus of the horror of the modern gaze looking upon a past that valorizes the physical suffering of the martyr’s body and the use of sexual imagery in this task. As a result, they are reticent to take Aldhelm’s sexual language at face value—Paschasius’s shame is described as “possibly sexual” and “the sexual aspect of the rigid sword” is “difficult to avoid”—and ascribe readings to the text rooted more firmly in a modern response than with medieval Latinity.\textsuperscript{42} This is especially the case with their reading of the word cruor, blood, which they take as “the clotted blood associated with wounds and menstrual flow and an indication of her body as shamed.” While the location of the bleeding would certainly suggest a connection with menstrual blood, the word itself more generally just means blood flowing out of the body, and any connection with a sense of shame is wholly imagined.

The more pertinent connection, and one which is supported by multiple other occurrences in Aldhelm’s oeuvre, is the connection of the type of blood associated with cruor with the

\textsuperscript{40} Aldhelm, Carmen de virginitate, 1830–3. “Then racked with a harsh disease of the mind, the judge did not bear the disgrace done him by the virgin, but violated her pure organs with his rigid sword. Purple gore immediately poured out of the flesh.”
\textsuperscript{41} This and the subsequent discussion all derives from Lees and Overing, Double Agents, 120–1.
\textsuperscript{42} Their analysis of modern reactions to the text is very valuable though, for if Aldhelm is to be integrated into the educational curriculum more generally, which he clearly should be, then teachers have to grapple with how to present the sexualized violence of the text to new audiences. I would argue for a reading that emphasizes that the heightened suffering experienced by the female martyrs was a function of the place of women in medieval culture, but that for Aldhelm this heightened suffering in the earthly life was a marker of greater rewards to come in the next one. However, this valorization of suffering was certainly a part of perpetuating a cycle of violence against women.
wounds of Christ. Thus we find the blood of the savior, *salvatoris cruor*, elsewhere in the *Carmen*, the sacrosanct dye of blood, *sacrosancto cruoris ostro*, in the *Prosa*, and the sacred blood of Christ, *Christi sacro cruore*, in the *Carmina Ecclesiastica*. In a devotional culture that valorized suffering, the sexual violence Lucia suffers serves to provide a bodily connection to Christ, one which, while much more disturbingly violent than the kisses described with regards to the other virgins, serves to put her body in an affective relationship with his. This affective relationship is only further highlighted by the use of the word *candida* to describe her entrails. As we saw earlier with the depiction of Christ’s shining, white neck, *candida* serves as a recognition of untouchability, that part that always withdraws from touch. When Paschasius violates Lucia’s entrails, it is not a means for tarnishing her purity and untouchability, but revealing it. Her entrails, which would not be visible without the sexualized attack, reveal themselves as untouched paradoxically in the act of being touched, and their dazzling quality is a concretization of the untouchable quality that manifests in Aldhelm’s paradigms of virginity, and the purple color of her blood recalls the purple gems which emerge from the soil with clods of dirt sticking to them. Her flesh comes apart, and in this readiness to accept the fragility of the body and its susceptibility to touch, Lucia touches the untouchable through her affective mirroring of Christ’s suffering.

While in the account of Lucia, it is her earthly suitor that breaks into her inner body, it is Christ who punctures the innermost parts of the saints in Aldhelm’s account of Julian and Basilissa. Aldhelm writes:

\[
\text{Attamen altithronus quadrati conditor orbis} \\
\text{Pacta tutatur sponsum cum virgine castum,} \\
\text{Propria fuscarent ut numquam crimine membra} \\
\text{Luxuriam carnis frenantes ilibus almis,} \\
\text{Praesertim pia cum Christus praecordia pungens}
\]

1290

43 *CdV*, 563; *PdV* 296.14; *CE* III.76.
In terms of Aldhelm’s repetitious quality, the phrase that immediately jumps out is the repetition of *praecordia pungens*, which appeared earlier in line 130, along with the interlineal alliteration with *pudorem*, although here the alliteration is even more established by *praesertim pia* at the beginning of the line. In an example of how Aldhelm can use classical references for Christian purposes, he describes God as the king of Olympus, but more particularly this appearance of God on the heights is tied to a revelation of something in the flesh, a book found within the marriage chamber itself, written with golden words, *aurato grammate*, instructing the importance of virginity and highlighting the book itself which Aldhelm wrote as a means of praising virginity.

The model *par excellence* of a book that provides Aldhelm with his model is the work of Saint Jerome, and this saint above the others shows not only the desire of the other saints to touch Christ, but Aldhelm’s own desire to touch the saints. The discussion of Jerome occupies a prominent place in the *Carmen* as the last of the male saints discussed before Aldhelm turns to the female saints, and Aldhelm writes:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Ecce sacerdotis pandam praeconia lauti,} \\
\text{Mentio dum sancti pulsat penetralia cordis,} \\
\text{Cuius quadratum crebrescit fama per orbem} \\
\text{Atque per extremas fulget prudentia metas.} \\
\text{Qui fuit interpres et custos virgo pudoris,} \\
\text{Ebreas Romanis vertens oracula verbis.}
\end{align*}
\]

44 Aldhelm, *Carmen de virginitate*, 1289–97. “Nevertheless the high-throned creator of the four-cornered world protected the chaste husband with the married virgin, so that their limbs might never be darkened with crime, restraining the extravagance of the flesh with holy loins, especially since Christ, puncturing their holy hearts, advised them to keep chaste purity in their sleep. For in the bedroom they discerned a passage of the Book, which the king of Olympus guided, written in golden language, in which holy virginity was ordered to be kept.”

45 Aldhelm, *Carmen de virginitate*, 1619–24. “Behold I will lay open the praises of a priest washed-clean, the mention of which saint beats the inner places of the heart, whose fame is widespread throughout the four-cornered earth and whose prudence shines in the furthest boundaries. He was the interpreter and virgin guard of modesty, turning Hebrew oracles into Roman words.”
Clearly Jerome has greatly affected Aldhelm, touching his own heart, and Aldhelm replicates this in the alliteration that in turn pulses the hearts of the readers. This alliteration comes on \( p \), as he \textit{pandam praecoria}, lays open praises, which in turn \textit{pulsat penetralia}, beat on the inner parts, of his readers. This alliteration recalls the alliteration on \( p \) in line 31, in which Aldhelm himself “potius nitar precibus pulsare Tonantem,” strives rather to strike the Thunderer with his prayers. This intratextual alliterative echo suggests the reciprocity of touch in Aldhelm’s work, a reciprocity that creates connections between saints and readers, pagan figures and the Christian God. Jerome’s role as an \textit{interpret}, a translator or interpreter, echoes Aldhelm’s own role in turning stories of Roman virgins into Anglo-Latin verse, and shows the reception of literature across time.

With the final saint to be discussed in the chapter, I return once more to the earth and a story of a man pushed down into the ground at the side of a road. The Apostle Paul’s conversion came on the road to Damascus, when, blinded by a vision of God, he fell to the earth. Aldhelm describes his conversion:

\begin{verbatim}
Quem pater ingeminans alta bis clamat ab arce;
Tunc ruit in faciem prostrato poplite Paulus
Stipatus tenebris et clari luminis expers:
Quamvis caecatus sentiret damna pupillae,
Ast tamen e caelo vidit fulgescere solem,
Pectora qui semper lustravit luce serena.\footnote{Aldhelm, \textit{Carmen de virginitate}, 495–500. “Whom (Paul) the father, redoubling his efforts, called twice from his high citadel; then Paul fell with prostrated knee onto his face, surrounded with darkness and free of bright light: although he felt the loss of sight, blinded, nevertheless he saw the sun shining from heaven, which always illuminated his heart with its serene light.”}
\end{verbatim}

The first two lines provide contrasting descriptions of the vertical placement of God and Paul. God, the father, calls down to Paul \textit{ab alta arce}, from his high citadel, while Paul is pushed to the ground, falling \textit{in faciem prostrato poplite}, on his face with prostrated knee. Aldhelm uses
alliteration to demonstrate Paul’s abjection, further highlighted by the contrasting placement of Paul and *pater*, both at different vertical levels, but also at different places in the line. God the father appears in the first foot of his line, while Paul appears in the last. As Paul is pushed to the ground, he becomes blind, seeing nothing except for the sun, which “illuminated his heart with its serene light” in line 500. Whereas before we saw the call to chaste purity presented as a puncture which precluded all further bodily penetration, here we see it presented as a light which blinds the subject with its overwhelming force, such that he is unable to see anything else. While surrounded by the darkness, his inner parts, his *pectora*, are illumined, and what is untouchable about Paul becomes touched.

**Conclusion**

In her book on erotic discourse in early devotional texts, Lara Farina notes an unfortunate tendency of scholars of medieval sexuality to omit discussion of the Anglo-Saxon and recognizes the potential for Anglo-Saxonists to reformulate this field, noting:

> [D]iscussion of the erotic elements of early English piety seldom begins with Anglo-Saxon material; any native contributions to devotional tradition in this regard have been almost entirely eclipsed in our research by attention to the overwhelming influence of Continental monastic theology in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries... But a connection between Anglo-Saxon monasticism, the erotics of devotion, and writing in the vernacular can be made as well. Its presence suggests that the later embrace of affectivity was perhaps less of a radical change in devotional goals and more of a revivification of familiar ones.47

While Farina makes her argument based on the erotic body in vernacular literature, the unexplored potential she identifies is equally true of the Latin work of the period. Aldhelm’s

47 Farina, *Erotic Discourse*, 16.
work in particular has been underexplored by scholars, who when they do read it have a tendency to find it “spectacularly boring” and a triumph of style over substance.48

In contrast, I find that a close reading of Aldhelm continually enriches the understanding of what it means to write poetry in the earliest days of recorded Anglo-Saxon literary culture. His consciousness of his position as a mediator of tradition combined with the characteristic features of his writing—especially his wide-ranging allusions and his inter- and intra-textual verbal echoes—to create literary works displaying not the triumph of style over substance but a recognition that style is a part of substance. The erotics of Aldhelm’s literary output lie not only in the affective desire of the virgins to touch Christ, but in the creation of space through the medium of the written, poetic word in which they may accomplish the touch and which facilitates their ability to touch others: each other, the readers, and even Aldhelm himself, who is not immune to the touch of Jerome who penetrates to the innermost parts of his heart. Central to the context in which readers receive these examples is Aldhelm’s own reception of the literature that preceded him, Classical literature, as exemplified by Vergil, and the late Antique literature that began to put the works of Vergil into new contexts.

In the first part of the chapter, I argued that Aldhelm’s reception of Classical verse as exemplified by his treatment of Vergil’s discussion of the Muses in the *Georgics* represents not an outright rejection, but a desire to bring them to earth, stripping them of their pagan reference, but also allowing them to be used to ornament Christian verse. While Vergil brought the Muses to earth in his treatment of agricultural topics, Aldhelm brings them to the ground that is Anglo-Saxon England, using them as a metonym for the larger body of Latin literature from the Mediterranean that Aldhelm reinterprets for a new geotemporal context. In bringing this literature to a new ground, Aldhelm also allows it to serve as the new grounds for the body of his

48 Lees and Overing, *Double Agents*, 121.
own Latin verse, touching the past, and allowing it to enter into his own life and give new meaning through his tendency to speak anew the words of the past.

In the second part, I dwelt more on the meaning of the earth as a part of a framework for understanding virginity. In an elaborate series of similes that provided six paradigms for virginity, Aldhelm depicts the paradox of how virginity, a state of being untouched, arises from a world characterized by touch, a world rooted in the baseness of the earth. The baseness of the earth was especially to be found in the nature of the flesh, which was both susceptible to touch and ready to come apart, but also revealed that even in the act of touching another, there remained something untouchable, a fact evidenced both in Aldhelm’s figurative concretizations of virginity and in modern theorists of touch. In spite of being untouchable, this untouched body which emerges from a world of touch provokes the desire to touch, and provides a way of thinking about how the desire to touch across time is mediated by both bodies of saints and bodies of literature.

In the final part I explored Aldhelm’s depictions of several saints in order to show how style and substance intertwine, represented by the kiss across time felt not only upon the lips of the virgins who pledge themselves to Christ, but upon the mouth of the poet, who speaks anew the words of the past. The queer desire to touch across time developed by Carolyn Dinshaw then becomes a way of thinking through the extension of substance into style, with the spatialization of words upon the page offering a space where multiple temporalities may mingle and bodies may strive to touch the untouchable objects of desire that reveal themselves through the inner touch that pulses upon our bodies.

The discussion of Aldhelm’s reception of earlier authors and the relationship of text and body set the stage for the next chapter, where I will turn to an examination of Felix of Croyland’s
reception of Aldhelmian diction as a means of creating the monstrous bodies of the demons who assault saint Guthlac in his Mercian fen. Whereas the discussion of bodies in Aldhelm’s verse focused on that which remains untouchable, the textualized bodies of the *Vita Guthlaci* reveal bodies in a state of becoming, highlighting the shifting materiality of subjects constructing themselves through their interactions with both their ecological and written environments.
Chapter 3

At Home in Guthlac’s Fen: Eating and Reading with the Environment

What does it mean to be at home? Every child who moves to a new house knows that it is not immediately home, nor can home necessarily be understood as a series of concentric rings. Toronto is my home in a way that Canada is not, such that flying across the US-Canada border always constitutes leaving one type of home for another. Home takes its meaning in the life of the imagination. It is a projection of space that gives an individual a sense of belonging. The projection of space constantly shapes the experience of the world, providing a horizon against which to orient one’s self. The centrality of home became most apparent to me in the summer of 2011, when I slipped on the stairs of my parents’ house in Fargo, ND, a city which they moved to shortly after I began graduate school. As a result of the fall, I dislocated my talus, fractured my fibula, and tore my deltoid ligament, which led to a month spent confined—aside from trips to the surgeon who would repair the ligament and put a plate into my leg—to three locations: my bed, the bathroom, and a recliner in the family room. Small obstacles, like a pile of laundry on the floor, became hazardous, and the stairs to the rest of the house seemed insurmountable. Meals initially consisted of a diet of eggs, toast, and fruit. As my experience of the world shrunk to a twenty foot stretch of carpet, it seemed to affect my consciousness more strongly, and by spending time, as Felix describes Guthlac’s monsters, *talo tumido*, with swollen ankle, my parents’ house became a home.¹

Felix’s *Vita sancti Guthlaci*, written in the early eighth century, tells of a saint making his home in a remote location, the Mercian fen or swamp, subsisting on scant food, and afflicted by visions of monstrous creatures that lacerate his body in a passage marked by rhetorical

¹ Connecting the search for home in Anglo-Saxon England has also been explored in Howe, “Looking for Home in Anglo-Saxon England.”
exuberance. It reveals the projection of the external world upon the imagination, a projection mirrored through the depiction of the swamp as a metaphor for the text, with the interwoven brambles standing in for the recondite diction of Felix’s Latin style modelled on the practice of Aldhelm. It portrays how space, food, and (dis)ability function as a network across which identity articulates itself, and provides a model for how a reader’s identity develops through the process of negotiating a text.

Critical response to Guthlac has taken a discursive turn in recent years. Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe takes the Latin life as a text concerned with the crossing of boundaries, with the swamp functioning as a Foucauldian heterotopia, an other space in which discourses meet and allow for transformation. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen takes the textual corpora of Guthlac lives, composed in various forms in both English and Latin in the subsequent centuries, as suggestive of the fragmented identity of the masculine body continually engaged in a process of becoming, and Alf Siewers sees the inscription of discourses surrounding Mercian nationality in the construction of Guthlac’s swamp. These narratives that seek to identify larger discursive trends working in the life and in the life’s dissemination through Anglo-Saxon England tend to preclude a focus on the intimacy of Guthlac’s story, the depiction of Guthlac alone in the swamp, the reader alone with the text. The move to discourse has opened the text to new and exciting interpretations, but at the expense of an understanding of how the swamp projects itself upon the mind of Guthlac, and the text, through rhetoric, upon the mind of the reader.

A prejudice against Aldhelmian style has hampered the understanding of Felix’s own Latinity. This prejudice is especially problematic and ahistorical given the large influence of Aldhelm on poets and hagiographers up to the eleventh century. This has led to statements such as those of O’Brien O’Keeffe and Cohen, which are not without merit but which overlook the intricate interplay of the swamp and the text.

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2 O’Brien O’Keeffe, “Guthlac’s Crossings.”
as W. F. Bolton’s that the life’s “Aldhelmian heaviness must have increasingly limited its usefulness,” and Benjamin Kurtz’s that Felix wrote “in a tumid and frigid style, in great part quite unlike the Latinity of Evagrius.” More recently, Paul Szarmach has read into the translation methods in Vercelli Homily XXIII “one of the earlier vernacular responses to the hermeneutic [formerly ‘Hisperic’] style,” which he sees as “negative.” These negative responses on the part of modern scholars have contributed to a neglect of Felix’s Latin style, with the emphasis placed on identifying sources rather than examining how Felix manipulates them.

Bertram Colgrave, the editor of the *Vita*, says the following concerning his Latinity:

But in addition to the ornate and bombastic style, there is a tendency especially in the later chapters to model himself on Bede rather than Aldhelm. ... To sum up, it may be said that Felix stands stylistically as well as geographically between the two contemporary schools of writing, the far-fetched highly elaborate and often almost unintelligible style of Aldhelm whose influence, especially in the south, was great; and that of the north-eastern scholar whose Latin style, though by no means entirely free from rhetorical elaboration, was nevertheless clarity itself compared with that of Aldhelm.

Colgrave’s account, which describes Aldhelm as ornate, bombastic, far-fetched, elaborate, and unintelligible, errs in not allowing for the possibility that Aldhelm’s elaborate style is a function of linguistic playfulness and in a general conflation of his prose and poetic styles. While the rhetorical elaboration in both is notable and his prose is informed by poetic sensibilities, his

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5 Szarmach, “The Vercelli Prose and Anglo-Saxon Literary History,” 22. On the unsuitability of the term Hisperic, see Alistair Campbell, “Some Linguistic Features of Early Anglo-Latin Verse,” 11: “Writers of Aldhelm’s school have been called Hisperic, but in fact it is doubtful if any Anglo-Saxon writer deserves that description, which should be reserved for writers who use strange and barbarous words of unknown origin of the type found in the *Hisperica Fama*. Aldhelm and his school rather delight to use words which are good and real enough, but very rare in classical authors.”
poetry is far easier to understand. This conflation leads Colgrave to underestimate the impact of Aldhelm’s poetry as both source and model, especially in the account of the attack in the swamp. Rather than alternating between Aldhelmian unintelligibility and Bedan clarity, Felix’s Latinity makes use of a linguistic and rhetorical playfulness modelled on Aldhelm’s use of language while also drawing upon the hagiographic tradition exemplified by Bede’s oeuvre. Sarah Downey has rebutted scholarly claims that Felix’s deficiencies led to the breadth of later works on Guthlac—including two Old English poems, Guthlac A and B; a long prose translation, and an excerpted translation of the monster encounter in Vercelli XXIII—noting that Felix’s life continues to serve the primary purpose of establishing the saint, with other lives acting in a secondary fashion and serving “other purposes which respond to the saint’s already-proven sanctity.”

In this chapter I will argue that Felix’s adoption of an Aldhelmian playfulness leads to a reception of Latin style that uses rhetoric to create a space for becoming at home with the monstrous projections of the imagination. The analysis of home draws upon Gaston Bachelard’s The Poetics of Space, which illuminates the effect of home on the poetic imagination. In particular, Bachelard’s account of corners shows how the remote places we seek to hide from the world provide an intimate space in which we are most radically open to it, a space populated by the monsters our imaginations construct. The dialectic of inside and outside expressed by this analysis takes on a material reality in Guthlac’s consumption of bread which some now suspect was ergotic and may have contributed to the visions he had in the swamp. As Jane Bennett has

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8 Gonser, ed., Das angelsächsische Prosa-Leben des heiligen Guthlac.
9 Scragg, ed. The Vercelli Homilies, 381–94.
11 Cameron, “The Visions of Saints Anthony and Guthlac.”
argued, the consumption of food provides an instance of the body incorporating elements of its surroundings into itself and is an act influenced by a network of factors that produces profound cognitive effects. Guthlac becomes at home in the swamp as a product of allowing his identity to be articulated across the swamp, as he is woven into its texture just as readers are woven into the text.

The Interwoven Text of Guthlac’s Swamp

Felix begins the life with a rhetorically sophisticated apology for any defects in his Latinity, a standard hagiographic trope which he develops especially from the *Vita Martini* of Sulpicius Severus. Felix writes, with words taken from Sulpicius Severus in italics:

Iussionibus tuis obtemperans, *libellum quem de vita* patris beatae memoriae Guthlacii conponi praecipisti, simplici verborum vimine textum non absque proacritatis inpudentia institui. *Ea tamen fiducia* coram obtuli obsecrans, ut si ullatenus, ut *fore arbitror*, illic *vitosus sermo aures* eruditi *lectoris perculerit*, litteram in fronte paginæ veniam poscentem intendent.\(^\text{12}\)

The passage shows both how Felix draws heavily from other sources and the type of rhetorical play he uses to embellish his source material. His account of his own style suggests a simplicity belied by the rhetorical sophistication of the passage which highlights the interweavings of his text. Much depends in the first sentence on the polysemous nature of *textum*, a word which entails the style of a literary composition but also can be used simply to mean weaving. Felix plays with the more concrete reference, highlighting weaving as a metaphor for the construction of a literary text by describing it as an interweaving of words, *verborum vimine*. The words flow back one into another: *textum* linked to *vimine* by the semantic field of woven objects, and *vimine* to *verborum* by alliteration. Felix employs the humility *topos* in describing this kind of

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\(^\text{12}\) *Felix’s Life of Saint Guthlac*, Prologue, 60. “Obeying your commands, not without the effrontery of boldness, I have put together the book which you instructed me to compose about the life of our father Guthlac of blessed memory, woven with a simple interweaving of words. With this confidence I have publicly offered it to you, praying that if, as I think may happen, the faulty speech found there should dismay the ears of the learned reader in any way, it will offer up a note at the beginning of the page seeking pardon.”
rhetorical flair as *simplici*, simple, and his bold style is emphasized by his use of litotes immediately following, in which he states that he is writing *non absque procacitatis inpudentia*, not without the boldness of effrontery. This type of litotes, denial of a negative, is common in Anglo-Saxon literary style, and reveals a wry playfulness pervading his work, rhetorically winking at the reader while acknowledging the standard hagiographic tropes exemplified by a writer like Sulpicius Severus.¹³

In the second sentence Felix says that his readers use their ears to experience the text, linking sight to sound. Gernot Wieland uses the invocation to the *aures lectoris* as a way of approaching the dynamic of orality and literacy.¹⁴ Wieland, drawing on Andy Orchard's analysis of orality in Aldhelm's Latin verse,¹⁵ uses Felix as a test case for examining the influence of Old English orality on Latin literacy because of Felix’s reliance on native vernacular sources for Guthlac's life, stating, “The question that concerns us in this paper is this: is Old English orality echoed in Felix's Latin literate work, or does he completely transform the oral vernacular accounts into Latin literacy?”¹⁶ Attempting to separate orality from literacy leads Wieland to statements like, “Orality triumphs over literacy,” but such triumphalism seems out of place given Felix’s capacity to draw from a combination of oral sources, continental hagiographic models, and Anglo-Latin texts in both poetry and prose.¹⁷ Orchard's analysis, which reveals that Aldhelm’s verse passes standard tests for oral composition, reveals the porous nature between the boundaries of orality and literacy.¹⁸ Wieland tries to re-assert this division by announcing orality's victory, reifying distinctions which do not seem apparent in Felix's account. His

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¹³ On the use of litotes, see Frank, “The Incomparable Wryness of Old English Poetry.”
¹⁴ Wieland, “*Aures lectoris*: Orality and Literacy in Felix's *Vita Sancti Guthlaci*.”
¹⁶ Wieland, “*Aures lectoris*,” 169.
¹⁷ Wieland, “*Aures lectoris*,” 174.
evidence for the triumph of orality lies in the oral use of written texts, specifically, the oral recitation of the Psalms as a way of dispelling demons. The distinction—which Wieland supplies, not Felix—between quoting the Psalms and reading them seems like rather slim evidence on which to assert the power of orality, especially given the rhetorical complexity of Felix's text that eruditely plays words against each other in ways that suggest both a literate and oral understanding of the Latin text.

