

Attention and Distraction in Middle English Literature

by

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the representation of attention and distraction in late medieval literary culture. The Middle Ages have been largely overlooked in recent efforts by scholars to chart the history of attention. Combining the methods of phenomenology and cognitive science with contemporary medieval accounts of perception, I argue that medieval thinkers developed complex theories and descriptions of attention that can help to historicize and complicate current debates about the nature of attention and distraction. Beginning with Augustine, who argued that attention is the prerequisite for perception, I trace how the vocabulary of attention evolved through the later medieval period. I concentrate on texts written in Middle English, the language of the distracted, according to one fourteenth-century translator. I conclude that these texts investigate the phenomenological and ethical qualities of attention and, in doing so, articulate a relationship between attention and distraction that cannot be reduced to a simple opposition.

Chapter One describes Augustine's influential model of attention. It then considers how this model is complicated by the descriptions of distraction in *Confessions*. Chapter Two picks up where the passage from *Confessions* leaves off. I argue that Aquinas reworks Augustine's response to the problem of distracted prayer by drawing a distinction between *attentio* and

intentio. I then examine how this distinction is adapted in the devotional writings of Walter Hilton. Chapter Three argues that Julian of Norwich's *Revelation of Love* can be read as a phenomenology of attention that discloses its retentive and anticipatory modalities. Like Hilton, Julian makes accommodations for the inevitability of distraction. Chapter Four examines how Thomas Hoccleve uses the sense of taste to articulate a theory of discernment rooted in the exercise of attention. I argue that Hoccleve's insistence on tasting and being tasted challenges the view of him as a skeptic. Chapter Five reads Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* as a reflection on the nature of diversion. The poem critiques medieval discourses of diversion based on the hydraulic model of desire and explores the creative possibilities that arise when people let themselves become diverted.

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Introduction

At the beginning of Book II of Chaucer's translation of Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, Lady Philosophy pauses for a moment. She has been working on rousing the Prisoner from the state of "litargye" caused by his despondency at being unfairly imprisoned.¹ Lady Philosophy wants to correct his skewed perspective by showing him the transitory nature of worldly goods. In order to do so she must first make the dull Prisoner attentive, which she does in part by interspersing songs into her dialogue. Book II begins after one such song: "Aftir this sche stynte a lytel; and after that sche hadde ygadrede by atempre stillenesse myn attencioun, she seyde thus [...]" (2.pr1.1-11). Having gathered the Prisoner's "attencioun," she can now dispense the medicine of philosophical instruction. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, this is the first recorded occurrence of the word "attention" in English.² At the centre of debates about technology, literacy, and pharmacology, "attention" has installed itself as a twenty-first-century keyword. This dissertation looks at the medieval history of attention. It argues that Chaucer and his contemporaries thought deeply about attention in ways that both resonate with and diverge from modern theories.

Medieval thinkers accounted for the role that attention plays in cognition. To get an initial sense of what these accounts looked like, we can turn back to Chaucer's *Boece*. In Book V, Lady Philosophy explains to the now attentive Prisoner that the Stoics got it wrong when they argued that the mind works like a mirror passively receiving external images. Rather than simply receive whatever happens to impress itself, the mind selects its objects of focus: "For somtyme it hevyth up the heved (*that is to seyn, that it hevyth up the entencioun*) to ryght heye thinges, and sometyme it descendith into ryghte low thinges" (5.met4.36-9). Note here how Chaucer is using "entencioun" instead of "attencioun." In Middle English, "entente" and its paronyms were typically used to denote "attention." Deriving from the Latin verb *intendere*, meaning "to stretch

¹ Chaucer, *Boece*, 1.pr2.20. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically by book, part, and line number(s).

² *OED*, s.v. "attention."

toward” or “to aim at,” ME “entenden” could also mean “to intend or plan (to do something).”³ Middle English writers exploited the semantic ambiguity to explore the relationship between attention and volition. Lady Philosophy adduces the voluntary or “endogenous” nature of attention to make her point.⁴ While the majority of late medieval thinkers agreed with Lady Philosophy that cognition is not entirely passive, there were debates in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries about how to reconcile the active principle of cognition with the fundamentally passive Aristotelian model of perception. One of the upshots of these debates, I will argue in chapter 2, is that attention becomes less closely connected with the will.

In addition to the sort of theoretical explanations offered by Lady Philosophy, we find within medieval texts rich descriptions of the lived experience of states of attention and distraction. Augustine’s *Confessions*, the main focus of chapter 1, is instructive in this regard. The *Confessions* are filled with phenomenologically nuanced descriptions. To glance ahead to the example that acts as the focal point of my discussion in the first chapter, Augustine describes how he is distracted from his thoughts by the sight of a dog chasing rabbit. He tries to reconstruct the various turns that carry him into what he calls the thicket of distraction. The texts I study here contain both theoretical explanation and phenomenological description, but I am particularly interested in uncovering the latter, especially those experiences that cannot be assimilated into theoretical frameworks or those that force frameworks to expand and shift.

The generic diversity of the texts under study here reflects both the centrality and diffuseness of attention within the discursive forms of the Middle Ages. One of the premises of this dissertation is that literary texts provide expansive, flexible spaces within which to describe the lived

³ *MED*, s.v. “entenden.” Robert Myles explains further: “‘Entencioun’ and ‘entente’ in Middle English have a basic sense of inclining or stretching towards something and so are closely related to the modern concept of ‘intentionality.’ In classical Latin, *intendere*, in addition to the sense of ‘to stretch’ and ‘to strain,’ meant ‘to aim weapons’ such as arrows. The image of the archer nicely contains the concept of directedness: ‘object-directedness’ controlled by the will of the subject, the ‘object-director.’ While the *Concordance* to Chaucer has several hundred entries for ‘entente’ and its paronyms, and *The Middle English Dictionary* devotes ten columns to it, they all are connected by the concept of *directedness*.” *Chaucerian Realism*, 35.

⁴ On the “endogenous” and “exogenous” orientation of attention, see chapter 1.

experience of attention.⁵ As Margaret Koehler writes in her recent study of attention in eighteenth-century literature: “Literary texts are rich but surprisingly unexplored sites for tracing—and reenacting—the precise operations and recurring dilemmas of attention.”⁶ What constitutes a “literary text” is a complicated question, especially when applied to medieval texts. I follow James Simpson in defining the “literary” as a flexible combination of several possible definitions: “works that conform to certain metrical and rhetorical norms”; “works designed especially as entertainment”; “works that were regarded by writers and readers within the period as forming a poetic tradition”; and “works that deliberate unsettle discursive norms.”⁷ Chapter 5 takes up the question of the “literary” by asking what it is that literature does. Most of the texts I study here—including those such as Augustine’s *Confessions* or Julian’s *Revelation of Love* that might not fit a narrow criteria of the “literary”—contain some kind of narrative component. Paul Ricoeur argues that the prime function of narrative is the reconfiguration of the messy, often obscure lived experience of time.⁸ Ricoeur arrives at his formulation through a careful reading of Augustine, who, he argues, takes a phenomenological approach to the question of time. The representation of time and attention are closely linked: narratives reconfigure moments of suspension, distention, and abbreviation that can be correlated with varying intensities of attention. By way of attention, my dissertation investigates the temporality of narrative and the nature of temporality more generally, themes of much recent interest to medieval literary scholars.⁹

I discovered while writing this dissertation that it is very difficult to talk about attention without talking about distraction. Much of the medieval language used to describe and define attention

⁵ My understanding of the phenomenological value of literature is indebted to Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei, who argues that literature “not only illustrates experiences of rich phenomenological import, but initiates discoveries that parallel and instantiate moments of phenomenological understanding, thereby vivifying the necessary capacities by breaking open the quotidian expectations, the habitual regard, which would hinder phenomenological seeing.” *The Ecstatic Quotidian*, 119.

⁶ Koehler, *Poetry of Attention*, 16.

⁷ Simpson, *Reform and Cultural Revolution*, 4-5. On the “literariness” of medieval literature, see also Burrow, *Medieval Writers and their Work*.

⁸ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative I*.

⁹ See, for instance, Dinshaw, “Temporalities”; Dinshaw, *How Soon is Now?*; Dailey, *Promised Bodies*; Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines*, 1-34.

assumes a counter-movement of distraction. Again, *Boece* provides a useful example. In addition to the first recorded occurrence of “attention,” it contains an early instance of the participle form of “to distract.”¹⁰ Lady Philosophy warns that seeking glory will entail distraction: “Axestow glorye? Thow schalt so bien distract by aspere thynges that thow schalt forgon sykernesse” (3.pr8.16-7). “Distract” translates the Latin participle *distractus*, which is derived from *distrahere*, meaning “to pull apart” or “to divide.”¹¹ What attention gathers, distraction scatters. Another influential “image schema” used to conceptualize the relationship between attention and distraction was turning.¹² The Latin verbs *convertere* and *avertere* could be used to signify a turning of attention, as could their Middle English cognates, “converten” and “adverten.”¹³ Augustine frames his distraction by the rabbit as a turn toward that is a simultaneous turn away; it is both conversion and aversion. One of the interesting things about this vocabulary is that, unlike much modern discourse on attention, it does not frame distraction as a deficit or diminution of attention, but rather as attention oriented toward a different object. The conversion-aversion model accords more closely with recent research in cognitive neuroscience that proposes that states of daydreaming are not characterized by the absence or relaxing of attention, but by an inward turning, by “introspective attention.”¹⁴ It is important to recover the medieval history of attention not only in order to understand why we continue to talk about attention and distraction the way we do, but also because it offers us points of contrast that suggest alternate ways of thinking about complex mental phenomena, the contours and boundaries of which are still in the process of being mapped.

The majority of the texts I study in this dissertation are written in Middle English: Walter Hilton’s *Scale of Perfection*, Julian of Norwich’s *Revelation of Love*, Thomas Hoccleve’s *Series*, and Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*. The fact that they were written in the vernacular has ramifications for how they take up issues surrounding attention. According to the fourteenth-

¹⁰ *MED*, s.v. “distracten.”

¹¹ Lewis and Short, *Latin Dictionary*, s.v. “distraho.”

¹² According to Mark Turner, image schemas are “skeletal patterns that recur in our sensory and motor experience.” *The Literary Mind*, 16.

¹³ Lewis and Short, *Latin Dictionary*, s.v. “convertio” and “averto”; *MED*, s.v. . “converten” and “adverten.”

¹⁴ See chapter 5.

century translator John Trevisa, English was the language of the distracted. Trevisa argued that it was necessary to translate Latin works into English because there were many people who lacked the time, resources, or intellectual ability to learn Latin.¹⁵ Authors writing theological and devotional works in English could not assume that their readers would have access to the training and leisure that enabled monastics to be such proficient and diligent readers.¹⁶ The emergence of what Ralph Hanna calls a “general vernacular literary public” in the late fourteenth century represented an important cultural shift in reading practices.¹⁷ Like all major shifts in the history of reading, it raised questions about attention. The Middle English writers that I examine in this dissertation are all concerned to various degrees about the attentive capacities of their audience, including the capacity of their readers to pay attention to the texts themselves, to read “aright,” as Hoccleve puts it. Like Lady Philosophy who uses her songs to render the Prisoner attentive, they seek to train and discipline the attention of their readers.

Writing the History of Attention

In his famous 1936 essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin argued that the various technological and economic changes associated with modernity had altered the way people perceive their environment: distraction, as opposed to contemplation, was now the dominant mode of perception.¹⁸ In the years since Benjamin’s essay, particularly with the proliferation of new forms of technology and the emergence of the diagnosis of Attention Deficit Disorder (or ADD), the distracted nature of contemporary life has become somewhat of a truism, a condition analyzed and frequently lamented by critics of various ideological and methodological stripes. Much of the discourse addressing distraction as a cultural

¹⁵ Trevisa, “Dialogus inter dominum et clericum,” ll. 65-68.

¹⁶ As Katharine Breen remarks, “Close-knit, well-educated, relatively homogeneous, and sympathetic to the author’s ends, cloistered monks were in a good position to catch subtle allusions, work through momentary confusions, and otherwise read a devotional or theological text as the author would like it to be read... One need not fall into the old trap whereby all users of Latin were ‘learned’ and all users of the vernacular ‘lewed’ to recognize that such favorable conditions rarely obtained outside of the cloister – and, even more important, that authors could never assume such conditions would obtain.” *Imagining an English Reading Public*, 9.

¹⁷ Hanna, *Pursuing History*, 240. See also Breen, *English Reading Public*; Somerset, *Clerical Discourse and Lay Audience*; Watson, “Censorship and Cultural Change.”

¹⁸ Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.”

problem presupposes that earlier forms of Western culture experienced attention differently. It has thus become an important scholarly project to examine the representation of attention in earlier historical periods.

In recent years, literary scholars and art historians have explored how the development of particular art forms and genres intersect with contemporary debates about the nature of attention. Margaret Koehler argues that eighteenth-century poetry demands a certain kind of flexible, fine-grained attention from its readers, a mode of attentiveness that has parallels with contemporary philosophical and scientific models of attention as a highly selective sensory filter.¹⁹ Similarly, Nicholas Dames begins his study of the nineteenth-century novel by asking, “What quality of attention do certain texts or genres demand and receive?”²⁰ He argues that Victorian criticism answered this question by seeing the novel as “a training ground for industrialized consciousness,” a consciousness characterized by a “rhythmic alternation of heightened attention and distracted inattention.”²¹ The link between attention and subjectivity is pursued by Jonathan Crary in his influential study of the discourse of attention in the late nineteenth century. According to Crary, this period witnessed an explosion in scientific and philosophical interest in the workings of attention, which, he argues, coincided with the awareness that perception does not, contra the Western tradition of metaphysics, offer “unmediated visual access to a plenitude of being.”²² Artists such as Manet, Seurat, and Cézanne investigated the disruptions at the heart of seeing and made “unprecedented discoveries about the indeterminacy of an attentive perception.”²³ Crary argues that Benjamin and other modernist thinkers saw distraction as symptomatic of the fragmented quality of modernity, the result of “a process of fragmentation and destruction in which premodern forms of wholeness and integrity were irretrievably broken up or degraded through technological, urban, and economic reorganizations.”²⁴ Crary challenges

¹⁹ Koehler, *Poetry of Attention*. On attention in the eighteenth century, see also Hagner, “Toward a History of Attention in Culture and Science.”

²⁰ Dames, *Physiology of the Novel*, 6.

²¹ Dames, *Physiology of the Novel*, 7.

²² Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*, 4.

²³ Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*, 9.

²⁴ Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*, 48.

this tenacious historical narrative by arguing that the association of modernity and distraction was itself a by-product of an expanding discursive field that aimed at constructing attentive subjects.

Crary rightly questions the simplistic opposition of premodern contemplation and modern distraction, but his insistence on the discontinuity of the modern and premodern recapitulates the thesis of the premodern as the site of absorbed contemplation, where subjects are undisturbed by the distraction of theoretical reflection on their attentiveness. He claims that, prior to the nineteenth century, “[e]ven when attention was an object of philosophical reflection, it was a marginal, at best secondary problem within explanations of mind and consciousness that either did not constitutively depend on it or in which it was one of a constellation of equally significant and mutually dependent faculties.”²⁵ This dissertation will argue that attention played a more significant role in medieval thought than has been assumed by many scholars. We will see medieval thinkers grapple with several of the questions identified by Crary as central to modern investigations of attention—to what extent is attention voluntary or involuntary? How many objects can we attend to at once? How does selective attention work? Treating attention and distraction as essentially modern problems risks eliding the theological heritage of these concepts. The philosopher Paul North argues that secular theories of distraction, including ADD, must take into account “theological, affective, and political origins . . . in all their complex historicity.”²⁶ My dissertation contributes to the ongoing attempt to historicize attention by focusing on the Middle Ages, a period that has so far been largely overlooked, despite the fact that it is the site of important innovations and conceptual shifts, many of which are provoked by theological considerations and problems.

There have been a few historical studies of attention that address the medieval period. Ciaran Mc Mahon’s doctoral thesis traces the development of the concept of attention from the third century

²⁵ Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*, 17-18.

²⁶ North continues: “What’s more, and more unsettling, to a clear division between religious and nonreligious spheres, a secular notion of distraction-dispersal cannot remain deaf to the Christian spirit in which *saeculum* itself is said. A diversion from the way and the truth is already at work in the concept of secularity. ‘Secular distraction’ is, in other words, a pleonasm.” *Problem of Distraction*, 55. Cf. Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*, 50n112.

BCE through the seventeenth century.²⁷ He examines dozens of passages from a wide variety of authors (writing in Greek, Latin, and English) and attempts to demonstrate how their understanding of attention was conditioned by the author's "psychosocial environment" and reading practices. Mc Mahon's explications of these passages are often perceptive, but the wider conclusions are not always convincing due in part to the fact that the passages frequently lack adequate contextualization. The limitations of this method are ramified by the methodological decision to frame the study as a "single-word" history that focuses exclusively on the word *attentio* (and its Greek and English cognates *prosoche* and "attention" respectively), despite the fact that many of the authors surveyed also use *intentio* to signify "attention," at times interchangeably with *attentio*. Peter von Moos also takes a rather broad geographic and temporal scope in his survey of the topic.²⁸ His useful article identifies some of the roles played by attention within the religious, ethical, and political spheres of the Middle Ages.²⁹

One of the areas of research that has prompted close engagement with questions of attention has been the history of reading. Scholars such as Brian Stock and Mary Carruthers have examined how medieval techniques of reading, such as *lectio divina*, require and cultivate certain forms of attention.³⁰ For instance, Stock argues that *lectio divina* differs from ordinary reading in that it demands a centripetal, nonintermittent attentiveness.³¹ Carruthers is one of the few literary scholars to examine in any detail the complexities of the concept of *intentio*, including its sense of "attention."³² She has argued that a clearer understanding of medieval theories of attention can illuminate our reading of literary texts.³³ This dissertation is particularly indebted to Carruthers' work.

²⁷ Mc Mahon, "The Prehistory of the Concept of 'Attention.'"

²⁸ Von Moos, "Attentio est quaedam sollicitudo." Overviews of the history of attention that touch upon the Middle Ages in less detail include Hatfield, "Attention in Early Scientific Psychology"; Neumann, "Aufmerksamkeit."

²⁹ Von Moos, "Attentio est quaedam sollicitudo," 98.

³⁰ See especially Stock, *Augustine the Reader*; Stock, *After Augustine*; Stock, *Augustine's Inner Dialogue*; Stock, *Ethics through Literature*; Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*; Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought*; Carruthers, "Virtue, Intention and the Mind's Eye"; Carruthers, "Meditations on the 'Historical Present.'" See also Saenger, "Books of Hours and the Reading Habits"; Zieman, *Singing the New Song*.

³¹ Stock, *Ethics through Literature*, 68.

³² See also Myles, *Chaucerian Realism*.

³³ See, for instance, "Virtue, Intention and the Mind's Eye."

Literary scholars have become increasingly interested in how medieval texts represent the process of perception, especially sight. Scholars such as Sarah Stanbury and Suzanne Akbari have done much to expand our understanding of how literary texts engaged with medieval theories of perception.³⁴ My dissertation builds upon this work, but shifts the emphasis: I focus on the capacity that, according to medieval thinkers, makes perception possible in the first place. Although medieval texts often figure attention in visual terms—one of the most common metaphors for attention was “the eye of the mind” (*oculis mentis*)—the texts under study here also explore attention through other modalities of sense, namely touch and taste.³⁵ In medieval theories of perception such as the one developed by Augustine, attention acts as the interface between the mind and the body.

In the chapters that follow, I bring medieval texts into dialogue with contemporary phenomenology, as well as other complementary discourses, such as cognitive science. Phenomenologists such as Husserl offer nuanced accounts of attention that intersect productively with the theories of their medieval predecessors. The fruitfulness of this transhistorical dialogue is enhanced by the fact that phenomenology is indebted to medieval thought in foundational ways. Husserl’s theory of intentionality was heavily influenced by the work of his teacher Franz Brentano, who had adapted the concept of *intentio* from the scholastics to describe how the mind aims at “objects” in perception and thought.³⁶ I examine phenomenology’s medieval inheritance more fully in chapter 3. That contemporary theories of perception including phenomenology can help to recover experiences of perception in earlier historical periods is an axiom of what Bruce Smith has termed “historical phenomenology.” I share Smith’s goal of “reconstruct[ing] bodily

³⁴ Stanbury, *Visual Object of Desire*; Akbari, *Seeing through the Veil*. See also Collette, *Species, Phantasms, and Images*; Stewart, *Arrow of Love*; Gayk, *Image, Text, and Religious Reform*.

³⁵ Cary points out how attention should not be limited to its visual manifestations: “Attention, as a constellation of texts and practices, is much more than a question of the gaze, of looking, of the subject only as spectator... In recent years, within the expanding study of visuality, vision has too often been posed as an autonomous and self-justifying problem... At the same time ‘visuality’ can easily veer into a model of perception and subjectivity that is cut off from richer and more historically determined notions of ‘embodiment,’ in which an embodied subject is both the location of operations of power and the potential for resistance.” *Suspensions of Perception*, 2-3.

³⁶ In an often-quoted passage, Brentano writes: “Every mental phenomenon is characterized by what the scholastics of the Middle Ages called the intentional (or mental) inexistence of an object, what we might call, though not wholly unambiguously, reference to a content, direction upon an object (which is not to be understood here as meaning a thing), or immanent objectivity.” *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint* 68. On premodern concepts of intentionality and their relation to phenomenology, see Myles, *Chaucerian Realism*, 33-53.

experience in the past on historically informed terms.”³⁷ While most of the work done under the aegis of historical phenomenology has been limited to the early modern period, scholars such as D. Vance Smith and Allan Mitchell have demonstrated how engaging with the phenomenological tradition can open up new vantage points of medieval texts.³⁸

The Middle English texts I examine here were written during a time when the role of attention in cognition was being hashed out—it is still being hashed out—and they were written in a language that by virtue of its vernacularity foregrounded questions about the distractability of its readers. These texts are deeply concerned with the ethics of attention, the stakes of looking in the right direction for the right length of time or of tasting something or someone with a sensitive enough palate. They are not content simply to frame attention as good and distraction as bad; they trouble the very distinction by accounting for the exigencies of embodied life.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1 examines a series of moments of distraction from Augustine’s works. In *Confessions*, Augustine tries to give an account of how his attention regularly gets caught by ordinary, seemingly insignificant things such as a dog chasing a rabbit. His examples are quotidian, but that is what makes them all the more disturbing and impenetrable. I consider how these descriptions accord with and complicate the theories of attention developed in *De Trinitate*. There Augustine insists on the active nature of attention. As evidence of the power of selective attention, he describes scenarios in which a person prescind entirely from the present and the world of sense. I unpack the phenomenological significance of these examples. Returning to the case of the small animals, I suggest that some of the obscurity surrounding the ease with which the mind averts from its path can be explained by reference to Augustine’s notion of habit.

³⁷ Smith, “Mona Lisa Takes a Mountain Hike,” 250. See also Smith, *Phenomenal Shakespeare*. I also share Smith’s view that bodily experience is disclosed through language: “We can insist on the body, even when the evidence at hand is not visual but linguistic.” *Phenomenal Shakespeare*, 26.

³⁸ Smith, *Book of the Incipit*; Mitchell, *Ethics and Eventfulness*. Within medieval studies, there has also been recent interest in speculative realism and object oriented ontologies—strains of thought with close ties to phenomenology. See, for instance, Joy et al., ed., *Speculative Medievalisms*.

Chapter 2 argues that the history of attention is closely bound up with the history of prayer. It examines how medieval accounts of prayer framed the relationship between attention and distraction. How did medieval thinkers reconcile the biblical injunction to pray without ceasing with the constant presence of distraction in their lives? I argue that Aquinas introduces an important distinction between *intentio* and *attentio*, as well as an influential taxonomy of attention. I then look at how Walter Hilton adapted and reworked the *attentio-intentio* distinction. Hilton argues more forcefully than Aquinas that prayer does not need to be attentive to be efficacious; as long as the intention motivating the prayer remains unbroken, the prayer is meritorious. One of the consequences of Aquinas and Hilton drawing a distinction between *attentio* and *intentio* was a clearer separation between attention and the will. We can see this in how Hilton’s vocabulary anticipates the modern distinction between “intention” and “attention.”

In my third chapter, I discuss the late fourteenth-century vernacular theologian Julian of Norwich’s *Revelation of Love*. The chapter argues that understanding the key role that attention plays in Julian’s thought shines light on some of the most vexing questions that confront readers of her text, including her idiosyncratic adaptation of Augustine’s categories of bodily and spiritual sight. *A Revelation of Love* describes how Julian’s attention is turned and sustained, as well as distracted, by the phenomena that arise through the course of her revelations. In her reflections, she articulates both the anticipatory and retentive modalities of attention. To describe the latter, she employs the term “beholding,” a word that points to the embeddedness of sight and touch. She also acknowledges the limits of attention, particularly how pain can frustrate attempts to “pass over” the body. One of the central claims of the chapter is that Julian’s attention to her own attentiveness anticipates the method and insights of contemporary phenomenology. *A Revelation of Love* thus not only engages with late medieval philosophical and theological debates, but it can also help to historicize our understanding of both attention and phenomenology.

In Chapter 4, I examine the role that attention plays in discernment and judgment through an analysis of Thomas Hoccleve’s *Series*. Hoccleve describes his recovery from a period of mental illness and laments the fact that his peers continue to suspect that he is still mad. He argues that they are the distracted ones. In order to prove his claim, he asks his peers—and his readers—to “taaste” him, a word that signifies both testing and tasting in Middle English. The full

significance of Hoccleve's "taste" has not yet been articulated. Drawing on medieval discourses of discernment and judgment, as well as debates about heresy, I argue that Hoccleve frames "taasting" as a highly experiential way of knowing, which he opposes to "imagining," the more speculative form of knowing that happens from a distance. For Hoccleve, discernment must be predicated upon acts of careful attention. Hoccleve's insistence on being "taasted" by his peers forces us to reconsider the popular reading of Hoccleve as a skeptic in the tradition of his literary predecessor Chaucer.

Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* is the subject of my final chapter. Whereas the previous chapters tended to frame attention as operating on a conversion-aversion model, *Troilus* investigates the phenomenological structure of diversion. I argue that Chaucer uses the digressions of Book II to interrogate the medieval tradition of ascribing diversion as remedy for pathological states of disturbed attention such as melancholy and lovesickness. Pandarus embodies an instrumental view of diversion that has little room for digressive events that cannot clearly connected back to a main narrative. Criseyde's sojourn in the garden, on the other hand, reveals the way in which aleatory diversions can shift the co-ordinates of self. I conclude by considering how the poem conceives of itself as a diversion that seeks to turn the attention of its audience in both determined and undetermined directions.

Chapter 1

The Allure of Small Animals: Experiencing Distraction in Augustine

In an essay that opens a recent collection of papers on the subject of “visual attention,” Gary Hatfield surveys various early representations of attention. Hatfield groups his sources under three rubrics: phenomenological descriptions, theoretical analyses, and empirical investigations. According to Hatfield, attention received scattered, “hit-and-miss” theoretical analysis from antiquity to the seventeenth century, and it was only with the development of psychology as an independent science that systematic theoretical accounts of attention emerged.¹ When it comes to phenomenological descriptions, the field is more promising for the pre-eighteenth-century historian. Building on the research of Odmarr Neumann, Hatfield attempts to identify the first thinker to describe each of several aspects generally thought to constitute the phenomenal manifestation of attention.² One of the aspects he lists is involuntary shifting. Within the fields of psychology and cognitive science, researchers make a distinction between the endogenous and exogenous orienting of attention.³ The former describes the active process of selecting a certain object of focus from a range of possible objects, while the latter refers to the way in which external stimuli can capture the attention involuntarily. In his influential and frequently cited 1890 work, *Principles of Psychology*, William James uses the example of a dinner party to illustrate what he calls the voluntary orienting of attention: at the party we might find ourselves in conversation with a guest who talks in a low voice about tedious subjects, and, even though the other guests are talking loudly about more interesting things, we can manage to focus on our interlocutor’s words amid the stream of other noise.⁴ Yet if there is a sudden loud noise, we will

¹ Hatfield, “Attention in Early Scientific Psychology,” 15.

² Neumann, “Aufmerksamkeit.”

³ There has been much research devoted to the question of how endogenous and exogenous attention interact. It is generally thought that they rely on distinct, but overlapping, neural processes. See Nobre and Kastner, *The Oxford Handbook of Attention*.

⁴ James, *Principles of Psychology*, Vol. 1, 420.

involuntarily break away from the conversation. James gives a list of objects that tend to attract our attention: “strange things, moving things, wild animals, bright things, pretty things, metallic things, words, blows, blood, etc., etc., etc.”⁵ While he is often credited with drawing the distinction between voluntary and involuntary attention, according to Hatfield, James is not the first thinker to describe how objects pull at our attention. That innovation belongs to Augustine, who, in Book X of *Confessions*, laments how he is besieged by distraction, and, as an example, recounts a hypothetical scene in which his attention is lured by “moving things” and “wild animals,” specifically a dog chasing a rabbit and a spider and lizard catching flies. This chapter considers the implications of Hatfield’s claim. It examines how Augustine tries to make sense of attention by analyzing how his attention turns—or is turned—toward these creatures.