Given Felix's emphasis on subtle, polysemous interpretations of words, the aures lectoris reads as an invocation of synaesthesia, the conflation of sensory experiences. Rather than attempting to untangle orality and literacy in the Vita Guthlaci, we should try to appreciate how inextricably Felix intertwines them in his text along with his source material. This intertwining is readily apparent in the passage as a whole. As a corrective to harmful speech striking the ears, it furnishes a letter in fronte paginæ, at the beginning of the page, asking pardon. It is not Felix asking, poscens, for pardon, but rather the littera, which reveals itself in the material form of the text. The life secures for itself a kind of agency linked to the fact that the source of its speech is not a mouth, but the page of the text, highlighting the deferral of speech that occurs when it takes a material form apprehended visually. The text speaks to its readers, whose minds are capable of processing visually encoded information as aural phenomena.

The materiality of the text is highlighted by resonances with the description of the swamp in which Guthlac makes his home. When the monsters attack, they drag Guthlac off into the swamp, drowning him in atrae paludis coenosis laticibus, in the foul waters of the black swamp, and dragging him off per paludis asperrima loca inter densissima veprium vimina, through the harshest places of the swamp among the densest interweavings of brambles. The phrase densissima veprium vimina recalls the simplici verborum vimine of the prologue, whose

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19 Felix’s Life of St Guthlac, Ch. 31, 102.
weavings tended to be dense rather than simple. The parallel structure of the phrases—the hyperbaton which provides the separation between noun and its agreeing adjective and a genitive linked to the head through alliteration—heightens the resonance between the passages and demonstrates the parallel functioning of the swamp and the life as interwoven environments, understood as metaphorized projections of each other. The swamp is a text, which reveals itself to Guthlac through a process analogous to reading, and the text is a swamp, full of brambled Latinity that presents barriers to understanding, causing the reader to seek new ways of negotiating its pathways.

This metaphorical relationship between words and plants is reinforced by a probable source in Aldhelm for the structure of simplici verborum vinine that Felix plays with. Aldhelm begins his metrical treatise addressed to Aldfrith with a discussion of the significance of the number seven, which he gathers together as in the making of a wreath: “de amoenissimo scripturarum paradiso quasi quosdam campestrium caulis aut vernantes pratorum flosculos coacervans ad unius coronae texturam congerere nitar.”

Aldhelm sets the stage for understanding selections of texts as flowers and other plants, which are then woven together into a singular whole, using texturam to play with the written nature of his scriptural sources at the same time that it represents metaphorical nature of his task. After giving a lengthy number of examples, Aldhelm brings the metaphor to full bloom:

Huiuscemodi sollicitudine permutus recolat et reminiscatur in primordio epistulae, quam tantopere exempli gratia protelaveram, inde meam mediocritatem radicem futurae locutionis oblato huius supputationis argumento sumpsisse, unde postmodum fragilis et gracilis ingenii frutices et nutabunda verborum vimina patulis defusa ramusculis succ reverunt.

Aldhelm, De metris, 62.12–14. “From the most pleasant paradise of scriptures I will strive to heap up, as it were, certain stalks of the fields or spring-time flowers of the meadows and gather them into the weaving of a single wreath.”

Aldhelm, De metris, 74.9–14. “If someone is stirred up by a concern of this sort, let him recall and recollect that in the opening of this letter, which I had prolonged so much for the sake of examples, my humbleness took root for
Now it is not only the scriptures that are being expressed within the horticultural metaphor, but it is Aldhelm himself, who, through his humbleness, *mediocritatem*, takes root, *radicem*. The metaphor has become a means for expressing his relationship to his text, structured according to his method of relating to textual tradition. In *nutabunda verborum vimina* we can see the root of Felix’s *simplici verborum vimine*. However, in its first iteration the metaphorical resonance employed by Aldhelm is more subdued, and it is not until Felix roots it in the new environment, full of thorns, that Aldhelm’s delicate shoots become the interwoven brambles of the *densissima veprium vimina*. As the metaphor is adapted from one text to another, it retains its sense of words as like plants, but as the context changes the metaphor expresses a different relation, and what in Aldhelm matures from first appearance into blooms upon spreading branches in the heavens, in Felix matures from an apparently simple weaving into the most dense thicket spread out upon the ground.

This connection that ties reading to the environment is not incidental. As Alf Siewers writes:

Mary Carruthers has noted how reading was a visual process in the early Middle Ages, and thus environmental in a sense. There is not so much the perceptual sense of being isolated in a book-lined study in early medieval monastic writings explored here. Theories and patterns of both perception and reading are related to personal modes of intersubjectivity. ... The textual effect heuristically reflects the story back to physical middle-place between reader and written words.22

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The act of reading takes place in a world full of perceptual experiences that are constantly informing how texts reveal themselves to readers, creating an interpretative constellation by which the experiences of readers informs how they perceive the texts. Nor can reading be separated from that world. The “physical middle-place” of Siewers is suggestive of what Martha Rust, adapting a phrase from Stephen Nichols, has termed the manuscript matrix, a physical space created by the interactions of reader and text that open up liminal worlds of the imagination. The text reveals itself by giving the reader’s experiences back to them, intertwining the work with the rest of a reader’s experiences, and in the case of descriptions of the environment, interweaving actual landscape with the imaginative landscapes of other texts.

One important intertext in Felix’s depiction of Guthlac’s home is Aldhelm’s *Enigma* 43, concerning the *sanguisuga*, leech, whose first line provides a source for Felix’s account of the location *in atrae paludis coenosis laticibus*:

\[
\text{Lurida per latices cenosas lustro paludes;}
\text{Nam mihi composuit nomen fortuna cruentum,}
\text{Rubro dum bibulis vescor de sanguine buccis.}
\text{Ossibus et pedibus geminisque carebo lacertis,
Corpora vulneribus sed mordeo dira trisulcis}
\text{Atque salutiferis sic curam praesto labellis.}
\]

The riddle begins by making the leech a phenomenon of a particular place, the muddy waters of swamps. The first line demonstrates Aldhelm’s predilection for alliteration and linguistic playfulness. The repetition of the liquid *l* suggests the languid rolling of muddy waters, and with the polysemous *lustro* Aldhelm foreshadows the multiple manifestations of the leech as something simultaneously monstrous and salvific. The leech *wanders* the swamp, but it also

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23 See the discussion below on pages 130–2 which elaborate the phenomenological sense of constellation I am using here.
25 Aldhelm, *Enigmata* 43. “Wan, I wander swamps through muddy waters; for fortune has made me a bloody name, since I feed on thirsty mouthfuls of red blood. I lack bones and feet and twinned arms, but I bite ill-omened bodies with three-pronged wounds and so I furnish a cure with salutary lips.”
serves the purpose of cleansing the body, acting as a saint who offers healing in his
peregrinations. The word also evokes *lustrum*, a bog or home to wild animals. The leech’s
monstrosity derives not from an abundance of physical features but a lack; it lacks bones, feet,
and arms, reduced to a body in the poem little more than cheeks and lips. The description of the
leech’s feeding habits requires the continual puckering of the lips, and as the mouth negotiates a
string of bilabials in *rubro...bibulis...buccis*, the poem projects upon the reader a manner of
speaking suggestive of the subject matter. The riddle ends with a paradox familiar to us from the
chapter on touch in Aldhelm’s *Carmen de virginitate*, a touch that both wounds and brings
healing, a touch characterized by a kiss. The Aldhelmian metaphorical echoes between the
swamps suggest that the dense interweavings of brambles in Felix’s text are a manifestation of
what Aldhelm would refer to as *densa totius latinitatis silva*, the dense forest of the whole of
Latinity.\(^{26}\) Thematic parallels between the two swamps heighten the importance of Aldhelm’s
riddle as a source. Both texts are set in swamps, describe in detail the appearance of monstrous
inhabitants which inflict disfiguring wounds upon others, and offer the possibility for a salvation
at odds with first impressions.

In addition to borrowing language, Felix draws heavily from the hagiographic tradition,
particularly from the life of St. Antony. However, as Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe argues, Felix
differs significantly in his treatment of place:

> It is clear from the *vita* that Antony is tempted in manifold ways—while living
outside the village he triumphs over demonically instigated sexual temptation, and
in moving to the desert he continues to battle demons, remarkable for their
ubiquity: ‘*ingens eorum turba istum pervolat aerem, non procul a nobis hostium
caterva discurrit.*’ This last point is an important one, and one that has significant

\(^{26}\) Aldhelm, *De metris*, 78.5.
bearing on Felix’s deployment of his source. In Felix’s narrative, the demons become a discrete phenomenon of place.\footnote{O’Brien O’Keeffe, “Guthlac’s Crossings,” 9.}

Like Aldhelm’s leech, the demons reveal themselves to Guthlac as a function of a particular place. However, in fixing demonic conflict to a particular place, Felix shifts the terms of the engagement. The world is not a blank canvas but an active contributor in the staging of the encounter, and as much as Guthlac projects his struggles onto the world, so too does the world project itself onto him.

**Of Corners and Monsters**

The account of the attack runs as follows

Per idem fere tempus, paucis intervenientibus dierum cursibus, cum vir beatae memoriae Guthlac adsueto more vigil inintermissis orationibus cuiusdam noctis intempesto tempore persistaret, en subito terterrimis inmundorum spirituum catervis totam cellulam suam inpleri conspexit. Subeuntibus enim ab undique illis porta patebat; nam per criptas et cratulas intrantibus non iuncturae valvarum, non foramina cratum illis ingressum negabant; sed caelo terraque erumpentes, spatium totius aeris fuscis nubibus tegebant.

Erant enim aspectu truces, forma terribiles, capitolibus magnis, collis longis, macilentà facie, lurido vultu, squalida barba, auribus hispidis, fronte torva, trucibus oculis, ore foetido, dentibus equinis, gutture flammivomo, faucibus tortis, labro lato, vocibus horrisonis, comis obustis, buccula crassa, pectore arduo, femoribus scabris, genibus nodatis, talo tumido, plantis aversis, ore patulo, clamoribus raucisonis.

Ita enim inmensis vagitibus horrescere audiebantur, ut totam paene a caelo in terram intercapedinem clangisonis boatibus inplerent. Nec mora, ingruitibus inrumpentesque domum ac castellum, dicto citius virum Dei prefatum, ligatis membris, extra cellulam suam duxerunt, et adductum in atrae paludis coenosis laticibus introserunt. Deinde asportantes illum per paludis asperrima loca inter densissima veprium vimina dilaceratis membrorum conpaginibus trahebant.\footnote{Felix’s Life of St Guthlac, Ch. 31, 100–2. “About the same time, with a few intervening passages of days, when Guthlac the man of blessed memory in his accustomed manner was keeping vigil at the dead of night with uninterrupted prayers, he suddenly saw his whole cell filled with the foulest troops of wicked spirits; for entrance was open to them pouring in from every direction; as they entered through underground passages and crannies, neither the joints of the doorways nor the fissures in the lattice-work denied them entry; but, erupting from heaven and earth, they covered the space of the whole air with dark clouds. For they were savage in appearance, terrible in shape, with great heads, long necks, thin face, sallow complexion, filthy beard, bristly ears, harsh forehead, fierce}
The attack begins with Guthlac in his home, going about his customary prayers, when suddenly the monsters burst in from the nooks and crannies and joints of the house. Felix describes the monsters in detail, with a catalog of linked adjectives and nouns that proceed from the top of the head to the feet, employing rare lexical items and poetic compounds, such as *flammivomus* and *raucisonis*. As the grotesqueness of their figure reveals itself, they make a cacophonous racket, and finally bind Guthlac’s limbs and drag him off into the swamp, whose brambles tear at his body.

Guthlac seeks out solitude in a remote corner of the world, a space in which he may contemplate God and pray. Felix presents his house as a dwelling filled with nooks and crannies, private spaces inhabited by him, but also haunted by the monsters of the swamp, who invade his world with cacophonous echolalia. They pour into his dwelling, materializing from both air and earth, not pouring in through customary entrances but seeking out the small, out of the way places which exist in the corner of the eyes, the spaces imagination populates with half-glimpsed apparitions. They enter through fissures in the floor, walls, and roof, and from the joints of the door, appearing as a vision before Guthlac, dragging him into their world as surely as his sight dragged them into his. Their invasion reveals how corners become spaces that are both radically closed and opened to the world, that, after all, are only partially bounded by walls. The description of the entry textualizes the house, demonstrating its own woven nature, and allowing the demons to bubble up into the text through its own interwoven threads.

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eyes, foul mouth, horse teeth, flame-vomiting throat, twisted jaws, thick lip, resounding voices, scorched hair, fat cheek, high chest, scabrous thighs, knotted knees, crooked legs, swollen ankle, splayed feet, gaping mouth, raucous cries. For they were so terrible to hear with their immense caterwauling, that they filled almost the whole intervening space between earth and heaven with their clangorous bellowing. Without delay attacking and bursting into his home and castle, and quicker than words they led the aforesaid man of God, with limbs bound, out of the cell; and having been led away, they immersed him in the muddy waters of the black swamp. Then, carrying him off, they dragged him through the wildest parts of the swamp among the densest thickets of brambles, with the structures of his limbs torn apart.”
The abrupt fullness of Guthlac’s solitude recalls Gaston Bachelard’s discussion of the phenomenology of corners:

[E]very corner in a house, every angle in a room, every inch of secluded space in which we like to hide, or withdraw into ourselves, is a symbol of solitude for the imagination; that is to say, it is the germ of a room, or of a house. ... And all who live in corners will come to confer life upon this image... For to great dreamers of corners and holes, nothing is ever empty... The function of inhabiting constitutes the link between full and empty. A living creature fills an empty refuge, images inhabit, and all corners are haunted, if not inhabited.29

The swamp is a symbol of Guthlac’s solitude, one which he chooses specifically because it is secluded. However, Guthlac’s imagination finds that the solitude is not empty but richly full. By inhabiting the swamp, Guthlac confers life upon, life that manifests in his visions. Most significantly, a corner is not enclosed space; it is only partially bounded, “a sort of half-box, part walls, part door.”30 When we look upon it we perceive the limits of our vision, a place of shadow half-glimpsed, but when we inhabit it we stand wholly exposed to the world at the same time that we seek to escape from it.

The catalog of demonic attributes is astonishing, with twenty-six adjective-noun pairs accumulating in a cloud of Latinity that obscures Guthlac’s cell. The appearance of the demonic has led in recent years to discussion about the unity or multiplicity of their form. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen writes of the passage:

Felix supplies an astoundingly visual account of demonic bodies in which, because the narratival gaze is simultaneously fragmented and dilatory, coherent

29 Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 136 and 140.
30 Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 137.
images fail to coalesce. A breathless barrage of deformed limbs, animal fragments, regurgitated flame, and glimpses of diabolical visages, membra disjecta, the turgid flow of Latin words and images never pauses long enough to cohere into some stable bodily form. ... The demonic invasion of Guthlac’s cell stages an encounter between a saint who, although an amalgam of disparate pieces himself, has unified these fragments into a totality, and a swarm of demons who resist any settled harmony, any figuring of the body as a stable, hierarchized, homogeneous collectivity.\footnote{Cohen, \textit{Medieval Identity Machines}, 149–50.}

Cohen looks at the passage, but he appears to base his analysis on the English translation provided in Colgrave’s edition rather than on the Latin itself. His argument that the demons possess animal fragments would be better suited to an analysis of the descriptions in chapter 36 with its account of animalistic hooting and howling, as only \textit{dentibus equineis} refers to animals, and the \textit{pigeon breasts} of Colgrave are rather a loose translation of the Latin \textit{pectore arduo}, with elevated breast. However, the later passage would undermine Cohen’s Deleuzoguattarian reading of the demons as possessing no settled hierarchy.

In contrast, Peter Dendle sees the demonic here and elsewhere in the life engaged in an interplay between singular and plural forms:

\begin{quote}
Though the narrator implies that a unity underlies the surface multiplicity [in reference to an earlier visitation], Guthlac shows no awareness of this yet. In his trip to the jaws of hell, however, in which the multiform variety of the demonic is presented in full splendour, he does directly address the antagonists in the plural. ... Only in the final demonic assault on Guthlac, in which the demons assail him as a menagerie of hooting, howling beasts—in the diverse forms of various
\end{quote}
monsters (variorum monstrorum diversas figuras)—does he at last both recognize and directly address the demonic as the single Satan.\(^{32}\)

Dendle provides the more coherent narrative for the full life, but evinces little interest in analyzing the particulars of the encounters, basing his argument primarily upon the forms of address Guthlac uses with the demonic. However, as I will show, the monsters reveal themselves in complex ways, and it is not necessary for readers to align themselves fully with Guthlac’s perceptions.

My principal objection to both Dendle’s and Cohen’s approaches to Guthlac’s demonic encounter is that both reify difference between Guthlac and the demonic. For Dendle the demonic is defined according to Guthlac’s gaze, and for Cohen the demonic represents an absence of structuring principles. However, a reading of the passage reveals not only a variety of structuring principles in the presentation of the demonic, but also a secondary purpose to the demons besides opposition in spiritual warfare. As a phenomenon of place, the demonic serves as a way for the space of the swamp to project itself upon Guthlac’s imagination, a projection that manifests as visions. This projection is mirrored in Felix’s lexis, creating what Gaston Bachelard calls language dreams: “Unexpected adjectives collect about the focal meaning of the noun. A new environment allows the word to enter not only into one’s thoughts, but also into one’s daydreams. Language dreams.”\(^{33}\) Familiar features are presented in new forms, allowing the imagination to range more widely. The demonic is not disfigured, but figured, calling attention to the ways in which every day phenomena are shaped, and Felix’s rhetoric is not disjointed, but jointed, filled with cracks and corners that give space for the imagination to fill.

As China Miéville said concerning the character Motley in his novel *Perdido Street Station*:

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\(^{33}\) Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 146.
Part of the pleasure of the grotesque is the notion, and obviously there’s a level in which these things are figures for trauma and catastrophe, but part of the great pleasure of teratology is the extent to which that pathology is also the norm and in fact there is no abstract norm from which these monsters are deviations and so part of the pleasure of the grotesque is a structural acknowledgement that actually there’s a great libidinal draw to this, this is what we want, this pathologized figure is something we can’t leave alone.\textsuperscript{34}

Guthlac’s escape into the remoteness of his Mercian wilderness is also an escape from the norms of society, a desire for the margins in which unexpected forms continually surprise and shape us.

The catalog of demonic traits has more form than Cohen’s reading argues. It begins with two generic descriptions in the form singular-ablative-noun with plural-nominative-adjective, which are followed by twenty-four pairs of adjectives and nouns, both in the ablative, with the ordering within the pairs variable. Thirteen of twenty-four pairs are plural, with eleven singular. The only repeated adjective is \textit{trux} in \textit{aspectu truces} and \textit{trucibus oculis}, such that the demonic is savage both when looked upon and when looking at others. The only repeated noun is \textit{os} in \textit{ore foetido} and \textit{ore patulo}, which is to be expected given that a mouth be open to create much of a stink. Otherwise, each feature creates a 1-1 mapping of nouns onto the field of adjectives; the demonic is not as multiform as the length of the catalog indicates to a casual reading. It is not the case that features come in all shapes and sizes, but in a singular form: necks are long, teeth horsey, and ankles swollen. Even though the grammatical number of the features shifts between singular and plural, the description as a whole suggests a singular amalgamation of parts. There is an organizing totality that figures these disparate parts as a single entity. The head-to-toe narration reinforces this reading. Most of the description concerns elements of the great heads.

\textsuperscript{34} Manglis, “An Interview with China Miéville,” http://www.wavecomposition.com/2011/06/chinamieville/.
that start the list—the sixteen items from *capitibus magnis* to *buccula crassa* are from the neck up—and from the head the catalog proceeds down, to chest, thighs, knees, legs, ankles, and then feet, before finally returning a second time to the mouth. This method of description employs the typical hierarchy of the body, even as it allows the body to be seen in new ways.

The passage contains a number of features that mark it as poetic in nature. The use of compounds such as *flammivomus, horrisonus, raucisonus, and* in the following sentence, *clangisonus*, all point to poetic lexis; as Colgrave notes, Felix is following the example of Aldhelm’s verse. However, Aldhelm’s writing is likely reinforcing Felix’s own reading of Latin verse. Thus, the most likely source of *flammivomus* is Aldhelm’s *Carmen de virginitate*, but Aldhelm’s reading of Juvencus and Arator, both of whom use *flammivomus*, informed his own usage and may have influenced Felix as well. Similarly, *horrisonus* appears in Aldhelm’s verse as well as Vergil’s, and Felix would have been familiar with both. Felix’s coinage of *clangisonus* then is especially interesting, as it appears not only to be based on Aldhelm’s *raucisonus*, but to be confected from a specific line of the *Carmen de virginitate*: “Tum tuba raucisonis reboat clangoribus alte.” By taking a poetic compound and using another word that appears in the same environment as the base materials to create a new word, Felix becomes a reader not only passively receiving the text, but actively engaged in repurposing the materials he finds there.