Hannah Arendt has observed that Augustine’s discussions of the will in *Confessions* “are almost entirely non-argumentative and rich in what we today would call ‘phenomenological descriptions.’”⁶ Influenced in part by her teacher Heidegger, who had argued that *Confessions* adumbrates a pre-theoretical concern with the concrete experience of life, Arendt’s doctoral thesis was a phenomenologically-inflected investigation of desire in Augustine.⁷ She would later return to Augustine in her study of the will, which forms the second part of *The Life of the Mind*, a text that I draw on in the course of this chapter. Arendt’s observation is particularly true of the distracting-animal passage, in which he describes in detail how the animals present themselves to him and how he turns toward them. He attempts to describe his experience of distraction. This is not an easy task. Paul North has recently argued that strictly speaking there can be no experience of distraction: “Suspending thought, I never catch distraction in the act.” We never say, “I am distracted,” only, “I *was* distracted.” For North, the belatedness of distraction calls into question the “I” who is said to experience it: “I experience my own distraction belatedly, and because of the inability to have forethought with regard to it, I am technically innocent of it.”⁸ North’s

⁵ James, *Principles of Psychology*, 417.

⁶ Arendt, *Willing*, 93.

⁷ Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*. On Heidegger and Augustine, see Heidegger, *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*. See also DePaulo, ed., *The Influence of Augustine on Heidegger*.

⁸ North, *The Problem of Distraction*, 46-7. North offers a provocative reading of the distracting-animal passage. He contends that “[i]n the postclassical world, the question of distraction must be asked in the terms this passage sets out” (60). North’s readiness to see the passage as anticipating the modern problematic of distraction leads him to

provocative statement raises a number of issues that Augustine grapples with in the animal passage: the belatedness of distraction, the relation between intention and attention, the question of innocence and guilt.

This chapter ranges beyond *Confessions* to examine other accounts of distraction, including those found in texts that we might classify as more theoretical or argumentative. Arendt's opposition between phenomenological description and argumentation—like Hatfield's similar distinction—does a bit of a disservice to Augustine whose methodology is characterized by the productive interweaving of description grounded in his own lived experience and more theoretical reflection. Besides the distraction effected by the lure of external objects, there is another kind of distraction that Augustine explores at length: what happens when a person becomes so focused on her thoughts and memories that she becomes unaware of her surroundings. Perhaps a better word for this state would be “inattention.” But it is inattention precipitated by the concentration of attention elsewhere. We find descriptions of this phenomenon in a number of Augustine's texts. While various scholars have discussed some of these passages, there has been no sustained examination of what Augustine's treatment of this phenomenon reveals about his understanding of how attention works.

In general, despite Augustine's central role in the history of attention and the central role of attention in his thought, there have been relatively few studies of Augustine that focus on attention in any detail, and fewer still that treat distraction as a phenomenological, and not just a moral, problem. Gerard O'Daly and Ludger Hölscher provide useful, if not extensive, commentary in their overviews of Augustine's theories of cognition.⁹ Brian Stock, Victor Caston, and Charles Brittain address issues touching upon attention as part of their investigations

misrepresent certain aspects of the passage, however. For instance, he argues that it “recalls in advance” the three forms of distraction possible in modernity: the mind can either stay on track, deviate, or experience “a dim-witted itinerancy, in which the context for sin has not yet been imposed” (62). For Augustine, this third option, mental vacancy, is a consequence of his turn toward the animals; it is not prior to his deviation but the dissipating effect of keeping his attention focused on them when he should not.

⁹ O'Daly, *Augustine's Philosophy of Mind*; Hölscher, *The Reality of the Mind*.

into other related questions.¹⁰ Perhaps the most comprehensive treatment is Deborah Brown's comparative study of Augustine and Descartes.¹¹ Brown argues that Augustine maintains a theory of attention as endogenously oriented, but she considers briefly how his discussion of distraction seems to complicate this model. Building on Brown's research, my chapter examines more fully Augustine's "mysterious" and "puzzling" accounts of distraction, including the animal passage in *Confessions*, which Brown does not mention.¹² It argues that Augustine experiences distraction as a kind of conversion, a turning away that is a simultaneous turning toward. Distraction is not framed as the opposite of attentiveness, as it is in much contemporary discourse; rather, it consists of attention misdirected at the wrong kinds of objects. This turning is motivated by the will, but, as we will see, distraction seems to take place in the space between the endogenous and the exogenous and the voluntary and the involuntary. If James' experience of attention is that "everyone knows what it is," Augustine's is closer to his famous comment about the nature of time, to which attention is closely related: "Provided that no one asks me, I know. If I want to explain it to an inquirer, I do not know."¹³

Confessions is a book of conversions. There is of course Augustine's eventual conversion to Christianity, the centerpiece of the book, but the narrative also contains less obvious moments of conversion. Augustine's conversions, whether major or minor, involve the reorientation of his attention. As Philip Cary observes, "the language of conversion (Latin *conversio*, Greek *epistrophē*) is based on verbs that mean 'to turn one's attention.'"¹⁴ In Book X, Augustine laments the ease with which he is daily converted by objects as he travels through a forest filled with snares and dangers (*immensa silva plena insidiarum et periculorum*).¹⁵ The forest is not only a metaphor for distraction, it is the site of Augustine's paradigmatic example of distraction.

¹⁰ Stock, *Augustine's Inner Dialogue*; Stock, *Augustine the Reader*; Caston, "Augustine and the Greeks on Intentionality"; Brittain, "Attention Deficit in Plotinus and Augustine."

¹¹ Brown, "Augustine and Descartes."

¹² Brown, "Augustine and Descartes," 164.

¹³ Augustine, *Confessions*, 11.14.17. "Quid est ergo tempus? Si nemo ex me quaerat, scio; si quaerenti explicare velim, nescio." English translations are from Augustine, *Saint Augustine's Confessions*, trans. Chadwick, unless noted.

¹⁴ Cary, *Augustine's Invention of the Inner Self*, 63.

¹⁵ Augustine, *Confessions*, 10.35.36.

He imagines riding his horse in the countryside and suddenly having his attention caught by a dog chasing a rabbit:

I now do not watch a dog chasing a rabbit when this is happening at the circus. But if by chance I am passing when coursing occurs in the countryside, it distracts [*avertit*] me perhaps indeed from thinking out some weighty matter. The hunt turns [*convertit*] me to an interest in the sport, not enough to lead me to alter the direction of the beast I am riding, but shifting the inclination of my heart. Unless you had proved to me my infirmity and quickly admonished me either to take the sight as the start for some reflection enabling me to rise up to you or wholly to scorn and pass the matter by, I would be watching like an empty-headed fool [*vanus hebesco*].¹⁶

Augustine is turned—converted—away from his thoughts and toward the creatures that race unexpectedly into view. This conversion is not a complete turn—he does not alter the direction of his horse—but the reorientation disturbs him. He feels powerless to direct his gaze away from the spectacle. Watching empties him out, consigns him to a state of hebetude, as weighty thoughts turn into empty thoughts. Only God, he insists, can redirect his attention. Augustine continues with another example:

When I am sitting at home, a lizard catching flies or a spider entrapping them as they rush into its web often fascinates me [*intentum facit*]. The problem is not made any different by the fact that the animals are small. The sight leads me on to praise you, the marvelous Creator and orderer of all things; but that was not how my attention first began. It is one thing to rise rapidly, another thing not to fall. My life is full of such lapses, and my one hope is in your great mercy.¹⁷

¹⁶ Augustine, *Confessions*, 10.35.57. “Canem currentem post leporem iam non specto cum in circo fit; at vero in agro, si casu transeam, avertit me fortassis et ab aliqua magna cogitatione atque ad se convertit illa venatio, non deviare cogens corpore iumenti sed cordis inclinatione, et nisi iam mihi demonstrata infirmitate mea cito admoneas aut ex ipsa visione per aliquam considerationem in te adsurgere aut totum contemnere atque transire, vanus hebesco.”

¹⁷ Augustine, *Confessions*, 10.35.57. “Quid cum me domi sedentem stelio muscas captans vel aranea retibus suis inruentes implicans saepe intentum facit? Num quia parva sunt animalia, ideo non res eadem geritur? Pergo inde ad laudandum te, creatorem mirificum atque ordinatorem rerum omnium, sed non inde esse intentus incipio. Aliud est cito surgere, aliud est non cadere. Et talibus vita mea plena est, et una spes mea magna valde misericordia tua.”

Like the flies caught in the spider's web, his attention is riveted. While the sight eventually leads Augustine to praise God—a reorientation foreclosed in the previous example—he condemns himself for the initial turn, for being distracted in the first place: “It is one thing to rise rapidly, another thing not to fall.” His lapses in attention are *lapsus*, falls. Augustine's self-condemnation begs the question: is it possible to avoid falling? If so, how? In order to answer these questions, it is helpful to look at moments in Augustine's writings where the mind turns inward, entirely preoccupied, undistracted by sense. The circumstances of these involutions range from the quotidian—musing over a philosophical problem at the breakfast table—to the sublime—an ecstatic vision of eternity. What each of these cases demonstrate is the capacity of attention to avert from the world of sense and instead come to occupy an “elsewhere.”

The Soul's Intensities

In Jacobus de Voragine's *Golden Legend*, the popular medieval compendium of saints' lives, Bernard of Clairvaux is celebrated for his fixity of attention. He was so absorbed in spiritual matters that he would rarely use his bodily senses. For instance, he spent a year living in the novices' cell and never noticed its vaulted ceiling. Upon arriving at the Grande Chartreuse for a visit, Bernard is asked about the fine workmanship of the saddle on which he arrived, workmanship that does not befit a person vowed to poverty. Taken aback, Bernard asks which saddle they are referring to. Apparently, he took no notice of it during his journey. Nor did he notice the lake he passed beside: “He rode along the Lake of Lausanne for a whole day without even seeing the lake, or not seeing that he saw it (*non vidit aut se videre non vidit*).”¹⁸ How does Bernard see without seeing? And how does seeing differ from seeing without seeing? Augustine was deeply interested in these questions. His theory of cognition accounts for the lived experience of being lost in thought and not noticing your surroundings, a state of being with which Augustine admits he was quite familiar. Augustine points to experiences of preoccupation as evidence of the active nature of perception, of the role that *intentio* plays as the interface of body and soul.

¹⁸ Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda Aurea*, 533. “Juxta lacum Lausannensem totius diei itinere pergens penitus eum non vidit aut se videre non vidit.” English translations are from Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, trans. Ryan.

At the heart of Augustine's anthropology is the belief that a person consists of a body and a soul.¹⁹ The soul is usually referred to as *animus* or *anima* (the latter is also used to refer to the souls of non-rational animals). The "best part" of the human soul is the mind (*mens, ratio*, sometimes *animus*).²⁰ Most fundamentally, the soul is the animating principle of the body; it is what holds the body together, nourishes the body, and provides the impetus for movement. Although the way that he frames the relation between body and soul shifts over time—gradually abandoning a strict Platonic dualism that sees the body as the servant of the soul—he maintains throughout his work the clear separation and superiority of soul over body. He adduces various arguments and demonstrations to prove the soul's superiority, but one line of argument is particularly interesting for our purposes here. In *De Genesi ad litteram*, Augustine submits the following evidence:

The difference is evident from the fact that the soul is frequently concentrated in thought and turns [*avertit*] itself away from everything, so that it is ignorant of many things which are present before the eyes when they are wide open and able to see. And if a person is intensely preoccupied [*major intentio est*] with his thoughts while walking, he will suddenly stop and withdraw the command of the will which had set his feet in motion. On the other hand, if his concentration is not intense enough to bring him to a halt but is sufficient to keep him from attending to the motion of his body as brought to him in a message from the central part of the brain, he sometimes forgets where he came from and where he is going, and without realizing it he passes by the villa for which he was heading, all this time enjoying health of body while his soul is off somewhere else.²¹

¹⁹ On the body-soul relation in Augustine, see O'Daly, *Augustine's Philosophy of Mind*, 7-75; Nightingale, *Once Out of Nature*; Hölscher, *The Reality of the Mind*; Rist, *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized*, 92-147; Byers, "Augustine and the Philosophers," 176-80.

²⁰ O'Daly, *Augustine's Philosophy of Mind*, 7.

²¹ Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram*, 7.20.26. "Namque aliud esse ipsam, aliud haec ejus corporalia ministeria, vel vasa, vel organa, vel si quid aptius dici possunt, hinc evidenter elucet, quod plerumque se vehementi cogitationis intentione avertit ab omnibus, ut prae oculis patentibus recteque valentibus multa posita nesciat; et si major intentio est, dum ambulabat, repente subsistat, avertens utique imperandi nutum a ministerio motionis qua pedes agebantur: si autem non tanta est cogitationis intentio, ut figat ambulantem loco, sed tamen tanta est ut partem illam cerebri mediam nuntiantem corporis motus non vacet advertere; obliviscitur aliquando et unde veniat, et quo eat, et transit imprudens villam quo tendebat, natura sui corporis sana, sed sua in aliud advocata." English translations are from Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, trans. Hammond.

Even if the body is perfectly healthy, acts of perception, movement, and memory can be impeded when the soul's *intentio* is involved in other processes or directed at other objects. Deriving from the verb *intendere*, meaning to aim at or stretch, *intentio* encompasses a variety of meanings in Augustine's writings, including attention, concentration, and tension.²² The term is closely associated, and often identified, with the will. Augustine argues that *intentio* is what animates the body: "For I think that our body is not animated by the soul in any other way than through the will of an agent [*nisi intentione facientis*]."²³ *Intentio* is spread throughout the body in different degrees of tension, "more intensely in one place and less in another."²⁴ Those who are preoccupied in thought experience reduced tension in other areas of the soul's operation.

Augustine's description of preoccupation gives an indication of how perception, and cognition generally, is an active process that requires the intervention of the will.²⁵ Augustine does not deny that the body undergoes changes when encountering sensory stimuli, but he wants to locate the catalyst for perception on the level of the soul. In his early text *De Musica*, Augustine introduces the cognate *attentio* to describe the soul's directedness to bodily reactions. The soul perceives by attending to bodily disturbances: "the soul, when it perceives in the body, is not in any way acted upon by it but acts more attentively [*adtentius*] in the reactions of the body, and that these activities, be they easy because of a convenience or difficult because of an

²² Stock, *Augustine's Inner Dialogue*, 60n191; O'Daly, *Augustine's Philosophy of Mind*, 43-4.

²³ Augustine, *De Musica*, 6.5.9. "Ego enim ab anima animari hoc non puto corpus nisi intentione facientis." English translations are from Augustine, *De Musica*, ed. and trans. Jacobsson. O'Daly notes that the concept of *intentio* as a tension animating the body has a precursor in the Stoic idea of the tensed soul (*tonos*), but, as he points out, "*tonos* does not appear to indicate the volitional energy which results in action." *Augustine's Philosophy of Mind*, 44-5.

²⁴ Augustine, *Epistola* 166, 2.4. "Per totum quippe corpus quod animat, non locali diffusionem, sed quadam vitali intentione porrigitur: nam per omnes ejus particulas tota simul adest, nec minor in minoribus, et in majoribus major; sed alicubi intentius, alicubi remissius, et in omnibus tota, et in singulis tota est."

²⁵ As Deborah Brown points out, "Augustine's language suggests to a modern ear that every act of sensing is an act of will, but we need to be careful about what we read into this discussion. It is highly contentious whether Augustine's will is anything like that which later medievals (e.g. Anselm) would recognise. If nothing else, it is a broader concept which incorporates a range of intentional, cognitive or emotional attitudes. Augustine's use of 'voluntas' is closer to what contemporary psychologists refer to as the 'voluntary' orienting of attention, and what he is really trying to articulate is a theory of how attention is endogenously oriented." "Augustine and Descartes," 161.

inconvenience, are not hidden to it, and this whole process is called ‘perceiving.’²⁶ When the body is most disturbed, when it is most affected by otherness (*alteritate*), it is most attentive.²⁷ Consequently, the soul attends closely to a body suffering from illness and disease.²⁸ (Chapter 3 will explore more fully the connection between pain and attention). If *attentio* is the soul’s response to bodily disturbance, it follows that *attentio* decreases in proportion to the body’s degree of stability and health. According to Augustine, when the soul is turned toward God, the body is most at ease and *attentio* is no longer necessary: “For the soul has no need of our attention [*attentione*], not because it is in no way active in the body at this moment, but because there is no easier activity.”²⁹ The soul struggles to achieve such security and ease, accustomed as it is to turning away from God, diverting its attention (*intentionem*) from contemplation to bodily cares.³⁰ The soul that is occupied with excessive cares (*curae*) experiences *curiositas*, a term which Augustine introduces here and continues to use throughout his work.³¹

In the sophisticated triadic account of perception developed in *De Trinitate*, Augustine no longer uses *attentio* to denote the soul’s attention to bodily reactions, but instead uses *intentio* to refer to the soul’s directedness in general, whether it is directed at the bodily reactions, mental images, or God. *Intentio* acts as the crucial mediating force that makes cognition possible. Taking sight as

²⁶ Augustine, *De Musica*, 6.5.10. “Et ne longum faciam, uidetur mihi anima, cum sentit in corpore, non ab illo aliquid pati sed in eius passionibus adtentius agere, et has actiones, siue faciles propter conuenientiam, siue difficiles propter inconuenientiam, non eam latere, et hoc totum est, quod sentire dicitur.”

²⁷ Augustine, *De Musica*, 6.5.10.

²⁸ Augustine, *De Musica*, 6.5.9.

²⁹ Augustine, *De Musica*, 6.5.13. “Nulla quippe attentione nostra opus habet, non quia nihil tunc agit anima in corpore, sed quia nihil facilius agit.” Robert J. O’Connell has argued that Augustine’s discussion of the body and soul in *De Musica* is strongly influenced by the Plotinian doctrine of the fallen soul. Plotinus argued that the soul retains some contact with the intelligible order even after falling into the world of the sensible; the reascent of the soul to a state of peace can only be achieved through contemplation. O’Connell argues that this section of *De Musica* “embodies among other features Plotinus’ contention that bodily consciousness becomes attenuated in the very measure that the contemplative soul recovers its ‘healthy’ relationship with the entire sensible order, a relationship enjoyed in its former, unfallen state. So too, absorbed in contemplation, the soul’s ‘active’ command of the body and of the bodily universe does not require its attention but issues as undistracting overflow, the spontaneous byproduct of its contemplation. The reader intent on what he is reading does not attend to his act of reading; when walking, steeped in thought, we lose almost entirely our consciousness of walking.” O’Connell, *Art and the Christian Intelligence*, 73-4. See also O’Connell, *St. Augustine’s Early Theory of Man*, 166-8.

³⁰ Augustine, *De Musica*, 6.13.39.

³¹ Augustine, *De Musica*, 6.13.39. On *curiositas* in Augustine’s early works, see Torchia, “*Curiositas* in the Early Philosophical Writings of Saint Augustine.”

the paradigmatic sense, Augustine lists the three things that constitute seeing: first, the object which is seen; second, the act of seeing itself; and third, “the power that fixes the sense of sight on the object that is seen as long as it is seen, namely, the attention of the mind [*animi intentio*].”³² Identified with the will, *intentio* is proper to the soul alone, unlike the other two. As such, the desire to sense can “neither perish nor be diminished”; for instance, even if a person is struck with blindness and therefore loses both the visible object and the act of seeing, he continues to desire to see.³³ The three components of perception correspond to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Properly speaking, the visible object can only be considered a “quasi-parent” of the act of seeing because even though it precedes and may even be said to “beget” the act of seeing, it cannot produce vision by itself; in the words of Victor Caston, “the father, in such cases, cannot go it alone.”³⁴ To be seen, the object requires the intervention of the sensing subject, whose faculty of sight will be impressed by the form of the object. But vision is completed only when *intentio* conjoins the visible object and the act of seeing. As Arendt puts it, “the Will, by virtue of *attention*, first unites our sense organs with the real world in a meaningful way, and then drags, as it were, this outside world into ourselves and prepares it for further mental operations.”³⁵ *Intentio* qua attention performs two main operations: it turns the sense toward the object and keeps the sense focused on it.³⁶ It thus both initiates and completes the act of perceiving.

In addition to directing the bodily eyes, *intentio* also moves the mind’s eye (described variously as *oculus mentis*, *acies cordis* and *animi acies*). In *Confessions*, Augustine gives an account of how recollection involves zeroing in on the desired memory-image. As the mind tries to recollect, it must turn away the random memories that rush forth, clamouring for attention: “Some memories pour out to crowd the mind [*catervatim se proruunt*] and, when one is searching for something quite different, leap forward into the centre as if saying, ‘Surely we are

³² Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 11.2.2.

³³ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 11.2.2.

³⁴ Caston, “Augustine and the Greeks on Intentionality,” 35.

³⁵ Arendt, *Willing*, 100.

³⁶ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 11.2.5.

what you want?”³⁷ The image of memories buzzing around and being swatted away by the hand of the heart (*manu cordis*) anticipates Augustine’s description of visual distractions that rush in like flies.³⁸ Eventually, the unwanted memories disperse and the sought-after memory emerges. Augustine’s account of recollection and perception foreground the importance of attention. Without attention clearing a path, the mind is swarmed by memories and thoughts. And, if the inner inhabitant is not attending through the windows of the body, they are open in vain.³⁹

The Elsewhere of Thought

In the description of preoccupation in *De Genesi ad litteram*, Augustine claims that the thinking soul is “off somewhere else.” Where is this “somewhere else?” Where does the soul go when it is caught up in thought? Arendt asks this question in her attempt to identify and localize what she calls the thinking ego. For her, the question is exemplified by the figure of Socrates, who was renowned for his habit of stopping suddenly and standing absolutely still, “deaf to all entreaties,” while “turning his mind to himself.”⁴⁰ Arendt concludes that the elsewhere of thought is really a nowhere: “The thinking ego, moving among universals, among invisible essences, is, strictly speaking, nowhere; it is homeless in an emphatic sense.”⁴¹ Invoking Augustine’s theory of memory, Arendt pivots away from this conclusion and reconsiders the question guiding her inquiry: perhaps instead of trying to localize the thinking ego in space, we should think of it in terms of time. Thinking takes place in time; mental representations, by which the absent is made present, are ordered by time into sequences or “thought-trains.” Thought proceeds by translating experience into “a succession of soundless words,” a process which “de-sense[s]” the original

³⁷ Augustine, *Confessions*, 10.8.12. “Ibi quando sum, posco ut proferatur quidquid volo, et quaedam statim prodeunt, quaedam requiruntur diutius et tamquam de abstrusioribus quibusdam receptaculis eruuntur, quaedam catervatim se prouunt et, dum aliud petitur et quaeritur, prosiliunt in medium quasi dicentia, “ne forte nos sumus?”

³⁸ Scholars have argued that the description of memories swarming about echoes Virgil’s description of bees in *Georgics* 4. See Hübner, “Die praetoria memoriae im zehnten Buch der *Confessiones*.”

³⁹ Augustine, *Sermo* 126, 2.3. “Dedit tibi Deus oculos in corpore, rationem in corde; excita rationem cordis, erige interiorem habitatorem interiorum oculorum tuorum, assumat fenestras suas, inspiciat creaturam Dei. Est enim aliquis intus qui per oculos videat. Nam quando aliquando in me cogitas averso interius habitatore, quae sunt ante oculos tuos non vides. Fenestrae enim frustra patent, quando qui per eas attendit absens est.”

⁴⁰ Arendt, *Thinking*, 197.

⁴¹ Arendt, *Thinking*, 199.

experience. Arendt then turns to a parable by Kafka that depicts a man struggling against two antagonists, one behind him and one in front of him, both of whom aid him in their fight against the other. The man dreams of one day jumping out of the fighting line and observing the conflict of his former antagonists from the vantage of spectator and judge. In Arendt's reading, the two antagonists represent past and future crashing into the present: "The present, in ordinary life the most futile and slippery of the tenses—when I say "now" and point to it, it is already gone—is no more than the clash of a past, which is no more, with a future, which is approaching and not yet there."⁴² Her gloss clearly owes much to Augustine's discussion of temporality in Book X of *Confessions*. According to Arendt, the man's dream of escaping this clash is nothing other than "the old dream Western metaphysics has dreamt from Parmenides to Hegel, of a timeless region, an eternal presence in complete quiet, lying beyond human clocks and calendars altogether, the region, precisely, of thought."⁴³ Augustine, we will see, shares in this dream too.

Augustine asks where thinking happens in a rather remarkable passage in *De Beata Vita*. He recounts a discussion that he had one day over breakfast with some relatives (including his mother Monica) and pupils (including a certain Trygetius). In the same way that their bodies are being fed by the breakfast, Augustine seeks to prepare a meal to nourish the souls of his interlocutors. He waits until they are attentive and then begins (*Quibus attentis, sic coepi*). He asks whether the soul can in fact be nourished, and, if so, how. Monica asserts that the soul is nourished by the understanding and knowledge of things (*intellectu rerum atque scientia*). Trygetius expresses some doubt about this proposition, which leads Monica to respond:

Did not you yourself today demonstrate from what and where the soul finds its nourishment? For, according to your own statement, you noticed only after a certain part of the breakfast which bowl we were using, since you had been thinking of some other things I do not know, although you helped yourself from that course and ate it. Where,

⁴² Arendt, *Thinking*, 205.

⁴³ Arendt critiques the metaphysical presumption implicit in Kafka's parable: "The trouble with Kafka's metaphor is that by jumping out of the fighting line 'he' jumps out of this world altogether and judges from outside though not necessarily from above." Instead of seeing thought as existing outside of the vector of the present, she would locate the thinking ego along a diagonal stretching toward, but never reaching, the infinite, and positioned equidistantly between past and future. It would occupy a space analogous to the "quiet in the center of a storm which, though totally unlike the storm, still belongs to it." *Thinking*, 207.

then, was your mind at the time when it did not pay attention [*non attendebat*] to what you were eating? From there, believe me, and by such meals is the soul nourished, that is, by those speculations and thoughts [*theoriis et cogitationibus*] by which it is able to gain knowledge.⁴⁴

We learn from Monica that Trygetius earlier confessed that, lost in thought, he had been paying no attention to his breakfast. His preoccupation is not as severe as the hypothetical person mentioned by Augustine who suddenly stops walking. As Monica points out, he has been using his hand to feed himself all the while. But, like that halting person, his mind is “off elsewhere.” Where was it? Nourishing itself, according to Monica. Rather than an indication of deviance, a slip to be corrected, Trygetius’ inattention to his breakfast (and presumably to his companions as well) is salutary. Monica does not specify what she means by *theoriis et cogitationibus*. She is likely assuming that Trygetius has been mulling over some philosophical problem posed by his teacher.⁴⁵ Indeed, Augustine goes on to explain how it is the liberal arts that fill up the soul. At this stage in his writings, Augustine saw the liberal arts as a propaedeutic to divine contemplation. According to John Kenney: “What the disciplines of the liberal arts offer is a capacity to move beyond sense experience and into the contemplation of eternal things.”⁴⁶ In his interval of preoccupation, Trygetius does indeed move beyond, or at least turns away from, sense experience. He momentarily pops out of the fighting line, in the language of Kafka’s parable. But the flight into the nowhere of thinking is only temporary. As Arendt explains, “time is the thinking ego’s greatest enemy because—by virtue of the mind’s incarnation in a body whose internal motions can never be immobilized—time inexorably and regularly interrupts the immobile quiet in which the mind is active without doing anything.”⁴⁷ Brian Stock points out how Trygetius’ moment of preoccupation is presumably preceded by an awareness of hunger

⁴⁴ Augustine, *De Beata Vita* 2.8. “De qua sententia cum Trygetius dubium se ostenderet: hodie, inquit illa, tu ipse nonne docuisti unde aut ubi anima pascatur? Nam post aliquantam prandii partem te dixisti non advertisse quo vasculo uteremur, quod alia nescio quae cogitasses, nec tamen ab ipsa ciborum parte abstinueras manus atque morsus. Ubi igitur erat animus tuus, quo tempore illud, te vescente, non attendebat; inde, mihi crede, et talibus epulis animus pascitur, id est theoriis et cogitationibus suis, si per eas aliquid percipere possit.” English translations are from Augustine, *The Happy Life*, trans. Schopp.

⁴⁵ Cf. Stock, *Augustine’s Inner Dialogue*, 98-99.

⁴⁶ Kenney, *Contemplation and Classical Christianity*, 71. The role of the liberal arts as preparation for contemplation diminishes in Augustine’s mature works.

⁴⁷ Arendt, *Thinking*, 206.

that intrudes upon his concentration.⁴⁸ The manner in which he satisfies his hunger is also significant. Augustine mentions off-handedly that they eat a light meal (*tenue prandium*) so as not to impede their capacity for thought (*ut ab eo nihil ingeniorum impediretur*).⁴⁹ The stomach must be carefully guarded and the appetite restrained precisely because the body can influence, even if only indirectly, the soul's readiness to turn away from sense experience.

There are other instances in Augustine's writings where the mind averts from the present in order to nourish itself. In *Confessions*, Augustine recounts how Ambrose's time was mostly taken up by the crowds of people who sought out his guidance. He only had a brief window of downtime, in which "he restored [*reficiebat*] either his body with necessary food or his mind by reading."⁵⁰ Augustine reiterates that reading is how Ambrose preferred to refresh his mind (*reparandae menti suae nanciscebatur*). People would come to observe Ambrose reading silently, but no one would dare to interrupt his attention (*intentio*). There was thus no way to discover what delicious joys he ruminated upon (*ruminaret*). Focused on the meaning of the text, Ambrose for his part remains oblivious to the visitors who come and go through his room. Although Ambrose does not turn away from the senses completely—his eyes scan the page, Augustine reports—his silent reading bypasses the tongue and it is the heart that perceives the meaning of the text directly (*cor intellectum rimabatur*). As we will see in Chapter 4, there is a well-established medieval tradition that holds that mental refreshment is effected by slackening or loosening one's attention. This is not the logic that Augustine uses to explain Ambrose's reading habits. Reading intently, Ambrose refreshes his mind through absorption, not diversion.⁵¹

Trygetius and Ambrose refresh their minds by turning away from the senses: Trygetius from the sight of his breakfast, Ambrose from the noise of words. These are not complete turns though. In the vision at Ostia, by contrast, Augustine experiences the complete withdrawal of sense. Unlike

⁴⁸ Stock, *Augustine's Inner Dialogue*, 98.

⁴⁹ The belief that excessive eating inhibited the functioning of the mind was accepted wisdom. See, for instance, Jerome's *Adversus Jovinianum*: "Adesse ergo debet ratio, ut tales ac tantas sumamus escas, quibus non oneretur corpus, nec libertas animae praegravetur" (2.10).

⁵⁰ Augustine, *Confessions*, 6.3.3. "Cum quibus quando non erat, quod perexiguum temporis erat, aut corpus reficiebat necessariis sustentaculis aut lectione animum."

⁵¹ For a discussion of the contemplative aspect of Ambrose's reading habits, see Stock, *Augustine the Reader*, 61-3.

Trygetius' and Ambrose' intervals, which are depicted as fundamentally private, the Ostia vision is shared by Augustine and Monica. Together they ascend through internal reflection into their own minds. They enter a region of inexhaustible abundance where they are nourished by the food (*pabulo*) of truth, where future and past do not exist.⁵² They are able to touch this truth "in some small degree by a moment of total concentration of heart" (*toto ictu cordis*). Eventually they return to "the noise of our human speech where a sentence has both a beginning and ending." They plunge back into time and sense.⁵³ As Andrew Louth points out, Ostia can be seen as a moment of *ecstasis*, which Augustine defines in *De Genesi ad litteram* as a turning away from sense: "[w]hen the attention of the mind is completely carried off and turned away [*avertitur*] from the senses of the body, then there is rather the state called ecstasy. Then any bodies that are present are not seen at all, though the eyes may be wide open; and no sounds at all are heard."⁵⁴ Instead of focusing on the objects of sense, the soul is occupied with the mental images of bodies, or, as in the case of the vision at Ostia, incorporeal realities that exist without bodily images.

Admitting that she does not—and cannot—know what thoughts Trygetius is turning over in his mind, Monica nonetheless gives him the benefit of the doubt by assuming that he is preoccupied by *theoriis et cogitationibus*, and not, say, memory-images of a particularly beautiful body he saw earlier in the day. Augustine is also interested in less exalted forms of *ecstasis*, such as when the ecstatic soul becomes fixated on its own mental representations:

Yet if that will, which continually moves the eye to be informed here and there and unites it when informed with its object, concentrates exclusively on that inner phantasy and turns [*avertit*] the mind eye's [*animi aciem*] completely away from the bodies which surround the senses and from the bodily senses themselves, and turns [*convertit*] entirely to that image which it sees within itself, then it comes upon so striking a likeness of the

⁵² Augustine, *Confessions*, 9.10.24.

⁵³ Andrea Nightingale points out how *intentio* can only ever achieve a temporary respite from distraction: "*Intentio* works against distractions and interruptions and, for brief periods, can reduce the feeling of being scattered and torn apart in time." *Once Out of Nature*, 99.

⁵⁴ Louth, *Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*, 133. *Confessions* 12.12.25. "Quando autem penitus avertitur atque abripitur animi intentio a sensibus corporis, tunc magis ecstasis dici solet. Tunc omnino quaecumque sint praesentia corpora, etiam patentibus oculis non videntur, nec ullae voces prorsus audiuntur."

bodily form, made clear from the memory, that not even reason itself can distinguish whether the body itself is seen without, or something of the kind is thought within.⁵⁵

The mind's eye averts from the bodily senses and converts toward the images that are within itself. The images appear so vividly and solidly that it is difficult to distinguish them from reality. Augustine mentions an acquaintance who was so fixated on his mental image of a certain woman that he would ejaculate. Such excessive thinking (*nimia cogitatione*) about the body of the beloved becomes the defining symptom/cause of the medieval discourse of lovesickness, as we will see in Chapter 4. For Augustine, his acquaintance's phantasmatically induced ejaculation is further proof of the mind's power over the body. The mind can effect alterations in the body in the same way that a person changes his clothes.⁵⁶ The mind's superiority also lies in the fact that it can avert from the senses.

In the vision at Ostia, a full-fledged ecstasy, Monica and Augustine turn away from the senses entirely. In less extreme cases, such as Trygetius zoning out over breakfast, Augustine acknowledges that we continue to perceive, albeit in a fleeting, limited manner. Trygetius sees the bowl as he is eating, he just fails to take note of it. In order to articulate this difference, Arendt draws a distinction between seeing (passive) and perceiving (active): "We can see without perceiving, and hear without listening, as frequently happens when we are absent-minded."⁵⁷ This explanation invokes a theory of active perception similar to Augustine's, but Augustine's own explanation of this phenomenon is slightly different. For him, the crucial distinction is between perceiving and perceiving-and-remembering. In *De Trinitate*, he gives an example of the kind of divided attention that Trygetius experiences:

[W]hen someone is speaking to us and we are thinking of something else, it often appears as if we had not heard him. But this is not true; we did hear, but we did not remember,

⁵⁵ Augustine, *De Trinitate* 11.4.7. "Voluntas vero illa quae hac atque illac fert et refert aciem formandam, conjungitque formatam, si ad interiorem phantasiam tota confluerit, atque a praesentia corporum quae circumjacent sensibus, atque ab ipsis sensibus corporis, animi aciem omnino averterit, atque ad eam quae intus cernitur imaginem penitus converterit; tanta offenditur similitudo speciei corporalis expressa ex memoria, ut nec ipsa ratio discernere sinatur, utrum foris corpus ipsum videatur, an intus tale aliquid cogitetur." English translations are from Augustine, *On The Trinity*, trans. McKenna.

⁵⁶ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 11.4.7.

⁵⁷ Arendt, *Willing*, 100.

because the speaker's words slipped immediately away from the perception of our ears, being diverted elsewhere by a command of the will which is wont to fix them in the memory. And, therefore, when something of the kind occurs, it would be more correct to say, 'We did not remember,' rather than, 'We did not hear.'⁵⁸

Augustine provides two other examples of similar experiences: walking and ending up somewhere unanticipated, without being able to recall the last thing seen; and having to reread a page because you realize that you do not know what you have just read.⁵⁹ Augustine remarks wryly that he is particularly familiar with the second scenario, an admission that recalls by way of contrast his description of Ambrose focusing intently on the words on the page, presumably without having to reread them. In each of the three cases, the failure is mnemonic, not perceptual. The will turns away (*avertit*) the memory from the sense, preventing present things (*praesentia*) from clinging to it. The sense perceives the object, but the will qua attention fails to unite the form of the object as it appears in the sense with the form of the object in the memory.⁶⁰ As a result, the perception is not fixed in the memory; it slips away immediately.⁶¹ *Intentio*, then, is not only what enables recollection, it is necessary for forming memories in the first place.⁶² Augustine's explanation anticipates recent scientific studies that have found that divided attention prevents experience from being sufficiently encoded and thus limiting its availability for retrieval.⁶³

⁵⁸ Augustine, *De Trinitate* 11.8.15. "Quod animadvertere facile est, cum saepe coram loquentem nobis aliquem aliud cogitando non audisse nobis videmur. Falsum est autem: audivimus enim, sed non meminimus, subinde per aurium sensum labentibus vocibus alienato nutu voluntatis, per quem solent infigi memoriae. Verius itaque dixerimus, cum tale aliquid accidit, Non meminimus, quam, Non audivimus."

⁵⁹ Augustine, *De Trinitate* 11.8.15. "Nam et legentibus evenit, et mihi saepissime, ut perfecta pagina vel epistola, nesciam quid legerim, et repetam. In aliud quippe intento nutu voluntatis, non sic est adhibita memoria sensui corporis, quomodo ipse sensus adhibitus est litteris. Ita et ambulantes intenta in aliud voluntate, nesciunt qua transierint: quod si non vidissent, non ambulassent, aut majore intentione palpando ambulassent, praesertim si per incognita pergerent: sed quia facile ambulaverunt, utique viderunt: quia vero non sicut sensus oculorum locis quacumque pergebant, ita ipsi sensui memoria jungebatur, nullo modo id quod viderunt etiam recentissimum meminisse potuerunt."

⁶⁰ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 11.9.16.

⁶¹ Elsewhere Augustine seems to argue that perception is contingent upon memory, since even the briefest perception has duration, which is generated through memory. See *De Genesi ad litteram* 12.11.22. See also Brown, "Augustine and Descartes," 163; O'Daly, *Augustine's Philosophy of Mind*, 87.

⁶² See Carruthers, *Book of Memory*, 77-8.

⁶³ In his discussion of absent-mindedness, the memory researcher Daniel Schacter invokes a concept of "energy supply" that somewhat resembles the medieval *intentio*: "Dividing attention reduced the overall amount of cognitive

The Aversions of Alypius

The ability to avert the mind's eye from the images generated in perception acts as a kind of override switch. Even if the senses perceive something, the will qua attention can ensure that these perceptions do not become fixed in memory. According to Augustine, the will can move the body to turn away from sensory objects: "For example, we avert [*avertimus*] our eyes from, or close them to, something we do not wish to see; and in like manner we keep our ears from sounds, and our nostrils from odors."⁶⁴ It sometimes experiences obstacles in doing so, however, due to its "servile mortality." The fact that the mind can avert from perceptions, even when it is in the act of perceiving, offers another level of insulation against the impingement of sense.

Averting from the objects of sense is what Augustine's friend Alypius attempts to do in *Confessions*. As a young man, Alypius is pressured by his companions to accompany them to a gladiatorial show. Alypius resists at first—he is averse (*aversaretur*) to such spectacles—but ultimately relents, exclaiming that although they may drag his body to the games, they will be unable to direct (*intendere*) his eyes and mind to the spectacle, and, thus, he will be there yet be absent.⁶⁵ His companions usher him to the games, curious to see if he can manage such a feat. Once there, Alypius shuts his eyes and tries not to think about the spectacle. If only he had closed off his ears too, remarks Augustine. The crowd roars with such vehemence that Alypius is overcome by curiosity (*curiositate*) and decides to open his eyes. *Curiositas* is defined in *Confessions* as the lust for knowing.⁶⁶ Because the eyes are the main conduit for knowledge,

resources—the "energy supply" that fuels encoding—that can be devoted to incoming information." *The Seven Sins of Memory*, 45.

⁶⁴ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 11.8.15. "Sed a sentiendis corporibus motu corporis separat corporis sensus, ne aliquid sentiamus, aut ut sentire desinamus: veluti cum oculos, ab eo quod videre nolumus, avertimus, vel claudimus: sic aures a sonis, sic nares ab odoribus."

⁶⁵ Augustine, *Confessions*, 6.8.13.

⁶⁶ Augustine, *Confessions*, 10.35.54. On Augustine's theory of *curiositas*, see Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*; Oberman, *Contra vanam curiositatem*; Newhauser, "Towards a History of Human Curiosity"; Peters, "*Libertas Inquirendi*."

curiositas is also called the “lust of the eyes.”⁶⁷ It is in order to satisfy this “diseased craving” (*morbo cupiditatis*) that people crowd around a corpse lying on the ground or clamour to see staged public spectacles.⁶⁸ Instead of turning away from what he sees, Alypius is fixated: “non se avertit, sed fixit aspectum.”⁶⁹ He becomes so fixated that he does not realize what he is doing (*nesciebat*). His attempt to cultivate a deliberate, prophylactic state of absent-mindedness fails. As Andrea Nightingale puts it, for Augustine, “the mind cannot just leave the premises.”⁷⁰

Augustine emphasizes the sequence of events that precedes Alypius’ fixation: the noise of the shouting enters his ears and unlocks his eyes. Alypius deliberately decides to open his eyes, believing that he will be able to despise and overcome whatever he sees. It is his second act of pride. Carl G. Vaught argues that the visual and auditory imagery in *Confessions* implies a certain sequentiality: “The ear waits passively for someone to address it; the soul decides how and whether to make a volitional response to what it hears; and having made a positive response, the soul attends to the voice of God as a preliminary step to seeing his face.”⁷¹ Alypius’ perceptual experience at the games follows this sequence, only he ends up seeing the gore of the spectacle, not the face of God. The ears, which cannot be controlled as easily as the eyes, present Alypius with a suggestion of sinful pleasure and he consents by opening his eyes.⁷² He wants to know what is happening. He is turned initially by the vehemence of the noise, but it is the opening of the eyes that completes the turn. Augustine rebukes Alypius for succumbing to *curiositas* and *cupiditas*, but he considers Alypius’ main error to be thinking that he could, by his own force of will, resist the sensory allures of the games. Instead of trusting in himself, he should have trusted in God, who, Augustine writes, will eventually rescue him from the habit that has been forged by this fateful visit.⁷³

⁶⁷ Augustine, *Confessions*, 10.35.54.

⁶⁸ Augustine, *Confessions*, 10.35.55.

⁶⁹ Augustine, *Confessions*, 6.8.13.

⁷⁰ Nightingale, *Once Out of Nature*, 127.

⁷¹ Vaught, *Journey toward God*, 17.

⁷² Von Moos observes that there was a medieval tradition that held it was possible to willingly close the eyes, but not the ears. “*Attentio est quaedam sollicitudo*,” 91-2.

⁷³ Augustine, *Confessions*, 6.8.13.

The Inclination of the Heart

Let us return to Augustine riding his hypothetical horse. Unlike the young Alypius, he does not attend public spectacles, whether willingly or begrudgingly, the kind of shows where one can expect to see things like a dog chasing a rabbit. Nonetheless, when this kind of thing happens in the course of his daily life, he is captivated. It is difficult to guard against these most insignificant (*minutissimis*) spectacles, which interrupt the great (*magna*) thoughts that were previously occupying him and return him, as it were, to his senses. He lacks Bernard's indefatigable obliviousness to the outside world. What bothers Augustine, though, is not so much the initial turn as the continued fixation on the hunt. Augustine's phrasing (*avertit me*) suggests that he was acted upon, that his eye was drawn by the novel stimulus intruding upon his field of vision. Strictly speaking, it would not be correct to call this orientation involuntary, since, as we have seen, perception cannot take place without the intervention of the will. But, as Brown notes, the *intentio* involved in basic acts of perception does not necessarily imply assent to those impressions.⁷⁴ At some point, though, Augustine does assent to the sight of the dog and rabbit. He responds to the sight not by deviating the course of his horse, but with an inclination of the heart (*cordis inclinatione*), an internal movement that is far more significant than any move he might make with his hand or eye. Elsewhere, Augustine identifies the inclination of the heart (*declinatio cordis*) with consent to evil suggestion.⁷⁵ If my reading of this scene is accurate, Augustine's conversion closely mirrors the structure of Alypius's conversion at the games: a (relatively) passive orientation—hearing a loud noise in one case, seeing fast moving creatures in the other—followed by fixation and assent. Both fail to avert from the present. However, Alypius clearly makes a conscious decision to open his eyes, reasoning that he will be able to remain unaffected by what he sees. The moment of assent is less clear in Augustine's case. He is caught off guard by how quickly and tenaciously the will responds to bodily reactions and, in doing so, entangles itself.

⁷⁴ Brown, "Augustine and Descartes," 161.

⁷⁵ Augustine, *De Continentia*, 2.3. D. G. Hunter writes: "Taking his cue from Psalm 141:3-4 ('Set a watch, O Lord, before my mouth and a door of continence around my lips. Incline not my heart to evil words'), Augustine suggests that continence must restrain not only the impulses of the body but, more importantly, the 'inclination of the heart' (*declinatio cordis*), that is, the interior consent to evil." "*De Continentia*," 237. See also Byers, *Perception, Sensibility, and Moral Motivation*, 172-214.

In the second example—the fly-catching spider and lizard—Augustine discloses another aspect of distraction. Here it is the initial turning of attention, rather than its fixation, that vexes him. There is an important difference between the two scenes. The dog and rabbit burst into his field of vision, but they are there only momentarily. Augustine does not divert his course to follow them. Sitting at home, on the other hand, Augustine can return his eyes again and again to the lizard and especially the spider, which, by virtue of its web, remains localized to one specific place. These distractions are near at hand, available to him. They present an ongoing temptation. When he does turn to look at them, Augustine catches himself, although always after he has already fallen. His attention turns away and then turns back. In some sense, his lapses could be construed as a *felix culpa*: they lead him to praise God for the careful ordering of creation. Viewed from the correct perspective, these creatures can function as reminders of God, not distractions from him. Elsewhere Augustine exhorts his readers to wonder at the miracle that is the natural world: “And we look at these things, and if his spirit is in us, they thus please us so that we praise their maker: not in such a way that turning [*conversi*] to the works, we are turned away [*advertamur*] from the maker, nor in such a way that turning our face to the things which are made, we turn our backs to him that made them.”⁷⁶ Augustine envisions a turn toward that does not turn away. He admits, however, that in this case his turn toward the spider and lizard was not motivated by the intention to praise God: “that was not how my attention first began (*intentus incipio*).” He does not say how his attention first began. Once again, there is an omission in the record, a gap at the heart of the experience of distraction.

The obscurity that persists in Augustine’s attempt to reconstruct his experiences of distraction is partly a result of the way in which these conversions are enabled by habit. Habit occupies the gap between the voluntary and the involuntary. When Augustine is riding across a field, he is performing an habitual action, one that originally required close attention to the various operations involved but has since become automatic. He thus has more mental energy, more

⁷⁶ Augustine, *In Ioannis Euangelium Tractatus*, 8.2.1 “Et videmus haec, et si est in nobis Spiritus ipsius, sic nobis placent ut artifex laudetur: non ut ad opera conversi ab artifice advertamur, et faciem quodammodo ponentes ad ea quae fecit, dorsum ponamus ad eum qui fecit.”

intentio, to direct at his important thoughts.⁷⁷ As he is turned from his thoughts, though, this habitual action is interrupted by a more pernicious habit. It is significant that the paradigmatic distraction that turns Augustine takes the form of a hunt. Elsewhere Augustine uses the example of pleasure derived from hunting to demonstrate how easily the soul is entrapped by *consuetudo*.⁷⁸ *Consuetudo* refers to habits that encumber the will and incline it towards sin.⁷⁹ Sinful deeds accumulate in the memory, which causes the pleasure derived from them to multiply and compels the agent to repeat the acts in search of this heightened pleasure.⁸⁰ When bound by *consuetudo*, the soul struggles to orient itself toward God and is instead inclined to take pleasure in worldly objects. The conflict between the spiritual and carnal wills has a dissipating effect on the mind: “their discord robbed my soul of all concentration,” Augustine laments.⁸¹ Although it often feels to a person gripped by *consuetudo* that he acts involuntarily, this is not quite true, since the first link in the chain of habit was not forged by necessity, just perversity of will. Still, the chains of *consuetudo* bind tightly and require the help of God to loosen them.⁸² Habit will continue to orient our attention until our fleshly body is exchanged for a spiritual body in heaven. For the spiritual body, there will be no distractions from the contemplation of God. Physical objects of perception, spiders and rabbits alike, will exert no attraction. As Charles Brittain puts it, “it will be possible to perceive without our attention being triggered, because the physiological process of perception will no longer stimulate the psychosomatic mechanism of habit (*consuetudo*).”⁸³ In the meantime, what we choose to pay attention to is largely determined by what we have paid attention to in the past. Seeing the dog chase the rabbit scratches the itch of *curiositas*, an itch that, despite Augustine’s best efforts, remains festering in his soul. The only remedy for his habitual lapses into distraction is God’s mercy.

⁷⁷ As far as I know, Augustine does not discuss situations in which mental preoccupation stems from habitual or boring actions, such as the commonly invoked case of the truck driver who daydreams while driving. His examples demonstrate the opposite causality: it is mental preoccupation that leads to the diversion of attention away from the tasks one is presently engaged in, not vice versa.

⁷⁸ Augustine, *De diversis quaestionibus octoginta tribus*, 70.

⁷⁹ On the concept of habit in Augustine, see Prendeville, “The Development of the Idea of Habit.”

⁸⁰ Augustine, *Confessions*, 8.5.10.

⁸¹ Augustine, *Confessions*, 8.5.10. “Ita duae voluntates meae, una vetus, alia nova, illa carnalis, illa spiritalis, confligebant inter se atque discordando dissipabant animam meam.”

⁸² Augustine, *Confessions*, 3.8.16.

⁸³ Brittain, “Attention deficit,” 261. Brittain is using “attention” here in the sense of *attentio* in *De Musica*.

Augustine concludes his discussion of the animal encounters by lamenting how these are the kind of distractions that trouble him while he is trying to pray:

When our heart becomes the receptacle of distraction of this nature and the container for a mass of empty thoughts [*vanitatis catervas*], then too our prayers are often interrupted and distracted; and in your sight, while we are directing [*intendimus*] the voice of our heart to your ears, frivolous thoughts somehow rush in [*inruentibus*] and cut short an aspiration of the deepest importance.⁸⁴

Augustine moves from talking about the distraction of external objects to the distraction of internal objects. Instead of flies rushing into a spider's web, it is now "frivolous thoughts" that rush in and seize his attention. The language of the passage recalls the image of distracting memories buzzing around the caverns of memory and crowding the mind (*catervatim se proruunt*). Like those memories, these thoughts come unbidden, following a trajectory that eludes Augustine (*nescio unde*). The receptacle of the heart is cluttered, filled, paradoxically, by empty thoughts. Quoting Ambrose, Augustine maintains that we cannot control our onrushing thoughts:

For our heart and our thoughts are not in our power. When they pour in unexpectedly, they confuse the mind and spirit and drag [*trahunt*] it elsewhere than you intended to go. They call us back to worldly things, introduce earthly ideas, inflict desires for pleasure, and weave snares, and at the very moment when we prepare to raise up the mind, we are filled with empty thoughts and are often cast down to things of earth.⁸⁵

As we will see in the next chapter, the fact that we cannot control what thoughts will occur us to means that we must be vigilant about how we respond to those thoughts. As M. B. Pranger points out, *vis-à-vis* the animal passage in *Confessions*, Augustine does not prescribe ascetic exercise to

⁸⁴ Augustine, *Confessions*, 10.35.57, trans. modified. "Cum enim huiusmodi rerum conceptaculum fit cor nostrum et portat copiosae vanitatis catervas, hinc et orationes nostrae saepe interrumpuntur atque turbantur, et ante conspectum tuum, dum ad aures tuas vocem cordis intendimus, nescio unde inruentibus nugatoriis cogitationibus res tanta praeciditur."

⁸⁵ Augustine, *De dono perseverantiae*, 8.20. "Non enim in potestate nostra cor nostrum et cogitationes nostrae, quae improvise offusae mentem animumque confundunt, atque alio trahunt quam tu proposueris: ad saecularia revocant, mundana inserunt, voluptuaria ingerunt, illecebrosa intexunt, ipsoque in tempore quo elevare mentem paramus, inserti inanibus cogitationibus ad terrena plerumque dejicimur." English translations are from Augustine, *The Gift of Perseverance*, trans. Teske.

eliminate mental distractions, as an earlier Greek tradition would. Rather, “Augustine is not—and never will be—in command.”⁸⁶ I will take up the problem of internal distraction and its remedies in much more detail in the next chapter. Here I will conclude by noting how the parallel Augustine draws between distracting thoughts and distracting animals blurs the distinction between the endogenous and the exogenous. Augustine’s description of the throng of thoughts encourages us to reconsider the widespread tendency in attention research to conflate the endogenous (“originating from within”) with the voluntary, as if we do not often find our attention caught by inner phenomena over which we feel we have little power.

Augustine’s descriptions of mental preoccupation are meant to demonstrate that the mind can avert from bodily distractions and avoid entanglement with present things. Trygetius, Ambrose, and Augustine and Monica at Ostia experience this redirecting of attention in varying degrees. The mind’s averting power can be put to ill use, however, as in the case of Augustine’s acquaintance who becomes fixated on the image of a particular body. Alypius’ experience at the games and Augustine’s encounters with the animals illustrate how difficult it can be to turn away from affectively charged objects. The inevitability of distraction in this life makes it necessary to rely on God to direct and redirect our attention. Recounting the lead up to his ultimate conversion, Augustine explains how God turned him around: “Lord, you turned my attention back to myself. You took me up from behind my own back where I had placed myself because I did not wish to observe myself [*nollem me attendere*], and you set me before my face.”⁸⁷ Here is a turn toward that is not a turn away, as God forces Augustine to confront himself anew. This is an involuntary orientation of attention that originates from within, or more accurately, from that which is *interior intimo meo*.⁸⁸

Although there were earlier theories that attributed an active dimension to perception, Augustine’s articulation of *intentio* as the crucial mediating force between sense and object

⁸⁶ Pranger, *Eternity’s Ennui*, 375.

⁸⁷ Augustine, *Confessions*, 8.7.16. “Tu autem, domine, inter verba eius retorquebas me ad me ipsum, auferens me a dorso meo, ubi me posueram dum nollem me attendere, et constituebas me ante faciem meam, ut viderem quam turpis essem, quam distortus et sordidus, maculosus et ulcerosus.”

⁸⁸ Augustine, *Confessions*, 3.6.11.

represented an important innovation.⁸⁹ His account of how attention can be voluntarily directed, and misdirected, proved influential for later medieval thinkers. The subsequent chapters of this dissertation examine how Augustine's terminology and conceptual distinctions are reworked, adapted, and critiqued in a number of late medieval texts. In the following chapter, we will see how the Augustinian equivalence between the will and attention, between *intentio* and *attentio*, becomes uncoupled in subtle but significant ways. It is in late medieval discussions of distracted prayer that we find a more fully theorized account of how attention can be involuntarily oriented.

⁸⁹ Caston, "Augustine and the Greeks on Intentionality," 39. According to O'Daly, "Only the Epicureans held a passive theory of perception, even if Aristotle and the Stoics (and, to some extent, Plato) identified both passive and active elements in the process." *Augustine's Philosophy of Mind*, 85.

Chapter 2

How to Pray while Distracted: Thomas Aquinas and Walter Hilton

“The key to a Christian conception of studies is the realization that prayer consists of attention. It is the orientation of all the attention of which the soul is capable towards God. The quality of the attention counts for much in the quality of the prayer. Warmth of heart cannot make up for it.”

-- Simone Weil¹

In the previous chapter, we saw how Bernard of Clairvaux was praised by the *Golden Legend* for his fixity of attention. Bernard remains so inwardly focused that he takes no notice of the lake or the saddle on which he rides. In another anecdote from the *Golden Legend*, Bernard is riding along, presumably oblivious to his surroundings, wrapped up in thought, and thinking, of all things, about distraction. Reflecting on how unstable the heart is during prayer, his meditations are interrupted, not by a dog dashing across a field, but by a peasant walking along the road. Bernard enters into conversation with the man and explains what he has been turning over in his mind. The peasant responds by claiming with confidence that he routinely prays without distraction. Aiming to correct what Bernard knows is a misperception, Bernard says to the peasant: “Go aside a little way and, with all the attention you can bring to it, begin to pray the Lord’s Prayer; and if you are able to finish it without any distraction or wandering of the heart, the beast I’m riding will be yours without doubt or question. But you must give me your word that if any other thought comes to you, you won’t hide it from me.”² The peasant accepts the offer and goes off to pray. He is not halfway through the prayer when a thought enters his mind: “The saddle...will I get the saddle with the mount, or not?” Aware of the distraction, he returns to Bernard and confesses his failure. Whereas in the previous anecdote Bernard paid no attention whatsoever to the saddle, the peasant cannot help but think about it. The lesson is clear: the peasant has been so inattentive to his prayers that he does not even notice how easily he becomes distracted.

¹ Weil, *Waiting on God*, 105.

² Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda Aurea*, 534.