The catalog also uses alliteration in phrases like *labro lato* and *talo tumido*. The two-word structure of the of the list creates many appearances of dactyls and spondees, whether incidental or purposeful, and each pair could be seen as a two stress line or half-line. Given these

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36 *Flammivomus* occurs in Aldhelm in the *Carmen de virginitate*, 1772; Juvenecus, *Evangelium*, preface, 23; Arator, *De actibus apostolorum*, 2.531.
38 Aldhelm, *Carmen de virginitate*, 372.
features, an experimentally-minded editor could easily make the decision to present the catalog as a poem. In the interest of seeking out further structuring principles, I do so below:

0) Erant enim
1) aspectu truces, forma terribiles,
2) capitibus magnis, collis longis,
3) macilenta facie, lurido vultu,
4) squalida barba, auribus hispidis,
5) fronte torva, trucibus oculis,
6) ore foetido, dentibus equineis,
7) gutture flammivomo, faucibus tortis,
8) labro lato, vocibus horrisonis,
9) comis obustis, buccula crassa,
10) pectore arduo, femoribus scabris,
11) genibus nodatis, cruribus uncis,
12) talo tumido, plantis aversis,
13) ore patulo, clamoribus raucisonis.\(^3^9\)

Remediating Felix’s prose as a poem laid out in this way highlights other instances of alliteration across word pairs, as in: *truces...terribiles*; *capitibus...collis*; *torva, trucibus; flammivomo, faucibus*; and *comis...crassa*. It also suggests an ordering principle across the half-lines, which in most cases join to form a logical line. Thus 1) contains more general description, 2) sets the stage for describing the head and neck, 3) concerns the face more generally, 4) concerns hairiness, 5) connects the forehead and eyes, 6) concerns the mouth, 7) the throat, 8) the mouth, 11) the legs, 12) the feet, and 13) the mouth. Only in 9) and 10) does the connection between half-lines feel forced. In 9) the fat cheeks and singed hair are juxtaposed, perhaps as unkempt hair naturally would fall upon the cheek. The space in 10) between the chest and thighs highlights the extent to which the demonic body here is defined primarily by the description of face and legs, with a single line bridging the gap between neck and knee. Formatting the passage as a catalog poem also highlights the extent to which new formats have the potential to allow readers to see the

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\(^3^9\) This re-editing should not be construed as the only way to read the text, but as a possibility that suggests itself from the form of the writing. Indeed, it would be interesting to re-edit the passage in a larger number of ways to demonstrate the extent to which our ideas about the formal properties of writing emerge as a result of the physical manner in which a text reveals itself to the eyes of the reader.
poem in a new light. Rather than being bloated and lacking organization, the sentence seems tightly written, with a minimum of repetition, grotesque but also artful.\(^{40}\)

The impression of the passage is of a raucous cacophony in which words come together in new forms, a cacophony whose poetic nature is emphasized by the string of poetic compounds describing the sounds of the demonic entity: *horrisonus, raucisonus*, and *clangisonus*. The words on the page strike the ear of the reader and denote the grotesqueness of both the visual and aural aspects of the demonic presence. The demons overwhelm Guthlac, bind his limbs, immerse him in the swamp, and drag him through the brambles, *dilaceratis membrorum conpaginibus*, with the framework of his limbs lacerated. This passage calls attention to the relationship between environment and imagination, where the body serves as the horizon upon which the two interact. As a phenomenon of the Mercian fen, the demons draw Guthlac into its embrace. The binding of Guthlac’s limbs and the subsequent tearing at them by the brambles enacts a process of textualization. The brambles of the swamp interweave themselves into Guthlac’s body at the same time that Felix’s interweaving of words works itself into the imagination of the reader, intertwining internal and external experiences of the world through textual metaphor.

In dragging Guthlac through the swamp the demons in effect seek to project the form of their own body upon the saint. The features of the demonic legs especially would be a natural result of broken bones incurred while being dragged through the swamp: scabrous thighs, knotted knees, crooked legs, swollen ankles, and turned feet. Other features like a dirty beard, it is worth comparing the sentence to the first sentence of David Foster Wallace’s posthumous novel, *The Pale King*, which likewise is characterized by a long list. “Past the flannel plains and blacktop graphs and skylines of canted rust, and past the tobacco-brown river overhung with weeping trees and coins of sunlight through them on the water downriver, to the place beyond the windbreak, where untilled fields simmer shrilly in the a.m. heat: shattercane, lamb’s-quarter, cutgrass, sawbrier, nutgrass, jimsonweed, wild mint, dandelion, foxtail, muscadine, spinecabbage, goldenrod, creeping charlie, butter-print, nightshade, ragweed, wild oat, vetch, butcher grass, invaginate volunteer beans, all heads gently nodding in a morning breeze like a mother’s soft hand on your cheek.” Although Wallace’s sentence is not intended to invoke monstrosity, it provokes debates over the quality of the writing, whether it is evidence of writerly excess or brilliantly exercised talent.
fierce eyes, and bad breath would be natural developments in an eremitic life. Through the attack Guthlac would acquire a body matched more to those of the fen’s inhabitants than to the norms of human society. While the demons ultimately serve the Antonian purpose of opposing Guthlac’s spiritual progress, in this passage they serve a secondary purpose as a phenomenon of place. A narrative of (dis)ability occurs within this scene; the limits imposed by a differently figured body allow for a more expansive imaginative space articulated as a projected experience of place. The demon’s home is the fen, and in the process of remaking Guthlac in their bodily image, they participate in the becoming-home of the fen for Guthlac.

**Food Networks and Visions**

Modern research has cast new light upon the source of Guthlac’s demons. M. L. Cameron has argued that the visions of both Antony and Guthlac could have been precipitated by their ascetic lifestyle.⁴¹ Certain types of bread that might have been consumed by the saints develop ergotic mold, which can cause waking hallucinations. While it is impossible to know whether Guthlac suffered from ergotism—given the scarcity of historical records and the influence of other eremitic hagiographies upon Guthlac’s *vita*—the possibility reveals an avenue of exploration for literary analysis, one which is especially important given the role of daily conduct as expressed by food and dress in the life. Regardless of whether or not Guthlac suffered from ergotism, his diet would have impacted his health and cognitive faculties, playing a role, direct or indirect, in the visions he experienced in the swamp.

Jane Bennett’s work on political ecology has argued for a vital materiality, in which matter takes an active role in exceeding human intentions. In particular, Bennett argues that food is part of a network demonstrating the relationship between inside and outside and suggesting the permeability of the body to external influences. She writes:

— Cameron, “The Visions of Saints Anthony and Guthlac.”
In the eating encounter, all bodies are shown to be but temporary congealments of a materiality that is a process of becoming, is hustle and flow punctuated by sedimentation and substance. ... The activity of metabolization, whereby the outside and inside mingle and recombine, renders more plausible the idea of a vital materiality. It reveals the swarm of activity subsisting below and within formed bodies and recalcitrant things.\textsuperscript{42}

The vital materiality of Guthlac’s food reveals his body in the fen as dynamic. It reacts to its surroundings and takes on new forms.

Felix depicts Guthlac’s daily life as follows:

\begin{quote}
Vitae scilicet illius haec inmota ortonomia fuit, ita ut ab illo tempore, quo heremum habitate coeperat, non laneo, nec lineo vestimine, nec alterius cuiuscumque delicatae vestis tegminibus usus est, sed in pellicis vestibus omnes dies solitariae conversationis suae exigebat.

Cotidianae ergo vitae ipsius tanta temperantia fuit, ut ab illo tempore, quo heremum habitate coeperat, excepta ordarcei panis particula et lutulentae aquae poculumento post solis occasum, nullius alicuius alimenti usibus vesceretur. Nam cum sol occiduis finibus vergeretur, tunc annonam parvam mortalis vitae cum gratiarum actione gustabat.\textsuperscript{43}
\end{quote}

The grecism ortonomia, for \textit{rule}, reflects Felix’s predilection for recondite vocabulary, whose unfamiliarity to Anglo-Saxon audiences gains expression in manuscripts that explain the term as the more familiar \textit{consuetudo} or \textit{legalitas}.\textsuperscript{44} The out-of-the-way diction parallels Guthlac’s out-of-the-way life. He eschews cloth garments, instead wearing animal skins; he spends every day in solitary conduct, and only eats after the sun sets, subsisting on a diet of barley bread and dirty

\textsuperscript{42} Bennett, \textit{Vibrant Matter}, 49.
\textsuperscript{43} \textit{Felix’s Life of St. Guthlac}, Ch. 28, 94. “The unmoved rule of that life was, that from that time in which he began to inhabit the wasteland, he did not use woolen or linen clothing nor the protection of any other fine garment, but he spent all his days of solitary conduct in garments of animal skins. Therefore, so great was the self-discipline of his daily life that, from that time in which he began to inhabit the wasteland, he ate only a bit of barley bread and a cup of muddy water after the sun set, with no other nourishment. For when the sun bent towards the western lands, then he enjoyed the small ration of his mortal life with thanks.”
\textsuperscript{44} Colgrave, \textit{Life of St. Guthlac}, 94n11.
water. Felix’s description of the diet borrows language from Jerome’s *Vita Pauli*, establishing continuity with eremitic tradition.\(^{45}\)

The passage uses repetition of the phrase *ut ab illo tempore, quo heremum habitare coeperat* to emphasize Guthlac’s break with the norms of human society. The language of denial highlights these differences, and the use of animal skins in particular shows how time is bound up with the idea of place. The water that he drinks is dirty, drawn from the fen itself, and filled with particles of soil and micro-organisms that would impact the health of a body unused to deprivation. The mud of the swamp becomes a part of his body through his drinking, and in the damp air mold would grow quickly on his bread, increasing each day as he only consumes little bits, *particula*, each evening. As the bread sits out, it changes in response to the environment; mold breaks down the bread into new *particula*, and when Guthlac consumes the bread he receives more than just the sustenance he intended from his meager meal. Beings with strange forms afflict the saint, micro-organisms that change Guthlac’s body while at the same time contributing to the visions that Guthlac projects upon his environment. The changes wrought on the microscopic scale parallel those already apparent from the visions themselves. As the demons interweave the saint’s body into the swamp, so too do the micro-organisms of the swamp work themselves into his body.

If networks of food consumption emphasize the nature of bodies as constantly engaged in a state of becoming, then networks of reading serve the same purpose for textual *corpora*. Eating as a metaphor for reading was common in medieval culture, with proper reading reflecting the *ruminatio* of cows chewing over their partially digested food. One manifestation of this metaphor occurs in Aldhelm’s *Carmen de virginitate* in a passage with special resonance for the encounter

\(^{45}\) Colgrave notes the following italicized items as borrowed from chapter 6 of the *Vita Pauli; ordeacei panis particula et lutulentae aquae*. 
with the demons in chapter thirty-one. The passage, lines 2767–78 of the Carmen, is notable for containing four words in common with the account of the demonic encounter: *scaber, coenosus, crassus*, and *guttur*. While the words do not collocate in specific phrases shared by the two texts—so the Carmen should not be called a source for Felix in this instance—the coincidence is striking, given Felix’s familiarity with the poem. The passage reads:

Sed me materiae moles cum sarcina grandis  
Deprimit, ut cunctas non possit carta coronas  
Prendere virgineas; aliis sed plurima restant  
Perficienda, rudem malunt qui noscere sensum  
Ingeniique sui nolunt torpescere cotem;  
Non aciem cordis *scabra* rubigine perdunt  
Otia neu propriam linquunt obtundere mentem.

Quin potius sacros versant sub pectore libros  
Crebro scrutantes praescripta volumina legum,  
Quae superant mellis mulsum dulcedine gustum  
Flaventisque favi, cecinit quod carmine vates.

Sic lector libri solers et gnarus amator  
Nititur electos scripturae carpere fructus,  
Ut pecus agrestes ex prato vellicat herbas,  
Nocturnis recubans quas rursus ruminat horis;  

Sed sus *caenosis* volutabri sordibus apta  
Alternare nequit *crasso* sub *guttur* rumen,  
Dum stratis recubans porcaster pausat obesus  
luncis et stipulis necnon filicumque maniplis.  

Aldhelm’s account of reading reveals how reading is rooted in embodiment. The reader turns sacred books over in her breast, allowing the words to fill her body and touch her inside. She

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46 Aldhelm, *Carmen de virginitate*, 2762–80. “But the weight of this lofty matter presses down with a burden, so that this book is not able to embrace all the virginal crowns; but more remains to be done by others, who prefer to learn about an untreated matter, and who do not wish the stone of their talent to become useless; they do not ruin the keenness of their heart with scabrous rust nor do they let leisure blunt their own mind. Rather they turn sacred books over in their mind frequently inspecting the previously written volumes of laws, which with their sweetness overcome the delightful taste of honey and of yellow honeycombs, which the poet sang of in his song. Thus the adroit reader and knowledgeable lover of the book strives to pluck the chosen fruits of scripture, as the cow nips rustic herbs from the meadow, which she chews over again lying down in the night-time; but the pig, suited to the muddy filth of its wallow, is not able to turn over cud below its fat gullet, while the obese porker rests, lying back on strewn rushes and reeds and bundles of ferns.”
looks upon the volumes, searching them for wisdom. Reading imparts the sweet taste of honeyed wine and yellow honey-comb as its reward. The words of the past sound upon the ear as the song of a poet. Fruits and herbs fill the mouth and nose with odor. Reading opens up a world of sensual experience to the imagination as a function of the body’s engagement with the material form of the book.

Not all embodied engagement is created equal, however. Aldhelm presents two animals’ eating habits as metaphors for reading. The cow represents the clever reader and knowledgeable lover of books. During the day she nips at the grasses of the meadow, and at night she regurgitates her daily intake from the rumen in order to chew it over again. The pig, on the other, dwells in a muddy wallow, swallows its food in a fat throat, and settles down at night to do nothing but sleep on its bed of rushes, straw, and ferns.

Aldhelm establishes contrast between the animals in several ways: the cow eats in the pratum, meadow, and the pig in the muddy filth of its volutabrum, wallow; the cow’s distinguishing feature is its rumen, the pig’s its fat gullet; the cow ruminates at night, and the pig rests. In addition to these contrasts, Aldhelm discusses the pig in more detail, demonstrating the libidinal appeal of the grotesque. Lingering adjectives highlight the bloatedness of the pig, who is obese with a fat throat, while verbs drive the kinetic narration of the cow. Aldhelm describes the pig’s environment more as well as the bed on which it sleeps. The rushes and straw which the pig grinds into the muck have no parallel. The only element present in the cow’s narrative lacking in the pig’s is an account of the food itself. The cow eats agrestes herbas, rustic grasses, but the pig has no identifiable food, presumably living off of whatever falls into its wallow. These differences reveal two reasons for the cow’s superiority. First, the cow exercises the ability to choose what it eats, with the agrestes herbas a clear parallel with the electos fructus,
chosen fruits, of the scripture. Second, the cow is distinguished by its ability to continue to act together with its food, making metabolization a conscious act. The pig metabolizes its food without thought, incorporating it instantaneously into its monstrous form as fat accumulating around its throat. The cow prolongs digestion through ruminatio, continually engaging with the processes that change its relation to the world. Aldhelm depicts the animals lying down in concert, employing recubans in an identical metrical position in the two lines, and in both cases he shows the permeability of the body to external influences. The knowledgeable lover of books, then, is one who engages a text with the entire body, not acted upon by books, but deliberately acting together with them in order to achieve spiritual goals.

The shared lexis with Felix could be explained by the fact that both texts describe a grotesque creature inhabiting filth. However, this thematic resonance argues all the more strongly the need to read the two texts in concert. Whether Felix had this passage specifically in mind is a question without any satisfactory answer. However, Aldhelm’s elaborate metaphor for reading illumines the textual metaphors of Guthlac’s swamp. As with the animals’ digestion, the demonic encounter takes place at night, when Guthlac keeps his vigil of unbroken, inintermissus, prayer, and Felix’s litotes provides a contrast for the surprising way in which the saint’s prayers are about to be broken. The nocturnal setting of the attack is a time of prayer, rumination, sleep, dreams, and nightmares. Familiar features become strange, stripped of color and cloaked in shadow. The concern with alimentary practice and its link with the environment present in Aldhelm is apparent in Guthlac’s careful attention to diet, the grotesqueness of the creatures that dwell in the swamp, and the connection between grotesquerie and environment.

Guthlac’s concern with food manifests in his careful diet. He does not eat at all during the day, and only eats a little after sunset before beginning his regimen of prayer. His days are spent
in \textit{solitaria conversatio}, solitary conversation, language that emphasizes the deliberate nature of his life. Like the knowledgeable lover of books, Guthlac turns things over, seeking wisdom. It is in this \textit{conversatio} that the demons manifest, a latent effect of the metabolization of his food. Guthlac does not act like the pig who collapses at night, but rather spends the night in active contemplation. The entity that attacks, like the pig, is suited to its environment, dwelling in muddy filth and characterized by distended features. Rather than digesting, the demons vomit up fire and harsh cries, filling the entire space between heaven and earth with their bellowing.

The monsters act as the linchpin between Guthlac’s visions and Felix’s language dreams. Their sensual and linguistic manifestations fall together into a single entity, and their body is made up of familiar parts contorted in estranging ways, as depicted by the collection of adjectives. In Anglo-Latin literary culture every act of writing is reception through rewriting. Hagiographers and poets learn their craft from reading the works of earlier writers, picking up tropes, cadences, themes, phrases, and lexical items to incorporate into their own works. As seen in chapter two, the Aldhelmian style of rewriting consisted of both transparent borrowing and confection of sources, something Felix employs on occasion, as seen in his use of the leech riddle. However, the catalog of demonic features represents a more inchoate form of language use. For Felix to be a \textit{lector solers}, he must take what he reads and ruminate over it constantly, turning it over in his mind as he lays down to rest. At night the brain processes its thoughts, combining experiences in startling forms. Felix’s use of language in the catalog reflects his reading of other texts. His vocabulary necessarily derives from prior reading, and his poetic coinages are clearly borrowed from or modelled on Aldhelmian lexis. The language dream of Felix’s monstrous vision is his own attempt to make sense of a language rooted in the wilderness, the only partially digested cud that he encounters in the night, whose textures have
already become a part of him, but with which he has not yet found accommodation. Felix’s language dream is a manifestation of his body as, in Bennett’s terms, a “temporary congealment of a materiality,” and the eating encounters provides a metaphor for Aldhelm’s text working its way into Felix’s body. Even though Felix would not have been aware of a connection between Guthlac’s eating habits and his visions, the networked assemblage of saint and hagiographer, food and environment, and the materiality of the written word act together in order to surprise his intentions, creating new ways of reading Felix’s text centuries after its composition. His work presents in parallel a manifestation of both the tenor and vehicle of Aldhelm’s figurative depiction of reading as eating.

**Conclusion**

Lexical resonances led to identifying two passages in Aldhelm’s oeuvre concerning creatures inhabiting muddy waters: the riddle of the leech and the discussion of the pig’s eating habits. These passages provide near contemporaneous models for how to read monstrous figures in swampy habitats which would have been available to Felix. From the *sanguisuga* riddle comes the idea that a monstrous form does not necessarily correlate with monstrous intent, that what would at first appear to be harmful could potentially be salutary when employed with the correct knowledge. In afflicting Guthlac’s body and replicating their own figurement upon his form, the demons would in effect be making his body suited to the environment in the same way that their own forms, as well as those of the leech and the pig, reveal themselves as the function of a particular place. However, in finding a home within the fen, Guthlac’s body does not simply change due to his environment, but his environment changes because of him. If the permeability of his body is revealed through his consumption of edible matter, then the swamp too ingests
him, incorporating his form into its own structure in a way that has salutary results for both saint and swamp.

Guthlac’s grappling with the *veprium vimina* of his environment parallels the reader’s attempt to grapple with the *verborum vimine* of Felix’s writing. The monstrous lexis of Felix’s Aldhelmian style resists settled interpretations—including the interpretation that the lexis is completely unsettled—with the cloud of the monstrous forms glimpsed in the night both disclosed and obscured by Felix’s style. Strange adjectives collect about the forms of the monstrous body and cast familiar features in a new light. Ruminating upon reading material becomes a powerful metaphor expressive of the language dreams of Gaston Bachelard, such that we see reading not as a single act of interpretation but as a process of mulling over words, allowing them to enter not simply into our conscious minds but into our unconscious, acting together with them so that our identity is always in a state of becoming with the textual matter that we consume.

The account of the demonic attack in chapter thirty-one of the *Vita Guthlaci* reveals a multitude of concerns playing out upon the landscape of the Mercian fen, sounding together in the harsh bellowing of the demons who break in upon Guthlac’s cell in the night. The Mercian fen presents a densely textured environment in both its physical and linguistic manifestations that weave together the senses in parallel ways for the saint and readers negotiating the interwoven brambles of the swamp. Rather than suggesting an absence of structuring principles, a multitude emerges as the form of the demons dissipate and resolve in new ways in accordance with how we read them. It is a text about the norms by which we see the body, showing the figured shapes that reveal themselves in remote places. It is a text about the consumption of edible and legible matter and the processes by which matter affects body and mind. It is a text about visions and
dreaming. It is about how our ability to navigate the world shifts in new environments. It is about finding home in a world that is always both outside of us and seeking entry into the form of our bodies. These concerns flow together, not necessarily settling into a coherent narrative but congealing in forms glimpsed for a moment in the corners and joints of Felix’s poetically influenced prose style.

While Guthlac’s visions took root in his environment, in the next chapter I turn to visions that cross time by turning to an exploration of the ekphrastic vision of the phoenix as expressed in the Latin poem of Lactantius and its Old English poetic adaptation. Guthlac’s visions that take form in interactions with the natural world take flight into a world of pure imagination, which complicates modern notions about the capacity for intersubjectivity even as it necessitates a translation of not only one language to another but of one culture to another. The world of the swamp gives way to a vision of paradise, and yet paradise is still rooted in a world of bodies and interwoven senses.
Chapter 4
Translation and the Visual Imagination: The Phoenix

The Old English Phoenix occupies a curious place in the corpus of Anglo-Saxon literature. Part poetic translation of its Latin antecedent, Lactantius’s Carmen de ave phoenice, part allegorical explication, it forces scholars to confront the inadequacy of terms like translation, adaptation, and allegory as traditionally deployed. Emphasizing the allegorical meaning of the poem tends to lead “either to disappointment with the poem or to an exegetical system so rigid that it falsifies the poem itself” due to the absence of a single coherent organizational scheme, while emphasizing the translation often leads to aesthetic judgments about the qualities of the Latin and Old English poetry that perhaps reveal more about critical bias than Anglo-Saxon translation practice. Whereas Daniel Calder advanced study of the Old English poem by advocating a holistic, symbolic approach, Janie Steen’s recent analysis of the range of methods used by the Old English poet in adapting and translating the rhetorical figures of the Latin has suggested how an equal awareness of original and translation leads to an enriched understanding of the interpretative possibilities of each poem. Steen’s narrow focus serves to address a glaring gap in Anglo-Saxon translation studies, but also reveals the extent of interpretative work that still remains, as her privileging of Latin rhetorical figures leads her to omit discussion of such

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2 See especially N. F. Blake’s comments in the introduction to his edition of The Phoenix, that the Old English is “verbose” and “diffuse” in contrast to the compactness of the Latin, 26. By contrast, Hermann Gaebler wrote that the Latin was lacking in “dichterischer schwung und hingebende wärme,” poetic zest and devoted warmth, “Über die Autorschaft,” 500. All quotations of The Phoenix derive from Blake’s edition, while quotations from Lactantius’s Latin poem come from FitzPatrick, Lactanti de ave phoenice.
3 See Steen, Verse and Virtuosity, especially chapter 4, “The Figure of the Phoenix,” 35–70.
4 Robert Stanton’s Culture of Translation in Anglo-Saxon England exemplifies this gap, with its initial rejection of poetry due to its perceived looseness, 5, and later conclusion that Anglo-Saxon authors hewed closely to their texts because there is little evidence of loose translation practices, 173.
Old English poetic devices as variation, which receives only a single mention in her work on *The Phoenix*.  

This chapter will demonstrate ways in which *The Phoenix* depends upon the embodied perception of both the Old English poet and his readers. The figure that emerges from such a reading is both singular and shifting in form, appealing simultaneously to the reader’s senses of sight and sound. Variation serves a significant role in this process, creating a way of rhetorically mirroring the variegation of the bird in language itself and enabling the juxtaposition of translation and allegory as a double vision held in tension throughout the poem. Helle Falcher Petersen has taken the absence of major studies of variation in the poem as a mark of critical neglect as a whole, an assessment which still holds true in spite of recent critical attention. The only sustained treatment of variation remains that contained in Claes Schaar’s 1949 volume, *Critical Studies in the Cynewulf Group*, which simply categorizes instances of variation across the entire corpus associated with Cynewulf.  