The exemplum of Bernard and the inattentive peasant was popular during the Middle Ages.³ It served as a warning against spiritual pride, while at the same time acknowledging how difficult it was to fulfill the biblical injunction to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17). If a person cannot even complete half of the Lord’s Prayer without being interrupted by distracting thoughts, what hope does he have of praying in perpetuity? The impossibility of realizing this ideal forced medieval thinkers to clarify what exactly it meant to pray without interruption, and, in order to do this, they had to determine the ethical and phenomenological qualities of distraction. One of the claims of this chapter is that some of the most important theorizing about the nature of attention and distraction in the Middle Ages occurs in accounts of prayer.

The central focus of this chapter is Walter Hilton, the fourteenth-century vernacular theologian, in his writings on prayer. As a canon regular, Hilton occupied a space between the monastery and the outside world. He wrote for a variety of audiences, ranging from vowed contemplatives to laypeople.⁴ Although Hilton aimed over the course of his career to provide a systematic theology, he emphasizes different aspects of his spiritual programme depending on the intended audience of a given work.⁵ Distraction is a problem for both the contemplative and the layperson, but its etiologies and remedies differ. Hilton’s writings on prayer share with a number of late medieval devotional works a desire to identify and describe “the various modes of attention or intention that can be invested in ritualized speech.”⁶ The divisions and categories employed by these texts owe much to the terminological distinctions worked out by scholastics such as Thomas Aquinas. The key distinction for Hilton, I will argue, is the one between attention and intention.

³ Tubach, *Index Exemplorum*, 280. See also McGuire, “A Saint’s Afterlife.”

⁴ For a good overview of Hilton’s life (the details of which are sketchy) and his works, see Putter, “Walter Hilton’s *Scale of Perfection*.” See also Bestul, “Walter Hilton.”

⁵ On Hilton’s systematic *theologica anglicana*, see Watson, “The Middle English Mystics,” 556.

⁶ Zieman, *Singing the New Song*, 124. As Zieman points out, these works have been largely neglected by scholars. The work that has been done on them tends to focus on questions of literacy. See also Zieman, “Reading, Singing and Understanding”; Zieman, “The Perils of *Canor*.” In addition to Zieman’s valuable studies, see Saenger, “Books of Hours”; Schirmer, “Reading Lessons at Syon Abbey.”

As Jennifer Bryan notes, Hilton was “at the forefront of an introspective, psychologically oriented spirituality” being developed in the late Middle Ages.⁷ In his masterwork, the *Scale of Perfection*, Hilton proposes a rather direct route to self-knowledge:

For what is a man but hise thoughtes and his loves? [...] And yif thou wolt wite what thou lovest, loke whereupoun thou thenkest; for where thi love is, there is thyne iye; and where thy likynge is, there is most thyn herte thynkyng.⁸

Examine your thoughts and you will know what you desire. Note that “herte” here does not refer to the desiring capability of the soul, but rather to the organ of thought.⁹ Hilton’s formula accords with the picture of the soul developed in *De Trinitate*, a text that Hilton was familiar with: the will moves the eye—whether physical or mental—and keeps it trained on its object. The will selects which thoughts are placed before the mind’s eye and remain there. Thoughts, then, function as indices of desire. Nicolette Zeeman has recently demonstrated how one of the central philosophical concerns in William Langland’s *Piers Plowman*, which was written around the same time as the *Scale*, is the relationship between thought and desire, between *cogitatio* and the will. Zeeman quotes the above passage from Hilton to illustrate the way in which thought and desire were often linked by medieval thinkers. According to Zeeman, the co-implication with thought allows desire to be legible, since it is elusive and obscure, and thus “can only be ‘traced’ in the epistemologically accessible intellectual and phenomenological structures through which it passes.”¹⁰ While the passage from the *Scale* does point to the enchainment of thought and desire, Hilton is also interested in occasions when they diverge, when thoughts wander involuntarily and when it is possible to desire something without thinking about it. Prayer, and more specifically distracted prayer, is the phenomenological ground in which this dynamic is parsed.

⁷ Bryan, *Looking Inward*, 66.

⁸ Hilton, *Scale of Perfection*, 1.87.2502-8. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically by book, chapter, and line number(s).

⁹ On the heart as the organ of thought in medieval accounts of prayer, see Saenger, “Books of Hours,” 247-51.

¹⁰ Zeeman, *Piers Plowman*, 83.

This chapter begins by examining how the issue of distracted prayer is treated by Aquinas, whose influence on Hilton John Clark advises us not to underestimate.¹¹ Aquinas draws a distinction between *attentio* and *intentio* that allows him to argue that attention is not necessary for prayer to achieve much of its efficacy, and provides him with a framework to analyze the varieties of attention that are exercised in prayer. I then turn to Hilton and argue that his writings on prayer are informed by a similar distinction. Hilton’s *Epistola de Leccione*, a Latin letter, frames prayer as a contemplative act that requires the alignment of *attentio* and *intentio*. In his English works, Hilton privileges the “entente” over the performance of prayer. Hilton goes so far as to claim that some people will never be able to pray attentively. The final section of this chapter examines Hilton’s ambivalence toward the disciplining of attention.

Thomas Aquinas: The Force of Intention

The question devoted to prayer is the longest one in the entire *Summa*. I want to focus on Aquinas’ response to two questions—first, is it possible to pray continuously, and, second, is it necessary to pay attention while praying? Aquinas’ answer to the first question borrows heavily from Augustine’s letter to Proba (*Epistola* 130). A wealthy Roman widow, Anicia Faltonia Proba, had requested guidance from Augustine on how she should best pray. She sought to reconcile the biblical injunction to pray always with the responsibility of performing active works in her community. While Proba lacks the leisure and discipline that are the hallmarks of monastic life, Augustine advises her that she should aim to pray continuously. She should pray by “desire of the heart” (*desiderio*) even when she cannot utter prayers in speech because she is occupied in other tasks.¹² Following Augustine, Aquinas argues that it is not possible to pray

¹¹ Clark, “Intention,” 80.

¹² Augustine, *Epistola* 130, 10.19. See also Augustine, *Enarrationes in psalmos*, 37.14: “This very desire [*desiderium*] is your prayer, and if your desire is continuous, your prayer is continuous too. The apostle meant what he said, Pray without ceasing (1. Thes 5:17). But can we be on our knees all the time, or prostrate ourselves continuously, or be holding up our hands uninterruptedly, that he bids us, Pray without ceasing? If we say that these things constitute prayer, I do not think that we can pray without ceasing. But there is another kind of prayer that never ceases, an interior prayer that is desire. Whatever else you may be engaged upon, if you are all the while desiring that Sabbath, you never cease to pray [Ipsum enim desiderium tuum, oratio tua est: et si continuum desiderium, continua oratio. Non enim frustra dixit Apostolus, *Sine intermissione orantes*. Numquid sine intermissione genu flectimus, corpus prosternimus, aut manus levamus, ut dicat, *Sine intermissione orate*? Aut si sic dicimus nos orare, hoc puto sine intermissione non possumus facere. Est alia interior sine intermissione oratio, quae

continuously if we understand prayer in the strict sense. If, however, we consider what causes prayer—charitable desire—then in so far as we desire, we pray. Desire should be continuous, if not actually, then virtually (*vel actu vel virtute*).¹³ Aquinas inflects Augustine’s argument with an important distinction between the virtual and the actual, which Simon Tugwell helpfully glosses as follows: “either in the sense that we are actually engaged in desiring something (we are making an act of desire) or in the sense that we are doing something prompted by desire, even if we are not particularly conscious of the desire at the moment.”¹⁴ The force (*virtu*) of the desire motivating prayer remains in all actions done out of charity, that is, the first desire remains in effect through all secondary ends; actual desire, on the other hand, cannot be sustained indefinitely, since it is necessary to engage in other tasks.¹⁵ Set periods of vocal prayer are useful because they rekindle holy desire. If vocal prayer goes on for too long, though, it might have the opposite effect.¹⁶ Aquinas cites Augustine on this point. Augustine had argued that the Desert Fathers use short prayers because short prayers prevent the attention (*intentio*) from growing dull (*hebetur*); as long as the attention (*intentionem*) remains, the praying should continue.¹⁷ The question of how vocal prayer actualizes and stimulates holy desire becomes a contested issue in later accounts of prayer, as we will see.

est desiderium. Quidquid aliud agas, si desideras illud sabbatum, non intermittis orare.]” English translations are from Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms, 33-50*, trans. Boulding.

¹³ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIa-IIae 83.14.

¹⁴ Tugwell, *Thomas and Albert*, 509n5.

¹⁵ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIa-IIae 83.14. “Causa autem orationis est desiderium charitatis, ex quo procedure debet oratio; quod quidem in nobis debet esse continuum vel actu, vel virtute: manet enim virtus hujus desiderii in omnibus quae ex charitate facimus.”

¹⁶ Aquinas also acknowledges that some people will find vocal prayer distracting and should thus dispense with it: “If these signs impede or distract [*distrahatur*] the mind, as often happens in those whose mind is sufficiently prepared for devotion without such signs, they should not be used [Si vero mens per hoc distrahatur vel qualitercumque impediatur est a talibus cessandum, quod praecipue contingit in his quorum mens sine hujusmodi signis est sufficienter ad devotionem parata]” (*ST* IIa-IIae 83.12). English translations are from the Blackfriars edition unless otherwise noted.

¹⁷ Augustine, *Epistola* 130, 10.20. “Dicuntur fratres in Aegypto crebras quidem habere orationes, sed eas tamen brevissimas, et raptim quodammodo jaculatas, ne illa vigilanter erecta, quae oranti plurimum necessaria est, per productiores moras evanescat atque hebetetur intentio. Ac per hoc etiam ipsi satis ostendunt, hanc intentionem, sicut non est obtundenda, si perdurare non potest, ita si perduraverit, non cito esse rumpendam. Absit enim ab oratione multa locutio, sed non desit multa precatio, si fervens perseverat intentio.”

The distinction between the virtual and the actual is also at work in Aquinas' response to the second question—"whether attention is necessary during prayer (*utrum de necessitate orationis sit quod sit attentiva*)."¹⁸ Note how Aquinas frames the question by using the cognate *attentio* here instead of *intentio*, the word that Augustine uses in his discussion of short prayer above.¹⁹ In his work as a whole, Aquinas uses *intentio* to signify a number of related, but distinct, concepts.²⁰ *Intentio* can refer to the mental representation of objects. It can also refer to the directedness of the intellect and the will. As he puts it, "intention [*intentio*] signifies a tending to another."²¹ While *intentio* in this latter sense is often best translated as "attention," Aquinas draws an important distinction between *intentio* and *attentio* in his discussion of prayer in the *Summa* and the *Commentary on the Sentences*. Aquinas' answer to the question of whether attention is necessary relies on his characteristic semantic parsing: it depends on which effect of prayer you are intending. There are three effects of prayer: merit, impetration (the gracious fulfillment of what is being asked for), and spiritual refreshment (*spiritualis refectio mentis*).²² To achieve the first two, it is not necessary that a person be "attentive throughout" her prayers. The mind may wander, but as long as the original intention to pray (*vis primae intentionis*) persists, the prayer will possess both merit and impetration.

Aquinas explains how the original intention to pray operates in his *Commentary on the Sentences*. An act may be said to endure in two ways: "in the sense that the act itself continues as well as its effect, but sometimes the act itself comes to an end but its effect continues."²³ To exemplify the latter principle, Aquinas uses the example of a stone thrown through the air; the

¹⁸ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIa-IIae 83.13.

¹⁹ As noted in the previous chapter, Augustine uses *attentio* in *De Musica*. In *Confessions* XI, he uses both *intentio* and *attentio* in his discussion of temporality. *Attentio* is associated with the present and connotes a certain passivity on the part of the soul, while *intentio* suggests a more active, forward-looking process (11.28.38). See Nightingale, *Once Out of Nature*, 88-104.

²⁰ On Aquinas and *intentio*, see Simonin, "La Notion d'intention"; Hayen, *L'intentionnel selon saint Thomas*; Perler, *Theorien der Intentionalität im Mittelalter*.

²¹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia-IIae 12.1. "Dicendum quod intentio, sicut ipsum nomen sonat, significat in aliud tenere."

²² Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIa-IIae 83.13.

²³ Aquinas, *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum*, IV 15.4.2. "[Q]uod aliquis actus dicitur durare dupliciter: aut secundum essentiam; aut secundum virtutem, sive effectum suum." English translations are from Aquinas, *Commentary on the Sentences*, trans. Tugwell.

stone continues its trajectory even though the act of throwing has ceased. In the same way, the effects of the original intention to pray can continue after the attention dissipates or wanders. The fact that the act of praying perdures through the “virtual” continuation of its effects (*secundum virtutem*) means that the prayer will retain its efficacy even if “actual attention” (*attentio actualis*) is lacking.²⁴ In this respect, the person praying is similar to the pilgrim who does not need to be thinking about his pilgrimage at every moment.²⁵ As Anthony Kenny puts it, “[a] tendency can be operative without being present to one’s consciousness, as one’s desire to reach a destination can govern one’s behavior on a journey without being constantly in one’s thoughts.”²⁶ The force of an original intention diminishes over time, however. Using the example of the stone, Aquinas writes: “the stone sometimes comes to rest or starts to move in the opposite direction to that in which it was thrown, unless its movement is given a boost.”²⁷ The force of the original intention can also be interrupted by a thought or feeling that runs contrary to it. We will consider how this happens in prayer shortly.

While the first two effects of prayer—merit and impetration—do not require *attentio*, the third effect—spiritual refreshment—does. Spiritual refreshment occurs only so long as *attentio* lasts. Due to human weakness, *attentio* will invariably wander and the mind will descend from the heights of contemplation. By “spiritual refreshment,” Aquinas refers to the experiences of devotion, fervour, and joy that were considered to be a goal—and, for some theologians, the primary goal—of prayer. Tugwell argues that Aquinas departs from this tradition by de-emphasizing prayer as a form of contemplation.²⁸ While it is true that Aquinas does not go into

²⁴ Aquinas, *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum*, IV 15.4.2.

²⁵ Aquinas, *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum*, IV 15.4.2.

²⁶ Kenny, *Medieval Philosophy*, 239. According to Alfred R. Mele, modern psychology tends to assume that intentions are by nature conscious. Mele argues that this assumption has obscured recent debates about the neurobiology of free will. During the 1980s, Benjamin Libet performed a series of experiments in which subjects were directed to move their wrists at random intervals, while watching a clock and noting the precise time that they became aware of the intention to move. The subjects were hooked up to that measured the level of biochemical activity in their brain. According to Libet’s findings, the surges in brain-activity preceded the intention to move by a couple of hundred of milliseconds. Mele disputes the influential interpretation that intentions are merely ad-hoc representations of biological processes by questioning whether the intention to the move is the same thing as the consciousness of the intention to move. “Conscious Intentions.”

²⁷ Aquinas, *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum*, IV 15.4.2. “Et sicut virtus motionis primae continue debilitatur, ut quandoque lapis impulsus quiescat, vel contrario modo moveatur, nisi iterum impellatur.”

²⁸ Tugwell, “Prayer, Humpty Dumpty, and Thomas Aquinas,” 36-7.

much detail about the contemplative aspect of prayer in the *Summa*, I am not sure that Aquinas would go so far as to call spiritual refreshment an “incidental” benefit of prayer.

Aquinas identifies three different types of *attentio* that are possible in vocal prayer: “One kind attends to the words, lest one err in pronouncing them, a second attends to the sense of the words, and a third attends to the end of prayer, namely to God, and to the thing for which we are praying.”²⁹ It is the third kind of attention that is most necessary. Even *idiotae*, those who do not understand what their mouths are uttering, are capable of this attention.

The tripartite division of attention raises an interesting question. Can a person exercise these three forms of attention simultaneously? In his *Commentary on the Sentences*, Aquinas considers the following objection:

By prayer the intellect is meant to ascend to God, as Damascene says, and the affections are meant to be directed toward him, as Augustine says. But if the soul is occupied in bodily acts, this hinders the ascent of the mind and of the affections to the things of God, because the soul cannot be engaged with any intensity in several different things at the same time.³⁰

The axiom that “the soul cannot be engaged with any intensity in several different things at the same time” recalls Augustine’s theory of *intentio* as a force spread throughout the body in varying degrees of tension.³¹ Indeed, in another work, Aquinas cites Augustine as having demonstrated this principle:

We find in all powers of the soul that when one power is intent on its act, another is either weakened in its act or entirely distracted [*abstrahitur*]. Thus it’s clear in the case of

²⁹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIa-IIae 83.13. “[U]na quidem, qua attenditur ad verba, ne aliquis in eis erret; secunda, qua attenditur ad sensum verborum; tertia qua attenditur ad finem orationis, scilicet ad Deum, et ad rem pro qua oratur.”

³⁰ Aquinas, *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum*, IV 15.4.2. “Praeterea, per orationem debet intellectus in Deum ascendere, secundum Damascenum, et affectus in Deum dirigi, secundum Augustinum. Sed occupatio animae circa corporales actus retrahit ascensum intellectus et affectus ad divina; quia anima non potest intense circa diversa occupari. Ergo oratio debet esse sine voce tantum in corde.”

³¹ See, for instance, Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia-IIae 33.3. In his *Commentary on Dionysius’ Mystical Theology*, Albert the Great makes a similar claim about the limits of multitasking: “when one of our powers is working with particular intensity, another power is weakened in its operation, as the philosopher says” (chapter 1). Tugwell notes that the reference to Aristotle is likely *De Sensu* 7 (447a14-5).

someone whose visual operation is very strongly intent that his hearing does not perceive things that are said, unless perhaps by their vehemence those things [*trahant*] draw the sense of hearing to themselves. The reason for this is that attention [*intentio*] is required for the act of any cognitive power, as Augustine shows in *De trinitate*.³²

It is worth noting that Augustine's examples of preoccupation in *De Trinitate* were cases in which the person was focused on mental phenomena—whether thoughts or memory-images—and not other objects of sense. There is another more important difference: while claiming *intentio* as the prerequisite for cognition, Aquinas also admits that loud noises can draw the sense of hearing to themselves, seemingly without the intervention of *intentio*. As Robert Pasnau points out, this passage is an example of Aquinas trying to reconcile Augustine's insistence on the active nature of perception with an Aristotelian framework that sees perception as a fundamentally passive process. Pasnau suggests that Aquinas develops a hybrid model in which attention is “a state that the senses are put into, either as a result of will's command or perhaps just as an automatic reaction to a loud noise.”³³ When the senses are in this state of readiness, they can receive the form of the object. In other words, attention can be oriented both exogenously and endogenously. Aquinas' modification of Augustine's theory of *intentio* represents an important innovation in the history of attention.

If the soul cannot focus on more than one object at a time, it would seem to follow that a person focused on the “bodily act” of praying out loud would be unable to direct his attention beyond the senses. Not so, insists Aquinas in his refutation of the objection stated above. He argues that, as long as they are directed at the same object, the different faculties of the soul do not distract from one another. In fact, they can aid one another:

When two faculties are engaged in the same pursuit they do not hinder each other's functioning, they help each other; for instance, the senses help the imagination when they

³² Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate*, 13.3c. “Hoc enim in omnibus animae potentiis invenimus quod, quando una potentia in suo actu intenditur, alia vel debilitatur in suo actu vel ex toto abstrahitur, sicut patet in illo in quo operatio visus fortissime intenditur quod auditus eius non percipit ea quae dicuntur nisi forte sua vehementia ad se trahant sensum audientis; cuius ratio est quia ad actum alicuius cognoscitivae potentiae requiritur intentio, ut probat Augustinus in libro De Trinitate.” Quoted and translated in Pasnau, *Theories of Cognition*, 134.

³³ Pasnau, *Theories of Cognition*, 144-5.

are directed toward the same object. So when we express our meaning aloud, it does not interfere with the ascent of the intellect to God, unless we take too much trouble over the actual formulation of what we want to say, as some people do who strive to use elaborately structured language in their prayer.³⁴

Aquinas supposes a synergistic relation between the act of speaking and the intellect's ascent to God. Aquinas imagines a conversion toward the senses that is not an aversion away from God. This balance of attention is disturbed, though, if the person focuses too much on the actual words of the prayer. Such a person is like a musician who is overly conscious of the particularities of his playing and thus makes mistakes.³⁵ If the third kind of attentiveness is strong enough, it will obliterate the other types, as the person will forget about all other things, including the prayer he is currently making.

Attentive prayer means more than just praying “in a tongue.” Aquinas cites Paul to underscore how the third effect of prayer—spiritual consolation—depends on attention: “If I pray in a tongue, my understanding is without fruit” (1 Cor. 14:14-5).³⁶ The Pauline passage was a touchstone for medieval discussions of prayer. But it is enigmatic and generated a diversity of interpretations about the meanings of the three key terms (“tongue,” “spirit,” and “understanding”). In the question on prayer in the *Summa*, praying in a tongue represents inattentive prayer—reciting the words mechanically or haphazardly while the mind is focused on some other, non-divine object. Aquinas interprets the passage differently in his *First Lectures on St. Paul*. There he argues that praying in a tongue signifies praying without comprehension: “if there is some simple person (*idiota*) saying his prayers, reciting a psalm or the Our Father, and

³⁴ Aquinas, *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum*, IV 15.4.2. “Ad tertium dicendum, quod quando duae vires ordinatae sunt ad idem, una non impedit aliam in suo actu, sed magis iuvat, sicut sensus imaginationem, quando ad idem ordinantur; sic intentio expressa per vocem non impedit ascensum intellectus ad Deum, nisi nimia cura in verbis proferendis fiat, sicut illi qui verba composita in oratione proferre nituntur.”

³⁵ Aquinas, *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum*, IV 15.4.2.

³⁶ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIa-IIae 83.13. “Si orem lingua, mens mea sine fructu est.” The full biblical verse is as follows: “For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prayeth, but my understanding is without fruit. What is it then? I will pray with the spirit, I will pray also with the understanding” (1 Cor. 14:14-5). Scriptural translations are from the Douay-Rheims version.

he does not understand what he is saying, then he is praying ‘with a tongue.’”³⁷ Such a person will derive less benefit from his prayers than someone who understands what he is saying: “The one who understands gains refreshment both in his intellect and in his feelings, whereas the mind of the person who does not understand does not benefit from any refreshment.”³⁸ In the *Commentary on the Sentences*, Aquinas had stated that if any of three kinds of attention are present, the prayer cannot be considered inattentive (*inattenta*).³⁹ Now he is arguing that the second kind of attention is a necessary condition for spiritual refreshment. The *idiotae* are out of luck. Aquinas explicitly links *attentio* and comprehension: “anyone who is not paying attention [*attendit*] to his prayer or who does not understand his prayer does lose this benefit [*fructum devotionis spiritualis*].”⁴⁰ Praying with understanding means both attending to the prayer and comprehending it. The linking of attention, comprehension, and spiritual refreshment, would prove influential for later writers.⁴¹

Aquinas is willing to tolerate a certain degree of mental wandering during prayer. After all, as the peasant in the *Golden Legend* discovers, “it is hardly possible to say a single Our Father without our minds wandering off to other things.”⁴² Even holy men struggle to keep their attention focused during prayer.⁴³ A person is blameworthy, however, if he deliberately lets himself become distracted: “If you allow your mind to be distracted [*evagetur*] from prayer on

³⁷ Aquinas, *Super I ad Corinthios*, 14.3. “[S]i sit aliquis idiota, qui faciat orationem suam, dicens Psalmum, vel Pater noster, et non intelligat ea quae dicit, iste orat lingua.” English translations are from Aquinas, *The First Lectures on St. Paul*, trans. Tugwell. Interpreting “understanding” to mean comprehension was a common way of reading the Pauline passage. Zieman, “Reading, Singing and Understanding,” 100-1; Saenger, “Books of Hours,” 257.

³⁸ Aquinas, *Super I ad Corinthios*, 14.3. “Nam ille qui intelligit, reficitur et quantum ad intellectum et quantum ad affectum; sed mens eius, qui non intelligit, est sine fructu refectionis.”

³⁹ Aquinas, *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum*, IV 15.4.2.

⁴⁰ Aquinas, *Super I ad Corinthios*, 14.3. “Et quantum ad fructum devotionis spiritualis privatur qui non attendit ad ea quae orat, seu non intelligit.”

⁴¹ The fifteenth-century *Myroure of oure Ladye*, for instance, argues that the highest form of “entendaunce”—attention to the “gostly vnderstondynge” of the prayer—presupposes comprehension of the words, which is what the author aims to provide through his programme of vernacular translation and commentary (49). Understanding what the words mean provides comfort to the soul. The *Myroure* does, however, allow that those who pray without comprehending can experience some “sauoure” in their prayers: “som symple soules haue other whyle good sauoure and deuocyon, though they vnderstand ryght nought what they say” (49).

⁴² Aquinas, *Super I ad Corinthios*, 14.3. “[S]ed quantum ad fructum meriti, non est dicendum quod privetur: quia sic multae orationes essent sine merito, cum vix unum pater noster potest homo dicere, quin mens ad alia feratur.”

⁴³ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIa-IIae 83.13.

purpose, this is a sin and it deprives the prayer of its effect.”⁴⁴ How does the mind become distracted on purpose? Aquinas does not specify. The question is considered at more length in the *Commentary on the Sentences*. Aquinas quotes Hugh of St. Victor: “If we are turning over something else in our mind while we pray, even if it is something good, we are not without fault.”⁴⁵ Aquinas softens this hardline position. He interprets Hugh’s quotation as follows: “Hugh is to be understood as referring to people deliberately turning their minds to other things while praying, because then they are not without fault, particularly if they wantonly engage themselves in something which will distract the mind, such as some kind of external work.”⁴⁶ If this other activity is opposed to prayer, then he commits mortal sin. The more interesting case is what happens when our minds wander without us noticing: “But if our minds wander off to other things without our noticing, then there is either no fault or only a very slight fault, unless we have to say that there was some fault involved in the things we were thinking about before praying, which prompted the distraction.”⁴⁷ Aquinas’ qualification points to the fact that the thoughts that enter our head when we are distracted are not always, or even mostly, random and unmotivated. A thought that has been “coloured” by desire will return with its own momentum.⁴⁸ If we have consented to the thought in the past, our consent can continue even if we are distracted. As Aquinas puts it, “consent follows the habitual inclination unless a great deal of deliberation is exercised beforehand.”⁴⁹ Distraction, by its nature, affords little space for deliberation. The mind that finds itself entangled in its habitual sinful thinking will lose the *virtu* of its prayer.

⁴⁴ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIa-IIae 83.13. “Ad tertium dicendum quod si quis ex proposito in oratione mente evagetur, hoc peccatum est, et impedit orationis fructum.”

⁴⁵ Aquinas, *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum*, IV 15.4.2. “Praeterea, Hugo de sancto Victore dicit: si cum orationem fundimus, aliud quodlibet in corde versamus, etiam si illud bonum sit, a culpa liberi non sumus.” According to Tugwell, the source of the Hugh of St. Victor quotation is unknown.

⁴⁶ Aquinas, *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum*, IV 15.4.2. “[Q]uod verbum Hugonis intelligendum est quando aliquis ex proposito mentem ad alia distrahit in orando; tunc enim sine culpa non est, praecipue si in aliis sponte se occupat quae mentem distrahunt, sicut sunt exteriora opera; et si ad contrarium mens evagetur, etiam culpa mortalis erit.” Cf. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia-IIae 74.10.

⁴⁷ Aquinas, *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum*, IV 15.4.2. “Si autem sine hoc quod percipiamus, mens ad alia evagetur; vel culpa caret, vel parvissima culpa est; nisi praecedens cogitatio, ex qua contingit evagatio talis, in culpa esse dicatur.”

⁴⁸ The image of thoughts coloured by desire comes from Gregory the Great. See Zeeman, *Piers Plowman*, 91.

⁴⁹ Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate*, 24.12. English translations are from Aquinas, *Truth*, trans. Schmidt. On the role that habit plays in deliberation and consent, see Breen, *Imagining an English Reading Public*, 206.

The phenomenon of distracted prayer forces Aquinas to distinguish between *attentio* and *intentio*. *Attentio* is born out of distraction. When praying, the *attentio* may wander, but, if the *intentio* remains focused on the end of prayer, even if only virtually, the prayer will be effective. Sustained attention is necessarily only for spiritual refreshment, which Aquinas links to contemplation and comprehension. The force of the *intentio* can be broken if the mind turns deliberately from its prayers or, more troubling, if the distraction is the result of a sinful thought has previously been consented to.