The figure of the phoenix depends heavily upon rhetoric to establish a form rooted in the visual imagination of a reading audience. Lactantius, in his description of the bird’s physical characteristics, uses the rhetoric of the “jeweled style” of Late Antique poetry which relies upon careful rhetorical patterning and concrete objects to create texts studded with rhetorical gems. The Anglo-Saxon poet adapts the Latin by eliding its material specificity in favor of relying upon formulaic associations with treasure in Old English verse and employing variation to create a kaleidoscopic vision that shimmers in different ways according to a reader’s perspective. Both

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5 Steen, 68. In spite of what I am reading here as a weakness, Steen’s focus on pure translation of rhetoric addresses a glaring gap in Anglo-Saxon translation studies, as revealed for example in Robert Stanton’s book.  
6 Petersen, “*The Phoenix: The Art of Literary Recycling*,” 378. Recent monographs that have granted sustained attention to *The Phoenix* include Steen’s and also Tyler, *Old English Poetics*.  
8 Roberts, *The Jeweled Style*, outlines the prevalence of the jeweled style in the poetics of the fourth through sixth centuries, noting particularly its emphasis on description and episodic treatments of subjects.
possess the kind of vividness associated with ekphrasis, “a speech that brings the subject matter vividly before the eyes.”\(^9\) However, the nature of the ekphrasis takes on a polysemous role due to the translation that occurs. While Lactantius’s poem vividly brings the form of the bird before the eyes of the reader, the Old English text musters both the bird and the Latin poem itself. Through the rhetorical adaptations, readers are able to see Lactantius’s text with Anglo-Saxon eyes, and the poem becomes both a translated and ekphrastic object rooted in the embodied perceptions of the adapter and his readers, and the reincarnation of the phoenix itself becomes a metaphor for the process of translation by which something takes on a new form while remaining itself.

The central image of the embodied phoenix radiates throughout the entire poem, leading the poet to play with the perception of words _on gewritum_ (30), in writings. He weaves in language of the Old English _Physiologus_ tradition that highlights the aural characteristics of the phoenix’s song, which, similar to the visual representation of the bird, appears equally pertinent to the song of and the song about the phoenix. Tropes of repetition and variation recur throughout the poem linking metaphorical symbols with allegorical explications and inculcating habits of thought that depend on wordplay to alter a reader’s understanding of standard rhetorical practices in Anglo-Saxon literature. Paul Ricoeur suggests in his analysis of metaphor, “Sometimes a whole poem is needed for the mind to invent or find a meaning; but always the mind makes connections,“\(^10\) rather than projecting a single, coherent allegory, _The Phoenix_ instills an awareness of the reader’s embodied state that both collapses and reifies the boundary between past and present. The poem ends with a coda marked not by the prevalence of variation, but common examples of polyptoton and some rare macaronic verses that juxtapose Old English

\(^9\) This is the definition brought back to prominence by Ruth Webb in _Ekphrasis, Imagination, and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice_, 1–2.

\(^10\) Ricoeur, _The Rule of Metaphor_, 82.
and Latin half-lines across the caesura of the Old English full verse. Interpreting this coda depends upon the habits of mind cultivated throughout the poem by rhetorical play, and allows for a realization of the plenitude of the poem’s meaning within its particular context.\textsuperscript{11}

\textbf{The Form of the Phoenix}

Lactantius was a rhetorician of the late third and early fourth centuries whose espousal of rhetorical figures derived from pagan authors was a prominent harbinger of the syncretistic approach to literary culture of other early Christian authors such as Prudentius, Claudian, and Sedulius. His major rhetorical treatise, the seven book \textit{Diuinae institutiones}, composed in the early fourth century, draws heavily from the canon of classical authors such as Vergil, Cicero, and Ovid, and its enduring popularity throughout antiquity, the medieval period, and renaissance, leads Jackson Bryce to suggest his lasting appeal is due to “his profound attachment to pagan literature.”\textsuperscript{12} Lactantius even goes beyond what Augustine would later assert in Book IV of \textit{De doctrina Christiana}, that rhetoric was a tool which could pragmatically be used by Christians and pagans alike,\textsuperscript{13} and instead allows the ideas of pagan authors to inform and animate his thought.\textsuperscript{14}

These habits are all demonstrated by Lactantius’s early poem the \textit{Carmen de ave phoenice}, although they have also fueled controversy over Lactantian authorship, aided by the absence of any mention of the poem in Jerome’s \textit{De uiris illustribus}, which lists his other extant

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{11} Ricoeur discusses plenitude as the principle that accords to a poem all possible interpretations allowable by context, while selection is the principle that narrows the range of possible meanings, \textit{The Rule of Metaphor}, 96.
\item \textsuperscript{12} Bryce, \textit{The Library of Lactantius}, 5.
\item \textsuperscript{13} Augustine, \textit{De doctrina Christiana}, IV.ii.5. “Cum ergo sit in medio posita facultas eloquii, quae ad persuadenda seu prava seu recta valet plurimum, cur non bonorum studio comparatur ut militet veritati, si eam mali ad obtinendas perversas vanasque causas in usus iniquitatis et erroris usurpant?” “No; oratorical ability, so effective a resource to commend either right or wrong, is available to both sides; why then is it not acquired by good and zealous Christians to fight for the truth, if the wicked employ it in the service of iniquity and error, to achieve their perverse and futile purposes?” Translation is that of R. P. H. Green in his edition of the text. For discussion of Augustine in an Anglo-Saxon context, see Steen, \textit{Verse and Virtuosity}, 17.
\item \textsuperscript{14} Bryce’s study in particular focuses on the roles of Cicero, 107–222, Lucretius, 223–75, and Vergil, 276–314.
\end{itemize}
works as well as several no longer extant, and the absence of contemporaneous testimony of
authorship.\textsuperscript{15} Mary Cletus FitzPatrick ably rebuts these claims, noting in particular that rather
than militating against Christian authorship, the abundance of classical allusions and figures well
suits Lactantius’s rhetorical theories.\textsuperscript{16} That the poem was understood to be the work of
Lactantius within Anglo-Saxon England is confirmed by both the incipit to text contained within
CUL Gg 5.35 (the Cambridge Songs manuscript), which reads, “Incipit libellus de fenice
paradisi ut fertur habitatrice. Quidam ferunt Lactantium hunc scripsisse libellum,”\textsuperscript{17} and the
reference to the poetic work of Lactantius in Alcuin’s description of the library of York.\textsuperscript{18}

The physical description of the phoenix comes towards the end of the poem, in lines 123–50,
and reads:

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mirandam sese praestat praebetque verendam:
tantus avi decor est, tantus abundat honor.
primo qui color est malis sub sidere Cancri,
cortice quae croceo Punica grana tegunt;
qualis inest foliis, quae fert agreste papaver,
cum pandit vestes Flora rubente solo:
hoc humeri pectusque decens velamine fulget;
hoc caput, hoc cervix summque terga nitent.
caudaque polligitur fulvo distincta metallo,
in cuius maculis purpura mixta rubet.
alarum pennas insignit desuper Iris
pingere ceu nubem desuper aura solet.
albicat insignis mixto viridante zmaragdo
et puro cornu gemmea cuspis hiat.
ingentes oculi: credas geminos hyacinthos,
quorum de medio lucida flamma micat.
aptata est moto capiti radiata corona,
Phoebei referens verticis alta decus.
crura tegunt squamae fulvo distincta metallo;
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\textsuperscript{15} Bryce, \textit{The Library of Lactantius}, 5–6.
\textsuperscript{16} FitzPatrick, \textit{Lactanti de ave phoenice}, 31–7.
\textsuperscript{17} “Here begins the book on the phoenix, the inhabitant of paradise, as it is said. People report that Lactantius wrote
this book.” Transcription of the incipit is my own.
\textsuperscript{18} Lactantius appears in the midst of a list of poets contained in the York library, which contains “quid Fortunatus
vel quid Lactantius edunt,” what Fortunatus or what Lactantius produced. Alcuin, \textit{Versus de patribus, regibus, et
sancitis}, 1553. This mention does not necessarily demonstrate that York had a copy of the \textit{Carmen}, but it does show
that Alcuin knew Lactantius as a poet, not just a rhetorician.
The entire passage abounds in ornate rhetoric grounded in a deep knowledge of classical culture, as evidenced by classical allusions like *Cancri* (125), *Punica* (126), *Flora* (128), *Iris* (133), *Phoebei* (140), and *Phasidis* (144). However, these terms not only suggest rhetoric’s origin within classical culture, but also the origin of the phoenix legend, which Lactantius adapts to a Christian use. The rainbow emblazon of the phoenix imbricates the bird within the worlds of natural beauty, highlighted by references to the coloring of clouds and natural flora like fruits and flowers, and artificial adornment, suggested by the metallic and jeweled quality of the bird’s appearance. The classical references serve as the means of linking these two, with Iris as a bridge between the painted form of the phoenix’s wings and the painted quality of the sky.

The description of the bird itself takes on a constructed quality in the schematic descriptive approach employed. Lactantius’s description moves with an increasingly close focus, starting with the largest features and eventually narrowing in on the most particular, in a motion

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19 Lactantius, *Carmen de ave phoenice*, 123–50. “It offers and presents itself to be wondered at and venerated: so great is the decoration of the bird, so much does its honor abound. First, its color is the fruits under the constellation of Cancer, which cover the Punic grains [pomegranate] with saffron-colored skin; it is as the foliage, which wild poppies bear, when Flora spreads out her garments on the reddening ground: the shoulders and breast becomingly shine with this covering; the head, the neck, and the upper back shine. The tail is stretched out, distinguished with tawny metal, in whose spots mixed-in purple blushes. Iris marks the feathers of the wings from above, just as she is accustomed to paint a cloud from above. The distinguished bird is white, with green emerald mixed in, and its bejeweled beak of pure horn gapes. The eyes are huge: you would believe them twinned hyacinths, from the midst of which bright flames glitter. A radiated crown has been fit to its moved head, suggesting the lofty decoration of Phoebus’s peak. Scales cover its legs, marked out with tawny metal. But color tinges the claws with rosy honor. Its image is seen mixed between the figure of a peacock and the painted bird of Phasis [pheasant]. The winged creature, whether it be beast or bird, which is born in the lands of the Arabs is scarcely able to equal its magnitude. Nevertheless, it is not slow like the birds with a great body, which have slow steps due to their heavy weight, but it is lithe and quick, full of regal decoration: such it always holds itself to men in sight.”
that suggests a guided movement of the eye over the phoenix’s body. The guidance provided by
the narration effects an interplay between visual and textual interpretation. Most important in
these descriptions is the way in which Lactantius uses color to vividly present the object under
consideration to an imagination simultaneously aware of the natural world, created beauty, and
the role of rhetoric in bridging the two. Lines 125–8 begin the description by suggesting the
scarlet quality of the features through comparisons to pomegranates—doubly appropriate for
their coloring both without and within—and poppies. Although this coloration occurs on the
upper body of the bird, Lactantius defers the location to lines 129–30, creating an ambiguity in
the description that enables the reader to understand the first apprehended color of the bird to be
the first singular element perceived and also the general impression of the bird’s color.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty gives a phenomenological account of the perception of colors
that provides us with a framework for evaluating Lactantius’s ekphrastic techniques. He writes:

This red is what it is only by connecting up from its place with other reds about it,
with which it forms a constellation, or with others colors it dominates or that
dominate it, that it attracts or that attract it, that it repels or that repel it. In short, it
is a certain node in the woof of the simultaneous and the successive. ... If we took
all these participations into account, we would recognize that a naked color, and
in general a visible, is not a chunk of absolutely hard, indivisible being, offered all
naked to a vision which could be only total or null, but is rather a sort of straits
between exterior and interior horizons ever gaping open.\(^{20}\)

\(^{20}\) Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 132. While Merleau-Ponty is here developing a phenomenological
use of *constellation* as a means of integrating the immediate experience of seeing a color amongst other colors with
prior experiences of seeing it in other settings, Walter Benjamin also employs *constellation* as a means of discussing
the subjectivity of interpretation, a concept which has gained entry into Anglo-Saxon studies recently through Renée
Trilling’s work. In this conception of the constellation, a collection of objects forms a constellation, which shifts
Seen in this light, the redness of the phoenix appears as part of a constellation—a felicitous coincidence of language given the sidereal references within Lactantius—of associations with both its surrounding elements and with the imagined world of the beholder. The color becomes a metonymic cipher allowing for the intermingling of exterior and interior horizons.

When Lactantius does identify the upper body, he separates it out into its constituent parts, using the repetition of hoc [with this color] to link the various body parts—shoulders (humeri), breast (pectus), head (caput), neck (cervix), and upper back (summaque terga)—while recognizing them in their own place. The lines possess similar forms, but the arrangement of singular and plural subjects vary, such that while each line contains at least one singular subject and a plural subject, the number of the verb only corresponds to the nearest antecedent noun, singular in line 129 and plural in 130. The alteration in verb number emphasizes the simultaneous singularity and plurality of the parts, and Lactantius highlights the iridescent quality of the color through the use of synonymic repetition on words meaning shining or glimmering: fulget and nitent, a semantic field further explored through the use of albicat in 135 and micat in 138.

The remainder of the passage continues the description of the bird, considering each part individually. Lactantius moves from the upper body to the tail, focusing particularly on the feathers (131–4), then moving on to the head, where he describes the beak, eyes, and crown (135–40). Finally he discusses the legs, with their scales and claws (141–2). At each stage of the description Lactantius takes care to demonstrate how each part breaks down into further parts. The use of color demonstrates how the parts remain separate but also flow into each other. Lactantius rhetorically highlights this antithesis through the alternation of participial forms of misceo and distinguo. These opposing forces of mixing and distinguishing colors integrate the
parts into a whole, while maintaining their individual integrity. Thus the tail is distinguished with its color of yellow metal, even as purple blushes within it, mixed in the form of spots (131–2); the bird gleams white, even mixed with green emerald (135). The repetition of the phrase *fulvo distincta metallo* (131 and 141) suggests a rhizomatic interconnectedness across parts, even as the phrase itself undermines this characterization by suggesting the distinctness of the colors.

The bird can best be approximated as a hybrid figure, a mixture of peacock and pheasant (143–4). However, rather than a mixture of the birds themselves, it is a mixture of phenomenal forms of the birds. The phoenix is perceived (*cernitur*) as an image or likeness (*effigies*) of representational forms of the birds: the figure (*figura*) of the peacock and the depicted form (*pictam*) of the pheasant.

The emphasis throughout the passage on the process of perception highlights the phenomenal nature of the phoenix. The form of the poem enables the construction of a mental image of the bird reliant upon shared sensory experiences. Lactantius uses images and colors that evoke culturally conditioned responses within his reading audience and guides them through an experience of looking upon the phoenix. His visually evocative language points up the applicability of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s statement that, “Words have a physiognomy because we adopt towards them, as towards each person, a certain form of behaviour which makes its complete appearance the moment each word is given.”

For the reader capable of negotiating the web of antique rhetoric, the poem summons a panoply of images that combine in the act of reading to resolve into the hybrid yet singular form of the phoenix. The reader’s perception of the emeralds and hyacinths, pomegranates and poppies that color the bird calls up associations with prior sensory experiences. While there is no actual link between signifier and signified, the mind creates links according to its own embodied experience of the words.

The phenomenal form of the phoenix depends upon the rhetorical ornament of the description, which is firmly rooted in the poetic style of Late Antiquity. Michael Roberts has named the dominant mode of poetic composition throughout the period as the jeweled style, set apart from “the classical aesthetic of unity of the whole, the proportion of the parts, and the careful articulation of an apparently seamless composition.” While classical scholars have often disdained this movement away from aesthetic unity, characterized especially by episodic structures that provide descriptions for the sake of rhetorical exercise, Roberts argues for a more inclusive aesthetics that takes late antique poetry on its own terms.

As we have already seen, the description of the phoenix—itself a lengthy set-piece—articulates an emphasis on the interaction of parts in a guided process of imaginary perception occurring concomitantly with the reading act. Recent attempts within English literary studies to return to questions of form without New Critical baggage provide a useful model for thinking through both the inseparability of form and content and the literature of a period less preoccupied with classical (and modern critical) formal concerns. Derek Attridge, in *The Singularity of Literature*, proposes that, “If, however, we think of the work as an act-event, as a process that is essentially temporal taking place in the performance of a reader, it is possible to reconceptualize form and the literary.” This reconceptualization leads Attridge to the conclusion that, “the literary work derives its singularity from the formal act-event that constitutes it, and that is constituted in reading.” The move from a concern for unity—which texts possess to greater or lesser degrees—to a singularity derived in all texts from the act of reading allows for a formalism freed from normative aesthetic judgments that often have the result of denigrating little-read texts. However, the singularity of the reading act is particularly important for understanding the

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Carmen because it appears implicitly within the text itself as a function of describing the perception of a bird unlike any other bird in creation.

Lactantius occurs only tangentially in Roberts’s study, mentioned for his role in justifying “the appropriation of pagan eloquentia for the Christian message;” however, the passages Roberts chooses to exemplify the jeweled style neatly align with Lactantius’s method in the Carmen de ave phoenice. The primary touchstone of the style for Roberts is a passage from the Heptateuchos, a poetic paraphrase attributed to Cyprianus Gallus. The paraphrase condenses much of the biblical subject matter, but Aaron’s breastplate within the Exodus is carefully described, a rhetorical setting provided to the twelve gemstones studding the armor. The passage contains many rhetorical echoes of Lactantius’s earlier poem, not necessarily suggesting readership, but continued interest throughout the period in the use of gemstones and colors as a means of representing poetic adornment. Roberts argues: “It is just this combination of regularity of outline, and brilliance and variation in detail, that the period most prized. ... The challenge to Cyprianus in describing Aaron’s breastplate was to create a verbal equivalent of a work of art.” While the organizational scheme of Lactantius’s phoenix is not as controlled as that of the breastplate, the analysis applies equally to his text. The description appears as a kind of virtuoso set piece demonstrating his abilities in stirring the imagination of the reader to perception. The description fittingly concludes by stating that the bird holds itself in aspectu ... hominum, in the sight of men. The constructed nature of Lactantius’s phoenix, its combination of natural and artificial elements, and its figural hybridity all suggest that what is present in the

25 Roberts, The Jeweled Style, 124. For Lactantius’s justification, see Divinae institutiones 1.1.10 and 5.1.9–28.
26 On the attribution of the poem to Cyprianus Gallus, see Herzog, Die Bibelepik der lateinischen Spätantike, xxv–xxxii, 52–60; Fontaine, Naissance de la poésie dans l’occident chrétien, 246–8; and Roberts, Biblical Epic and Rhetorical Paraphrase, 92–96.
sight of men is not a physical bird itself, but an impression of a visual phenomena roused by poetic rhetoric.

The rhetorical practices of classical and antique culture played a significant role in shaping the depiction of visual phenomena. The practice of ekphrasis, defined as, “A speech that brings the subject matter vividly before the eyes,”29 highlights the connection between words and sensory perception and served as a device well-suited to the visual concerns of the jeweled style. Roberts in particular cites a form of ekphrastic composition in which the immediacy of the image is created through a wide variety of details—a technique termed leptologia—as apt to late antique concerns for detailed description and the aesthetic value of the part over the whole.30 The detailed description of the phoenix certainly suggests a kind of visual immediacy through the tabulation of parts. By choosing the phoenix as a subject of ekphrasis, Lactantius faced the challenge of making vivid an animal that had never been seen. However, as a symbol for revivification, the phoenix makes a rather apt subject for a rhetorical technique which depends on demonstrating vividness (enargeia). In attempting to put before the eyes what has not been seen, Lactantius lists details that serve to approximate the appearance of the bird through a concern for its parts. The vividness of each part metonymically stands for the vividness of the whole, and contributes to an overall impression of the form of the bird on the mind of the reader.

How could the late antique writer be at all sure that an ekphrasis could make language visible, a claim apparently risible to at least one critic?31 Ruth Webb argues in Ekphrasis, Imagination, and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice that, in

30 Roberts, The Jeweled Style, 40–41.
31 Molinié, Dictionnaire de rhétorique, 145, cited by Webb, Ekphrasis, Imagination, and Persuasion, 88. “Par-delà de la naïveté linguistique de la présentation traditionnelle (cette fameuse et ridicule suppression de l’écran du discours, avec l’idée que l’auditeur est transformé en spectateur), on sera particulièrement sensible au caractère social de cette qualité” [Beyond the linguistic naivety of the traditional formula (the notorious and ridiculous suppression of the screen of discourse, with the idea that the hearer becomes a spectator it is important to note the social aspect of this quality]. The translation is Webb’s with slight modifications.
contradistinction to modern beliefs that the imagination is “the most untrammelled and individual of faculties,” the writing of ekphrastic passages was a controlled skill to be developed within the context of the Roman-Greek rhetorical schools through exercises known as the *progymnasmata*. Authors of treatises on rhetoric, such as Quintilian in the *Institutio oratoria*, describe the principle of *enargeia* that lies at the heart of ekphrasis. Webb’s analysis leads her to the conclusion that, for Quintilian, “*enargeia* is conceived of as the result of an internal, *psychological* process,” in which, “words are important ... only as the means by which an internal, mental image is conveyed from speaker to listener.” Through the influence of the rhetorical tradition propagated by Quintilian, Cicero, and, for Christian Antiquity, Lactantius, writers and orators became inculcated in the idea that language could evoke uniform responses in a listening (or reading) audience. The shared cultural contexts through which rhetoric was employed demonstrate how words’ physiognomy informs the singularity of the individual reading act in Derek Attridge’s theory of performative reading. While the reading act is individual and always singular, words acquire meaning within a particular temporal horizon that provides a certain level of uniformity.

The idea that words serve only as a vehicle for the direct transfer of meaning between writer and reader takes on additional significance within an allegorical context. As Suzanne Conklin Akbari notes, “by avoiding the limitations inherent in literal language, allegory creates meaning within the reader, bypassing the inevitable degeneration of meaning as it passes through the obscuring veil of language. The paradox, of course, is that it is this veil which makes the transmission of meaning—the revelation—possible.” The ekphrastic description of the phoenix

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34 For Quintilian’s discussions of *enargeia*, see especially Book 6 and Book 8.3.
not only conveys an image, but also participates within a larger network of allegorical meaning within the poem. Language paradoxically drops away at the moment within the temporally bounded reading act that it achieves a polysemous representation of meaning. The quality of *enargeia* uses vividness to make absent things present, a formulation that could as easily be read to make present things, the words of a poem, absent.

**Gewritu, Reception, and Cognition**

While Lactantius wrote within a literary culture with explicitly articulated theories about poetics and rhetoric, the same cannot be said for the Anglo-Saxons. As discussed in chapter two, knowledge of classical rhetorical figures most often derived from *enarratio poetarum*. Anglo-Saxon authors and readers would have been familiar with ekphrastic techniques garnered from their reading of poets like Virgil, Prudentius, and Dracontius. However, due to the absence of the theoretical background provided by rhetoricians such as Quintilian and also Lactantius, the reception of these techniques was characterized by a cultural disjunction. Rhetorical techniques like ekphrasis depended on shared attitudes about the psychological effects of language, attitudes developed through extensive reading and writing within a common tradition. The Anglo-Saxon reception of the classical and early Christian poets can be read as the fragmentation of the reading subject. Translators and adapters are, of necessity, readers first, and the changes they make to a text reveal something about what they perceive as its content. An examination of *The Phoenix* poet’s treatment of his subject matter generally and of the ekphrastic description of the phoenix particularly bears this out.

*The Phoenix* is something of an anomaly within vernacular verse. Eric Stanley describes it as “the longest example of sustained allegory in Old English poetry,” and Janie Steen makes

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the claim that, “Of all vernacular poems, *The Phoenix* is the most directly influenced by classical
myth and Roman rhetoric.” Elizabeth Tyler simply introduces it as, “so literary and clerical.”