Walter Hilton: “Entente” and Performance

One of Hilton’s surviving Latin works is a letter addressed to a priest who is experiencing some difficulties with his spiritual progress. Among other topics, *Epistola de Leccione* advises the priest on how best to pray:

When you are at prayer, direct your intention and attention [*intencionem et attentionem*] to the Lord: that is, let your intention be applied to the worship of God, with all the powers of mind and body concentrated on this. And your attention, too, should be formed in the same way: withdraw [*Abstrahe*] the point of your thought [*aciem mentis*] from every bodily thing, from all past and future actions and words of yours which have to do with temporal matters, from all affection for creatures and dwelling on them in imagination, and as far as is possible, from all the activity of your senses; then direct your thought by a holy desire [*pio desiderio*] toward God, for you cannot yet see him in your understanding or feel him in your affection.⁵⁰

Prayer should involve the co-ordination of *intentio* and *attentio*. Hilton had earlier explained that, despite the priest’s faults, chief among them his habit of *curiositas*, his *intentio* remains directed at God through God’s grace (*per Diem gratiam*).⁵¹ In order to purify the mind, though, the priest

⁵⁰ Hilton, *Epistola de Leccione*, ll. 282-91, trans. modified. “In orando namque dirige intencionem et attentionem tuam in Domino, uidelicet ut preparetur intencio tua seruire Domino cum omnibus potenciis anime tue et membris corporis ad hoc dispositis et ordinatis. Sit eciam attentio tua sic generaliter formata. Abstrahe uidelicet aciem mentis tue ab omni re corporea, ab omnibus actibus et dictis tuis prioribus et futuris rerum temporalium, ab omnibus affectionibus creaturarum et earum vana ymaginacione, et quantum potes ab omni sensualitate tua, et dirige illam quodam pio desiderio in Deum, velut in quoddam summum quod nondum uides per intellectum nec sentis per affectum.” English translations are from Hilton, “A Letter to a Hermit,” trans. Russell-Smith.

⁵¹ Hilton, *Epistola de Leccione*, 95-101.

should work to increase and strengthen his *intentio* so that it may be “pure, whole, lasting and not intermittent.”⁵² Even if it feels onerous at times, the *intentio* should stretch (*intensa et extensa*) toward God without any voluntary interruption.⁵³ The language Hilton is using to describe *intentio* is deeply Augustinian, but it is an Augustinianism mediated by scholastic interventions. Clarifying what it means to pray “without voluntary interruption,” Hilton invokes a distinction between the *intentio* and the act itself: “I am speaking to you of your intention, not strictly of the action itself, which will sometimes cease from necessity, as when you are asleep, and sometimes be set aside through the weakness and frailty of human nature”⁵⁴ Nonetheless, if it is whole, the *intentio* will persevere and direct the priest’s attention back to God.

In addition to *intentio*, Hilton uses *attentio*, and although the distinction is not as clear as it is in Aquinas’ discussion of prayer, Hilton clearly understands the two terms to mean different things. *Attentio* is associated with the *acies mentis*—the point of thought—an Augustinian phrase referring to the highest part of the intellect that came to be widely used in late medieval theology.⁵⁵ The mind’s eye should abstract itself from thoughts about the future and the past. It should aim for the “total concentration of the heart” (*toto ictu cordis*) that Augustine experienced in his vision at Ostia, when future and past dissolved into a timeless moment.⁵⁶ There is an apophatic quality to this endeavor: the mind’s eye should pare away thoughts and perceptions and turn toward a God that cannot yet be seen in the understanding (*intellectum*) or felt in the affection (*affectum*). Hilton is envisioning prayer as a fairly advanced form of contemplation. He is urging his reader to exercise the third, and most important, kind of *attentio* identified by

⁵² Hilton, *Epistola de Leccione*, 251-54. “Verumptamen ut edifices perfecte super hoc fundamento oportet ut intencio tua sit pura, integra, iugis, non interpollata, id est continue intensa et extensa in Deum, non querens requiem voluntarie nisi in illo.”

⁵³ Hilton, *Epistola de Leccione*, 253.

⁵⁴ Hilton, *Epistola de Leccione*, 269-72. “Istud dico tibi de intencione, non tamen ita stricte dico de accione, que propter necessitatem quandoque cessabit, ut in sompno, et quandoque propter infirmitatem et fragilitatem humane corrupcionis remittetur.”

⁵⁵ On *acies mentis* in Augustinian thought, see Van Fleteren, “Acies Mentis.”

⁵⁶ Augustine, *Confessions*, 9.10.24.

Aquinas—attention to the end of prayer, God, which can be so strong that the person praying forgets himself and his prayer. For Hilton, too, praying attentively annihilates the self.⁵⁷

But Hilton also emphasizes the importance of paying close attention to the words of prayer. Being a priest, the addressee of his letter should recite the canonical hours with “greater devotion and attention [*deuocione et attentione*] in so far as you can.”⁵⁸ He should not rush through the words or think about other prayers and meditations. Hilton’s emphasis of this point is likely related to the fact that the priest suffers from the habit of *curiositas*. He anxiously desires to seek out hidden things, and, despite having enclosed himself within a cell, his mind wanders, occupied by various objects.⁵⁹ Attentive prayer might curb this tendency: “This attentiveness [*consideracio*] will perhaps drive out the distaste you feel, and rid your heart of its constant itch for something new and different.”⁶⁰ Hilton touches upon a long tradition of prayer as an ascetic practice intended to stabilize the wandering heart. The desert fathers used vocal prayer as a focusing technique, a method of dispelling the restlessness associated with *curiositas* and *acedia* (sloth).⁶¹ Evagrius of Pontus gives a vivid description of the kind of mental wandering that afflicts monks suffering from *acedia*: these monks are impelled “to look constantly towards the windows, to jump out of the cell, to watch the sun to see how far it is from the ninth hour, to look this way and that.”⁶² Selecting a short phrase from scripture and repeating it out loud can help to stabilize the mind and protect it against demonic incursions. Via Augustine, Aquinas mentions this practice as useful in preventing the attention from flagging. As I will explore in more detail later, some of Hilton’s contemporaries recommend a variation on monologic prayer. Hilton is more ambivalent about the ascetic potential of prayer. He only goes so far as to claim that *perhaps* (*forsan*) paying close attention to the words will stabilize the priest’s mind. This “perhaps” is significant, because it hints at Hilton’s insistence—unfolded at length elsewhere in

⁵⁷ Hilton, *Epistola de Leccione*, 292.

⁵⁸ Hilton, *Epistola de Leccione*, 303.

⁵⁹ Hilton, *Epistola de Leccione*, 93; 60.

⁶⁰ Hilton, *Epistola de Leccione*, 309-11. “Et hec consideracio forsan depellet fastidium cordis tui, et illum cordis tui prurimum semper noua et insolita desiderantem penitus amputabit.”

⁶¹ Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 107. According to Columba Stewart, “[t]he question of focus is the single most important practical problem [John] Cassian addresses in his monastic theology” (105).

⁶² Evagrius of Pontus, *The Monk*, 12.

his work, as we will see—that the effects generated by attentive prayer are not caused by the individual’s own efforts, but by the intervention of God’s grace. Whether or not the priest actually achieves stability of mind through prayer is ultimately up to God. It would be a mistake for the priest to view his prayers solely or even primarily as a vehicle with which to stabilize his attention. As an organ of the Church, the priest has a duty to say his prayers accurately, albeit a duty that he should treat as if it were a free gift.⁶³ If his attention wanders or his desire is tepid, the fault is his, to be sure, but the Church that will render the prayers efficacious, provided that the priest repent for his carelessness (*necgligencia*).⁶⁴

In his English works, Hilton translates the technical Latin terms *intentio* and *attentio* in a variety of ways. Generally he uses “entente” or “entencion” to translate *intentio*. In the *Scale* I, Hilton defines the “hool [and] stable entencion” that is one of the prerequisites of spiritual work as “an hool wille and a desyre oonli to plesse God” (1.22.578-9). He tends to use the terms “wille,” “desyre,” and “entencion/entente” fairly interchangeably. *Attentio* is harder for Hilton to convey in English, since “attention” has not yet established itself and the distinction would be muddled if he also used “entente” to refer to “attention,” as many of his contemporaries do. For instance, *The Myroure of Oure Ladye*, a fifteenth-century translation and commentary of the Latin office used by the nuns at Syon, aims to help its readers “entend” their prayers more fully.⁶⁵ As Elizabeth Schirmer points out, the terms “entend” and “entendaunce” blur the distinction between attention and intention: “An active, participial form of ‘entente’ or intent—encompassing both intending (willing) and attending (listening attentively, paying attention)—‘entendaunce’ refers to an effort of the will with regards to the meaning of the text one is most immediately reading, an effort that both grows from, and seeks to form, an inner, spiritual life.”⁶⁶ Hilton is keener to preserve the distinction that is developing between the two senses. To translate *attentio*, Hilton often uses periphrases, representing, for example, attentiveness as a

⁶³ Hilton, *Epistola de Leccione*, 313-15.

⁶⁴ Hilton, *Epistola de Leccione*, 331-35.

⁶⁵ For the reception of Hilton’s works at Syon Abbey, see Gillespie, “Walter Hilton at Syon Abbey.”

⁶⁶ Schirmer, “Reading Lessons at Syon Abbey,” 354. See also Zieman, *Singing the New Song*, 127.

gathering of thought: “gadre thyn affeccoun and thi thought for to seie hem more sadli and more devouteli” (1.27.692-3).

In the *Scale* and the *Mixed Life*, Hilton reiterates the need to exercise the “entencion” toward God continuously. The “entencion” is identified with the infused virtue of charity, which in turn is identified with grace (*Scale* 1.22.579-80; 1.68.1950-1).⁶⁷ There will be occasions when a person cannot “performe [her] entent,” when she cannot attend to God due to the fact that she is asleep, eating or thinking about something else (1.22.589-90). The inevitability of distraction does not mean that people should deliberately seek out distractions. Hilton rejects the idea that engaging with idle thoughts and actions can be useful in relaxing the mind, a medieval tradition I explore in length in Chapter 5. Lay people in particular will have a great deal of difficulty performing their “entent.” Their spiritual lives are filled with interruptions. They are preoccupied with worldly business and lack the leisure and training required to discipline their attention: they are not able to “fulli setten here herte to profiten in goosteli wirkyng” (*Scale* 2.18.905). In the *Mixed Life*, Hilton’s epistle to a lord who is trying, like Proba, to further his spiritual progress while remaining active in the world, Hilton downplays the importance of praying attentively. (Hilton does suggest however that performing active works can improve the quality of attention exercised in prayer, since these intervals of work dispel the sloth and idleness that fester under the “colour of contemplacion”).⁶⁸ What matters more is ensuring that the desire motivating both prayer and active works is as intense as possible. Quoting Augustine, Hilton describes desire for God as a kind of prayer in itself, “a greet cryng in þe eeris of God” (474). Hilton explains that it is possible to exercise this desire continually in habit, but not deed (539-40). To illustrate this principle, he gives an example:

3if þou were sike, þou schulde haue, as eche man haþ, a kendeli desire of bodili heele
continueli in þyn herte, what thou dide, wheþir þou slepe or þou wake, but not ai jliche,
for 3if þou slepe, or ellis wake and þenkest on sum wordli þinge, þanne þou hast þis

⁶⁷ Clark points out how a majority of medieval theologians, including Aquinas, distinguish between charity and grace. “Intencion in Walter Hilton,” 70n6.

⁶⁸ Hilton, *Mixed Life*, ll. 325-7. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically by line number(s).

desire in habite oonli, and not in worchinge. But whanne þou þenkest on þi sikenesse and of þi bodily heele, þanne hast þou it in vsynge. (541-7)

The desire for God is compared to the desire for health, which is actualized in deed when the sick person thinks about his sickness, but operates only habitually if he is asleep or thinking about something else.⁶⁹ The reference to “sum wordli þinge” in the third line is rather curious. It is as if Hilton has forgotten for a moment that now, according to the analogy, he is talking about sickness, a “wordli þinge,” and no longer God. He cannot keep his attention focused on the vehicle; it reverts back to the tenor. One way to read this apparent slip would be to see it as performing the very dynamic between “entente” and performance that Hilton is articulating. Aquinas observed how the thoughts that distract us from our tasks are set in motion by previous desires and acts of consent. In Hilton’s case, we might see his word choice as motivated by the “entente” for God that continues to operate habitually, drawing his attention back to God. His slip becomes a legible structure through which we can trace his desire.

When the attention wanders or slumbers, the “entente” remains vigilant. If a person falls into idle occupation or vain speech, either through weakness or negligence, the “entente” will act as a safeguard, a prick that recalls her to herself. She can then reorient herself and “turne agen hastili into inwarde biholdynge of Jhesu Crist bi praieres or bi summe gode dede or ocupacion” (*Scale* 1.22.594-9). Hilton gives an example of a contemplative who feels pleasure when stirred by feelings of vainglory; he delights in these stirrings only because “he perceyveth hit not” (1.60.1708-9). He is drawn to the feelings without realizing it. When he “cometh to himself,” pricked by the desire to please God that he has earlier set in his heart, he will then rebuke himself, oppose the stirring with his will, and ask God’s forgiveness for this venial sin (1.60.1709-10). If, on the other hand, he assents to the stirring, then he commits mortal sin.⁷⁰ That assent is necessary for mortal sin to take place was a widely accepted theological tenet, but Hilton points out how in practice it can be difficult to tell if assent has occurred: “whanne thei

⁶⁹ The example is similar to one used by Aquinas to demonstrate the perduring effect of virtual intention: while the healer is collecting herbs to make his concoction, he may not be thinking about health, but he is nonetheless intending health virtually (*[v]irtualiter...intendit*). *Quaestiones disputatae de caritate* 1.11.

⁷⁰ Clark considers various theological explanations for the possibility of committing deadly sin without losing the habit of charity. “Intention in Walter Hilton,” 74-5.

han feelid fleschli stirynges of pride, of envie, of covetise, or of leccherie, or of ony othir heed synne, thei witen not sumtyme whethir thei sentiden to hem or noo” (2.521-3). When a person comes to himself, there tends to be doubt about what occurred in the interval. The will’s movements are not always accessible to the mind. This fact applies as much to virtuous actions as it does to vicious ones: “whan þou doost a good deede, or praieest or þenkest on God, þenk not in þyn herte, doutynghe wheþir þou desirest or noon, for þi deede schewep þi desire” (*Mixed Life* 561-3). Hilton argues that the “entente” of prayer matters more than its performance, especially for laypeople, but here he suggests that the “entente” cannot be known outside of its performance. The relationship between an “entente” and its performance is dynamic and reciprocal. Not only does prayer increase desire, but it clarifies it – we know what we desire, and how much we desire, by expressing that desire through praying. Even still, Hilton suggests that the full measure of one’s desire is known only to God.

The “Maistrie” of Attention

Prayer is most effective when *intentio* and *attentio* align. But the distinction between the two opens up the possibility that they are not always synchronized. Hilton devotes a lengthy chapter of *Scale* I to the problem of distracted prayer. Following Aquinas, Hilton stresses the importance of establishing an initial “entente” before praying: “Whenne thou schalt praie, make thyn entente and thi wil in the biginnyng as hool and as clene to God as thou mai schorteli in thi mynde, and than bigynne and do as thou mai” (*Scale* 1.33.835-7). At this moment, *intentio* and *attentio* are united. The co-ordination cannot last long; *attentio* will slip away “schorteli.” When the attention wanders from the prayer, the “entente” will ensure that the prayer is meritorious and will be rewarded by God: “For wite thou weel that thou art excusid of thi dette, and thou schalt have meede for it as for anothir good dede that thou doost in charité, though thyn herte were not thereupon in the doynge” (1.33.843-5). Hilton reassures his readers that praying inattentively cannot be avoided in this life (1.33.848). When a person is going about her daily business, she does not realize how many distracting thoughts cross her mind. As soon as she tries to pray, she is overwhelmed by them:

For whanne thou woldest have the mynde of thyn herte upward to God in praier, thou felist so many veyn thoughtis of thyn owen deedis bifore doon, or what thou schalt doon,

or of othir mennys dedis, and siche many othire lettynge and tarynge thee, so that thou mai nevere fele savor ne reste in thi praiere ne devocioun in thi seiynge. (1.33.818-22).

Thoughts of the past and future drag the mind downward, away from God. It often feels that the harder we try to keep our attention focused, the more it strays (1.33.822-3). There are some people who will never achieve any respite from distraction in prayer: “For ther is many a soule that never mai fynde reste of herte in praiere, but al here lifyme aren stryvande with here thoughtis and taryed and troblid with hem” (1.33.855-6). They should not try to overcome their distraction by force of will: “Stryve no more therewith, ne hange noo lenger therupon, as thou woldest bi maistrie not fele siche wrecchidnesse” (1.33.851-2). Instead, they should recognize their inconstancy of mind and ask God for mercy. As long as they remain in a state of humility and charity, they will receive “mede” in heaven for their efforts. It is difficult to say whether the anchoress to whom the work is addressed would find this frank admission comforting. Desiring God is a sufficient end goal for the layperson, but the contemplative is seeking to be reformed not only in faith, but in faith and affection, and this latter goal involves feeling some degree of “savor” and “reste.”

We might read the chapter on distracted prayer as a moment in which Hilton is envisioning a wider audience for his work, one that extends beyond those who have chosen the contemplative life. As Tugwell argues in relation to Aquinas, the importance of attentiveness varies depending on the extent to which prayer is seen as a form of contemplation. In Book II of the *Scale*, which is more concerned with the higher stages of contemplation, Hilton states that when the contemplative prays “everiche silable and every word is sowned savourli, sweteli and delitabli, with ful acord of mouth and of herte” (2.42.3172-5).⁷¹ The prayers of those living the active life, by contrast, consist of two disjunctive words: the word they form in their heart, while thinking about worldly business, and the word they utter with their mouth (2.41.3128-9). While these divided prayers have merit, they lack sweetness and savour. Significantly, unlike the *Myroure*,

⁷¹ Book I had positioned silent prayer as the highest form of prayer (1.32.790-814). The description of praying with special grace in Book II does not privilege the heart over the mouth, but reconciles the two in “ful accord.” Cf. Saenger, “Books of Hours,” 257-8.

Hilton does not ascribe the disjunction between heart and mouth to incomprehension.⁷² It results from a lack of attention.⁷³ But Hilton reiterates the warning from Book I that the “accord of mouth and of herte” and the sweetness that results are not achieved by “maistrie.” While reformation in faith and feeling demands some labour on the part of the contemplative, this labour plays a secondary role: “For it mai not be geten thorough studie ne bi mannys traveile oonli, but principali thorough grace of the Hooli Goost and with traveile of man” (40.2858-60). For Hilton, striving to attain “maistrie” of attention can actually hinder the soul from receiving grace.

The clearest expression of Hilton’s ambivalence toward the disciplining of attention occurs in *Of Angels’ Song*. The treatise is intended to help its readers distinguish between divine visitations, especially as manifested in song, and phenomena that are merely self-generated. According to Hilton, hearing the song of angels is the “souerayne Ioye of þe saule” (178).⁷⁴ It is heard by those who have had their soul purified by the love of God (179). There are many who claim to hear the song but are deceived by their own imagination or demonic interference (179). Hilton identifies one spiritual practice in particular that encourages delusion: “some man is desceyued on þis wyse: He heris wel say þat it is gude till haue Ihesu in hys mynde, or any opir gude worde of god, þan he streynes hys herte myzttly to þat name, & be a custome he has it nerehande alway in hys mynde” (181). The tradition of monologic prayer extends back to the Desert Fathers, but, as Denis Renevey notes, devotion to Jesus’s name was a popular trend in late medieval devotional

⁷² Schirmer, “Reading Lessons at Syon Abbey,” 358-9. Hilton’s decoupling of comprehension and spiritual refreshment is evident in his discussion of silent prayer in Book I of the *Scale*. He cites and interprets the passage from *I Corinthians* about praying in a tongue:

Yif y prairie with my tunge oonli, bi wille of spirit and bi traveil, the preier is meedful, but my soule is not fed, for it felith not the frughte of goostli swettenesse bi undirstondyng. What schal y thanne doo? seith Seynt Poul. And he answereth and seith: I schal prairie bi travaile and bi desire of the spirit, and I schal pray also more inward in my spirit withouten travaile, bi felinge of goosteli savour and the swettenesse of the love and the sight of God, bi the whiche sight and felyng of love my soule schal be fed. (*Scale* 1.32.799-805).

“Understanding” does not mean comprehension here, but something closer to the Augustinian *intellectus*, which Hilton links with “feeling.” Clark, “Augustine, Anselm, and Walter Hilton,” 12-13.

⁷³ Zieman argues that many late medieval discussions of the proper performance of the liturgy “figure the lack of [semantic] mastery as a temporary state resulting from a failure of attention, not as a permanent condition stemming from a lack of literacy” (*Singing the New Song*, 125).

⁷⁴ Quotations are from the text based on MS. Cambridge University Library Dd v. 55 in Hilton, *Of Angels’ Song*.

practice.⁷⁵ The late fourteenth-century *Cloud of Unknowing* includes a variation on the practice.⁷⁶ The *Cloud*-author exhorts his readers to direct a “naked entent” to God, and, if need be, to enwrap this “entent” in a single word, preferably consisting of one syllable.⁷⁷ Like Evagrius, the *Cloud*-author sees the word as a shield that will repel distracting thoughts: “yif any thought prees apou thee to aske thee what thou woldest have, answeere him with no mo wordes bot with this o worde.”⁷⁸ The contemplative should not analyze the meaning of the word; it should remain whole, unbroken. The repetition of the word is meant to shear it of its semantic meaning and remove it from a radial network of associations that threaten to carry the mind elsewhere.⁷⁹ For the *Cloud*-author, fastening the heart to a single word offers a way to move beyond the distraction of language and thought.

Hilton does not dispute the value of meditating on Christ’s name or other holy words. Some manuscripts of *Scale I* contain a passage on the name of Jesus in chapter 44 that was likely the work of Hilton himself.⁸⁰ And, in *Scale II*, Hilton offers a mantra-like phrase to remind his readers to be humble and love Christ: “I am nought, I have nought, I coveite not, but oonli for to love Jhesu” (2.22.1234-5).⁸¹ They can use this phrase as protection against the attacks of demons. Hilton is clear that it is not necessary to attend to the words continuously to derive benefit from them. His readers do not need to keep the form of the words in front of their mind’s eye, but they need to keep the meaning of the words in their “entente”: “Thou schalt have the menyng of thise wordes in thyn entente and in habite of thi soule lastanli, though thou have not thise wordes speciali formed ai in thi thought, for that nedeth nought” (2.21.1140-2). The opposition between “entente” and “thought” reflects the distinction between *intentio* and *attentio*

⁷⁵ Renevey, “Name Above Names,” 103.

⁷⁶ Ziemann argues that *Of Angels’ Song* is a critique of the *Cloud*-author. “Perils of *Canor*,” 155-63.

⁷⁷ *The Cloud of Unknowing*, 7.497.

⁷⁸ *The Cloud of Unknowing*, 7.508-9.

⁷⁹ John Cassian maintains that reciting longer forms of scripture can afford opportunity for distraction: the mind can find itself chasing from verse to verse, as the words and images generate links of association, or it can become distracted by thinking about the psalm that is supposed to be recited next. *Conferences* 10.13.1; 23.6.2.

⁸⁰ Renevey, “Name Above Names,” 115.

⁸¹ The *Cloud*-author mentions a similar phrase that can be used to ward off distracting thoughts: “Him I coveite, Him I seche, and nought bot Him” (7.470-71).

that we have been tracing. Just as the “entente” behind prayer continues to be operative even when we are not uttering the words, the meaning of this phrase can endure in the “entente” even if the words themselves are no longer held in mind. The soul can be “printed” by certain thoughts and memories that shape the trajectory and intensity of desire.⁸²

The practice of focusing on Christ’s name is not inherently bad. The danger arises when the practitioner mistakes his own efforts for God’s. Fixating on a “gude worde” can generate a “nakyd mynde of god,” but it is only through grace that this “nakyd mynde” is filled with sweetness (*Angels* 181). Attentiveness by itself is sterile.⁸³ Hilton clarifies the direction of causality at work in prayer: the sweetness of grace is what causes the soul to cry out Jesus’ name over and over again—and not the other way around; and the sweetness of grace is what causes the soul to sing psalms and hymns without “any travayle” (*Angels* 181). The mind that hews too closely to its chosen target insulates itself from distractions that may not be distractions at all, but gifts. As opposed to the common grace that is bestowed to each Christian and persists as long as his general “entente” remains directed toward God, special grace—the grace that fructifies prayer—comes and goes, arriving and departing unexpectedly (2.41.3128-39). Some people are so wedded to their particular form of practice that they do not recognize when grace is encouraging them to pursue new, better ways of practicing (2.18.948-51). Mistaking a means for an end, their desire to perfect a single spiritual practice hinders them from receiving more grace. They should learn from grace, which teaches them “whereupoun he schal sette the poynt of his thought in his praiere, whether upon the wordes that he seith, or elles on God or on the name of Jhesu” (2.42.3237-9). This advice does not only apply to contemplatives. Critics have questioned whether by offering a prescribed “middle way,” the *Mixed Life* was ultimately intended to restrict and control the laity’s engagement with contemplative practice.⁸⁴ While there may be some truth to this claim, the *Mixed Life* affords its readers a fair amount of freedom in deciding which techniques they should use at a given time to best accommodate the experienced directives

⁸² Translating Isaiah 26:8-9, Hilton writes, “Lord Jhesu, the mynde of Thee is printed in desire of my soule, for my soule hath desired Thee in the nyght and my spirite hath coveited Thee in al my thenkyng” (*Scale* 2.24.1353-4).

⁸³ As Zieman puts it, in the eyes of Hilton, the *Cloud*-author “mistakes sterility for sacrality.” “Perils of *Canor*,” 156.

⁸⁴ See, for instance, Bestul, “Walter Hilton,” 99.

of grace.⁸⁵ If, for instance, during prayer, a ghostly thought about Christ enters the mind, the person is free to shift his focus away from the words of the prayer (759-63). He should not hang on to the thought too tightly, though. It is important to let the thought pass away when it will: “be not to bisi to kepe it stille bi maistrie” (768-9). The passing away of the thought will increase the soul’s desire, since desire is fuelled by the absence of what we love (510-8). Always having Christ’s name “nerehand” risks obscuring these generative periods of absence by leading the contemplative to imagine that she is experiencing the divine, when in reality she is experiencing a simulacrum of grace generated by her own efforts. We will see in the next chapter how Julian of Norwich models a form of attention that is focused but capacious, and stable but not static.

Summarizing the practice of monologic prayer in his letter to Proba, Augustine states that attention (*intentio*) is “most necessary” (*plurimum necessaria est*) in prayer.⁸⁶ Later medieval thinkers would interrogate just how necessary it is. They would develop a line of argument suggested in the letter to Proba, which argues that Christians should always be praying by desire no matter what they are doing. Aquinas distinguished between virtual and actual desire, associating virtual desire with the infused habit of charity. There is a virtual desire at work in prayer too, and it ensures that distracted prayers are meritorious. The solution to the practical problem of distracted prayer opened up a theoretical distinction between *attentio* and *intentio*, in which the former is more closely associated with cognition and the latter with volition.

Walter Hilton was deeply concerned with the extent to which attention is necessary in prayer. Hilton presents a sophisticated attempt to come to terms with the inevitability of distraction. His writings are marked by a distinction between “entente” and its performance. As long as the “entente” remains intact, the prayer will accrue merit in heaven, even if the heart is not focused on the performance. For Hilton, though, it can be difficult to say for certain whether a person has assented to the thoughts that press upon the mind when it is trying to pray. Attention is not unimportant; if a person wants to experience spiritual refreshment, she needs to pay attention to

⁸⁵ Hilton suggests that laypeople can experience some degree of what he calls in *Scale II* “special grace”: “And 3if he wole of his free grace ouer þis desire send us of his goostli li3t, and openen oure goostli i3en for to se and knowe more of him þan we haue tofore bi comone trauaile, þanke we him þerof.” *Mixed Life*, 803-7.

⁸⁶ Augustine, *Epistola* 130, 10.20.

the words she is uttering. In the works where prayer is more closely linked to contemplation—the *Epistola de Leccione*, Book II of the *Scale*—attention is emphasized more strongly. Yet, even here, we see an ambivalence surrounding the disciplining of attention. Hilton insists that the ultimate alignment of heart and mouth in prayer comes through the inspiration of grace. Hilton’s work provides us with an indication of how the terminological and conceptual vocabulary of attention was shifting during the later Middle Ages. Although Hilton does not use the English word “attention,” his use of “entente” implies a framework in which attention is distinguished from intention and thus adumbrates the Present-day English distinction between “intention” and “attention.” Along with his predecessors Augustine and Aquinas, Hilton demonstrates that to write the history of attention we must first write the history of prayer.

Chapter 3

Julian of Norwich's Phenomenology of Attention

“Perception gives as well as receives. But how giving, how yielding, is it? How yielding are we, for example, in the way we behold, and thus give attention to, that which the light of visibility yields, and gives over, to our vision? And what is the *character* of our way of giving attention? We need to give much more thought to the way we give our attention to that which shines forth in the field of light.”

-- David Michael Kleinberg-Levin¹

In May 1373, the woman known to us as Julian of Norwich received a revelation. She received sixteen of them, to be precise, each successive one related to the first, a striking vision of Christ bleeding on the crucifix. Much of the meaning of the revelations only became clear in retrospect, after a period of meditation and rumination guided by moments of divine illumination. When Julian is unable to understand fully the significance of a detailed scene in one of her revelations, she receives some inner advice: “It longeth to the to take hede to alle the propertes and the condetions that were shewed in the example, though the thinke that it be misty and indefferent to thy sight.”² Pay attention, the voice urges. This imperative echoes throughout *A Revelation of Love*. Like Hilton, though, Julian is aware of and responsive to the inevitability of distraction. In the analysis that follows, I explore Julian's complex phenomenology of attention—the ways in which her focus is turned, sustained, lost, and recovered.