Each of these descriptions suggests different ways in which the poem engages with antecedent
literary traditions, an engagement explicitly addressed within the text itself. The poem claims to
describe things just as, “witgan þurh wisdom on gewritum cyþað” [wise men through their
wisdom reveal in writings] (30) and “þæs gewritu secgað” [of which writings speak] (313b). The
idea that writings reveal something reoccurs at 332b, “ond gewritu cyþað” [and writings reveal],
although in this case the agency has moved from the wise men to the writings themselves, and
writings speak again at 655b. The emphasis on writings is rare, though not completely unique in
Old English verse. A search of the DOE Corpus demonstrates the appearance of *gewrit* in the
following places: *Genesis A* 1121b, 1630b, 2565b, 2612b; *Exodus* 520b; *Elene* 155a
(fyrngewrīto), 373b (fyrngewrītu), 385b, 431a (fyrngewrītu), 560b (fyrngewrītu), 654b, 658b,
674b, 826b, 1255b; *Christ B* 547b; *The Phoenix* 30b, 313b, 332b, 655b; *Precepts* 67b
(fyrngewrītu), 73a (fyrngewrītu); *The Panther* 14b; *Riddle 39* 1a, 13b; *Paris Psalter* 86.5; *Meters
of Boethius* 1.63a (æringewrīt); *The Coronation of Edgar* 14b; *Solomon and Saturn* 54b;
*Menologium* 43a; *The Metrical Preface to the Pastoral Care* 1a (æringewrīt).

It is hardly surprising that most of these texts deal with written antecedents or address
themselves specifically to other writings. Chapter five will discuss the interpretation of writings
within the context of biblical verse as exemplified by *Exodus*. For now, the most interesting
point of comparison is that aside from *The Phoenix, Elene* contains the largest concentration of
references to *gewritu*, writings. *Elene*, along with the also present *Christ B*, is part of Cynewulf’s

39 Throughout this list I use the DOE short titles for ease of reference. The occurrence of *gewrit* within compounds is
indicated in parentheses.
poetic output, with which scholars have long associated *The Phoenix.*\(^{40}\) Although scholars no longer consider *The Phoenix* the product of Cynewulf, stylistic commonalities between the poems of the larger Cynewulf group suggest a pattern of influence.\(^{41}\) Cynewulf shared with *The Phoenix* poet an interest in classical culture; Steen writes, “There is no doubt that Cynewulf is one of the most Latinate of vernacular poets, and that his poetry is permeated by Latin themes and rhetorical style.”\(^{42}\) Whether the frequency of *gewrit* in *The Phoenix* and in Cynewulf’s *Elene* derives from direct influence or shared interest in the textual remnants of the Latin past, it demonstrates the way in which formulaic systems may concentrate within a small number of texts.

*Elene* uses formulaic language to describe the way in which writings say things (674b) and also how things are revealed in writings (826b and 1255b). However, to these it adds the idea that things can be set in writing (654b and 658b). The entire passage, which occurs in Elene’s interrogation of Judas as to the location of the cross, is useful for the glimpse it gives to the role of writing in cognitive processes:

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Elene maðelade him on andsware,
“Hu is þæt geworden on þysse werþeode
þæt ge swa monigfeald on gemynd witon
alra tacna gehwylc swa Trojan[æ] 645
þurh gefeoht fremedon? ðæt wæs [ie]r myc[le]
open ealdgewin þonne þeos æðele gewyrd,
geara gongum; ge þæt geare cunnun
edre gereccan hwæt þær eallra wæs
on manrime mordorslehtes, 650
dareðlacendra deadra gefeallen
under bordhagan; ge þa byrgenna
under stanheoðum 7 þa stowe swa some
þa wintergerim on gewritu setton.”
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\(^{41}\) Orchard, “Both Style and Substance: The Case for Cynewulf,” 283–7.

\(^{42}\) Steen, *Verse and Virtuosity,* 137.
Elene quizzes Judas about the location of the cross and in doing so highlights the apparent contradiction that he is able to recall detailed information about ancient battles by the Trojans, including such pertinent information as how many died in battle. Elene’s language throughout the passage highlights the role of cognition by highlighting the relationship between memory and the mind. Judas’s people *on gemynd witon*, know in their minds, the events of the past and they *cunnan edre gereccan*, are able to recount them instantly. Even the types of details they recall suggest something of cognitive abilities: if they can recall what there was of the *manrime morðorslehtes*, the count of men of the slaughter, why then can they not recall the *wintergerim*, the count of years, since the burial of the cross. The processes of remembering, counting, and reckoning described by Elene are enabled, she argues, because Judas’s people have set them down into writing. Writing here serves as a kind of prosthetic memory. In fact, their cognitive abilities are predicated upon their interactions with written texts, and we here see evidence of the sort of distributed cognition described by N. Katherine Hayles in *How We Became Posthuman*.

Hayles argues that recent advances in technology point to embodiment as the fundamental condition of existence and goes against threads of thought that see the rise of  

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43 Gradon, *Cynewulf’s Elene*, 642–61. “Elene spoke to him in answer, ‘How has it happened in this people that you know in your mind so many of all those wonders as the Trojans performed in their fighting? That renowned ancient-struggle was much longer ago than this noble event, still young in years; if you are instantly able to reckon how many of all the spear-warriors fell in the count of the slaughter under shield-cover, then you will have set down in writings the burial place under stone-cliffs and the place as well and the count of years.’ Judas spoke—weighed down with sorrow—‘We remember that war-work, my lady, from necessity and set in writings the battles, actions of those peoples, and never heard this revealed to warriors through the mouth of any man except here and now.”
computers and technology as effacing the role of embodied interactions with the world. Hayles makes four fundamental points characterizing what it means to be posthuman, the last two of which are pertinent here: “Third, the posthuman view thinks of the body as the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate, so that extending or replacing the body with other prostheses becomes a continuation of a process that began before we were born. Fourth, and most important, by these and other means, the posthuman view configures human being so that it can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines.”

Hayles develops her view of the posthuman out of an engagement with new advances in computer technology and cybernetics; however, the fundamental claims she makes about the posthuman view are equally applicable to all periods and their relationship with technology. Elene and Judas both use words to highlight the immediacy of the knowledge gained from books, _edre_ and _nean_. This immediacy derives from the fact that the writings have been studied extensively, such that the knowledge gained from them rests upon the community’s embodied engagement with the texts. Martha Rust has already demonstrated the value of Hayles’s view of embodiment in her description of involved reading of medieval manuscripts. The form of the writings becomes the technological prosthesis manipulated by the humans such that what was distant appears ready-to-hand, while what Elene desires to know, what is young by comparison, seems distant.

In the same way the Old English _Phoenix_ makes what was distant appear close as a record of embodied engagement with the Lactantian text. The idea of distance is explicit from the opening lines of the poem.

```oldenglish
Hæbbe ic gefrugnen þætte is feor heonan
eastdælum on æþelast londa
firum gefræge. Nis se foldan sceat
ofere middangeard mongum gefere
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44 Hayles, _How We Became Posthuman_, 3.
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The land in which the phoenix dwells is far from here in the east, not accessible to many, and removed by God. This passage considerably expands on the first line of Lactantius’s version, which reads, “est locus in primo felix oriente remotus” (1). The Anglo-Saxon adapter expands the idea of removal into three separate ideas expressing distance, which at first blush emphasizes the separation between the reader and the land being described. The claim that the land is not gefere, accessible, to many is an understatement of the kind common in Old English verse. However, the claim that the land is not accessible to many is rhetorically integrated into the subsequent claim that it is removed from sinners by God. Interlineal alliteration on gefere, folcagendra, and afyrred across lines four and five connect the ideas aurally, and this connection is further explored through the paronomastic play on gefere, accessible, and afyrred, removed. Although the words each express the distance of the land from the perspective of the reader, what emerges from this aural play is the intimation of access.

The land, inaccessible and removed, becomes accessible through the poem itself, and this idea of accessibility is reinforced by the subsequent sensual descriptions of the land that enliven our senses to the imaginary world opened up by the poem:

   Wlitig is se wong eall, wynnum geblissad
   mid þam fægrestum foldan stencum,
   ænlic is þæt iglond, æþele se Wyrhta
   modig meahtum spedig, se þa moldan gesette.
   Ðær bið oft open, eadgum togeanes
   onhliden hleopra wyn, heofonrices duru.

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46 The Phoenix, 1–6. “I have heard tell that there is far from here in the east the noblest of lands known to men. No corner of land is accessible to many of the rulers upon the earth, but it is removed through the might of the Maker from evil-doers.”

47 “There is a fortunate place removed in the far east.”

48 Frank, “The Incomparable Wryness of Old English Poetry.”

49 The Phoenix, 7–12. “Beautiful is that entire land, blessed with the most beautiful scents of the earth; singular is that island, noble the Maker, mind abundant with power, who established the land. There is often open, joy of songs uncovered to the blessed, the door of the heavenly kingdom.”
The ekphrastic adaptation begun here engages in a multi-sensory description. Within the space of a few lines the poet appeals to a reader’s senses of sight (wlitig), smell (pam fægrestum stencum), and sound (hleoþra wyn), and the earlier claim that the land has been removed from the wicked is here contrasted with its characterization as lying open to the blessed. The ekphrastic treatment of paradise reveals itself as something vividly presented before the eyes, as well as the other senses, of the reader. This is not simply a metaphorical way of speaking, but as Webb’s analysis demonstrates, ekphrasis allows for the possibility of authentic intersubjective knowledge. The descriptions in the passage highlight the embodiment of the reader within a world of sensory perception, and through appeals to that world establish the vividness of the passage to allow for commerce between interior and exterior worlds. Rather than being ancillary ornament, these appeals are fundamental to the creation of meaning within the poem.

As in Elene, what had been rendered distant is brought near due to what has been set down in writings, both by Lactantius and the Anglo-Saxon poet. An understanding of paradise is grounded in the fact of distributed cognition represented by books, such that they become prosthetics for speaking and perceiving. However, as noted earlier, not only do wise men reveal things in their writings, as in line 30, but the writings themselves reveal and speak (lines 313, 332, and 655). The shift in agency suggested by this transition has important ramifications for our interpretation of human interactions with books as well as for the functioning of ekphrasis outside of communities sharing explicit assumptions about textual interpretation. D. F. McKenzie’s call for an understanding of bibliography as a sociology of texts sought to

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50 Steen, Verse and Virtuosity, 40–51, discusses the Phoenix poet’s ekphrastic adaptation more fully, noting especially that he draws not only on the ekphrastic description of paradise in Lactantius’s text, but also on ekphraseis in other authors, notably Dracontius.

51 Too, “The Appeal to the Senses in the Old English Phoenix,” argues that sensory language also participates within medieval allegorical traditions relating to experiences of God expressed through the topos of the five senses, and as such is also an integral part of the Christian ideology expressed by the poem.
emphasize “the human motives and interactions which texts involve at every stage of their production, transmission, and consumption” and “the roles of institutions, and their own complex structures, in affecting the forms of social discourse, past and present.” This approach uses books and other textual artifacts to construct histories of human interactions; however, it tends to elide the fact that in spite of the fact that books were produced, transmitted, and consumed by humans, there is something profoundly inhuman about them. They are assemblages of animal tissues, natural fibers, and inks. Their properties impose restrictions upon human interactions, and they often deteriorate in ways unexpected by their compilers.

If books can be part of the kind of distributed cognition described by Hayles, then it is one in which the prosthetic, even as it is articulated within a conception of human being, retains something of its own ontological uniqueness. The book and the writings contained therein are objects, man-made, certainly, and capable of being used as prosthetics to extend human being, but still with their own nature separate from man. What Hayles argues is a seamless articulation is in fact a contested space. A book impacts me by my involvement with it, just as I in turn impact it. Graham Harman’s theory of object-oriented ontology articulates how objects interact with each other in ways explicitly available to our perceptions and also veiled from them:

In one respect, human beings inhabit a sphere of explicit perception, seduced by pleasant odors and colorful spectacles, our attention absorbed by the numerous people and animals and solid objects we encounter. The objects that surround us are specific phenomena, accessible in some way. ... But this is only half the reality, since the analysis of equipment entails that entities are much more than luminous facades. ... Anything, prior to erupting in its explicit form, is real simply by

exerting its efforts in the cosmos, by breathing its life into a world that would not
have been the same without it.\(^{53}\)

Harman does not limit his analysis to certain types of objects but extends it to a
consideration of everything in the world. Lactantius’s text creates a world in which the Anglo-
Saxons were capable of encountering the phoenix, even before they entered into that world by
reading his poem. Although the perception of the poem is constituted in the performative act of
reading, this moment of perception does not constitute the entirety of the poem’s being or of the
book containing it. The same could be said of the form of the phoenix itself. Lactantius’s
ekphrastic description of the phoenix brings the subject matter, in this case the form of the bird,
vividly before the eyes of the reader, making it present to the world of explicit perception.
However, this luminous facade, as Harman would call it, is only half the reality of the phoenix,
the other half being the reality brought into being by the fact of its existence. Here ekphrasis
brings into being something which itself has no material existence. Although our knowledge of
the object of ekphrasis depends upon the words set down by authors like Lactantius and our
vernacular poet, both the object and the text describing it take on an existence independent of
their creators’ intentions. Thus the text is able to speak and reveal itself to us, and the phoenix
appears shimmering before our eyes.

Webb’s analysis of ekphrasis depends upon the assumption of the shared training derived
from the standard rhetorical handbooks and in the schools of rhetoric in the cultural context of
antiquity. She purposefully circumscribes her historical context to the period which promulgated
the use of ekphrasis. Early medieval traditions, like that in which the Old English Phoenix was
composed, however, did not share the same historical horizon, and yet the literary style of the
period was heavily influenced by the texts themselves, as demonstrated both earlier in this

chapter and in chapter two on Aldhelm. As Gabrielle Knappe and Janie Steen have noted within the context of Anglo-Saxon literature and as Rita Copeland has demonstrated for a wider medieval context, the interpretative hermeneutics of literary texts often came from the *enarratio poetarum* from the texts themselves rather than the interpretative guides available within the rhetorical traditions of earlier Christian literature.\(^{54}\) However, with an understanding that ekphraseis transmitted direct knowledge of their subjects through the veil of language, there emerges the possibility that what the vernacular poet adapts is not simply the words set down by Lactantius, but also what the words themselves reveal independent of Lactantius’s intentions and the phenomenal form of the phoenix that appears through the ekphrastic passages of the text.

**Singularity in Translation: The Variegated Phoenix**

The preceding discussion on the status of writings and ekphrasis has been preparatory to our real purpose, an account of the adapted form of the phoenix as it appears in Old English. The Old English translation of the Latin reveals a wide variety of changes and reflects the variance of aesthetic concerns in the two texts:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Is se fugel fæger } & \text{ forweard hiwe,} \\
\text{bleobrygdum fag} & \text{ ymb þa breost foran.} \\
\text{Is him þæt heafod} & \text{ hindan grene} \\
\text{wraeltice wrixleð} & \text{ wurman geblonden.} \\
\text{Donne is se finta} & \text{ fægre gedæled,} \\
\text{sum brun sum basu} & \text{ sum blacum spolltum} \\
\text{searolice beseted.} & \text{ Sndon þa fíþru} \\
\text{hwit hindanweard} & \text{ ond se hals grene} \\
\text{niþoweard ond ufeweard} & \text{ ond þæt nebb lixeð} \\
\text{swa glæs opþe gim,} & \text{ geaflas scyne} \\
\text{innan ond utan.} & \text{ Is seo eaggebyrd} \\
\text{stearc ond hiwe} & \text{ stane gelicast,} \\
\text{gladum gimme,} & \text{ þonne in goldfate} \\
\text{smiþa orþoncum} & \text{ biseted weorþeð.} \\
\text{Is ymb þone sweoran,} & \text{ swylce sunnan hring,} \\
\text{beaga beorhtast} & \text{ brogden ðeðrum.}
\end{align*}
\]

The tone of the passage is established within the first few lines by a series of phrases expressing related ideas: bleobrygdum fag (292), wrætlice wrixleð (294), wurman geblonden (294), and fægre gedæled (295). We could translate them, respectively, as “adorned with variegated colours,” “splendidly variegated,” “mixed with purple,” and “beautifully variegated,” but to translate them so reductively is to miss the artistry of their selection. Bleobrygd is a hapax legomenon compounded from bleo, meaning color and also form, and brygd, meaning variegation and change. Wrixlan is a word with the root meanings vary and change, but it can also be extended to the variation or modulation of voices in song, attested in The Phoenix at line 127. Geblandan means mix or mingle, and gedælan divide and separate.

The central theme in these phrases is variation, which serves to create a shifting, shimmering field of colors and forms. However, this scintillating image derives from opposing effects, as colors not only mix and mingle with each other but are also divided and separated out into discrete entities. This concept reflects the Latin, and yet the rhetorical presentation of it is purely Anglo-Saxon. The image of the phoenix here depicted, encompassing both the intertwining and the division of colors and forms, provides a model for thinking through the

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55 The Phoenix, 291–313. “The bird is fair in form in front, adorned with variegated color about the front of the breast. His head is green in back, variegated splendidly, mingled with purple. Then the tail is beautifully variegated, parts brown, parts crimson, parts cunningly covered with shining spots. The feathers are white in the back and the neck green below and above, and the beak shines like glass or a gem, the jaws shining within and without. The nature of the eye is black and most similar in form to a stone, to a sparkling gem when it is placed in a gold-setting by the art of smiths. Around the neck is also a ring of the sun, the brightest of treasures set in feathers. The stomach below is beautiful, splendidly fair, bright and shining. The crest is gloriously joined together from above, over the bird’s back. The legs are covered in scales, the yellow feet. The bird is utterly singular in form, most similar to a peacock, blissfully grown up, as writings say.”
oscillating linguistic relations brought about through poetic variation. In the first two lines the poet links fæger and bleobrygdum fag through variation, strengthened here by paronomastic sound play. Paronomasia plays on words that sound alike, creating aural associations through suggestive etymologies, and as Roberta Frank has argued, was a powerful tool in Anglo-Saxon rhetoric for shaping reader’s responses to a text. The poet uses paronomasia to full effect here by combining it with variation.

The importance of variation has long been acknowledged within Anglo-Saxon studies. Arthur Brodeur, perhaps most notably, defined variation as, “a double or multiple statement of the same concept or idea in different words, with a more or less perceptible shift in stress.”

Fred Robinson would later modify this definition to match it to his conception of the appositive style in Old English literature: “What is essential, apparently, is that the two elements in an appositive construction be the same part of speech, have the same referent, and not be connected except by syntactic parallelism within the sentence in which they occur.” Variation works through parataxis, juxtaposing ideas without expressing a grammatical relationship between them, leaving the construction of linguistic meaning to the mental performance of the passage. This is in opposition to hypotactic strategies, which use subordination to express a clear grammatical relationship. One way we could interpret variation here is as a gloss, whereby bleobrygdum fag acts as a way of explaining the adjective fæger. The phoenix is beautiful in

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56 Frank, “Some Uses of Paronomasia in Old English Scriptural Verse,” 209, argues that paronomasia was an integral part of the Anglo-Saxon imagination, although it may not always appeal to modern conceptions of the proper use of rhetoric. As Frank notes, “Most of the examples that will be cited here seem to have passed unnoticed by editors and commentators, perhaps at least partly because the style of verbal wit favored by the Old English poets is one that is no longer immediately apparent or appealing to us. “I do not like lucus a non lucendo,” proclaimed a scholar upset by the excesses of patristic-exegetical trends in Old English scholarship. Yet, whether we like it or not, such etymologies were an undeniable aspect of the medieval verbal imagination.” Here Frank quotes Sisam, The Structure of Beowulf, 20. For the importance in particular of onomastic paronomasia, see Robinson, “The Significance of Names in Old English Literature.”

57 Brodeur, The Art of Beowulf, 40.

58 Robinson, Beowulf and the Appositive Style, 3.
form because it is adorned with variegated color, and the sound play connecting *fag* with *fæger* creates the impression that the variation mixes and mingles the two concepts, intertwining their meaning through sound and paratactic relationships.

The association of these words may simply be due to their relative frequency and the Anglo-Saxon proclivity for sound-play, but it may also play on intertextual relationships, as *fag* and *fæger* occur in close proximity in two other Old English poems, *Genesis B* and *Homiletic Fragment I*. The line from *Genesis* reads, “fah wyrm þurh fægir word” (899), and appears as Eve describes how Satan in the guise of a serpent tricked her. 59 Although the deceiver is fah, which could mean hostile, variegated, and stained all together, his deception employs words which appear fair. The passage from *Homiletic Fragment I* reads:

> Wea bið in mode,  
> siofa synnum fah, faire geblonden,  
> gefyllē mid facne, þeah he fæger word  
> utan ætywe. 60

In each case, the beauty of the words is belied by the guilt of the one speaking, and the poets play on the idea of *fah* as both variegated and guilty or evil. *Fah* and *fæger* are linked through contrastive paronomasia, but they are not in variation with each other. They are placed in opposition rather than apposition. In *The Phoenix* the fair words of the poem itself serve to bring *fag* and *fæger* into harmony with each other, returning the readers to a prelapsarian paradise, which is of course the native home of the phoenix. By associating the words with the figure of the phoenix, rather than the serpent, the poet ameliorates their negative connotations and allows *fag* and *fæger* to mean variegated and beautiful.

59 *Genesis* quoted from Krapp, *The Junius Manuscript*, “the hostile/variegated/stained serpent through fair words.”
60 *Homiletic Fragment I*, 15–18. “Woe is him in spirit, stained with seven sins, mired in affliction, filled with sin, though he use fair words without.” This is the ASPR text.
While variation may function as a gloss guiding the reader in interpreting the significance of the original term, it may also divide the image under consideration into different aspects with their own, singular interpretations. Within this model, *fag* and *fæger* are discrete descriptive terms with separate meaning, and they allow us to perceive different aspects of the bird striving equally for our attention. While the aspects implied by the words might have some overlapping connotations, the differences in reference serve to texture our reading. The form of the phoenix is then fragmented into parts constituting a whole, which is described in line 312 as, *ænlic*, singular, unique, or noble, in form. The singularity of the phoenix’s form appears as a result of the use of poetic variation. In describing the variegated form of the phoenix, the poet suggests that colors both flow together and separate into discrete spots. In the same way, variation creates an image through oscillating linguistic relationships. Paratactic variation leaves the creation of grammatical relationships to the imagination of the reader, whose mind must strive to understand the words in relationship to and independent of each other.

We can already see from these introductory sketches how the vernacular poet adapts the visual impression derived from Lactantius using the resources of Old English poetic composition. He uses variation to describe anew the constellation of colors that develop meaning through their relationships with each other and with the entirety of the experience of the reader. The vision is constituted in the reader’s embodied interaction with the text, and yet the vision also remains separate from the reader, held at a distance. As Merleau-Ponty notes:

> And yet it is not possible that we blend into it, nor that it passes into us, for then the vision would vanish at the moment of formation, by disappearance of the seer or of the visible. What there is then are not things first identical with themselves, which would then offer themselves to the seer, nor is there a seer who is first
empty and who, afterward, would open himself to them—but something to which we could not be closer than by palpating it with our look, things we could not dream of seeing “all naked” because the gaze itself envelops them, clothes them with its own flesh. … What is this talisman of color, this singular virtue of the visible that makes it, held at the end of the gaze, nonetheless much more than a correlative of my vision, such that it imposes my vision upon me as a continuation of its own sovereign existence? How does it happen that my look, enveloping them, does not hide them, and finally, that, veiling them, it unveils them.\textsuperscript{61}

This simultaneous action of veiling and unveiling works at multiple levels with the visual world of books, both the worlds of its material and imaginary constitution. My vision envelops the book, and in this enveloping unveils something of its relationships within the world. The same occurs with the poem within the book, the ekphrastic passage within the poem, the object vividly realized as if before our eyes that the ekphrastic passage reveals to us, the individual parts of the variegated bird mixing and separating in a shimmering visage, and the varied words that rhetorically mirror this variegation. At each level what appears visibly before the eyes expresses its sovereign existence even as the vision is constituted in the embodied interaction of the reader with the manuscript in what Martha Rust terms the manuscript matrix, a liminal space allowing for the creation of imaginary worlds through the involvement of the reader in the form of medieval texts.\textsuperscript{62} The parts are intertwined, establishing a constellation of relationships that are not expressible without the others, and their meaning derives from the totality of their relationship with the world. As in Harman, this totality is always veiled, but each object’s existence breathes into being a world that would not be the same in its absence. Our

\textsuperscript{61} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{The Visible and the Invisible}, 131.
\textsuperscript{62} Rust, \textit{Imaginary Worlds in Medieval Books}, 16.
understanding of the poem depends upon an act of distributed cognition that articulates vision through the material form of the text as a prosthetic for human being, and yet the text retains its own being separate from us, blending into and separating from us as the colors of the phoenix blend and separate in its form.

The variation on \textit{wrixleð} and \textit{geblonden}, variegated and mingled, further demonstrates this emphasis on flow and division in the image of the phoenix. The poet uses variation to suggest the mixing of colors, but specifically mentions purple, rhetorically separating it from other colors in the phoenix’s variegated form. Double alliteration on \textit{w} in the line, “\textit{wrætlice wrixleð wurman geblonden} combines with variation to tie the half lines together more firmly. Imbricating variation with other devices, paronomasia in the first pair of words and double alliteration here, highlights the poet’s descriptive artistry, and his descriptions in the remainder of the passage further suggest that the phoenix is as akin to artfully wrought treasure as natural creature. For example, in line 297a, the phoenix’s tail feathers appear \textit{searolice beseted}, artistically or cunningly covered, with multi-colored spots. The variegated colors of the preceding line are not randomly distributed, but represent the careful decisions of a cunning artisan, rhetorically suggesting their interrelations through double alliteration and anaphora in the tricolon abundans: \textit{sum brun sum basu sum blacum splottum / searolice beseted} (296–7). While individually highlighting specific phrases here, double alliteration is also more generally a part of the \textit{Phoenix}-poet’s method, for as B. R. Hutcheson notes, the poem has one of the highest rates of double alliteration in the Old English poetic corpus at 63\%.”

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63 In Hutcheson’s corpus of 33 poetic texts, rates of double alliteration range from a low of 20\% (\textit{CEdg}) to a high of 69\% (\textit{MRune}), with a mean of 47\%. The \textit{Phoenix}’s rate of alliteration is considerably higher than this mean and is also significantly longer than the three works with higher rates of alliteration \textit{MRune} (94 lines), \textit{Wand} (115 lines), and \textit{LRid} (14 lines).
The expression of conscious artistry reaches its height with the description of the phoenix’s eyes (301b–304). What was hinted at before in the adverb searolice appears here fully formed. The closest approximation to the phoenix is a wrought treasure, with the eyes as gems brought into high relief by the setting in which they are placed through variation. Within the poetic simile, this setting is golden; however, within the poem, the setting is the variegated body of the phoenix. This simile represents a significant shift away from the Latin source, which reads, “ingentes oculi: credas geminos hyacinthos, / quorum de medio lucida flamma micat.”64 In both passages the eyes are depicted as gems, naturally occurring objects of great beauty. However, the Old English expresses the beauty of the gems as a function of artistic control. The jewel achieves its beauty not purely on its own merits, but from its placement within a gold setting, crafted by the hands of smiths. What was implicitly articulated through the rhetorical embellishments employed by Lactantius in the jeweled style of antiquity here becomes explicitly expressed, and the ekphrasis becomes a vivid description not simply of the bird itself but also of the poetic style in which the bird was initially described. The phoenix’s multi-hued variegation results from the intentions of a skilled craftsman, and the poet embodies the physical appearance of the variegated bird with varied language that mirrors the physical fruits of a goldsmith’s craft with the rhetorical fruits of a poet’s.

Elizabeth Tyler’s study of verbal repetition and formulaic language further bears out the importance of ornament and craft within the poem. Tyler’s Old English Poetics: The Aesthetics of the Familiar argues that Old English poets, including the scribes who transmit poetic texts, use the formulaicity of verse composition to achieve a timeless quality, creating an aesthetics of the familiar, such that the notorious difficulty in dating poetic texts is in fact a function of Anglo-

64 Lactantius, Carmen de ave phoenice, 137–8. “It has huge eyes: you would believe they were twinned sapphires, from whose middle clear flame glitters.”
Saxon aesthetics. *The Phoenix* achieves prominence in her study, given its repeated use of terms related to ornament, especially *frætwe*. In Tyler’s estimation, “The distinctive style of *The Phoenix* is marked by a coming together of allusion to the conventional associations of established formulas and verbal repetition; the result is a richly textured poem whose multi-layered symbolism is rooted in a both carefully controlled and a highly imaginative use of the conventions of Old English religious poetry.” For Tyler the Anglo-Saxon predilection for verbal repetition is a function of both reception of the literate traditions of the classical period and antiquity and vernacular models of oral composition. The effect of this repetition in *The Phoenix* allows for an interweaving of parts, such that the various treasures and adornments discussed throughout assume prominence over their surroundings. It is not, however, a static impression that emerges but one that shifts in the course of reading. This dynamic understanding of the creation of poetic meaning across the entire poem occurs in microcosm here within the description of the phoenix’s appearance. Within this passage *fæger* appears three times in lines 291, 293, and 307. These repetitions assessing in turn the bird itself, its tail, and its stomach, lend prominence to the beauty of the whole while emphasizing the beauty of the parts, and the entire effect, as the description of the phoenix’s tail puts it, is an image *fægre gedæled*, beautifully variegated.

So far our analysis of the ekphrastic description of the phoenix has focused on the visible elements, exploring the ways in which the form of the phoenix is *wraetlice wrxled*, splendidly variegated or modulated. However, the aural elements of the passage deserve similar explication, and such a discussion is best foregrounded with a consideration of the song of the phoenix itself, which he modulates elsewhere in the poem in the only other occurrence of *wrixlan* in the poem:

The earlier discussion looked at how variation conveyed the physical appearance of the phoenix, appealing to the sense of sight with a constellation of words related to color and form. In this passage, by contrast, the poet appeals to our auditory senses to describe the phoenix’s song. He suggests the singular quality of that melody through the inexpressibility topos, compiling a list of musical instruments which fail to approach the beauty of the phoenix’s voice. This list echoes an earlier expression of the inexpressibility topos in the description of Paradise, and as there, the list is characterized by the appearance of rhyme and near-rhyme highlighted by two-stress rhythm and double alliteration. This list of melodies is not monotonous, but conveys small aural shifts
throughout, from the off-rhyme of *hlyn / stefn* to the homeoteleuton of *eorpan / organan* and the paronomasias of *geswin / swanes*.

This passage further contains an intertextual link with other poems. The words *sweg* and *hleoþor* collocate in several poems during discussions about music, both natural and heavenly, as in *Exodus* (308), *Guthlac B* (1322–3), *The Seafarer* (20–1), and *The Panther* (42). However, only in *The Panther* do we find the occurrence of the compound *sweghleoþor*:

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Sweghleoþor cymeð,
woþa wynsumast þurh þæs wildres muð.
Æfter þære stefne stenc ut cymeð
of þam wongstede, wynsumra steam, 45
swettra ond swiþra swæcca gehwylcum,
wyrtal bolsterm um ond wudubledum,
eallum æþelicra eorþan frætwum.70
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The relationships between the passages is further emphasized by the stylistic similarities in the use of the inexpressibility topos. While *The Phoenix* emphasizes the beauty of the voice without parallel, *The Panther* emphasizes the scent emerging from the animal’s mouth as a postlude to its song,71 and both texts make use of comparative adjectives to establish the topos, especially *wynsumra* and *swetra*. *The Phoenix*, not unexpectedly given its heavier emphasis on the audible beauty of the bird, plays more with the idea of melody and sound expressed by the compound *sweghleoþor*. *The Phoenix*-poet separates the constituent elements of the compound into their own words in line 131, creating a chiastic envelope around lines 131–6 that highlights the

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70 Quoted from Muir, *The Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry. The Panther*, 42b–48. “Melody comes, the most joyful of sounds through the mouth of that wild animal. After the voice, a scent comes out of that place, an exhalation more joyful, sweeter, and stronger than any perfumes, than the blossoms of herbs and woodland fruits, nobler than all the fruits of the earth.”

71 McFadden, “Sweet Odors and Interpretative Authority in the Exeter Book Physiologus and Phoenix,” argues that the interpretation of odors in these poems “functions for the manuscript’s compiler and/or scribe as a symbol not just of correct textual interpretation but also of the containment of disruptive social elements,” 183. Unfortunately, the connection between text and historical context is entirely speculative, given that the composition of these poems considerably predate their manuscript appearance and that the issues of textual interpretation, as we have seen throughout this dissertation, were issues that engaged Anglo-Saxon readers and writers at all times and in all historical contexts.
parallels between *The Phoenix* and its *Physiologus* counterpart. The entire passage adapts the
form of the Latin original into a style rooted in vernacular poetics. Lactantius’s text reads:

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incipit illa sacri modulamina fundere cantus
et mira lucem voce ciere novam,
quam nec aedoniae voces nec tibia possit
musica Cirrhaeis adsimulare modis,
sed neque olor moriens imitari posse putetur
nec Cylleneae fila canora lyrae.72
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There are familiar elements adapted by the Old English: the modulation of song, the role of both
artificial and natural melodic instruments, the structure of negation characteristic of the
inexpressibility topos. However, the classical references are removed, and in their place are
intertextual features that participate in the formulaic nature of Old English poetics.

The use of *wrixlan* in the description of the phoenix’s song establishes an important
subtext brought to fruition by its later appearance in the description of the phoenix’s physical
form. The variegation of the bird and the variation within the poem create a marriage of form and
meaning, sound and sense. The aural subtext of *wrixlan* ties the variegation of the phoenix more
firmly to the song in which that variegation gains expression. The description of the phoenix then
functions as a polysemous ekphrasis of image and sound: even as it describes the appearance of
the bird, it also mirrors the sound of the poem itself and the modulated song of the bird described
in the poem. The entire effect is of synaesthetic textual entanglement similar to that described in
chapter three’s discussion of the appeal of Felix to the *aures lectoris*, ears of the reader, in the
*Vita sancti Guthlac*. We see here a manifestation of the intertwining of object and text, sight and
sound, manifested in the embodied engagement with the text in the act of reading. This
polysemous ekphrasis of the phoenix as both bird and song provides a meeting place for orality

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72 *Carmen de ave phoenice*, 45–50. “It begins to pour out modulations of sacred song and to stir up a new light with
its marvelous voice, which neither the calls of nightingales nor the musical flute is able to approach with Delphic
rhythms, nor is the dying swan thought to be able to imitate it, nor the melodious threads of the Cyllenian lyre.”
and textuality in the poem. The interlineal alliteration throughout the entire descriptive passage
on b, s, f, and w contributes to the effect of modulation.\textsuperscript{73}

The Latin text presented the phoenix as a kind of hybridized figure of natural and
artificial art, mixing representational forms of both peacock and pheasant. In the Old English we
now see the bird as ænlic, onlicost pean, / wynnum geweaxon þæs gewritu secgad, singular, most
like a peacock, joyfully matured of which writings speak. Even here we see evidence of how
forms slide one into another while retaining their unique character. Although ænlic and onlicost
represent opposing ideas, they are linked through paronomasia, so that what is singular aurally
flows into what is most like other things. The passage becomes a metaphor for the act of
translation itself. Although the phoenix is engaged in a continual cycle of rebirth, it always
retains its singular character. Likewise with the poetic representations of the phoenix across the
adaptations and translations. The forms of each flow into the other, while retaining a singular
character. Although the process of translation could be seen as a hierarchical structure, in which
one text precedes another, the effect of the vernacular adaptation is to create a lateral relationship,
such that the poems stand side by side in the type of structure that Linda Hutcheon sees as
characteristic of the paradoxical nature of adaptations.\textsuperscript{74} Although Lactantius’s poem is older by
far, it is in the Old English that we see the older form of the phoenix, blissfully matured into a
new form.

Superlative Endings

The adapted ekphrasis of the phoenix serves a mediating role in the vernacular poem.

Whereas it comes at the end of the Latin, it becomes a transition between the adaptation of the
Latin text and the allegorical exegesis of the second half. This structure of juxtaposition mirrors

\textsuperscript{73} For the importance of interlineal alliteration to Anglo-Saxon poetics, see Orchard, “Artful Alliteration in Anglo-
Saxon Song and Story.”

\textsuperscript{74} Hutcheon, \textit{A Theory of Adaptation}, 171.
in macrocosm the paratactic juxtaposition of parts apparent in the description of the phoenix, and
the image of the variegated phoenix then becomes a means of teaching the proper way of reading.
As we saw from Merleau-Ponty, the visible becomes “much more than a correlative of my vision,
such that it imposes my vision upon me as a continuation of its own sovereign existence.” The
vision of the phoenix made accessible to readers through its ekphrastic treatment imposes its
vision while retaining its own existence. The emphasis on variegation and variation, with parts
shifting into and out of one another teaches a method of interpretation of Lactantius’s allegory
rooted in an embodied interaction with the text, which articulates itself through the reader as
much as the reader articulates himself through it.

This fact has important ramifications for the interpretation of the poem. As Daniel Calder
notes, “An ever-changing perspective in the poem makes it difficult to discover a logically
coherent and consistent pattern of allegorical meaning, and attempts to find such a pattern have
led either to disappointment with the poem or to an exegetical system so rigid that it falsifies the
poem itself.” Elements in the first half of the poem refer proleptically to their explication in the
second half, with a mirrored process occurring retrospectively. The allegory and exegesis flow
into each other, only to separate into distinct parts, just as the colors and forms of the bird itself.
The production of meaning occurs across the entirety of the poem, and if the fundamental mode
of Lactantius’s text is allegory, then that of the Old English is allegoresis. The poem teaches a
method of understanding allegory by explaining its shifting interpretations. The poem imposes
this understanding upon the reader by situating him in the world of Anglo-Saxon culture,
providing the interpretative horizon upon which a hermeneutic understanding of the Latin text is
available.

The conclusion presents a marked stylistic shift that demonstrates the importance of the reader’s embodied interaction with the poem. Even before the renowned macaronic ending, the poet begins making use of a new form of repetition: superlative genitives. Damian Fleming introduces the superlative genitive as follows: “In the superlative genitive construction, a noun in any case is modified by the same noun in the genitive plural, raising the meaning of the first noun to the superlative… Although this construction is used as a means of ‘superlation’ in pre-Christian Latin, its popularity and wide use in the Christian west is due to its use within the Hebrew Bible and the subsequent translation of the construction into Latin in the Vulgate.”

In quick succession *The Phoenix* presents us with *ealra þrymma þrym*, majesty of majesties (628), *deapes cwealm*, death of death, included here for the similarity in form to a superlative genitive achieved through synonymic substitution (642), *in lifes lif*, in life of life (649), *in dreama dream*, in joy of joys (658), and *þurh woruld worulda* (662). Many of these instances of superlative genitives have connections to other vernacular texts. *Ealra þrymma þrym* occurs also in *Elene* (483), *Christ B* (726), and *Guthlac B* (1103); *deapes cwealm* as *deaðes cwealm* in *Christ and Satan* (497), *Guthlac A* (224), and *Guthlac B* (858); *lifes lif* is unique to *The Phoenix*; *dreama dream* in *Christ and Satan* (313) and *Christ B* (580); and *worulda woruld* in many texts, but unlike the earlier phrases which were restricted to poetry, *worulda woruld* also appears prominently in homiletic texts.

Aside from *worulda woruld*, the texts that contain these superlative genitives are quite small in number: *The Phoenix, Elene, Guthlac A and B, Christ B*, and *Christ and Satan*. This list is notable for the number of texts associated either directly with Cynewulf (*Elene* and *Christ B*) or with the Cynewulfian group of poems more generally (*The Phoenix* and *Guthlac*). It may be

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that the use of superlative genitives as a trope of repetition is rare in Old English, and a general study of the phenomenon across the entire poetic corpus would be useful. Although these phrases occur within a limited corpus of texts, only in *The Phoenix* are they so closely collocated. These superlative genitives all employ a similar structure, employing the genitive to suggest a magnification of the referent by making it the most significant part of some singular or plural representation of itself. The effect of the embodied form of understanding imposed by the poem on the reader is to immediately suspect the continuity implied in relations between wholes and parts. While the superlative genitive is an expression of the hypotactic mode, the cumulative effect of *The Phoenix* is to encourage a reading of paratactic relationships between the parts jostling amongst their wholes. The excrescence of superlative genitives here allows for a re-evaluation of their meaning according to the poetics projected by the form of the poem, allowing the adaptation of a Latin poem to bring about changes in the relations of vernacular poetics. Rather than simply magnifying joy or majesty by the superlative genitives, we see the part moving both in and out of the whole.

The famous macaronic ending of the poem further demonstrates how the embodied perception of the poem projected throughout can influence interpretation. The final eleven lines juxtapose Old English and Latin in alternating half-lines:

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Hafað us alyfed lucis auctor
þæt we motun her merueri,
goddædum begietan gaudia in celo,
þær we motum maxima regna
secan ond gesittan, sedibus altis
lifgan in lisse lucis et pacis
agan eardinga alma letitię,
brucan blæddaga, blandem et mittem
geseon sigora Frean sine fine
ond Him lof singan laude perenne
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The poet ties the half lines together by linking them through traditional vernacular poetics, further tightening the links by employing double alliteration in lines 669, 671–5, and 677. *Lof* and *laude* are linked across the caesura by alliteration, emphasizing the relationship between the words, even as the shift in grammatical case allows them to be used in a new light. A similar play in translation occurs between *gesittan* and *sedibus* in 671, and the poet employs paronomasia to tie together *goddædum* and *gaudia* (669), *blæddaga* and *blandem* (674), and *geseon* and *sine* (675). The passage presents a linguistic juxtaposition, with the Latin and Old English aurally merging into each other and then retaining their own character, one never translating the other, and yet occasionally glossing it by playing on aural and etymological relationships between words. The effect of the passage, as of the poem, is of a shimmering poem veiling and unveiling itself in the gaze of the reader, creating a dynamic form whose singular meaning paradoxically shifts without end. What remains is neither original nor translated being but a new form that juxtaposes linguistic codes in a song of praise.

The stylistic shifts in the conclusion of *The Phoenix* suggest a poetics of using material that is ready to hand in the form of the superlative genitives and the macaronic verses. By using them in conjunction with *The Phoenix*, the poet renews their language by association, allowing the phoenix to find a new birth in a linguistic nest, forcing the literary critic to create new meaning according to the metaphor of the animal’s cyclical life and death. Gaston Bachelard notes that this phenomenon is in fact characteristic of poetic treatments of the phoenix: “The Phoenix of the poets, exploding with flaming and inflammatory words, finds its place at the

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79 *The Phoenix*, 667–77. “The creator of light has granted to us that we may here deserve, receive through good deeds joys in heaven, where we may seek and reside in the greatest realms, live in the happiness of light and peace among the high seats, possess the blessed dwellings of happiness, enjoy days of prosperity, see the Lord of victories, pleasing and gentle without end and sing praise to him with unending praise, to him blessed with the angels. Alleluia.”
center of a boundless metaphoric field. An image of this sort does not leave the imagination undisturbed. It is ever born again of the detritus of its spent expressions—ever and again shaking the lazy phenomenologist up.80 This metaphoric field sweeps all expression up in its theme of renewal and rebirth, balanced between the superlative *lifes lif* and *deapes cwealm*. Alleluia.

In approaching the end of this study of how the works of the past reveal themselves, I find myself confronting the question, “What is the point of it all?” Or, as a somewhat belligerent bioethicist once asked me at dinner, “Isn’t studying medieval literature a bit like being a nun praying while the world goes to hell around her?” The present, future, and recent past have problems enough, so why do I find myself returning again and again to the old foundations, troubling the still waters of the past to see what they reveal? In the introduction to his work on hermeneutics, Hans-Georg Gadamer provides the beginnings of an answer:

The hermeneutic consciousness, which must be awakened and kept awake, recognizes that in the age of science philosophy’s claim of superiority has something chimerical and unreal about it. But though the will of man is more than ever intensifying its criticism of what has gone before to the point of becoming a utopian or eschatological consciousness, the hermeneutic consciousness seeks to confront that will with something of the truth of remembrance: with what is still and ever again real.¹

We do not learn from the past by running away from it as quickly as possible. The past offers more than an example of a primitive state from which we have evolved, but in order to allow these truths of remembrance to emerge, we have to tarry with the past for a time.

Throughout this work it has been my intention to be guided by the way texts reveal themselves, not abandoning my own critical faculty, but being open to new modes of reading taught by the words of Anglo-Saxon literature. In this final chapter, then, I focus on *Exodus*, a

text which is explicit in teaching an approach to textual interpretation, but which nevertheless has given rise to a multiplicity of interpretations. ² The poetic Exodus poses a number of problems for modern interpreters, due both to the difficulty of its language and its ability to touch upon a wide range of issues in the course of relating only a small portion of the Israelite’s flight from Egypt. Critics have argued that there is something of the Old Norse skald in its diction, as well as echoes of Aldhelmian readership or even authorship. ³ The poem itself has been variously seen as an allegorical treatment of baptism, a typological or figural anticipation of Christ, and a heroic epic with historical overtones. ⁴ This last interpretation, put forward by Nicholas Howe in his study of how the myth of Germanic migration manifests in Anglo-Saxon literature, reinvigorated criticism of the poem, which has long suffered under the too rigidly exegetical approaches of critics who, as Edward Irving argues, tend to “neglect the powerful and valid religious experience the poem offers.”⁵ However, as groundbreaking as Howe’s interpretation was—and remains—it still feels dissatisfactory, in that it seeks to make sense of

² Throughout this chapter, I will primarily be using Peter Lucas’s edition of Exodus. However, given the difficult nature of the poem and the variety of interpretations, I also make use throughout of the editions of Edward Irving and J. R. R. Tolkien, as prepared for publication by Joan Turville-Petre. At points the numbering of the editions vary. I will consistently use Lucas’s lineation in my own presentation of the poem, but when making reference to notes from the other editions I will follow their lineation in the citations.

³ On the Exodus poet’s skaldic tooth, see Roberta Frank, “Did Anglo-Saxon Audiences Have a Skaldic Tooth?” For the possibility of Aldhelmian authorship see Paul Remley, “Aldhelm as Old English Poet.” Aldhelm’s possible readership appears at Wyly, Figures of Authority in the Old English ‘Exodus’, 302: “Given Lucas’s contention that Junius 11 is a product of the Malmesbury scriptorium, Aldhelm, Bishop of Sherborne, presents an attractive candidate for an historical explanation of how Exodus could have reached Saxon territory during the seventh-century. Aldhelm was an ethnic Saxon, yet his Epistola ad Acircium documents his literary contact with contemporary Northumbria. Furthermore, Aldhelm’s Latin works demonstrate the literary education necessary to appreciate many of the Latinate allusions posited for Exodus, while Aldhelm was also rumoured to have practised as a vernacular poet. Yet more important than Aldhelm’s personal identification with Exodus, the historical precedent of his career contributes to the plausibility of the date of composition and mode of transmission hereby proposed for this work.” Given the late date of Junius 11’s compilation, I am not sure that it is necessary to postulate that any of the poems arrived in Malmesbury during Aldhelm’s lifetime, but the idea is nevertheless intriguing if unproven.

⁴ On the baptismal reading of Exodus, see most recently Remley, Old English Biblical Verse, 168–230.

⁵ Irving, “Exodus Retraced,” 220. Irving expands upon his disdain for typological readings of Exodus, noting, “From a literary point of view, typology—and, strictly speaking, it is typology rather than allegory that we are examining—means a story that repeats or suggests a pattern found in other stories, or in The Story. But a narrative poem of this kind is aesthetically effective not because it obtrusively keeps drawing our attention to its similarity to another story but because it is first of all a vivid and ‘true’ literary experience in itself. ... The Egyptians in Exodus are bullies and villainous treaty-breakers; it adds little to their dramatic reality as characters in the fiction to maintain that they are ‘really’ mankind’s sins, to be washed away in the purifying baptismal waters,” “Exodus Retraced,” 211.
the difficulties in *Exodus* by interpolating them into a more familiar framework. Even more recently, Sarah Novacich has broken new ground, arguing that the Israelite’s crossing of the Red Sea amounts to an act of reading the sea, so that the waters of the sea part to reveal old foundations from which new interpretative structures arise.\(^6\)

My own work on *Exodus* has developed along a parallel trajectory to Novacich, grounded more in the phenomenological tradition as exemplified by Gadamer’s theory of hermeneutics and extending further into a discussion of how material culture reinforces the idea of a textualized sea that offers itself up for interpretation. My argument focuses on the speeches Moses gives upon either shore of the Red Sea, in which Moses calls attention to the wonder and mystery of interpretation. The speeches have created difficulties for textual critics because they are not clearly rooted in Biblical tradition, but they serve the purpose of bracketing the crossing of the sea.\(^7\) In the first speech, which appears in direct discourse, Moses calls attention to the miracle occurring upon the water, which ultimately reveals the *ealde stapolas*, old foundations, from which new interpretations are built. By contrast, the speech on the latter shore appears in indirect discourse, formally calling attention to the role of remediation at the same time that Moses talks about the role of translation/interpretation performed by the *lifes wealthstod*, the interpreter of life.

In making sense of these passages, I draw upon Gadamer’s hermeneutic theory, in which the act of interpretation is figured as a fusion of past and present horizons. For Gadamer, “The concept of “horizon” suggests itself because it expresses the superior breadth of vision that the person who is trying to understand must have. To acquire a horizon means that one learns to look

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\(^6\) Novacich, “The Old English *Exodus* and the Read Sea.”

\(^7\) Recent work has been more likely to recognize the digressive structure of *Exodus* as fitting within native paradigms of verse composition. Manish Sharma reads the poem as participating in a kind of linguistic gift-exchange, whose “linguistic economy ... reveals the epistemological underpinnings of the text—knowledge is a process of exchange,” “The Economy of the Word in the Old English *Exodus*, 173.
beyond what is close at hand—not in order to look away from it but to see it better, within a larger whole and in truer proportion.”

The fusion of horizons provides an opportunity to think about not only how Moses makes sense of the past for the Israelites, but also how the poet makes sense of the Biblical past for the Anglo-Saxons and how we make sense of the Anglo-Saxon past in the present. Towards that end, I close my discussion of *Exodus*, before moving on to a reflection upon the entirety of my work, by considering how the Junius manuscript in which *Exodus* appears provides a material embodiment of the waters of the textualized Red Sea, with blank spaces for incomplete illustrations acting as still surfaces that initially conceal but ultimately reveal textual depths to the interpreter equipped with the keys of the spirit.

**The Parting of the Waters**

Rather than adapting the entirety of the book of *Exodus*, the Old English poet deals primarily with the material from chapter fourteen, which describes the flight of the Israelites and the crossing of the Red Sea. Before the crossing Moses, in direct discourse, gives a speech to the Israelites:

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Hwæt ge nu eagum to on lociað, folca leofast, færwundra sum nu ic sylfa sloh ond þeós swiðre hand grene tacne garsecges deop. Yð up færeð, ofstum wyrceð wæter on wealfæsten. Wegas syndon dryge, haswe herestæta, holm gerymed, ealde staðolas, þa ic ær ne gefrægn ofer middangeard men geferan, fage feldas, þa forð heonon in ece tid yðe þeccað. Sælde sægrundas sudswind fornam, bæðweges blæst; brim is areafod, sand sæcir spaw. Ic wat soð gere þæt eow mihtig God miltse gecyðe, eorlas ærglade. Ofest is selost þæt ge of feonda feðome weordæn
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This speech differs substantially from the presentation of the miracle in Exodus 14.21–2, in which the miracle is simply and succinctly described by the narrator. Lucas argues that this shift to direct discourse was “presumably employed to give the event greater immediacy, an impression reinforced by the use of the nu...nu correlative construction.” To some extent this is true, but the move to direct discourse is also a shift away from immediacy, depending on the purpose of the passage. If the perspective is that of the Israelites waiting on the shore with Moses, then the addition of the speech actually distracts from the immediacy of the experience. In spite of the nu...nu correlative that opens the passage (278 and 280) and the nu that comes towards the end (295) and the urge for haste (293), the speech actually represents a slowing down of the action. Rather than lending immediacy to the miracle or the Israelites’ experience of it, the speech gives immediacy to Moses’s hermeneutic function as an interpreter of experience for both the Israelites and the Anglo-Saxon readers.

In particular, by serving as the mediator of visual experience, Moses also calls attention to his role as a mediator in divine communication. Although God has manifested his favor by the

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9 *Exodus*, 278–98. “Now you, dearest of peoples, look with your eyes upon a sudden marvel, now I myself and this right hand have struck the deep sea with a green symbol. The wave travels up, quickly works the water into ramparts. The ways are dry, the silvery army-paths, the sea opened up, the old foundations which I have never before heard that men upon the earth traversed, the mottled fields which henceforth the waves cover for eternity. The south wind, the sea-way’s blast, seized the confined sea-grounds; water is drawn back, the churning sea spewed sand. I well know the truth—earls happy of old!—that mighty God showed you mercy. Haste is best, that you may escape the grasp of enemies now that the Master has raised up the red waters into a shield-fort. The fore-walls are fairly built up, wondrous wave-passage, up to the heaven’s roof.”

10 Ex. 14:21–2: “cumque extendisset Moses manum super mare abstulit illud Dominus flante vento vehementi et urenre tota nocte et vertit in siccurn divisaque est aqua et ingressi sunt filii Israel per medium maris sicci erat enim aqua quasi murus a dextra eorum et leva.” From the Douay-Rheims: “And when Moses had stretched forth his hand over the sea, the Lord took it away by a strong and burning wind blowing all the night, and turned it into dry ground: and the water was divided. And the children of Israel went in through the midst of the sea dried up: for the water was as a wall on their right hand and on their left.”

signs that lead the Israelites through the Egyptian desert, he has only communicated with Moses, a fact which Edward Irving explores:

Unlike Moses, the Israelites have not seen God, and do not yet comprehend God’s full power and benevolence; they have risen and formed their ranks only out of a faith in their leader. Thus it is the very intensity of this personal relationship between Moses and his people that demands that Moses himself must tell them of the miracle, show it to them, shift their trusting eyes from his gesturing hand to what is taking place in the sea.\(^\text{12}\)

However, Moses does not so much shift their eyes from his hand to the sea, as use his hand to signify what is going on in the sea, as exemplified by the \textit{grene tacne}, the green sign, of his staff with which he does more than gesture in the act of striking the water.\(^\text{13}\) Whether Moses’s relationship with his people actually demands that he must tell them is up for debate, given that this demand would presumably be at least as apparent in the Vulgate, but it is certainly a shift towards dramatization of the act that makes sense in adapting the work for an Anglo-Saxon audience. Through the dramatization of the miracle, Moses is interpolated into the tradition of Anglo-Saxon poets interpreting the past for readers, a fact which is particularly evident given the use of elaborate diction as expressed through the variety of poetic compounds in the passage and the use of variation.

\(^{12}\) Irving, “\textit{Exodus Retraced},” 215.

\(^{13}\) While some editors, like Irving, would emend \textit{tacne} to \textit{tane}, recent shifts in analysis, particularly in the wake of Tom Hill’s article more firmly rooting the \textit{grene tacne} within the Latinate tradition of Moses’s \textit{virga}, have led to greater acceptance of the manuscript reading. See Hill, “The \textit{Virga} of Moses and the Old English \textit{Exodus}.” In her analysis of \textit{Judith}, Ann Astell argues that Holofernes’s head functions as \textit{tacen}, providing an allegorical embodiment of the cross as a sign of Christian victory; Astell, “Holofernes’s Head,” 117–33. As in \textit{Exodus}, the \textit{Judith} poet adds speeches to the biblical material as an aid to teaching, guiding readers through the process of interpretation.
Variation appears most significantly in the sentence running from 283b–8.\textsuperscript{14} As in the description of the phoenix discussed in chapter four, rhetorical variation is paralleled with variegation in color. The passage places five phrases in apposition: \textit{wegas...dryge} (283), \textit{haswe heresræta} (284), \textit{holm gerymed} (284), \textit{ealde staðolas} (285), and \textit{fage feldas} (287). Of these, the color terms \textit{haswe} and \textit{fage} pose the most interpretative difficulty. Of \textit{haswe}, Lucas notes “the word comes midway on the AS light-dark axis ... but ‘silvery’ or even ‘glistening’ would be a preferable rendering here.”\textsuperscript{15} By contrast, Tolkien argues based on the collocation with \textit{heresræt} that \textit{haswe} indicates “the dun, dusty colour of well-trodden roads,” such that the descriptor makes the passage “like a trampled dusty military road.”\textsuperscript{16} Carole Biggam has more recently argued for an ambiguous reading of color in the passage, writing, “In this context, \textit{hasu} should refer to a dry, flat, stone surface of natural, or supernatural, form which is reminiscent of paved Roman roads… Unfortunately, since paving stone can be many colors, it is necessary to conclude that Hasu 6 is ambiguous, as regards color.”\textsuperscript{17} Tolkien’s reading of \textit{haswe} within its environment raises a central tension in the passage: the way through the sea has apparently never been traversed, and yet is also suited to a purpose. The path reveals itself as something ready-to-hand, able to be manipulated and traversed by the Israelites, in spite of the fact that Moses has not heard of anyone else who has traversed it. The brightness of the path is then placed against the horizon of the sea-floor, the \textit{fage feldas}. On \textit{fage}, Biggam writes, “[Earlier] a preliminary argument was put forward that fag does not denote ‘shiny’ but indicates a shape, and/or surface treatment of contrasting color, as with the definitions ‘spotted,’ ‘variegated,’ and ‘dyed.’ The ‘fage feldas’ should, perhaps, be interpreted as open expanses dotted or streaked with shallow

\textsuperscript{14} Krapp punctuates this sentence such that \textit{sælde segrundas} in 289a is included in the appositive catalogue, with \textit{sæðwind} as the first word of the subsequent sentence.
\textsuperscript{15} Lucas, \textit{Exodus}, note to 284a.
\textsuperscript{16} Tolkien, \textit{The Old English Exodus}, note to 284.
\textsuperscript{17} Biggam, \textit{Grey in Old English}, 293.
pools of the water left behind.”¹⁸ This visual texturing in Moses’s speech places it within the tradition of ornate, Anglo-Saxon description. The shifting brightness of the landscape parallels the shifting diction, while these strange uses of familiar words defamiliarize them, such that the landscape renews the words for a new audience.

The effect of the rhetorical texturing of the speech is to create a horizon of the past that reveals itself through Moses’s words to the hearers. This projection of a historical horizon is a fundamental act in Gadamer’s hermeneutics:

Every encounter with tradition that takes place within historical consciousness involves the experience of a tension between the text and the present. The hermeneutic task consists in not covering up this tension by attempting a naive assimilation of the two but in consciously bringing it out. This is why it is part of the hermeneutic approach to project a historical horizon that is different from the horizon of the present. Historical consciousness is aware of its own otherness and hence foregrounds the horizon of the past from its own.¹⁹

Moses projects a historical horizon upon the garsecges deop, the deepness of the sea, presenting it as an other space which possesses considerable tension with his own present. The old foundations, ealde stāðolas, that are revealed when Moses strikes the sea with his staff are an alien landscape. Even as they are described in terms that interpolate them into a rhetorical framework that would be familiar to the Anglo-Saxons, the old foundations reveal themselves as distant and unknowable, normally closed off from sight by the concealing waves. By projecting a horizon, Moses sets the stage for bringing out the tension inherent in interactions with the past, providing a material embodiment of the abstract idea of interpretation.

¹⁸ Biggam, *Grey in Old English*, 292.
¹⁹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 305.
The distance between past and present is most apparent in the relative clause following *fage feldas*: “þa forð heonon / in ece <tid> yðe þeccað” (287–8). For modern readers, the tension between past and present is only heightened by an apparent need for emendation in the manuscript, which contains the un-metrical half-line *in ece*. Editors deal with this issue by emending the half-line to either *in ece tid*, as in Lucas, or *in ecnyssæ*. The major issue facing interpreters is determining the nature and extent of this eternal time, a task complicated by the ambiguous meaning of *forð heonon*. According to Irving, “What the poet means here is evidently something like ‘the fields which waves have always covered up to this point in time.’ *Forð heonon*, however, usually means ‘henceforth, from this time forward’; and expressions with *ece*, such as *in ecnesse*, *in ece tid*, ordinarily look forward to the future as well.”

Tolkien deals with this issue by reversing the gaze of eternity into the past: “This would involve a backward, rather than a forward, prospect of eternity. Although eternity is normally represented as a forward prospect, the direction depends on the point of view. This poet is often bold, even strained in his use of language. He seems to be using the fixed expression *forð heonon* ‘reckoning on from now’ in the sense ‘from now back into eternity.’” There is however something both backward and forward looking in this moment. With one glance Moses looks back upon past tradition, but through it he perceives a way forward, positioning himself in the middle in a way fitting to his role as the interpreter of the miracle through whose words we perceive the changes in the sea.

The statement that the waves cover the fields henceforth into eternity become more sensible by keeping in mind Gadamer’s instruction that the hermeneutic consciousness must both be awakened and kept awake. At every moment we perceive the past and future extending into eternity; by awakening the hermeneutic consciousness we project a horizon of the past which

foregrounds the alien nature of our own present moment, and through the understanding derived from this we perceive a path forward. However, every act of interpretation requires projecting this horizon anew, drawing back waters upon old foundations that remain strangely new.

A part of the estranging beauty of *Exodus* lies in its difficult language, exemplified by the use of poetic compounds.\(^2\) As one marker of linguistic difficulty, critics have noted the abundance of compounds, especially hapax legomena, in *Exodus*.\(^3\) This passage contains thirteen compounds, including: five hapax legomena (*færwundra, sæcir, ærglad, randgebeorh*, and *wægfaru*); two compounds whose only other occurrences are in glosses (*suðwind* and *foreweall*); one compound which only occurs in poetry (*baðweg*); three compounds with a handful of occurrences in both poetry and prose (*wealfæsten, herestræt*, and *sægrund*); and two compounds that are commonplaces (*garsecg* and *middangeard*). Through the creation of new words and the manipulation of familiar words in new contexts, the *Exodus* poet develops the figurative language necessary to portray the singular nature of the miracle called attention to by Moses. The hapax legomena pose special interpretative challenges, in that they can only be interpreted according to the context in which they occur. Words like *sæcir* and *wægfaru* speak directly to the unique circumstances presented by the miracle of the parting of the Red Sea, but they also call attention to its strangeness. The composition of the compounds suggest literal meanings suitable to everyday life: the rhythmic retreat of water on the beach and the passage through the water cut by the prow of a ship. That this would be a natural interpretation is also suggested by the use of *baðweg*, which in every other instance occurs as part of the poetic

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\(^2\) Robinson, “The Significance of Names in Old English Literature,” 25–9, presents another aspect of difficult diction in the poet’s use of patristic onomastics, through his use of translations of Latinate interpretations of Hebrew names as a basis for coining appropriate words in a poetic context.

\(^3\) See George, “‘Hwalas ðec herigað’: Creation, Closure, and the *Hapax Legomena* of the OE *Daniel*,” 106;
formula *brecan ofer bæðweg*.²⁴ By breaking from the poetic formula to describe the miraculous experience of crossing through the water on foot, the poet incorporates a sense of the sudden wondrous nature of the miracle, the *færwundor*, described in *Exodus*.

Many of the compounds fall into the semantic field of fortification words: *randgebeorh*, *foreweall*, *wealftæsten*, and *herestræt*. The latter two words have very concrete reference, not only occurring in literary texts, but also, as searches in the DOE Corpus reveal, in charters. The use of more familiar words to describe the wondrous nature of the construction of the sea wall renews their meaning, especially in light of other compounds used elsewhere in the poem. As Clare Lynch writes:

We have seen that architectural compounds such as *sæftæsten*, *sæweall*, and *holmweall* (or similarly constructed compounds) are found elsewhere in Old English poetry, though usually with different meanings. Indeed, in employing the compounds in senses different from elsewhere, the Exodus-poet calls attention to the metaphorical nature of such compounds and renovates the fortification image that is only implicit elsewhere. Such a treatment of kennings for the sea would seem to suggest a concern with the ability to interpret, not only the meaning of the individual kenning, but also the allegory of *Exodus* as a whole, and is appropriate given the poet’s concern with human perception.²⁵

The poet’s fortification compounds in Moses’s speech extend a pattern already existing in the rest of the text and highlight the fruits of the act of projecting a horizon, which allows the interpreter to build new structures from existing materials.

The compound *foreweall* is especially interesting in this light, in that its other main occurrence is in glosses of the Aldhelmian word *propugnaculum*.26 The DOE identifies the source for the two glosses of *propugnaculum* as the *Prosa de virginitate*, 293.11, but the word was fairly common within Aldhelm’s work, appearing nine times.27 Most pertinently, Aldhelm writes of the *fidei propugnacula* (241.21), the fore-walls of faith, in the *Prosa de virginitate* in a passage immediately after his account of the Hebrew’s crossing of the Red Sea (241.9–14). Aldhelm’s depiction of the crossing is brief, with none of the *Exodus* poet’s dilation of the material and insertions of new material; consequently, it is difficult to discern any lines of influence between the two works. However, the close proximity of *propugnaculum* to the crossing narrative raises the possibility that the hapax legmonenon *foreweall* may have arisen as a loan-translation of Aldhelmian lexis acquired by reading the *Prosa de virginitate*.28 Understanding the origin of *foreweall* in this way allows us to read the passage as an embodiment of the metaphorical *fidei propugnacula*. This embodiment renews the metaphor, and shows the poet working not only within the vernacular literary tradition, but also drawing inspiration from the Latin literature of the Anglo-Saxon period.

Moses’s ability to weave together the rhetorical threads of Old English poetic style parallels the working of the waves accomplished by Moses’s hand through God’s power in the Red Sea. As Sarah Novacich writes,

> We might understand this as what art (or exegesis) always tries to do. Art makes an attempt to understand the world, and, vice versa, an attempt to understand the world, to get to the bottom of its riddle, makes art. My consideration of Moses as

26 “fore-weall,” *Dictionary of Old English: A–G.*
27 Occurrences are as follows: *Carmen de virginitate* 639, 2079, 2540, and 2644; *Prosa de virginitate* 241.21, 282.8, 293.12, 322.23; *Epistula ad Geruntium* 486.5.
28 In opposition to this argument, it may also be pointed out that *foreweall* glosses *antemurale* in Monastic Canticle 3, in which the word still functions as a loan-translation, although not necessarily one of Aldhelmian origin.
a reader of the sea has aligned him primarily with the reader confronting the
difficult text of *Exodus*, but the patriarch’s parting of the water and raising of the
waves also suggest the work of the poet who delves into the canonical Book of
Exodus and makes a new, artistic, linguistic production rise out of it.\(^{29}\)

While Novacich’s approach focuses on using the riddle-genre as a paradigm for understanding
difficulty in the Old English *Exodus*, I have avoided doing so in this analysis, in part because
assimilating the difficulty in the language to a more easily understood approach lessens the
alienation experienced by the interpreter confronted with the past, especially when the past so
clearly foregrounds the otherness of the interpreter’s position.\(^{30}\) It also serves to make more
explicit what Novacich acknowledges as implicit in her approach, that Moses’s position as a
reader of the past is at heart a creative act, which results in the formation of new interpretive
horizons, setting the stage for understanding the multiple historical horizons we must project in
interpreting the text, whose necessity becomes even more apparent once Moses has crossed the
Red Sea.

**Translating Bodies of Knowledge**

Standing upon the further shore of the sea, Moses speaks again to the Israelite’s, although
in this second speech his words appear in indirect discourse rather than in his own words:\(^{31}\)