In a discussion of what the phrase “I saw” might have meant for visionary writing in the Middle Ages, Barbara Newman notes a general tendency to suppress traces of personal agency. She suggests some possible motivations for this move:

¹ Kleinberg-Levin, *The Opening of Vision*, 83.

² Julian of Norwich, *The Writings of Julian Norwich*, 51.74-6. Subsequent references to the long text (*A Revelation*) are cited parenthetically by chapter and line number(s).

[One reason] was the link between visionary experience and women, who were often deemed too “simple” to speak of the things of God unless they became direct channels of his Word. The subtlest but most significant factor may have been the perception of a genuine givenness in the experience itself, however deeply it had been desired, solicited, or anticipated beforehand.³

Many readers of Julian have focused on what Vincent Gillespie and Maggie Ross call her “poetics of effacement.”⁴ Scholars have examined how Julian’s persona of “a simple creature unlettered” and her reticence regarding her sources reflect her precarious social position as a female writer (2.1).⁵ As productive as this line of inquiry has been, this chapter takes a different tack by focusing on the other factor identified by Newman. It argues that Julian practices a form of attentiveness that foregrounds how the revelations are given to her and how she receives them. In other words, she is attentive to her own attentiveness. As a result of this methodological emphasis, her work is rich in phenomenological description.⁶ Anthony J. Steinbock argues that the phenomenological attitude consists of “a peculiar kind of reflective attentiveness . . . not merely as a meta-reflection on what something is, but as an inquiry into how or the way in which things are given and our openness to them.”⁷ Steinbock goes on to describe the phenomenological reduction: “What phenomenology really wants to bracket, then, is a self-implication so as to let the phenomena flash forth as they give themselves; what we become dispassionate about is ourselves through a literal dis-position of the self from the scene, and by so doing, dispose ourselves to be struck *in which ever way* the phenomena give themselves.”⁸

³ Newman, “What Did it Mean to Say ‘I Saw,’” 5.

⁴ Gillespie and Ross, “The Apophatic Image.”

⁵ See, for instance, Baker, *Julian of Norwich’s Showings*; Jantzen, *Julian of Norwich*; and Watson, “The Composition of Julian of Norwich’s *Revelation of Love*.”

⁶ For a phenomenologically nuanced reading of the thirteenth-century Beguine Hadewijch, see Rozenski, “The Promise of Eternity.”

⁷ Steinbock, “Affection and Attention,” 39. In a footnote to *Ideas I*, Husserl indicates that attention could be considered a fundamental kind of intentionality: “not even the essential connection between attention and intentionality—this fundamental fact: that attention of every sort is nothing else than a fundamental species of intensive modifications—has ever, to my knowledge, been emphasized before” (§92n32). P. Sven Arvidson argues that Husserl’s work does not clearly distinguish attention and intentionality. *The Sphere of Attention*, 130.

⁸ Steinbock, “Affection and Attention,” 40. See also Steinbock, *Phenomenology and Mysticism*, 3-5. Steinbock’s investigation into the links between phenomenology and mysticism develops a line of inquiry initiated by Heidegger. As scholars have noted, there are parallels between Heidegger’s method of “formal indication”—which,

Julian dis-positions herself not by eradicating all traces of her self-impositions, but by registering them in precise detail.⁹ She highlights the process of receiving the revelations: how she variously anticipates, is enticed by, grasps, misses, and retains the bodily and ghostly images that flash through her soul. When Julian declares her intention to “sey as I saw,” we should hear the emphasis on the “as” (44.5). She not only tells us what she saw, she tells us how she saw.

The process of seeing continued long after the original series of revelations ceased. Julian’s work is preserved in two extant versions: the longer, more detailed version—*A Revelation of Love*—was likely composed later, the product of sustained reflection on the events of May 1373 and perhaps even the shorter text itself.¹⁰ In both texts, Julian chronicles how her understanding of the revelations alters over time. She frequently uses the qualifier “in this time” to signal the provisional status of an interpretation; for example, she concludes that Christ’s act of redemption will remain a mystery until completed, according “to the understanding that I toke of oure lordes mening in this time” (32.49-50). The phrasing here is also important. The meaning of the revelation comes from Christ and is given to Julian to “take.” As Denys Turner points out, Julian’s method cannot be adequately explained by the positivist framework underlying certain modern theories of “mysticism.”¹¹ Julian does not frame her revelations as the primary datum of experience that must subsequently be conceptualized and interpreted by a subject. A key index of

as an alternative to the theoretical attitude, sketches provisionally the contours of the “pre-theoretical something” without hardening into objectifying thought—and the ways in which mystical theologians disclose their singular encounters with the divine. Heidegger in fact praises the mystic’s posture of devotion or submission (*Hingabe*), through which the self “is given” over to its experience. In the notes for a lecture series on medieval mysticism that he never gave, Heidegger describes the movement as “[t]urning back to one’s own sphere of experience and paying attention to that which is given in one’s own consciousness.” *Phenomenology of Religious Life*, 252, trans. modified. On Heidegger and mysticism, see McGrath, *The Early Heidegger*.

⁹ Vincent Gillespie points out the dis-positional quality of *A Revelation*: “[t]he showings seem to have required from Julian an acutely attentive stillness (she calls this paradoxical state ‘willful abiding’) and the suspension of her hermeneutic preconceptions.” “Pastiche, Ventriloquism and Parody,” 193. Rather than seeing Julian’s kenotic dis-positioning as an attempt to enter “apophatic consciousness,” which fixes Julian on one side of the problematic apophatic-cataphatic binary, I think it is more productive to read Julian’s dis-positioning as an attempt to illuminate the givenness of her experience. Gillespie and Ross, “The Apophatic Image,” 56. On the limitations of describing medieval “mystics” as “apophatic” or “cataphatic,” see Turner, “The Darkness of God.”

¹⁰ On the dating of the two versions, see Watson, “The Composition of Julian of Norwich’s *Revelation of Love*.”

¹¹ Turner, *Julian of Norwich*, 76.

her hermeneutical practice is her use of the word “see” to denote acts of both perception and interpretation.¹² Julian receives her revelations *as* meaningful, full of meanings that shift and deepen as she attends more closely to what she has been given.

Time matters for Julian. Nicholas Watson observes how “[t]he passing of time is not an incidental feature of the Long Text; on the contrary, dates, numbers of years, Julian’s own age, are carefully brought before us at the work’s most crucial moments, as though they are of thematic importance.”¹³ Despite the thematic prominence Julian affords to the passing of time, there have been few sustained investigations into the text’s representation of temporality.¹⁴ Focusing on attention helps to clarify how time moves and gets stuck in *A Revelation*. In the Augustinian phenomenology of time, it is attention that holds together disparate, fleeting moments, creating a continuity that is a simulacrum of eternity. Julian is particularly interested in the relationship between time and perception. It is difficult to respond to Julian without giving some account of her idiosyncratic adaptation of Augustine’s categories of spiritual and bodily sight. And indeed critics have spent much time doing so.¹⁵ It is my contention that Julian’s descriptions of sight become clearer and more coherent if we consider the role played by attention, the force that Augustine believed was necessary for both bodily and spiritual seeing to take place. The temporal dimension of seeing is brought out by Julian’s identification of the close affinity between sight and touch.

In the argument that follows, I chart two interrelated forms of attentiveness described by Julian—beseeching and beholding. While beseeching looks ahead to what can never be anticipated, beholding attempts to retain the sensory impressions that have been given to the

¹² As Denys Turner observes: “If the same word ‘see’ can do the epistemological work necessary for anything from the visual immediacy of the sight of a hazelnut to what comes to her by way of the meanings which that sight discloses after a minimum of twenty years of reflection on it, then the elasticity of the word has been made to extend, in practice, across a vast semantic range, heedless of any distinctions we might think fit to make between experience and its meaning, or between the immediacy of the visual and its theological mediation.” *Julian of Norwich*, 79.

¹³ Nicholas Watson, “Trinitarian Hermeneutic,” 83.

¹⁴ Clark, “Time and Eternity in Julian of Norwich,” 259-76; Pelphey, “Leaving the Womb of Christ”; Dailey, *Promised Bodies*, esp. 157-71.

¹⁵ The most perspicacious of these accounts is Watson, “Trinitarian Hermeneutic.”

soul. I conclude by looking at how Julian represents the limits of attention, particularly the body's vulnerability to pain.

Beseeching

A Revelation of Love opens with Julian wondering where to turn her attention. Having received “a bodily sicknes” from God, she lies in her bed languishing (3.1). She expects to die, but this idea provokes “a great louthsomnes” in her (3.5-6). She wants to live longer: “But it was for I would have lived to have loved God better and longer time, that I might, by the grace of that living, have the more knowing and loving of God in the blisse of heaven” (3.7-11). Nonetheless, she assents fully to whatever God wills and prepares to die. After losing feeling from her waist downward, she is propped up in bed and a priest is called to provide solace during what appear to be her dying moments. The priest places a crucifix in front of her face, advising her to look upon it for comfort. Prior to this, she had her eyes “set uprightward into heaven” (3.21). But with the arrival of the crucifix, she switches focus: “But nevertheles I ascended to set my eyen in the face of the crucifixe, if I might, and so I dide, for methought I might longar dure to looke evenforth then right up” (3.22-24). Why does Julian think that looking straight ahead will allow her to endure longer than looking upward? It is, of course, less physically taxing to keep one's line of vision level than it is to crane upward. But there is more at stake here. The answer becomes clearer if we examine how Julian is faced with the same choice in the eighth revelation. This time, though, the order of the directions is inverted: as the first seven revelations unfold, she has been staring straight ahead at the crucifix, taking refuge in its security against the fiends who swarm around it, when a seemingly friendly voice says to her: “Loke uppe to heven to his father” (19.5). Julian responds:

And than sawe I wele, with the faith that I felt, that ther was nothing betwene the crosse and heven that might have dissesede me, and either me behoved to loke uppe or elles to answeere. I answered inwardly with alle the might of my soule, and said: “Nay, I may not! For thou art my heven.” This I saide for I wolde not. For I had lever have bene in that paine tille domesday, than have come to heven otherwise than by him. (19.5-11)

She will not look up because Christ has come down to earth.¹⁶ The lowering of her gaze mirrors Christ's descent into flesh and time. She experiences great pain as she watches him suffer—although she is quick to point out that her own pain cannot be compared to the intensity of what he undergoes. She wants to endure because Christ endured for so long: “And thus saw I oure lorde Jhesu languring long time” (20.1). Glancing away from Christ would entail overlooking the sense of duration that distinguishes Christ's suffering. Above all, it would mean eliding both her and Christ's embodiment. Julian's “evenforth” gaze is an act of resisting what the philosopher David Farrell Krell calls “ascensional reflection.”¹⁷ Julian desires to suffer with Christ, and she can only do so by “living in my deadly body” (3.43). Her desire to remain rooted in her “deadly body” gives an initial indication of her refusal throughout *A Revelation* to subordinate bodily sight to spiritual sight.¹⁸

The glowing crucifix begins to bleed, initiating the sequence of revelations, which, for the most part, keep Julian's eyes focused on the cross. She has been granted what she desired so long ago—“a bodely sight” of Christ's passion (2.10). But Julian makes clear that no causal relationship links her desire and its fulfillment. There is always a temporal gap between the asking and receiving that ensures the gratuity of Christ's appearing. Christ appears when he will: “It is Gods will that we seke into the beholding of him, for by that shall he shew us himself of his special grace when he will” (10.63-65). The value of “seking” or “beseching” is not diminished if the *intentio* remains unfulfilled. Julian urges her readers: “Pray interly: though thou fele nought, though thou se nought, yea, though thou think thou might not” (41.35-36). The act of

¹⁶ *The Cloud of Unknowing* gives a different reason why contemplatives should not look up during their spiritual practice: looking upward, as if one could see God with his eyes, confuses the spiritual with the physical (2035).

¹⁷ Krell argues that Western thought has been dominated by the desire to go up, to overpass the material, to soar into ethereal realms. “In all cases,” writes Krell, “the essential strategy is to purify the spirit of its mortal dross, to wean the soul from its corporeal integument, which remains a wretched and wholly unaccountable catastrophe.” Further, “ascensional reflection is a matter of dying ahead of time, moving the hands of the clock ahead, beating the system.” *Infectious Nietzsche*, 78. “Dying ahead of time” is precisely what Julian wants to avoid. I do not want to deny the presence of “ascensional thinking” in Julian. Rather, I want to point out how the upward trajectory of her thought is countered by a deep awareness of the importance of descension. Besides her refusal to “loke uppe,” there is perhaps no better expression of this awareness than her observation that even the act of shitting is holy, since the goodness of God “cometh downe to us, to the lowest party of our need” (6.25-6).

¹⁸ As Watson puts it, “no other visionary material . . . combines ‘bodily’ and ‘ghostly’ sight with any of the almost polyphonic complexity of Julian's revelation (it is more common for them to be contrasted . . . than to occur together in an integrated act of divine communication).” “Trinitarian Hermeneutic,” 86.

praying will loosen and stretch the soul, making it “suppl and buxom to God” (43.25-26). The collocation of “suppl” and “buxom” appears in a passage from Hilton’s *Mixed Life*. Hilton advises novices to make the body “souple and redi” by breaking down its “vnbuxumnesse” through ascetic exercise.¹⁹ Julian, in contrast, it is praying “interly” that makes the soul receptive.

As I argued in the previous chapter, Hilton is influenced by the Augustinian ideal of life as a state of continuous holy desire. Julian is also engaging with this Augustinian theme.²⁰ The necessity of clearing space for the arrival of God is taken up by Augustine in an exegesis of Philippians 3.12-14, an important locus for his theory of *intentio*.²¹ Augustine asks his audience: “What are you doing in this life, then, if you haven’t yet laid hold?”²² He replies that the Christian should devote his life to cultivating holy desire: “What you desire, however, you don’t yet see.”²³ He compares the soul to a leather purse that is stretched by desire when God withholds what it wants to see. Augustine urges his audience to stretch their own purses so that they might increase their capacity to receive God. To this end, he cites Paul: “I have forgotten what is behind, I have stretched out [*extentus*] to what is ahead; in accord with the plan [*secundum intentionem*] I pursue the victory of my lofty calling” (Phil. 3.13-14).²⁴ But first they must empty and cleanse their “vessels” of evil, so that the space is fit to receive the inpouring of God’s grace. For Augustine, as for Julian, the “seking” soul stretches beyond the present, beyond what can be seen with the eyes, and makes room for what is yet to come. Julian also shares Augustine’s belief

¹⁹ Hilton, *Mixed Life*, 9-10. The terms “suppl” and “buxom” also appear in the work of Richard Rolle. In one of the “Meditations on the Passion” ascribed to Rolle, the speaker expresses a desire for his hardened heart to be made “souple” by a drop of Christ’s blood (249). On Julian’s relation to Hilton and Rolle and the other so-called “Middle English mystics,” see Baker, “Varieties of Middle English Mystical Discourse.”

²⁰ Given the uncertainty surrounding her identity and her reticence regarding sources, it is difficult to gauge the level of Julian’s familiarity with Augustine’s works. Critics have argued that she knew *Confessions* and *De Trinitate*, but whether directly or indirectly remains an open question. On this matter, I share Jeanette S. Zissel’s view: “Julian’s ideas may indeed be innovative, but in their innovation they do not completely reject Augustine or the Augustinian tradition, but instead adapt his ideas to new purposes.” “Universal Salvation in the Earthly City,” 335-36.

²¹ Augustine, *Tractatus in Epistolam Joannis*, 4.6. For Philippians 3.12-14, see also Augustine, *Confessions*, 11.29.39.

²² Augustine, *Tractatus in Epistolam Joannis*, 4.6. “Quid ergo agis in hac vita, si nondum apprehendisti?”

²³ Augustine, *Tractatus in Epistolam Joannis*, 4.6. “Quod autem desideras, nondum vides.”

²⁴ Augustine, *Tractatus in Epistolam Joannis*, 4.6. “Videte Paulum extendentem sinum, ut possit capere quod venturum est. Ait enim: *Non quia jam acceperim, aut jam perfectus sim: fratres, ego me non arbitror apprehendisse. Quid ergo agis in hac vita, si nondum apprehendisti? Unum autem, quae retro oblitus, in ea quae ante sunt extentus, secundum intentionem sequor ad palmam supernae vocationis.*”

that desire for God is itself evidence that the soul has found—or rather been found by—God. Christ tells Julian: “I am grounde of thy beseking” (41.8). The belatedness of beseeching is captured in Julian’s understanding of prayer as thanking: “Thanking is a true, inward knowing, with gret reverence and lovely drede, turning ourselfe with alle oure mightes into the werking that oure lorde stereth us to, enjoyeng and thanking inwardly” (41.45-47). Prayer opens the soul to receive further gifts, while at the same time thanking God for the gift that has already initiated this turning of attention. “Late have I loved you,” exclaims Augustine in *Confessions*.²⁵ A lament for his delayed conversion, to be sure, but also a realization that his turn toward God was preceded and precipitated by God’s turn toward him. As he goes on to say, he tasted God and now he hungers and thirsts for him; he was touched by him and now he burns for him.

The kenotic dimension of “seking,” its openness to the “not yet,” entails a certain vulnerability.²⁶ The author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* compares the newly shriven soul to “a clene paper leef” that two parties strive to write upon—God and his angels on one side and the devil and his angels on the other. Each individual soul must choose which thoughts and “sterings” it will receive—good or evil—and thus inscribe: “Bot it is in þe free choise of þe soul to receiue whiche þat it wole.”²⁷ Ideally, the soul will inscribe itself with the traces of God, and will thus become like the vernicle which, Julian writes, Christ “portrude with his owne blessed face” (10.31). Julian is “stered” by God, but also by demonic and unidentifiable sources. Closely associated with Richard Rolle’s school of affective devotion, the verb *stiren* and its related forms usually signified physical or spiritual arousal, but could also mean a turning or change of direction.²⁸ Julian dismisses an internal “stering” that questions the value of sin, and later she thinks that her final encounter with the devil is intended to “stere” her to despair (27.7; 69.6). Towards the end of *A Revelation*, she wonders whether the “lighteninges and touchinges” that continued to illuminate the revelations beyond their initial bestowal were from “the same spirite that shewed

²⁵ Augustine, *Confessions*, 10.27.38. “Sero te amavi, pulchritudo tam antiqua et tam nova, sero te amavi! [...] Vocasti et clamasti et rupisti surditatem meam; coruscasti, splenduisti et fugasti caecitatem meam; fragrasti, et duxi spiritum et anhelo tibi; gustavi et esurio et sitio; tetigisti me, et exarsi in pacem tuam.”

²⁶ On this point, and for the subsequent quotation, I am indebted to Karma Lochrie’s discussion of divine speech. *Margery Kempe*, 72.

²⁷ *A Tretis of Discrecyon of Spirites*, 91.

²⁸ Staley, “Julian of Norwich,” 136-37.

them alle” (65.30-31). At this moment, she attempts to exercise the kind of discernment that the *Cloud*-author advises: “And þerfore beware, and proue wel þi sterynges & whens þei come. For houso þou arte steryd, wheþer fro wiþinne by grace or fro wiþouten on ape maner, God wote and I not.”²⁹ Julian’s initial doubt about the authenticity of her revelations comes partly as a result of her inability (at the time) to recognize their divine provenance.

In the *Scale II*, Hilton compares the soul to a “highwai” through which all manner of stirrings, voices, and images come and go, clamoring for attention.³⁰ For Julian, desires, such as the desire for a bodily sickness, can come “frelye withouten any sekinge” (1.20-1). Thoughts and images “come to mind” or are “broughte...before the eye of of my understanding” (60.7-8). If we cannot control what occurs to us, we can control how we respond, at least to a point.³¹ Much depends, then, on what we decide to keep in mind, what we decide to inscribe onto the parchment or fabric of our souls. The Scholastic theologian Peter Lombard went so far as to argue that prolonged focus on a pleasurable impulse constitutes consent in itself: to avoid committing sin, one must expel improper thoughts immediately by directing one’s attention elsewhere.³² For Julian, culpability is similarly not determined so much by what comes to mind as by what stays in mind. For instance, when the “eye of the soule” is visited by images of other people’s sins, it should avert its gaze: “The soule that wille be in rest, when other mennes sinnes come to minde he shuld fle it as the paine of helle, seking into God for remedye for helpe againe that” (76.10-1). Beholding the sins of other people clouds and distorts the mind’s eye. On the other hand, when the soul is graced by the sight of Christ, it should attempt to preserve the showing by beholding diligently: “[W]hanoure curtesse lorde of his special grace sheweth himselfe tooure soule, we have that we desyer. And then we se not for the time what we shulde more pray, but alloure entent with alle our mightes is set hole into the beholding of him” (43.15-18). Julian’s use of “entent” is characteristic here: the primary sense is *attentio* but there is also a suggestion of

²⁹ *A Pistle of Discrecioun of Stirrings*, 68.

³⁰ Hilton, *The Scale of Perfection*, 2.2958.

³¹ As Eugene TeSelle explains, for Augustine, “it is not in our power to control what will ‘occur to us,’ either from external events or through the inward association of ideas. . . . What is in our power is how we respond to these impressions that ‘come to mind.’” “Exploring the Inner Conflict,” 321. See also Knuuttila, “The Emergence of the Logic of Will,” 211.

³² Knuuttila, “The Emergence of the Logic of Will,” 212-13.

intentio. Julian has now “laid hold,” as Augustine puts it. Whether one uses the eyes of the body or the soul, beholding is the proper response to the gracious fulfillment of beseeching.

Beholding

Sarah McNamer has recently argued that, despite its prominence in Middle English devotional writing, the term “beholding” has received short shrift from critics, who tend to view it merely as another synonym for words like “seeing” and “gazing.”³³ She posits that beholding describes a particular kind of seeing—one that is highly empathetic and socially coded as feminine.

McNamer bolsters her interpretation by demonstrating how Nicholas Love’s English translation of the influential Pseudo-Bonaventurian *Meditations on the Life of Christ* distinguishes between “lookers” and “beholders,” with the former representing an aggressive masculine gaze devoid of compassion. I think Julian would agree with McNamer’s thesis that she has an obligation to behold, not look, at Christ’s passion, even if Julian’s use of the word “beholding” is not as unequivocal as McNamer’s argument would have it.³⁴ Julian also appears mindful of the etymological and/or morphological connection between “biholden” and “holden” that McNamer identifies: Middle English “biholden” ultimately descends from the Old English “healden,” a derivation underscored by the tendency for the past tense of “biholden” to be shortened to “held” in Middle English. By the late fourteenth century, McNamer continues, “biholden” “implies a movement outward: it appears to function as a prompt to reach out and hold.”³⁵ This section builds upon McNamer’s fruitful attempt at historical phenomenology by exploring how beholding is represented in *A Revelation*, a text she mentions only in passing.

³³ McNamer, *Affective Meditation*, 134-42.

³⁴ For example, Julian describes the contemplation of other’s sins as “beholding”: “For the beholding of other mennes sinne, it maketh as it were a thick mist afore the eye of the soule, and we may not for the time se the fairhede of God, but if we may beholde them with contrition with him, with compassion on him, and with holy desyer to God for him. For without this it noyeth and tempesteth and letteth the soule that beholde them” (76.12-16). The fact that Julian finds it necessary to specify what kind of beholding is appropriate here—beholding “with compassion” as opposed to simply “beholding”—casts doubt on McNamer’s claim that “beholding” always implies a sense of empathetic attachment.

³⁵ McNamer, *Affective Meditation*, 136.

If beseeching anticipates what is yet to come, beholding activates the retentional aspect of attention. Husserl uses the term *im Griff behalten* (retaining-in-grasp or be-holding) to describe how consciousness keeps hold of the traces of the recent past. When I hear a melody, writes Husserl, I am able to follow the trajectory of the notes because I retain in the present moment the traces of the notes that have come before. If I were to attempt to recollect (as opposed to be-hold) these earlier notes, my attention would turn from the present object and become focused on, and thus distracted by, the past object. The combination of receptivity and holding leads him to describe this process as “passivity in activity.”³⁶ According to Edward S. Casey, Husserl’s be-holding “consists in a holding-in-mind of recently experienced objects and states of affairs whenever they remain impressionally present (e.g., a sound continuing to sound as we retain-in-grasp its earlier phases) or have become non-impressional altogether . . . [T]he achievement of retaining-in-grasp is always a coincidence or overlapping.”³⁷ Augustine describes a similar process of retention in *Confessions*, when he uses the example of hearing a hymn to argue that attention lends duration to the present (11.27.35). The words of the hymn cannot be heard simultaneously; it is only because the mind can collect each passing sound through stretching itself that it can generate the experience of listening to one unified and enduring object.³⁸ Both Husserl and Augustine point to the way in which the past is always implicated in the present, how perception is imbricated in memory.

As a form of attentiveness, beholding in *A Revelation of Love* generates a sense of “coincidence and overlap” that is constitutive of Husserl’s be-holding. The various modalities of sight that Julian experiences—bodily, ghostly and variations thereof—constantly overlap. Yet Julian carefully acknowledges their distinctions. For instance, the beholding of the lord and servant scene occurs on two levels: “ghostly in bodely liknesse” and “more ghostly withoute bodely liknes”

³⁶ Husserl, *Experience and Judgment*, 109-12.

³⁷ Casey, “Memory and Phenomenological Method,” 44.

³⁸ Paul Ricoeur points out the paradoxical consequences of Augustine’s theory of time. Arguing that Augustine replaces the notion of a cosmological, pointlike present with an “extended and dialectical present,” Ricoeur shows how *intentio* invariably results in *distentio*. For instance, when Augustine attends to the recitation of a psalm, his attention is divided (*distenditur*) between memory and expectation, as it looks back at what it has recited and looks ahead at the words still to come (*Confessions* 11.28.38). As Ricoeur puts it, “the more the mind makes itself *intentio*, the more it suffers *distentio*.” *Time and Narrative* I, 21.

(51.4-5). The vision begins on the first level and then her understanding is led onto the second level. She then returns to the more bodily realm: “And now was my understanding ledde againe into the furst, *both keeping in mind*” (51.38-39, my emphasis). A layering takes place here, as her mind stretches to “keep” both visions. In Middle English, the word *keep* was often used as a synonym for attention.³⁹ The “more gostly” perceptions remain, as if they were afterimages on her mind’s eye, ready to be superimposed onto the bodily sights. At other times, the shuttling between levels of sight seems to occur simultaneously, such as when she sees the ghostly Virgin against the bodily backdrop of Christ’s bleeding body: “And in alle that time that he shewd this that I have now saide in gostely sight, I saw the bodely sight lasting of the plentuous bleding of the hede” (7.9-10). Julian’s attention is evenly divided between ghostly and bodily sights. She inevitably runs up against the limits of language in trying to represent the simultaneity of the two layers of sight, however. Since language proceeds successively—“by processe,” as she would say (65.32)—Julian must describe one of the sights first (the ghostly image of the Virgin) and then rely on the adverbial phrase “in alle that time” to redirect readers’ attention backwards, so that they may retrospectively fill-in their mental representation of the scene with the added layer of Christ’s bleeding body. Readers end up enacting the process of retention that Husserl and Augustine describe; they are able to achieve a semblance of simultaneity by retaining the traces of the images generated by the words that came earlier and hold them in conjunction with the images that follow subsequently.

Beholding, for Julian, is generative, marked by what Husserl calls “associative awakening,” the tendency for present perceptions to activate sedimented or forgotten retentions on the basis of some similarity.⁴⁰ Julian makes a point of noting the proliferation of these associations. The

³⁹ Originally meaning to grasp with one’s hands and by extension with one’s attention, Old English “*cepan*” was pressed into service as a translation for Latin *observare* sometime around 1000. *OED*, s.v. “keep,” v.