```plaintext
Þanon Israhelum ece rēdas
on merehwearfe Moyses sǣgde,
heahþungen wer, halige sprǣce,
deop ærende. Þægweorc ne mað,
swa gyt werðeode on gewritum findað
doma gehwilcne, þara ðe him Drihten bebead
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\(^{29}\) Novacich, “The Old English *Exodus* and the Read Sea,” 59.
\(^{30}\) However, it is worth saying that though I would resist the interpolation of *Exodus* into the riddle tradition,
Novacich’s work has made significant strides as a result which have sharpened my own work considerably.
\(^{31}\) Lucas notes, “Although a case could be made for taking this didactic passage as an actual speech (if so, the verbs
*healde* (535), *murnað* (536), *witon* (536) would have to be taken as 2 pl.), it seems more likely that the speech is
being reported in the third person; Krapp notes the ‘informality’ of *Moyses sǣgde* (517) as pointing to this
on þam siðfate soðum wordum.

Gif onlucan wile lifes wealhstod,
beorht in breostum, banhuses weard,
ginfaesten god Gastes cægon,
run bið gerecenod, ræd forð gæð;
hafað wislicu word on fæðme,
wise meagollice modum þæcan,
þæt we gesne ne syn Godes þeodscipes,
Metodes mîltsa.

He us ma onlyhð,
nu us boceras beteran secgæð,
lengran lyftwynna.32

The speech once again does not accord exactly with Biblical tradition, causing numerous headaches for textual critics. Lucas writes, “[T]he content of the speech is so inappropriate to the narrative context that Moses must be considered here as a type of Christ,” and reads the speech as drawing more from Paul’s distinction between the letter and the spirit in 2 Corinthians 3.6.33 Irving describes the opening as “A passage of the greatest obscurity, but perhaps typical of the poet’s cryptic and allusive style,” whose chief difficulty, the location of Moses’s speech, Irving explains by recourse to Deuteronomy, whose opening references the Red Sea, although more as a marker of geographic location than narrative importance.34 Tolkien finds the situation even more intolerable, writing the following before ultimately concluding that the speech was probably a later addition:

32 Exodus, 516–32. “Then on the sea-shore Moses, that illustrious man, said eternal counsels, holy words to the Israelites, related a deep message. The day’s work did not remain concealed, just as people still find in writings each of the laws, of those ones to whom the Lord commanded on that journey with true words. If the interpreter [translator] of life wishes to unlock, bright in heart, the guardian of the body, ample goods with the keys of the Spirit, then the mystery is explained, counsel goes forth; he has wise words in the breast, earnestly desires to teach minds, so that we are not lacking the understanding of God, the mercies of the Measurer. He grants us more—as bookish-people tell us—longer heavenly-joys.” The full speech runs to line 548, with its ending marked with “Swa reordode ræda gemynig / manna mildost,” 549–50a.

33 Lucas, Exodus, note to 519–48.
Moses is nowhere represented as haranguing the Israelites on or near the shore of the Red Sea, or as drawing any moral from the events. He did of course often exhort or rebuke them in all the troublous years that followed. These exhortations were no doubt in the poet’s mind. Thus he may regard his peculiar treatment of the end of his poem as a deliberate telescoping of Scripture. He wished to present a moral for his own people: to make his end answer his beginning. It is plain that he has in mind all the speeches of Moses, or of God through him, during the Wanderings.35

The critical discomfort stems, at least in part, from a desire for textual origins that provide clear guides for reading and that assimilate the speech into a more familiar scriptural context.

The preoccupation with identifying sources for the passage comes at the expense of interpreting the passage itself. By identifying the gewritum (520) and boceras (531) more concretely, critics hope to find an object on which to cast their critical gaze, whose secrets may be unlocked by the mind armed with the keys in the passage.36 However, this leads them to miss what the poet points out. Upon the Egyptian shore of the Red Sea the poet puts Moses’s words in direct discourse, calling attention to Moses’s status as an interpreter of the miracle at hand and representing it for a new audience. On this new shore, however, the poet puts Moses’s words in indirect discourse. This move defers the Mosaic speech and lends immediacy to the voice of the poet himself, who emerges as a new mediator of tradition. This mediating role is captured in the content of the reported speech itself. Moses speaks of what we may find in old writings, on

35 Tolkien, The Old English Exodus, 519–47.
36 The perils of too closely attempting to identify the boceras of the poem are suggested by the diametrically opposed views arising from these attempts. Lucas writes, “By boceras is probably meant principally the Church Fathers (rather than just the evangelists) who, after Christ has ensured the salvation of mankind (nu), can teach the rewards of heaven (beteran) through the interpretation of the scriptures,” Exodus, note to 531. Contrast this with Tolkien, who writes, “boceras: any learned men. Here the authors of the New Testament are primarily meant, though patristic writers are not excluded,” The Old English Exodus, note to 530. Neither critic admits the possibility that the boceras could also include Anglo-Saxon authors.
gewritum findað (520), true words, sodum wordum (522), whose meaning is unlocked by the interpreter of life, lifes wealhstod (523), armed with the keys of the spirit, Gastes cægon (525). While Lucas ascribes the reported nature of the speech to “considerations of aesthetic tact,” the mediation of Moses’s own words by the written medium parallels the content of the speech. The material context of literature with oral roots written down in books provides a setting that shapes how Moses’s speech reveals itself to the reader. What we find in books is not only the work of the distant past, but also contemporary responses that mediate it for new audiences.

The lifes wealhstod is what accomplishes the task of interpretation, and presents another case study of the Exodus poet using language for new purposes. Critics typically take the phrase as a unit, meaning the intellect, and Lucas writes of wealthstod: “the word clearly implies elucidation of the correspondence between two sets of information, in this context the correspondence between literal and allegorical and the typological connection between historically separate events or personages.” The word is unique in the poetic corpus of Old English, but is normal as a gloss for interpres and also occurs a handful of times in prose texts where it means interpreter, with Christ identified as the wealthstod of God and men in the Pastoral Care, or even translator, as in the proem to Boethius, which identifies Alfred as the wealthstod of the book. These references point to something made explicit in the composition of the compound, which literally identifies the interpreter as someone who stands on the boundary between different bodies. While Christ mediates between God and men and Alfred mediates between the bodies of Latinate and vernacular literature, the wealthstod of Exodus mediates

37 Lucas, Exodus, note to 519–48. What Lucas intends by this statement is enigmatic, and seems to depend upon his belief that the speech is inappropriate to the Biblical narrative, even if appropriate to the interpretation of scripture. 38 Lucas, Exodus, note to 523. Irving and Tolkien are in concord on this interpretation, although Tolkien phrases it as “the intellective faculty of the soul,” The Old English Exodus, note to 522–3. 39 Based on a search in the DOE Corpus, wealthstod occurs sixteen times: once in poetry, five times as a gloss of interpres and its related forms, and ten times in prose. This count excludes two occurrences of the proper name Wealthstod. Based on the connection to Alfred’s Pastoral Care, Dorothy Haines has read Christ as both the lifes wealthstod and the banhuses weard; see Haines, “Unlocking Exodus,” 493–4.
textual tradition more generally, and suggests the importance of translation as cultural practice. As Moses has carried the Israelites across the Red Sea, so too the poet has carried the material into a new context.

While *wealhstod* occurs in other sources, the phrase *lifes wealhstod* is unique to *Exodus*, and the interpretation of the phrase as the intellect aligns it with Gadamer’s conception of understanding:

> In fact the horizon of the present is continually in the process of being formed because we are continually having to test all our prejudices. An important part of this testing occurs in encountering the past and in understanding the tradition from which we come. Hence the horizon of the present cannot be formed without the past. There is no more an isolated horizon of the present in itself than there are historical horizons which have to be acquired. *Rather, understanding is always the fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves.*

Within the narrative of *Exodus*, Moses makes his final speech after having escaped the Egyptians, with the prospect of a new life ahead of him. However, he chooses to dwell on the past, explaining how to understand tradition. In his first speech Moses uses a vertically oriented metaphor to project a historical horizon, in which the old foundations appear at the bottom of the sea-floor. In the placement of this speech upon the *merehwearfe*, however, we see an implicit recognition of a horizontally oriented metaphor, in which the historical horizon of the past is the first shore of the sea, and this new shore represents the horizons of the present. In crossing the sea on dry ground, Moses has accomplished a literal fusion of horizons that parallels the fusion of horizons represented by the act of reading the things found in writings and interpreting them for a new context.

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40 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 305.
The means of unlocking the meaning of textual tradition in Exodus are the keys of the spirit, Gastes caegon. In his typological reading of the Old English Advent, Robert Burlin discusses typology as the key of David, which Lucas suggests is the probable intention of this figure:

One meaning of “clavis domus David,” put forward by Haymo (CXVI.823) in the ninth century and later by Hervaeus (CLXXXI.219), was “scientia Scripturarum” or “scientia interpretandi Scripturas”—that is, the science of typology itself, opened by the Lord to His disciples and through them to the entire Church. ... Through the power of Christ, the secrets of the divine law are open to the faithful and closed to unbelievers, for the door which yields to the key of David is the Church.\(^{41}\)

Reading the keys of the spirit as this key of David makes a great deal of contextual sense, given the concern with interpreting scripture evinced in the content of the poem as well as Moses’s connection with the law, especially Deuteronomy, and his role as a type of Christ, connecting the old and new law in one figure. However, the simple importation of this concept is not perfectly smooth. The poem is less concerned with providing an accurate interpretation of scripture than with translating it to a new context, and as we have seen, using Exodus as a guide to the interpretation of specific Biblical passages or textual traditions is a minefield given the poet’s syncretic approach. Rather than mediating a specific textual tradition, the Exodus poet provides a model for the mediation of all textual tradition. That this is the case is suggested by the use of genitives in consecutive lines that emphasize the fusion of body and spirit animating the living being. These genitive phrases—lifes wealhstod (523), banhuses weard (524), and Gastes caegon (525)—develop a more universal model for interpretation. Since we come to our senses within

\(^{41}\) Burlin, The Old English Advent, 75.
the body, understanding is necessary for integrating our lived experience of the world into a meaningful framework, accomplished through a process of projecting and fusing horizons that appear to exist independently but come together to form our relation to the present.

A more general framework for using keys as a metaphor for understanding appears in a numerical apothegm inserted between the capitula and the text in a manuscript of Bede’s *De arte metrica*:

\[
\text{Quinque sacrae claues dicunt perstare sophiae:} \\
\text{Quarum prima frequens studium nescita legendi} \\
\text{Altera quaee religis memori committere menti} \\
\text{Tertia quaee nescis per crebra rogatio rerum} \\
\text{Quarta est uerus honor sincero corde magistri} \\
\text{Quinta iubet mundi uarias contemnere gazas} \\
\text{His te si dederis poteris perfectus haber.}^{42}
\]

In spite of the concluding line’s assertion that the one possessing the keys of wisdom may be held *perfectus*, complete or perfected, the keys actually reveal understanding as a continual process of engagement with the work of the past. The first three keys all describe actions which involve returning to the study of materials in order to know them better, which echoes both Gadamer’s and the *Exodus*-poet’s approach to hermeneutics. The fourth key of wisdom’s emphasis on respect for instructors suggests the importance of instructors as mediating figures in the Old English poem, with both Moses and the poet appearing as figures who mediate the past in order to facilitate understanding. The keys of wisdom present a more supple and expansive

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42 Jones, ed. *Beda Venerabilis: Opera didascalica*, CCSL 123A, 71. “People say there are five keys of sacred wisdom: the first of them is frequent zeal for reading unknown things; the second, to commit to memory what you reread; the third, frequently asking what you do not know; the fourth is true honor with a sincere heart for the teacher; the fifth commands that you despise the diverse treasures of the world. If you give yourself over to these things, you will be able to be held perfect.” The poem appears in Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Ottobon, lat. 1354 (s. xi/xii), fol. 58, and is conjoined to another poem consisting of acrostic verses reading *BÆDA LECTOR*. For discussion of this joint poem, see Orchard, *Poetic Art of Aldhelm*, 274–7, which is chiefly of interest due to verbal echoes of Aldhelm contained in the acrostic. On the Five Keys of Wisdom, see also Avesani, “Leggesi che cinque sono le chiavi della sapienza,” 62–73, and Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*, 334–6, who notes the presence in England of variants that reduce the keys of wisdom from five to four. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, 512, presents an edition of the poem based on a different manuscript.
model for textual interpretation that more closely approaches the varied textual interests that appear in *Exodus*.

A part of the challenge of interpreting the Old English *Exodus* is dealing with the multiple horizons and interpreters present: Moses interprets tradition for the Israelites, the poet interprets Moses for an Anglo-Saxon audience, the manuscript interprets the poem from a late Anglo-Saxon viewpoint, and we interpret it from our own modern vantage. However, rather than being a polytemporal swirl, the poem consistently foregrounds the otherness of the past as a function of textual interpretation and in turn reveals how we are constantly separated from the things that have gone before us. That the horizon of the present changes is evidence of the need for the hermeneutic faculty not only to be awakened, but also kept awake. These moments of fusion accrete around the form of the manuscript itself, which serves as our way of understanding the different ways in which people interact with textual tradition. In particular, the form of the Junius 11 manuscript provides a material embodiment of the mysteries of interpretation.

Junius 11 contains four poems—*Genesis* (consisting of two parts), *Exodus*, *Daniel*, and *Christ and Satan*—whose scriptural content led to an early but false association of the manuscript with Cædmon. The manuscript’s chief distinction is that alone of the vernacular poetic codices, it contains illustrations in two hands, with forty-eight illustrations of *Genesis* extant and blank spaces left for illustrations throughout *Exodus* and *Daniel*.\(^43\) *Exodus* has thirteen pages with blank space left for illustrations, whose intended subjects Peter Lucas has

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reconstructed based on comparisons to other manuscripts dealing with similar material.\textsuperscript{44}

Catherine Karkov’s \textit{Text and Picture in Anglo-Saxon England} has analyzed the pictorial narrative presented in the manuscript, arguing: “Neither of the Junius 11 artists conceived or executed his drawings as images that simply accompanied the text, rather they are active translations of it and can be understood as forming a narrative distinct from that of the text. As Michael Camille, amongst others, has stressed, even images within manuscripts have an existence apart from the texts they accompany, and cannot be understood only in conjunction with them.”\textsuperscript{45} Karkov moves through an analysis of the narrative strategies made available by the illustrations in \textit{Genesis}, and then uses them as a model for understanding latent points in the unillustrated poems that create networks that could be activated by the intended illustrations. However, in analyzing the unillustrated poems in this way, Karkov of necessity seeks to understand the absent illustrations in conjunction with the texts.

As revealed in the analysis of the illustrated Prudentius manuscript of the first chapter, blank space offers equally rich interpretative possibilities. Whatever the historical circumstances that led the illustrators to only partially complete the intended program, the presence of blank spaces in the manuscript are a part of how it reveals itself for interpretation, and are themselves moments that demand interpretation. At a basic level we ask what images belonged in the spaces? To what extent would they have continued the program of illustrations begun with \textit{Genesis}? What new directions would they point in? How would we have read them as together with and separate from the text they appeared with? These questions, which Lucas and Karkov

\textsuperscript{44} Space left for illustrations appears in the following pages: 144, upper half; 145, lower half; 147, lower half; 150, whole; 152, whole; 153, lower half; 155, lower half; 157, upper half; 159, whole; 164, whole; 165, whole; 168, whole; 171, lower half. By reference to the Old English illustrated Hexateuch and a continental Pentateuch, Lucas has reconstructed the illustrations that presumably would fill in the spaces, \textit{Exodus}, 16–7.

have done much to answer, only provide a partial answer to the problem of interpretation. For if
the task of interpretation is to unlock the mysteries of what we find in writings (*on gewritum
findað*) of the *boceras* of the past, then we must ask how what remains, even the blank space,
reveals itself to us.

One way that the blank space of *Exodus* reveals itself is as a textual embodiment of the
Red Sea as the space in which interpretation takes place. In *Exodus*, the Red Sea appears as the
untroubled waters that conceal the work of the past and as an expanse to be crossed in the work
of interpretation. The blank spaces of Junius 11 have the same effect. The untroubled portions of
pages call attention to themselves and suggest old foundations that have not been revealed. The
critic attempts to draw back the waters of the past to reveal these foundations, which are engaged
in a play of revealing and withdrawing from vision. Answers suggest themselves based on the
material of the manuscript itself and comparison to other manuscripts, and yet even with these
answers the materiality of the past confronts us whenever we return to the manuscript, whose
surface remains untroubled in spite of all the critical work that has been done. Like Moses
stretching forth with his *grene tacne*, the *boceras* of the past have struck the deep waters with
their own signs to bring forth signs of wondrous miracles, words that reveal long hidden counsels
upon the expanse of the parchment that are continually engaged in the mediation of textual
tradition. The *ealde stapolas* that appear to Moses appear then as the form of manuscripts
themselves, a reading supported by the description of manuscripts in the bookworm riddle
consisting of “þrymfaestne cwide / ond þæs strangan stapol,” illustrious words and their strong
foundation.\(^{46}\) These words then constitute the shores on either side of the blank expanses that
form the foundation of Junius 11, which the eye must necessarily traverse. By lingering on them

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for a time rather than hurrying from shore to shore, we find that they may offer their own narrative.

I have chosen to end this work with an analysis of *Exodus* because it is a poem of remembering what has gone before, a poem whose vantage point is ever the present moment from which we look back into the past in order to recover, in Gadamer’s phrasing, “what is still and ever again real.” The speeches that Moses gives upon each shore of the Red Sea develop a theory of hermeneutics typically applied by critics to scriptural and patristic writings, but whose ambit I have argued should be expanded to writing more generally, and especially the type of poetic writing represented by *Exodus* itself. In this respect *Exodus* teaches a way of reading that emphasizes the role of understanding in projecting a way of looking at the past and present and then integrating them in a creative act that mirrors what Gadamer has termed the fusion of horizons. The *Exodus* poet highlights this fusion of horizons and the necessity of continually performing the work of interpretation by emphasizing the role of the interpreter as someone who stands on the boundaries, adapting old material for new viewers. In the first speech Moses calls attention to himself as the mediator of tradition, while in the second the poet does the same by calling attention to his own role as the mediator of Moses’s words given in indirect discourse. Finally, the manuscript, with its blank spaces, speaks to its own role as a mediator of the past in an ever shifting present that leads to our own modern vantage. The work of interpretation is never completed, and so we strive not only to awaken the hermeneutic consciousness, but to keep it awake.
Conclusion

Love and the Otherness of Anglo-Saxon Literature

I want to conclude with a few words about the role of love in adaptation, by way of a pair of quotations, one from an Anglo-Saxon author and the other from a modern philosopher. The first comes from Acca of Hexham, who wrote to Bede to ask him to write a new commentary on Luke and whose epistolary plea was included as part of the prefatory material for that eventual work. Acca anticipated the objection that Bede would make concerning such a project: why write a new commentary when the patristic authors had already handed down a significant body of commentary to later authors? Acca rebutted this charge, noting: “Sed huic objectioni tuae breuiter respondeo quia iuxta comicum nihil sit dictum quod non sit dictum prius et quia caritas omnia sustinet.” The second quotation comes from the final paragraph of Jean-Luc Marion’s work on givenness. After arguing that the problem of intersubjectivity is in fact a problem of intergivenness—that all subjects must first be given to themselves, and so do not hold a privileged position—Marion concludes:

This situation, still unspoiled by exploration, not only allows and requires reconsidering the thematic of ethics—of respect and the face, obligation and substitution—and confirming its phenomenal legitimacy. It would also perhaps authorize broaching what ethics cannot attain: the individuation of the Other. For I neither want nor should only face up to him as the universal and abstract pole of counter-intentionality where each and every one can take on the face of the face. I

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1 Hurst, ed. *Commentarium in Lucam*, prologue, 5. “But to your objection I briefly respond that according to the comic nothing has been said which has not been said before and that love bears all things.”
instead reach him in his unsubstitutable particularity, where he shows himself like no other Other can. This individuation has a name: love.²

These two quotations both, in their way, speak to the role of love and individuation. In Acca, love allows for individuation, for Bede’s work to separate itself from everything that has come before it. In Marion, individuation allows for love; that the subject is not privileged but is given by the flesh allows recognition of the shared gift. These principles are at the core of an affective reception of texts, a form that manifests both in the works under consideration in this dissertation and in the dissertation itself. The more I dwelled with these works, the more they revealed themselves in their particularities and taught me how to read in a way mediated by the body.

One overarching metaphor of the work is coming to your senses. Chapter one concerned the givenness of the flesh, which gives us over to the experience of the world and allows for recognition of the consanguineity of Christ, the early medieval book, and its readers. The word comes alive in the flesh, and allows the world to affect it in the form of suffering. In the second chapter, the suffering reveals itself as the capacity for love across time. This love, which manifests on the bodies of saints and in the words of Aldhelm’s text, appears as an erotic desire to touch the untouchable, which plays about the lips and penetrates the innermost parts. In the third chapter the body comes further apart, and through the eating of food the separation between inner and outer realities is made porous. Digestion allows the environment to enter in and reconstitute bodies, revealing the body as engaged in a continual process of becoming. Chapter four reveals the phoenix in two bodies manifesting synaesthetically in visual and aural phenomena. One phoenix gives birth to the other, and yet they both paradoxically reveal themselves as singular beings singing together in the imagination. And chapter five depicts the

² Marion, Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness, 324.
organization of perceptions and experience, as Moses leads his people and the poet leads us through the act of interpretation in order to bring the objects of the past into the present and equip us to move into the future.

Coming to your senses is a powerful metaphor for this narrative, but what emerges in the course of the dissertation is a multiplicity of metaphors that color our perception of how we read. The words of the past are gifts. They press upon our lips in the form of a kiss. Reading is a process of making a home in an unfamiliar place. Translation is the phoenix birthing itself in a new yet singular form. Interpretation reveals hidden depths and involves the crossing of a sea. These metaphors are used in the various texts with both literal and figural dimensions. Prudentius offers his words as a gift to God, but they also come down to us as a gift. Aldhelm’s saints feel the lips of Christ pressing against their own, but in using the words of past authors Aldhelm shapes his mouth to the form of another’s, and as we read we do the same. Guthlac finds a home for himself in the swamp of Mercia and Felix finds a home in Aldhelm’s monstrous diction. The phoenix dies and rises again the same, and the translated work of Lactantius receives a new birth in Old English verse. Moses reveals the old foundations and crosses the Red Sea, but it also requires the act of unlocking the hidden secrets of words and integrating horizons so that a crossing from one state of understanding to another may be enabled. These metaphors become a way of teaching the reader new methods of reading suited to the texts that generate them.

In spite of the emphasis throughout on singularity and examining the multiplicity of metaphors produced by the texts, part of the motivation for this dissertation was also integrative. Discussions of Latin and Old English literature are often disconnected from each other, even when scholarly work uses a thematic framework that would seem to demand a more holistic
approach to the literature of the period. By focusing on the role of perception in textual re-appropriation, I wanted to develop a framework that would demand study of both the vernacular and Latinate material, and more importantly, that did not present the Latin simply as teleological precursor to the Old English but allowed it to come into its own as a language whose literature was an integral part of the fabric of literary culture in the period. An understanding of Anglo-Saxon poetry would be deficient if it did not encompass the early Christian poetic material of authors like Prudentius that formed a core of the poetic reading material in the period. From the late Antique, Aldhelm provides a natural transition as his use of earlier writings provided a model for later writers, upon whom he exerted a considerable stylistic influence. Felix’s appropriation and emulation of Aldhelmian diction provides evidence of this as he turns lexical inventiveness to local purposes in his account of demonic encounter in the Mercian fen.

However, early Christian poetry also had a profound effect on vernacular verse, as was the case with the Old English translation/adaptation of Lactantius’s *Carmen de ave phoenice*. And finally, Old English verse was indebted to the Latin Biblical material, as exemplified by *Exodus*, which gives a model for how to interpret textual remains even as its syncretic approach and complex style makes identifying sources a difficult task.

In integrating these materials, it was also important to mark out new ways of interpreting texts that were suited to their individual natures. My methods throughout have been primarily formalist and phenomenological: exploring the shapes of texts and how they disclose themselves to readers. Formalist methods are familiar ground to Anglo-Saxonists, although my habit of affective, involved reading leads to more subjective evaluations of works than is customary in a field where the impulse to criticism as literary history is more common. My phenomenological methods, however, are likely unfamiliar, both to Anglo-Saxonists in particular but also to the
field of literary studies in general, which aside from the schools of reader-response theory that emerged out of an engagement with phenomenological approaches to hermeneutics, has had little direct engagement with the phenomenological tradition. However, the field of Anglo-Saxon literary studies seems to be moving toward engagement with problems of subjectivity, embodiment, and perception, issues which are central to phenomenology’s concerns. My engagement with particular authors was spurred by a sense that the Anglo-Saxon texts I was interested in required a vocabulary that was lacking in the available scholarship: 1) Prudentius’s concern with the flesh, which led to Marion’s analysis of givenness and flesh; 2) the linked corpora of Aldhelm’s saints and textual sources, which led to Lakoff and Johnson’s study of embodied metaphor theory and Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s description of the untouchable; 3) the sense of finding home in Guthlac, which led to Gaston Bachelard’s readings of home in French poetry; 4) the role of vision in The Phoenix, which led to Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s account of visual phenomena and color perception and Paul Ricoeur’s understanding of metaphor as embedded in discourse; 5) and the way in which the interpretation of texts was linked to making sense of the past in Exodus, which led to Gadamer’s theory of hermeneutics. The variety of authors working within the phenomenological tradition reflects the need to be responsive to the individual concerns of the texts, but their range displays how much phenomenology has to offer to a critic whose concern is not only—or primarily—understanding what literary texts meant to the Anglo-Saxons, but also understanding what Anglo-Saxon literary texts mean and how they continue to create meaning today.

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3 For an application of this type of criticism in an Anglo-Saxon context, see Kessler, “Reading Gnomic Phenomena in Old English Literature.”
Bibliography


Lactantius. *Lactanti de ave phoenice. With Introduction, Text, Translation, and Commentary.*