⁴⁰ Husserl describes the process of “associative awakening” as follows: “From what is given intuitively (perception or memory) emanates an intention, an intentional tendency, in which, gradually and uninterruptedly, what is submerged and no longer living seems to steadily change over to the vivid and ever more vivid, until, at a tempo now more deliberate, now more rapid, what has receded appears again as intuition.” *Experience and Judgment*, 178. The mind’s capacity to form associations played an important role in medieval reading practices, such as *lectio divina*. On Julian and *lectio divina*, see Davies, “Transformational Processes”; and Gillespie and Ross, “The Apophatic Image.”

second revelation begins as an indeterminate showing, one “so lowe and so little and so simple” that Julian is not sure if it is a revelation at all:

And then diverse times our lord gave me more sight, whereby that I understode truly that it was a shewing. It was a figur and a liknes of our foule, black, dede hame which our faire, bright, blessed lord bare for oure sinne. It made me to thinke of the holy vernacle of Rome, which he protrude with his owne blessed face when he was in his hard passion, wilfully going to his death, and often changing of coloure. Of the brownhead and the blackhead, rewlyhead and leenhead of this image, many marveyled how that might be, standing that he portrude it with his blessed face, which is the fairhede of heaven, flower of earth, and the frute of the maidens wombe. Then how might this image be so discolourede and so farre from fairhead? (10.27-37)

The passage moves from a bodily showing of an indistinct shape to an allegorical interpretation (“a figur and a liknes”) of the shape to an analogical association suggested by the shape (“[i]t made to thinke of”). It appears to end with a blend of the figurative and literal: does “this image” refer to Julian’s revelation or the vernicle in Rome? The force of this passage derives from the “montage-like” accumulation of these various layers of signification.⁴¹

Julian’s beholding of Christ’s dripping blood is similarly associative. The moment is capacious: “[T]he bleding continued till many thinges were sene and understoded” (7.14-15). Among the things seen and understood are the following three analogical associations: “Thes thre thinges cam to my minde in the time: pelettes, for the roundhede in the coming oute of the blode; the scale of herring, for the roundhede in the spreding; the droppes of the evesing of a house, for the plentuousshede unnumerable” (7.20-23). Elizabeth Robertson quotes this passage to argue that Julian’s style is characterized by dilation.⁴² In this case, though, Julian specifies that the three images are not post factum rhetorical amplifications, but are generated “in the time” by the initial act of beholding. In both examples, Julian’s particular locutions, if taken literally, imply a

⁴¹ Barry Windeatt describes Julian’s revelations as “montage-like.” “Julian of Norwich,” 73. The Russian filmmaker and theorist Sergei Eisenstein notes how medieval miniatures that depict simultaneously successive events, such as the events in the life of the Prodigal Son, can be understood as a precursor to the “montage phenomenon” of cinema. “Laocoön,” 111.

⁴² Robertson, “Julian of Norwich’s ‘Modernist’ Style,” 145-46.

passivity on her part—the indistinct figure “made me to thinke” of the vernicle and the three images “came to my minde.”⁴³ If the analogical associations emerge spontaneously, Julian follows up by identifying the grounds upon which the comparisons rest.⁴⁴ She holds together tenor and vehicle, as the associations disclose various profiles of an inexhaustible sight.⁴⁵

In the case of the lord and servant scene, many of the aspects of the revelation remain undisclosed for nearly twenty years. At which point, Julian hears the voice urging her to “take hede.” She does:

I assented wilfully with gret desyer, seeing inwardly, with avisement, all the pointes and the propertes that were shewed in the same time, as ferforth as my wit and my understanding wolde serve: beginning my beholding at the lorde and at the servant; at the manner of sitting of the lorde and the place he sat on, and the coloure of his clothing and the manner of shape, and his chere withoute and his nobley and his goodnes within; at the manner of standing of the servant, and the place, where and how; at his manner of clothing, the coloure and the shape; at his outwarde behaving; and at his inwarde goodnes and his unlothfulhede. (51.76-84)

She is recollecting in the primary sense of the word—gathering together the “pointes” and “propertes” of the scene in an attempt to identify their correct associations and see how they tie together. Her shifting of focus from point to point reflects how recollection proceeds “by processe” too. According to Augustine, the eye of the mind is not able to simultaneously hold (*tenet*) the entire contents of memory, so *intentio* directs the mind’s eye toward the particular

⁴³ Watson questions whether we should read phrases such as these literally. “Trinitarian Hermeneutic,” 80-81. My own sense is that the consistency and coherence of expressions that signify receptivity suggest that they have been chosen in accordance with Julian’s characteristic linguistic precision and are not merely idiomatic.

⁴⁴ Focusing on Julian’s engagement with medieval forms of exegesis, Michelle Karnes argues that Julian’s interpretive method is characterized by the linking of dissimilar, but compatible, images. “Julian of Norwich’s Art of Interpretation.”

⁴⁵ Julian gives us a wonderful way to imagine the contiguity of tenor and vehicle. Describing how the crown of thorns wounds Christ’s forehead, she writes: “And than I saw it [the skin] was for it beganne to dry and stint a parte of the weight that was round about the garland, and so it was environed all about, as it were garland upon garland. The garlonde of thornes was deyde with the blode. And that other garlond and the hede, all was one coloure, as cloterred blode when it is dried” (17.24-8) The literal garland (the crown) produces in its painful wake a phantasmatic garland (a circle of dried blood), and the two rest together intertwined, “garland upon garland.”

memory it wants dragged up from the mnemonic storehouse.⁴⁶ Julian does not retrieve her memory exactly as it was stored in May 1383; through the act of recollection, more of its “privates” are disclosed (51.62). Mary Carruthers’s work on medieval mnemonic techniques helps us see more clearly how this aspect-change occurs in recollection. Carruthers points out how premodern thought divided memory images into two components: a likeness (*similitudo*) and an inclination (*intentio*). Carruthers defines the latter as follows: “Latin *intentio*, derived from the verb *intendo*, refers to the attitudes, aims, and inclinations of the person remembering, as well as to the state of physical and mental concentration required.”⁴⁷ Each likeness is coloured with a specific mental tone that allows it to resonate with other memory images. When St. Bernard wrote about the necessity of receiving forgiveness for sins instead of obliterating their memory, argues Carruthers, he was implying this two-stage understanding of memory: “what forgiveness changes is that *intentio*, the emotional direction (the root metaphor in *converto*) towards the memory images that still exist in one’s mind.”⁴⁸ When Julian recollects the lord and servant scene, the likeness remains the same. For instance, the color of the lord’s dress is the same (blue), as is his placement (sitting on the earth). What has now changed is Julian’s ability to understand the significance of these details; she is now attuned to the correct associations: the blueness represents the lord’s steadfastness and the sitting represents his position at the center of the human soul. Carruthers quotes the fifth-century bishop Peter Chrysologus describing the process of decoding the Gospel parables: “A potential spark is cold in the flint, and lies hidden in the steel, but it is brought into flame when the steel and flint are struck together. In similar manner, when an obscure word is brought together with meaning, it begins to glow.”⁴⁹ Using Carruthers’ framework, we can say that Julian has found the right “mental networks” to make the “misty” images glow with meaning (51.75). These mental networks were constructed by the repeated viewings of the vision as a whole, her subsequent inner learning and the (she hopes)

⁴⁶ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 11.7.12. “Sed quoniam non potest acies animi simul omnia quae memoria tenet, uno aspectu contueri, alternant vicissim cedendo ac succedendo trinitates cogitationum, atque ita fit ista innumerabiliter numerosissima trinitas: nec tamen infinita, si numerus in memoria reconditarum rerum non excedatur.”

⁴⁷ Carruthers, *Craft of Thought*, 15.

⁴⁸ Carruthers, *Craft of Thought*, 97.

⁴⁹ Peter Chrysologus, *Sermo* 96, ll. 6-10. “In lapide friget ignis, latet ignis in ferro, ipse tamen ignis ferri ac lapidis conlisione flammatur; sic obscurum uerbum uerbi ac sensus conlacione resplendet. Certe si mystica non essent, inter infidelem fidelemque [...] discretio non maneret.” Quoted in Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought*, 45.

divine “lightenings and touchings” that continue to illuminate the revelations. Julian’s new mental tone towards the lord and servant parable reverberates throughout the revelations as a whole, as it diminishes her haunting fear about the consequences of sin (53.7-8).

Critics have pointed out the reciprocal structure of beholding in *A Revelation*: Julian beholds Christ and he beholds her.⁵⁰ Despite the active connotations of the root word “hold,” beholding also renders Julian passive. She is held by what she beholds.⁵¹ Her refusal to look away from Christ on the crucifix culminates in the realization that she is bound to him: “For I wist wele that he that bounde me so sore, he shuld unbind me whan he wolde” (19.10-11). Christ guides the process of beholding, as well as beseeching. The tenth revelation begins with Christ beholding himself: “With a glad chereoure good lorde loked into his side and behelde, enjoyenge. And with his swete loking he led forth the understanding of his creature by the same wound into his sid, within” (24.1-3). Enticed by Christ’s “swete loking,” Julian’s mental eye follows the direction of Christ’s eyes into his wound. Their attention has been “oned,” or, in the vocabulary of developmental psychology, joined.⁵² Readers too are invited to join their attention with Julian’s. Indeed, the work requires as much. As Derek Anderson observes, “Julian seeks to draw her reader into the ‘performance’ of her showing by enacting the deflections of her own attention that occurred as she received the revelation and as she subsequently sought divine aid in

⁵⁰ See, for example, Gillespie, “Pastiche, Ventriloquism, and Parody,” 194. However, according to Julian, “otherwise is the beholding of God, and otherwise is the beholding of man” (52.58). For one, God’s beholding is characterized by a simultaneity that human beholding only approximates. From God’s perspective, past, present, and future are united in one single moment, and thus from this point of view both of Julian’s seemingly contradictory statements – “alle is welle” and the better known “alle shalle be wele” – hold true (34.20; 27.10).

⁵¹ Following Heidegger, David Michael Kleinberg-Levin argues that modernity is characterized by the experience of the world as a picture, that is, as something we watch, “without being touched.” Premodern thinkers, by contrast, saw themselves as phenomenally intertwined with the world; for them, “to behold is to be held by what one sees. To behold is, in this sense, to be beheld. Conversely, since the beheld is that which holds our gaze – holds it, sometimes, and binds it under a spell, it is also true to say that the beheld is also the one beholding.” *The Opening of Vision*, 257. Heidegger’s fondness for epochal narratives has been critiqued by Derrida, who insists on the heterogeneity of every apparently discrete and coherent historical moment. See, for instance, Derrida and Ferraris, “I Have a Taste for the Secret.” On periodization and the Middle Ages, see Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty*.

⁵² “Joint attention” refers to a child’s ability to follow the direction of another person’s attention (e.g., a parent’s gaze). Typically developed between the ages of nine and eighteen months, the capacity for joint attention is, as Stock points out, one of the developmental milestones that Augustine describes in his account of his childhood in *Confessions. Augustine the Reader*, 25. On joint attention generally, see Tomasello, *Cultural Origins of Human Cognition*.

understanding its meaning.”⁵³ Where Julian looks, so do her readers. It is worth noting that *A Revelation* contains only one explicit imperative for the reader to “behold,” a rhetorical device common in Nicholas Love and other devotional writers that places the narrator over and above the reader: “Beholde and see the vertu of this precious plenty of his dereworthy blode!” (12.17).⁵⁴ Instead, Julian engages readers by aligning their sight with her own, and, in doing so, helps them to see as she saw.

Julian prizes beholding as the fulfillment of beseeching, as the conversion of the “not yet” into the “now.” Beholding unites temporally and perspectively disparate phenomena in what Ricoeur calls an “extended and dialectical present.”⁵⁵ This present is not static. Although Julian advises her readers to turn their *intentio* from seeking to beholding when granted a divine vision, she at the same time admits that beholding God invariably provokes further seeking: “And whan we see ought of him graciously, then are we stered by the same grace to seke with great desire to see him more blissefully. And thus I saw him and sought him, and I had him and wanted him” (10.12-14). The initial desire to see Christ turns into a desire to see more of him. As Denys Turner puts it, “[w]here the contemplative religious characteristically thought of contemplation principally in terms of rest as its goal, Julian is endlessly, if not at all goalessly, restless.”⁵⁶ Julian cannot contain Christ in his entirety; her purse is not large enough. And though she may “have” him one moment, he will inevitably slip from her grasp.

The Limits of Attention

After Julian’s first fifteen revelations subside, the bodily sickness that initiated them returns. She is visited by a “religious person” who inquires about her condition (66.12). Julian begins to recount the revelations, but she cuts herself off, feeling ashamed for her recklessness. The

⁵³ Anderson, “Julian of Norwich’s Non-Violent Account of Salvation,” 105.

⁵⁴ Vincent Gillespie describes the style of guided meditations found in Love’s *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ* and other late medieval devotional texts as “manipulative,” “Anonymous Devotional Writings,” 137n5. Denise Baker considers the ways in which Julian’s text differs from Love’s and other handbooks of devotion, but she does not take into account techniques of focalization. *Julian of Norwich’s ‘Showings,’* 40-62.

⁵⁵ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative I*, 11.

⁵⁶ Turner, *Julian of Norwich*, 147.

disavowal comes to weigh heavily on her: “But as a fole I let it passe from my minde” (66.22). She has failed to keep what was given to her. In the sixteenth revelation, she perceives an admonishment for this lapse, interpreting Christ’s words as saying, ““For the sighte was passed fro the, thou lost it and couth or might not kepe it”” (70.15-16). Christ has preserved the entire sequence, though, refusing to “let it perish,” and he graciously shows it again (70.12).⁵⁷ How are we to account for Julian’s faltering? What makes her mind’s eye glance away at this critical moment?

The loss of the vision happens partly because Julian is not convinced at this point that the revelations are in fact sent by Christ. It is only upon re-viewing the entire sequence in the sixteenth revelation that she is confirmed in her faith. However, there is another factor at work as well. She was in pain: “I, for foly of feling of a litille bodely paine, so unwisely left for the time the comfort of alle this blessed shewing of oure lorde God” (66.23-25). Critics tend to overlook this explanation, preferring to see Julian’s hesitation as the result of the difficulties involved in describing the revelations in words or the product of a confrontation with the authority of a male priest.⁵⁸ While these are no doubt complicating factors in this highly suggestive episode, Julian is quite clear that she buckled because she was suffering “bodely paine.” This confession is reiterated later when Julian describes how the devil tries to distract focus away from Christ by inciting pain: “Than is it oure enmye that wille put us aback with his false drede of oure wrechednesse, for paine that he threteth us by. For it is his mening to make us so hevy and so sory in this that we shuld *let out of minde* the fair blisseful beholding of oure everlasting frende” (76.34-37, my emphasis). The phrasing here recalls Julian’s earlier self-recrimination (“I let it passe from my minde”). She has learned about the devil’s threat of pain firsthand. A late medieval treatise on dying explains how those on their deathbed might be visited by the devil seeking to inflict pain in order to induce despair, and recommends focusing on Christ’s pains on

⁵⁷ One of Christ’s roles in *A Revelation* is to keep. Keeping is what prevents us from scattering, from falling out of time: “And though we, be wrath and the contrariousnes that is in us, be nowe tribulation, deseses, and wo, as fallth to oure blindnesse and oure frailte, yet we be sekerly safe by the merciful keping of God, that we perish not” (49.25-8). See Palliser, *Christ, Our Mother of Mercy*, 70-75. On Christ as the keeper of time, see also *The Cloud of Unknowing*, 4.366-76.

⁵⁸ See, for instance, McAvoy, ““For we be double of God’s making,”” 174.

the cross as an antidote.⁵⁹ Throughout *A Revelation*, the devil attempts to distract Julian from beholding Christ. After the sixteenth revelation, for instance, Julian hears a cacophony of mocking voices that threaten to make her despair. In response, Julian refocuses her attention on the cross and shunts the voices to the periphery, ensuring that they remain little more than a garble of noise in the background.⁶⁰ Her disavowal before the priest, though, suggests that she has not always been successful at resisting the devil's temptations.

In the chapter preceding Julian's disavowal, she describes how a person should respond to pain: "And therefore, though we ben in so much paine, wo, and disese that us thinkith we can thinke right nought but that we are in or that we feele, as soone as we may, passe we lightly over, and set we it at nought" (65.22-24). The capacity to pass over pain is a common feature in saints' lives. Indeed, this passage, and Julian's disavowal in the following chapter, take on additional resonance if we view them in light of the saint introduced near the beginning of Julian's short text—St. Cecilia. Julian claims that her desire for the triple wounds of contrition, compassion, and longing are inspired by hearing of St. Cecilia's devotion: "I harde a man telle of halye kyrke of the storye of Sainte Cecille, in the whilke shewing I understode that she hadde thre woundes with a swerde in the nekke, with the whilke she pinede to the dede."⁶¹ Although the reference does not appear in the longer version, I suspect Julian is thinking of Cecilia when she describes how the sight passed from her mind because she was in pain. According to Jacobus de Voragine's *Golden Legend*, Cecilia was a noble Roman woman who managed to convert a series

⁵⁹ The text was known variously as *Trattato de l'arte di bien morire, attributo al Cardinale di Fermo Domenico Capranica* and *Fratri Alberti magni ordinis predicatorum quondam episcopi Ratisponensis*. Cohen, *Modulated Scream*, 139-41. Cohen glosses the relevant passage: "On a difficult and hazardous journey, the almost inevitable pain of dying was a dangerous distraction that might cause the traveler to lose his footing and tumble into the abyss of hell" (141).

⁶⁰ In Christian thought, the devil is closely associated with the threat of distraction. A particularly vivid medieval example comes from the biography of Christina of Markyate, a twelfth-century anchoress. While she reads her Psalter, a gang of toads invades her cell to divert [*averterent*] her attention: "Their sudden appearance, with their big and terrible eyes, was most frightening, for they squatted here and there, arrogating the middle of the Psalter which lay open on her lap at all hours of the day for her use. But when she refused to move and would not give up her singing of the psalms, they went away, which makes one think that they were devils" [Apparebant subito teterrima. terribilibus ac spaciosis orbibus oculorum. se debant hinc: spalterio vendicantes medium locum in gremio virginis quod propemodum omnibus horis iacebat expansum in usum sponse Christi. At cum illa nec se moveret nec psalmodiam dimitteret: iterum abibant. Unde magis credendum est eos fuisse demones].” *The Life of Christina of Markyate*, 98-9. Quoted in Camille, *Image on the Edge*, 72-73.

⁶¹ Julian of Norwich, *A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman*, 1.36-38.

of pagans to Christianity, including her betrothed husband (thus preserving her virginity) and a would-be executioner.⁶² The Roman authorities tried to boil her alive, but she survived unscathed; they then tried to slash her neck, but it took three attempts to finish the job, and, even then, she persevered for three days. For many late medieval readers, including Nicholas Love, she was a model of setting one's pains "at nought." In Love's *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, Cecilia keeps her attention so focused on an interior representation of the Passion that she becomes impervious to both physical torments and sensual pleasures, including the pomp of her wedding.⁶³ Watson claims that Love's Cecilia exemplifies a trend in late medieval devotion that sought inner objects of concentration to block out the distractions of the external world.⁶⁴

But, for the unsanctified, ignoring the lures of the external world is not so easy. One need only ask Alypius, who attempts an act of Cecilia-like impassability at the gladiatorial games. At the same time that Julian advises readers to set their pains "at nought," she points toward the riveting quality of extreme bodily pain: "though we ben in so much paine, wo, and disese that us thinkith we can thinke right nought but that we are in or that we feele." The body in this degree of pain can think of nothing other than its pain. Aquinas explains that the soul experiencing pain cannot learn anything new, since its *intentio* is entirely occupied: "physical pain, more than anything, absorbs the soul's energies [*intentionem animae*]."⁶⁵ And if the pain is especially acute, the person will be unable to direct his attention to what he already knows, let alone learn something new. Similarly, Augustine describes how severe bodily pain "blocks off the internal routes through which the soul's attention [*intentio*] was striving to reach out and sense things through the flesh."⁶⁶ The festering of attention results in a state of excessive imagining in which images pop up without significance. Julian's revelation of the lord and the servant exemplifies the

⁶² Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda Aurea*, 771-76.

⁶³ Love, *Mirror of the Blessed Life*, 12.5-11.

⁶⁴ Watson, "Methods and Objectives," 137.

⁶⁵ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia-IIae 37.1. "Manifestum est autem quod dolor sensibilis maxime trahit ad se intentionem animae, quia naturaliter unumquodque tota intentione tendit ad repellendum contrarium, sicut etiam in rebus naturalibus apparet."

⁶⁶ Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram*, 12.49. "[S]ive prorsus ingravescente aliquo morbo vel dolore corporis, et intercludente intus vias quibus animae, ut per carnem sentiret, exserebatur ac nitebatur intentio, altius quam somno absentato spiritu, corporalium rerum existunt aut monstrantur imagines, vel significantes aliquid vel sine ulla significatione apparentes."

contracting force of pain. She marvels at the servant's inability to rise up, project himself beyond the walls of the ditch, or turn his attention back towards the lord: "[H]e culde not turne his face to loke uppe on his loving lorde, which was to him full nere, in whom is full comfort. But as a man that was full febil and unwise for the time, he entended to his feling and enduring in wo" (51.16-18). Although dwelling on his pain is "unwise," Julian does not blame him. The servant's failure to pass over his pain anticipates her own yielding to "a litille bodely paine."

It is important to point out that the experience of "bodely paine" is not inherently unwelcome. After all, Julian in her youth desired a sickness that would include "all manner of paines" (2.22). Esther Cohen explains how medieval religious texts tend to extol the utility of pain, often framing illness as a divine beneficence. According to Cohen, "[t]he idea that pain might distract people from concentrating upon salvation is extremely unusual."⁶⁷ One of the primary values of pain was its purgative effect; just as fire purifies gold, pain cleanses the body of sin. As Julian states: "For it purgeth and maketh us to know oureselfe and aske mercy" (27.24-25). The cultivation of compassion also requires experiencing some degree of pain. Julian's desire for a bodily sight of Christ's passion is largely motivated by a wish to share the suffering of Christ and those who witnessed his crucifixion (2.7-10). Julian participates in the trend of late medieval devotional practice that embraced pain for the sake of coming closer to Christ. The danger, though, is that pain will produce the contracting effect observed by Aquinas and Augustine, and the soul will shrink inside of itself, away from God, as the servant does. In *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, which Love translated into the *Mirror*, martyrs like St. Cecilia are reminded to contemplate Christ's suffering above their own at the risk of faltering under the pain and denying their faith.⁶⁸ At one point in *A Revelation of Love*, Julian explains how her love for Christ is so much greater than her love for herself that the sorrow she feels while witnessing Christ's pain far exceeds her own excruciating pain (17.50-52). However, when the suffering Christ is dislodged from her mind's eye, her own pain reasserts itself. Her sensitivity to the distracting force of pain is perhaps why, in the longer version, she removes the reference to the impassible St. Cecilia but retains the list of redeemed sinners, including Peter, who, not unlike Julian, denied Christ under

⁶⁷ Cohen, *Modulated Scream*, 11.

⁶⁸ Magill, *Julian of Norwich*, 106-7.

the weight of the world.⁶⁹ Christ does not punish Julian for her disavowal. He frames it not as willful disregard but as an overwhelming of her capacity: “For the sighte was passed fro the, thou lost it and couth or might not kepe it” (70.15-16). It is not that she *would* not keep the revelation; rather, she *could* not keep it.

The distracting force of pain is not the only reason why Julian struggles to keep the revelations. They are marked by unpredictable and discontinuous turns that frustrate the gathering movement of attention. While beholding Christ’s passion, she expects to see him die: “And I loked after the departing with alle my mightes and wende to have seen the body alle dead” (21.5-6). She is stretching forth in anticipation. But the moment of death is passed over. Instead, Christ is instantaneously reborn in delight: “[S]odenly, I beholding in the same crosse, he changed in blisseful chere” (21.8-9). Julian’s “chere” changes in turn. Note how Julian ascribes the agency to Christ’s “chere” and not her own initiative: “The changing of his blisseful chere changed mine, and I was as glad and mery as it was possible” (21.9-10). It has the quality of an involuntary movement, something akin to the way Augustine’s eye is drawn to the rabbit or spider.⁷⁰ A great deal of descriptive energy is put into the rendering of faces in *A Revelation*, particularly Christ’s. Julian pays close attention to the modulations of Christ’s “chere,” aware that the emotions she reads on his face are likely to be mirrored on her own.⁷¹ As her “chere” changes, Julian is filled with a pervasive joy that recalls Mary Magdalene’s joyful surprise at discovering the risen Christ at the tomb where she expected to find his dead body. Christ transforms himself and Julian in the “twinkling of an eye” (1 Cor. 15.52). His movements throughout *A Revelation* are characterized by suddenness: “his apering shalle be swithe sodeyn” (10.81). The discontinuous rhythm of the revelations sometimes leaves Julian behind. For

⁶⁹ The absence of St. Cecilia from the long text has proven a popular topic of speculation. Susan Hagen argues that Julian’s long text evinces a more mature, self-confident voice that does not need to define itself vis-à-vis an exemplar like Cecilia. “St. Cecilia and the St. John of Beverley.” Similarly, Liz Herbert McAvoy sees Julian as repudiating the “paternal language” of hagiography to ground the text in the experience of her own body. “For we be doubel of God’s making,” 17). My explanation has the advantage of accounting for pedagogical motivation: Julian may well want to convince her “evenchristen” that pain is not as easily overcome as saints’ lives would have us believe.

⁷⁰ Augustine notes how facial expressions can be spontaneously affected by feelings of joy or anger before being processed on the reflective level. *Epistola 7, 7*. Cited in O’Daly, *Augustine’s Philosophy of Mind*, 53n144.

⁷¹ Andrew Sprung argues that *A Revelation* stresses the importance of the mother maintaining a “blessed lovely chere,” “The Inverted Metaphor,” 192. See also Lorenzo, “The Mystical Experience of Julian of Norwich,” 163.

instance, she would rather continue to behold Christ than attend to the thought that he brings to her mind about the inevitability of her sin: “God brought to my minde that I shuld sinne. And for liking that I had in beholding of him, I entended not redely to that shewing. And oure lorde fulle marcifully abode, and gave me grace for to entende” (37.1-3). Here it is “liking,” not pain, that distracts Julian. She cleaves a little too closely to Christ. The *Cloud of Unknowing* warns its readers not to seize eagerly the spiritual nourishment offered by God: “And abide curtesly and meekly the wil of oure Lorde, and lache not over-hastely, as it were a gredy grehounde, hungre thee never so sore” (46.1631-33). Julian’s decision to momentarily ignore Christ’s will and remain focused on her “liking” represents a minor breach of courtesy. In a passage that echoes the *Cloud*, Julian explains how the desire to touch Christ should be tempered by courtesy:

Cleve we to him, and we shalle be seker and safe from alle manner of perilles. For our curtese lorde wille that we be as homely with him as hart may thinke or soule may desyer. But be we ware that we take not so rechelously this homelyhed for to leve curtesye. For our lorde himselfe is sovereyn homelyhed, and so homely as he is, as curtesse he is. For he is very curteyse. (77.41-45)

Do not be too eager to Christ, too over familiar, she warns. Touch lightly. One hears perhaps echoes of the risen Christ’s words to Mary Magdelaine, “noli me tangere” (John 20:17), which, in the words of Karmen MacKendrick, “warns against a touch that would grasp rather than brush across the surface.”⁷² Christ demonstrates his courtesy in turn when he suspends his teaching and waits for Julian to catch up. *A Revelation of Love* makes it clear that the divine can neither be entirely anticipated nor entirely constrained.

Julian’s echoing imperative to attend is complemented by an awareness of the limitations of attention. As humans we cannot achieve the perpetual vigilance of Christ, who, writes Julian, “taketh heed to nobile thinges and to gret, but also to litille and to small, to lowe and to simple,

⁷² MacKendrick, *Word Made Skin*, 31. Glossing the passage from John, Augustine writes: “For touch sets as it were a limit to knowledge. And, therefore, he did not want the intention of their heart, which was directed towards him, to be limited, so that he would be considered only what he appeared to be [Tactus enim tanquam finem facit notionis. Ideoque nolebat in eo esse finem intenti cordis in se, ut hoc quod videbatur tantummodo putaretur].” *De Trinitate*, 1.9.18, trans. modified. Rather than take the imperative *noli me tangere* as a repudiation of phenomenality, we can, following Jean-Luc Marion, read the phrase as an attempt to safeguard the excess of the *saturated phenomenon* par excellence, divine revelation. Marion, *In Excess*, 117.

and to one and to other” (32.4-5). Julian reciprocates Christ’s attentiveness by attending to what he gives her, including seemingly insignificant or obscure details. She looks ahead to what can never be anticipated, and when it arrives she beholds with the utmost diligence. Her readers are encouraged to reciprocate in turn. Her text demands the careful, patient response that she herself models, a way of receiving and keeping its meanings without holding them too tightly, so as to provide space for the text to continue unfolding and deepening.

In the next chapter, we will see how Thomas Hoccleve picks up many of Julian’s concerns about the ethical stakes of attention. He too is deeply concerned with how his text will be received. He worries that his readers are not paying sufficient attention to what they read and what they see. In less subtle ways, Hoccleve sets out to train the gaze—and, I will argue, taste—of his readers. He advocates an ethics of discernment, not in order to come closer to God, as Julian does, but as a way to come closer to his fellow “evenchristen.”

Chapter 4

Tasting Thomas Hoccleve: Discernment in the *Series*

In one of the most famous scenes in the *Series*, Thomas Hoccleve's suite of five interconnected poems, the poet-clerk sets up a rather unusual experiment. He enters his bedroom and jumps back and forth in front of the mirror, trying to catch a glimpse of himself as he appears to the outside world. He claims he has long since recovered from a period of mental illness, a period in which his wits went on pilgrimage, as he so vividly puts it, but his peers and neighbours think otherwise; they are convinced that his physical appearance betrays signs that Hoccleve is in fact still mad. After making a few jumps, Hoccleve concludes that if the face he is looking at in the mirror is the same one he displays outside his room, (a rather large "if," he seems to acknowledge), nobody could rightfully accuse him of looking unsound. But this conclusion is immediately scuttled by an unsettling realization:

Men in hire owne cas been blynde alday,
 As I haue herd seyn many a day agoon,
 And in þat same plyt I stonde may.
 How shal I do [...]?¹

Hoccleve concludes that he may be too close to himself to judge accurately, that he cannot rely solely on his own judgment. The experiment fails. But Hoccleve does not stop here. He responds to this deadlock by suggesting another kind of test. A taste test. Instead of basing judgments on appearances, his peers should "Taaste and assay if it be so or no" ("Complaint" 210). The Middle English verb "taasten" could mean to "exercise the sense of taste" and to "put something or someone to the test," as well as more broadly, "to experience something."² The work evokes a constellation of inter-related

¹ Hoccleve, "Complaint," l. 170-73. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically by line number.

² *MED*, s.v. "taasten."

meanings that Hoccleve explores in the *Series*. In this chapter, I examine how Hoccleve tries, with varying degrees of success, to offer himself up to the taste of others.

The question of what it means to taste another person is taken up by Jacques Derrida in one of his final essays, “Justices.”³ I have some familiarity with my own “selftaste,” what it tastes like to be me, but, Derrida asks, how can I possibly know what it tastes like to be you?⁴ Derrida concludes that it is ultimately impossible to share my taste of self with another person, since selftaste overflows the generality of language. Derrida’s concern with safeguarding the untasteability of the other is entailed by his conviction that “tout autre est tout autre” (every other is wholly other), a maxim that shows his indebtedness to the work of Emmanuel Levinas.⁵ For both Derrida and Levinas, it is imperative to respect the singularity of the other by underscoring how he or she remains inaccessible to direct experience. J. Hillis Miller characterizes the Levinasian other as entirely “impenetrable”: “another mind is so alien, so impenetrable, that it is never possible by any means to lift the veil that hides the other from me.”⁶ To assume otherwise, to assume knowledge of the other, runs the risk of foreclosing the other’s singularity. While the ethics of alterity has been influential within literary studies, helping to stimulate the so-called “ethical turn,” it has been subject to some important critiques.⁷ Richard Kearney argues that the kind of unconditional openness to the unexpected arrival of the other advocated by Derrida leaves the subject with the dilemma of how to discern between true and false prophets, between good and evil spirits. He suggests that Derrida underestimates “the need for some kind of critical discernment—based on informed judgment, hermeneutic memory,

³ Derrida, “Justices.”

⁴ Incidentally, Derrida borrows the notion of selftaste from Gerard Manley Hopkins, who in turn adapted the idea of *haecceitas* (“thisness”) from the medieval philosopher John Duns Scotus. For a study that places Scotus and other medieval thinkers’ theories of singularity into conversation with the modern phenomenological tradition, see Lee, *Science, the Singular, and the Question of Theology*.

⁵ Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 68.

⁶ Miller, *Theory Now and Then*, 53.

⁷ See, for instance, Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature*. For an example of how an “ethics of alterity” can generate productive readings of medieval texts, see Astell and Jackson, eds., *Levinas and Medieval Literature*.

narrative imagination, and rational discrimination.”⁸ For Kearney, discernment is an “intense act of attention,” which can take other, less ratiocinative forms as well, such as the pre-reflective discernment that occurs in the body, “by the ear and eye,” and, I would add, tongue.⁹ Underlying Kearney’s theory of discernment is the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis* (*prudentia* in Latin), commonly translated as “practical reason” or “practical judgment.” Practical judgments concern singular matters and can thus never be made with complete certainty. In the Middle Ages, *prudentia*, the ability to deliberate well by applying general rules to specific, concrete situations, was the cornerstone of ethical theory and the subject of reflection for many thinkers, including, I will demonstrate, Hecleve.

Kearney’s call for an ethics of discernment is also indebted to phenomenology. To make his point about the embeddedness of pre-reflective discernment, Kearney quotes Merleau-Ponty’s observation that “perception already stylizes.”¹⁰ Phenomenology is premised on the imbrication of perception and interpretation. According to Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi, this holds true when we perceive other people: “At the phenomenological level, when I see the other’s action or gesture, I see (I *directly perceive*) the meaning in the action or gesture. I see the joy or I see the anger, or I see the intention in the face or in the posture or in the gesture or action of the other.”¹¹ Gallagher and Zahavi go on to argue that we do not experience other minds through introspection or analogy, but through words and actions. For instance, “[i]f someone is acting in a puzzling way, by far the easiest and most reliable way to gain further information is not to engage in detached theorizing or internal simulation, it is to employ conversational skills and ask the person

⁸ Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 145n77.

⁹ Kearney, *Anatheism*, 46-47.

¹⁰ Kearney, *Anatheism*, 46. Cf. Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, 59.

¹¹ Gallagher and Zahavi, *The Phenomenological Mind*, 179. Their phenomenological account of intersubjectivity is indebted to Wittgenstein. Using the example of encountering a person who is afraid, Wittgenstein writes: “In general I do not surmise fear in him – I *see* it. I do not feel that I am deducing the probable existence of something inside from something outside.” *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, 2.42.

for an explanation.”¹² In the course of this chapter, I will explore some medieval variations and antecedents of these arguments.

For many critics, the Hoccleve who emerges from the *Series* remains largely untasteable. There has been a recent trend in criticism to read him as a skeptic when it comes to the possibility of knowing—and being known by—others. For instance, Sarah Tolmie argues that Hoccleve insists on his unknowability throughout the *Series*: “The poet’s inner character and sanity cannot be judged by any external sign, up to and including his words.”¹³ Jennifer Bryan similarly argues that Hoccleve’s poetics is characterized by fissure: “Hoccleve’s poetry assumes an ineradicable split between inside and out.”¹⁴ Bryan points to the mirror scene as exemplifying Hoccleve’s vain attempt to close the ever-present gap between his inner state and its external representations. Some critics see Hoccleve’s supposed fascination with highlighting the gap between inner and outer, between intention and word, as a preoccupation he inherits from his “maister deere and fadir reverent,” Chaucer.¹⁵ A figure like the Pardoner, who boasts about how his seemingly moral sermons are motivated by an evil intention, represents a particularly fraught case study. One of the goals of this chapter is to reconsider the view of Hoccleve as a thorough-going skeptic. In the *Series*, Hoccleve makes the orthodox, and entirely conventional, claim that only God knows “euery hertes secree” (“Complaint” 100). And he admits that there are hypocrites out in the world, people who, like Chaucer’s Pardoner, use language to deceive. But these disclaimers do not preclude the possibility of forming accurate judgments about other people; rather they underscore how these judgments must be undertaken with the utmost of care and diligence. Hoccleve repeatedly insists that he can be known to others, provided that his would-be assayers pay sufficient attention to his words and actions. I would argue that scholars have generally not paid sufficient

¹² Gallagher and Zahavi, *The Phenomenological Mind*, 185.

¹³ Tolmie, “The *Prive Scilence* of Thomas Hoccleve,” 285.

¹⁴ Bryan, *Looking Inward*, 199.

¹⁵ Hoccleve, *The Regiment of Princes*, l. 1961. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically by line number. See, for instance, Meyer-Lee, *Poets and Power from Chaucer to Wyatt*, 96. For Hoccleve’s relationship to Chaucer, see Knapp, *The Bureaucratic Muse*, 107-28.

attention to Hoccleve's words on precisely this point.¹⁶ Hoccleve develops a complex theory of discernment that draws on discourses of prudence and discernment current in fifteenth-century England. One of the most striking features of this theory is the way he uses the sense of taste to think through some of the epistemological and ethical quandaries involved in living with and coming to know other people.¹⁷

The Preeminent Virtue: Prudence and Discernment in Medieval Thought

In the previous chapter, we saw how Julian tries, not always successfully, to discern the origin of her revelations. She worries too about how others will receive her claim to have beheld Christ in this life. Christian theologians have always been concerned with the threat of false prophets, with the wolves who dress in sheeps' clothing, as the Gospel of Matthew puts it (7:15-20). Among the charismatic gifts bestowed by God, Paul listed "discernment of spirits," which likely referred to the ability to distinguish true and false prophets.¹⁸ The Desert Fathers placed a high value on *discretio spirituum*. It was a necessary part of the practice of *prosoche*, or attention to self. The person who possessed *discretio* was able to determine if he or another was moved by divine or demonic forces. In one of his *Conferences*, John Cassian calls *discretio* the "begetter, guardian, and moderator of all virtues."¹⁹ He compares *discretio* to a roving eye that penetrates and

¹⁶ A notable exception is Stephen Medcalf's essay "Inner and Outer," which argues that Hoccleve does not deploy the inner-outer distinction to emphasize their contrast, as, say, Chaucer does with the Pardoner, but rather to bring them together. My chapter expands and develops some of Medcalf's insights. I am also indebted to Sarah Beckwith's analysis of skepticism and language in *Shakespeare and the Grammar of Forgiveness*. Beckwith argues that Shakespeare's post-tragic plays attempt to remedy an increasingly widening gap between inner and outer, as, for example, evidenced in mandatory oaths of allegiance, by expressing a view of language as "dedicated to the common and the shared as prior to any failure in sharing, any lapse in commonality" (12).

¹⁷ One of the few critics to examine Hoccleve's references to taste in any detail, Hisashi Sugito argues that Hoccleve is alluding to the mystical tradition of figuring divine contemplation as a kind of tasting; "taaste" thus signifies a "direct understanding" that transcends language. "Rereading Hoccleve's *Series*," 53. In my view, Hoccleve uses "taaste" to figure the second, less exalted half of the *theoria-praxis* dyad, the operation of practical reason, which unlike *theoria* (contemplation) does not strive to overcome language.

¹⁸ Anderson, *Discernment of Spirits*, 20-1.

¹⁹ Cassian, *Conferences*, 2.4.1. "Omnium namque uirtutum generatrix, custos moderatrixque discretio est."

illuminates thoughts and actions.²⁰ While Cassian follows Paul and lists *discretio* as one of the highest gifts of God, he describes how it can be cultivated through humility and subjecting one's thoughts and actions to the scrutiny of elders. *Discretio* ensures that a person will act righteously; for monks, this means navigating between insufficient and excessive degrees of asceticism. From the fifth century onward, this moral implication, the sense of *discretio* as moderation, began to overshadow the sense of *discretio* as discernment.²¹

Later thinkers continued to refine and rework the concepts of *discretio* and *discretio spirituum*. In the twelfth century, Richard of St. Victor enumerated and classified the various functions of *discretio*, including the ability to determine which actions are most appropriate for a particular set of concrete circumstances (an act he calls *deliberatio*).²² Like Cassian, Richard saw *discretio* as the preeminent virtue, the precondition for the operation of the other virtues. Working through a complex allegorical reading of the Old Testament figure of Joseph, Richard argues that *discretio* takes significant time and experience to develop and is the offspring of reason (signified by Rachel). Richard sums up the various qualities of *discretio* as follows: *discretio* “ought to know fully—insofar as it is possible—the total state and quality of the inner and outer person and to seek out skillfully and to investigate carefully not only what sort he is but also even what sort he ought to be.”²³ Richard's understanding of *discretio* as the preeminent virtue that determines contextually appropriate actions and makes moral distinctions indicates the

²⁰ Cassian, *Conferences*, 2.2.5.

²¹ Anderson, *Discernment of Spirits*, 35.

²² Richard of St. Victor, *Anotationes Mysticae in Psalmos*, 143. On Richard of St. Victor, see Ragazzi, *Discretion in the Spiritual Writings of Saint Catherine of Siena*, 123-30.

²³ Richard of St. Victor, *Benjamin Minor*. “Et ut totum breviter concludam, debet hic noster Joseph totum interioris et exterioris hominis statum et habitum in quantum possibile est, plene cognoscere, nec solum qualis sit, verum etiam qualis esse debeat subtiliter quaerere, diligenter investigare.” English translations are from Richard of St. Victor, *The Twelve Patriarchs; The Mystical Ark; Book Three of the Trinity*, trans. Zinn.

conceptual overlap between *discretio* and *prudentia* in the medieval imagination. Indeed, Aquinas would go onto classify *discretio* under the broader rubric of *prudentia*.²⁴

When it came to discerning the heart—either one’s own or that of others— medieval writers tended to draw a distinction between the powers of God and the powers of humans. Aquinas explains that the appellation “discerner [*discretor*] of the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb. 4:12) is fitting for God because God can see invisible thoughts and intentions directly.²⁵ Human judgments about singular matters do not possess this kind of transparency and certainty. According to Aquinas, these judgments should be grounded in careful observation: “Judgment is correct when the cognitive faculty perceives a thing as it really is, and this comes from a healthily disposed power of perception.”²⁶ The disposition to receive things as they are is a product of *synesis*, an aspect of prudence that can be augmented by experience or the gift of grace. We perceive another person’s thoughts and intentions as they are manifested in acts: “That which man does or thinks is manifested through acts.”²⁷ Most obviously, a person’s intentions are revealed when he or she utters commands, but intentions are also manifest in non-verbal behavior.²⁸ One can gain knowledge (*cognoscere*) of another’s thoughts by observing bodily changes.²⁹ Thoughts that induce strong emotions, such as joy or anger, are

²⁴ Aquinas, *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum*, III 33.2. On Aquinas and the development of *discretio*, see Dingjan, *Discretio*, 229-50.

²⁵ Aquinas, *Super epistolam ad Hebraeos lectura*, 4.226.

²⁶ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIa-IIae 51.3. “Ad primum ergo dicendum quod rectum iudicium in hoc consistit quod vis cognoscitiva apprehendat rem aliquam secundum quod in se est; quod quidem provenit ex recta dispositione virtutis apprehensivae.”

²⁷ Aquinas, *Super epistolam ad Hebraeos lectura*, 4.226. “Quid enim homo facit vel cogitat manifestatur per opus.”

²⁸ Influenced by Aquinas’ theory of action, Anthony Kenny writes: “Desire manifests itself not only in the utterance of commands and wishes, but also in behaviour; one obvious manifestation of *wanting X* is *trying to get X*, and the will that *p* shows itself in efforts to bring it about that *p*.” *Action, Emotion, Will*, 164.

²⁹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia 57.4. In *De Trinitate*, Augustine argues that we can have beliefs about the intentions of others but not knowledge: “For it is not said to the mind: ‘Know thyself,’ as it is said: ‘Know the Cherubim and the Seraphim!’ For they are absent, and we believe what we have been taught concerning them, that they are certain heavenly powers. Nor as it is said to a man: ‘Know the will of that man!’ It is utterly impossible for us either to perceive or to understand his will unless certain corporeal signs are given, and even then we would believe rather than understand [Si autem utrumque novit, novit et se ipsam: quia non ita dicitur menti, Cognosce te ipsam, sicut dicitur, Cognosce Cherubim et Seraphim: de

particularly evident.³⁰ Demons are better than humans at reading the particularities of bodily signs. But, as Robert Pasnau points out, this is partly because, in their attempts to distract humans from the good, they cannot rely on humans to give honest answers to questions about what is occurring in their minds.³¹ The easiest way to understand another person's mind is simply to ask that person.³² Of course, it is always possible that people will lie about what they are thinking and intending. Aquinas warns against forming rash judgments about other people's intentions based on "slight indications" (*levibus indiciis*).³³ In fact, it is better to be deceived than to be unduly suspicious.³⁴ Aquinas makes this clear in his discussion of marriage. He argues that a marriage is only valid if both parties consent to it. Since the act of consent is invisible in itself, however, there could be doubt about whether or not both parties had actually consented. Aquinas goes on to qualify his position: "However, one may believe in all probability that there is no fraud unless there be evident signs thereof; because we must presume good of everyone, unless there be proof of the contrary."³⁵ If there are no "evident signs" to the contrary, humans are obligated to take one another at their word. (Of course, as the *Series* makes clear, the

absentibus enim illis credimus, secundum quod coelestes quaedam potestates esse praedicantur. Neque sicut dicitur, Cognosce voluntatem illius hominis: quae nobis nec ad sentiendum ullo modo, nec ad intelligendum praesto est, nisi corporalibus signis editis; et hoc ita, ut magis credamus, quam intelligamus.]” *De Trinitate*, 10.9.12, modified trans. However, in Book XV, Augustine softens the distinction between belief and knowledge and admits that we can know (*scire*) unseen things via the testimony of others.

³⁰ Aquinas, *De malo*, 16.8.

³¹ Pasnau, *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature*, 358.

³² According to Robert Pasnau, Aquinas' understanding of language and cognition renders the modern problem of "other minds" moot, since "his theory of mind makes no use of the sorts of qualitative conscious phenomena that cannot be captured in language or behaviour." *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature*, 358.

³³ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIa-IIae 60.3.

³⁴ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIa-IIae 60.4.

³⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Supplement 45.4. "Tamen probabiliter potest credi dolus non esse, nisi signa evidentia doli appareant: quia de quolibet praesumendum est bonum nisi probetur contrarium." English translations are from Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province.

question of what exactly constitutes an “evident sign” is frequently vexed). For Aquinas, judgments about others demand more than just clear perception; they must be guided by good will and a willingness to extend the benefit of the doubt.

The powers of *discretio* and *prudencia* were often described using the vocabulary of sight. However, there was also a long tradition of associating *discretio/prudencia* with the sense of taste. Medieval writers were aware of, and frequently exploited, the etymological connection between *sapor* (taste) and *sapientia* (wisdom). Commenting on this link, Isidore of Seville writes: “*Sapiens* is from *sapor*; for as taste is able to distinguish the flavour of foods, so knowing is to analyse matters and causes, for whoever analyses also discerns the truth by sense.”³⁶ The widespread trope of figuring reading as chewing and tasting exploits this connection. Medieval exegetes were encouraged to “ruminate” upon a textual passage, and after a sufficient time, the passage would offer up its sweetness.³⁷ The Aristotelian tradition saw more than an etymological or figurative connection between *discretio/prudencia* and taste. In his commentary on Aristotle’s *De Anima*, Aquinas explains how humans are the most prudent of all animals (*prudētissimum*) because they have the most exact sense of taste.³⁸ Following Aristotle, Aquinas considers taste to be a localized form of touch. Both senses appear to make immediate contact with the objects of perception. Upon further reflection, however, it becomes clear that touching and tasting take place via a medium, albeit an internal one—flesh, or, in the case of taste, the tongue. The organ of touch and taste is located near the heart. Late medieval physiological texts emphasized the connection between the tongue and the heart. The thirteenth-century Dominican preacher Giovanni da San Gimignano describes taste as a process of circulation between the tongue and the heart, the latter of

³⁶ Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae* 10.240. “*Sapiens* dictus a sapore; quia sicut gustus aptus est ad discretionem saporis ciborum, sic sapiens ad dinoscentiam rerum atque causarum; quod unumquodque dinoscat, atque sensu veritatis discernat.” Quoted and translated in Carruthers, *The Experience of Beauty in the Middle Ages*, 95.

³⁷ See Carruthers, *Experience of Beauty*, 127-30. The popular Berengaudus gloss of the Book of Revelations interprets the image of St. John eating the book as an act of discernment: “By the mouth, in which all tastes are discerned, we can understand the hearts of the apostles.” Quoted and translated in Camille, “Sensations of the Page,” 40.

³⁸ Aquinas, *Sentencia libri De anima*, 2.19.

which acts as the seat of prudential wisdom.³⁹ According to this model, the heart discerns what enters the mouth and in turn manifests its prudence by means of the tongue in the form of speech.

In the *Regiment of Princes*, a “mirror for princes” addressed to Henry, Prince of Wales, Hoccleve includes a section on prudence. It condenses a number of iconographic tropes: prudence is personified as a female figure bearing a lantern that illuminates past, present, and future (4762-6).⁴⁰ The prince who exercises prudence takes things under “good avysament” and ensures that his subjects do not come to resent him (4775). The prince who lacks prudence is like an archer who cannot see the target (4856-7). Much of what Hoccleve says about prudence here is commonplace. There is an interesting moment earlier in the text, though, when Hoccleve suggests that prudence is responsible for making aesthetic, as well as moral, judgments. The figure of wisdom in the poem, the Old Man, advises Hoccleve to write “a goodly tale or two” for the Prince:

“Sharpe thy penne and wryte on lustyly.
 Let see, my sone, make it fressh and gay;
 Owte thyn aart if thow canst craftily;
 His hy prudence hath insighte verray
 To juge if it be wel ymaad or nay. (1905-9)

By virtue of his prudence, the Prince will be able to determine whether Hoccleve’s poetic offerings are well made. The Prince possesses what in the eighteenth-century will be

³⁹ Giovanni da San Gimignano, *Summa de exemplis*, 194. “Taste, as he [Constantine] says, happens in this way: two nerves are fixed in the middle of the tongue and are dispersed by many branches to the extreme edges of the tongue, and through them (as it is said), the animal spirit is brought to the tongue. Thus when something tasted penetrates the tongue, the animal spirit is there transformed according to the properties of that thing, which it then re-presents to the judgment of the soul. Thus as the heart is the first instrument of taste, so the heart is said to be the first lodging of *sapientia*, according to the Proverbs. In the heart rests the *sapientia* of the prudent man: and yet the instrument of proper wisdom by which it is manifested to others is the tongue [Fit enim gustus, sicut ipse dicit, hoc modo: qui duo nervi linguae medio infigunt, quia in multos ramos in extremis lateribus linguae disperguntur, & per eos (ut dictum est) spiritus animalis, quod ibi est immutatur secundum proprietates eius, quas postea iudicio animae repraesentat. Sicut ergo circa cor est primum gustus instrumentum, ita in corde dicitur esse primum sapientiae prudentis: sed proprium instrumentum sapientiae quo aliis manifestatur, est lingua].” Quoted and translated in Webb, “Cardiosensory Impulses in Late Medieval Spirituality,” 278.

⁴⁰ On the iconographic representation of prudence, see Burrow, “The Third Eye of Prudence.”

referred to as “good taste.” Mary Carruthers has examined the medieval analogues of the eighteenth-century concept.⁴¹ She argues that in the Middle Ages aesthetic judgments typically considered whether an artwork was beneficial, pleasing, and, perhaps most important, fitting. The standard for these judgments was the consensus of those who were esteemed honourable and worthy, that is, those who were renowned for the soundness of their ethical judgments. According to the Aristotelian tradition, successfully crafting an object requires the same kind of practical judgment that results in prudent behavior: the particularities of the situation must be grasped thoroughly and arranged to fulfill a specific end.⁴² The focus on the particular, and its relation to the whole, is what makes art, especially narrative, such a powerful tool to train discernment.

Hoccleve’s description of prudence in *Regiment* draws on Giles of Rome’s *De Regimine Principum*, one of the three texts that Hoccleve lists as sources for the work (the other two being the *Secretum Secretorum* and Jacob de Cessolis’ *Chessbook*).⁴³ Scholars have tracked the correspondences between *De Regimine* and Hoccleve’s *Regiment*; it has gone overlooked, however, how closely Hoccleve’s later text, the *Series*, echoes the rhetoric and arguments of *De Regimine*. The *Series*, I would argue, contains a far richer, if less obvious, argument for the value of prudence than does the *Regiment*. Originally composed for Philip the Fair of France, *De Regimine* was one of the most popular “mirror for princes” circulating in the late Middle Ages, surviving in over 300 copies, as well as numerous vernacular translations, including an English rendering by John Trevisa made sometime in the early fifteenth century.⁴⁴ *De Regimine* is divided into three books, which

⁴¹ Carruthers, *Experience of Beauty*, 120-22.

⁴² Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia-IIae 57.3. Aquinas stresses an important difference between prudence and art: the end sought by prudence is the good, while the artisan aims merely to make a good object, which in turn may be used for good or evil. See Summers, *The Judgment of Sense*, 266-82. According to Summers: “The identification of art and prudence thus signaled an awareness of art as constitutively concerned with the particular, not only in subject matter – this would be implied by any naturalism – but in the very act of art itself” (273).

⁴³ On Hoccleve’s use of *De Regimine* in the *Regiment*, see Perkins, *Hoccleve’s Regiment of Princes*, 87-125.

⁴⁴ Trevisa’s translation survives in only one manuscript (Oxford, Bodleian MS Digby 233). See Briggs, *Giles of Rome’s “De Regimine Principum,”* 74-91; Hanna III, “Sir Thomas Berkeley and his Patronage”; Somerset, *Clerical Discourse and Lay Audience*.

cover the respective domains of ethics, economics, and politics. The tripartite structure reflects Giles' deep engagement with the Aristotelian corpus as mediated by his teacher in Paris, Aquinas. Although the book is principally intended for kings and princes, Giles gestures toward a wider audience: "For theigh this book be ityled of the lore of princes, 3ut al the puple schal be itauzt þerby; and thei nouzt eueriche man may be kyng oþer prince, 3it eueriche man schulde desire besiliche to make himself worthi to be a kyng oþer a prince."⁴⁵ While the applications may differ, many of the skills and virtues that Giles extols are beneficial to all classes of society.

Chief among these skills is the ability to make accurate judgments about other people. It is a talent necessary for prince and servant alike (2.3.16). *De Regimine* provides a detailed analysis of prudence, which, following Aquinas, includes the virtue of synesis, "þe vertue of good demyng" (1.2.6). Good judgment comes from experience; judges must be "expert in wordes and dedes of mankynde" in order to render correct verdicts (3.2.22). Those who lack experience with particular conditions tend to base their judgments too readily on suspicions. Given that "inward thinges beth nouzt iknowe to vs bote outwarde thinges," judges must pay careful attention to what a person says or does (1.1.8). When it comes to "assaying" the character of someone—whether a wife, servant, or counsellor—it is important to consider the person's actions over an extended period of time: "No man may assay þe goodnesse and trouþe of anoþer ate fulle but by long tyme" (2.3.18). The point is reiterated throughout the text (1.4.2; 2.1.20; 2.1.24). According to Giles, women and children tend to be less proficient at making judgments that call for "longe tyme of avisement" (2.1.23). The ideal judge should find the medium between credence and suspicion. To make this point, Giles argues that rulers should emulate children in the sense that children, due to their own innocence, are not malicious in their judgments: "Also þei schulde not be malicious so þat þei schulde haue not of al men euel suspecioun" (1.4.1). On the other hand, princes should not be as naïve as children.

⁴⁵ No modern critical edition of *De Regimine* exists. I quote from Trevisa's translation, *The Governance of Kings and Princes*, 1.1.1. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically by book, part, and chapter number. Giles' seemingly egalitarian invitation is undercut somewhat by the claim that nobility are more likely to be prudent (2.3.18).

Children trust too readily; if they possessed more experience, “þei wolde not anon assent and trowe al þyng þat is told to hem bot þei wolde bysilich avise hem wheþer it were to trowe oþer no.” (1.4.2). The prince must reconcile the child’s innocence with the old person’s experience of the world; he must “bysilich avise” without succumbing to suspicion.

Judging is associated with the sense of taste throughout *De regimine*. Discussing how a judge should adjudicate between competing claims, Giles writes: “For we schal knowe þat a iuge in demynge of plee for to deme ariȝt scholde be bytwene hem þat pleden, as þe tonge demynge of sauours oþer as of eche oþer wit demynge of sencible knowynge þat longeþ þerto scholde be bytweyne sauours oþer bytweyne sencible propre thinges” (3.2.21). Taste is identified as the paradigmatic discriminatory sense. Giles develops the analogy further: “As while þe tonge is not infecte wiþ euel humour, it demep ariȝt and demep þat bitter is bitter and swete is swete [...] So a iuge while he is mene bytwene partees and as it were an euene rewle not inclined to þe oon partie, he seith þat riȝt is riȝt and wrong is wrong” (3.2.21). An unbiased judge is analogous to a healthy tongue. Aristotle had argued that people who are ill taste everything as bitter because their tongues are coated with bitter moisture.⁴⁶ Aquinas teases out the metaphorical implication of this observation; just as the person with a healthy sense of taste will judge honey to be sweet and not bitter, the person with a healthy moral disposition (*habitus*) will judge morally right actions to be morally right.⁴⁷ Giles is particularly taken with the analogy between the health of the tongue and the right operation of prudence; in some variation, the analogy appears five times in the text. He uses it to underscore how malice can corrupt a prince’s judgment so that he “demep euel of actus and dedes” in the same way that a corrupted tongue tastes everything as bitter (1.2.9). But he also uses it to make a point similar to Aquinas about how temperate judgments follow from a temperate disposition (1.2.27; 1.2.31; 1.3.7). The analogy is particularly apt in this case because the formation of a temperate *habitus* depends largely on disciplining the sense of taste. Giles

⁴⁶ Aristotle, *De Anima*, 422b6-10.

⁴⁷ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIa-IIae 24.11.

makes this clear in his discussion of table manners. People become “intemperat” by eating too quickly; these gluttons do not chew their food carefully, but greedily swallow it, because, according to Aristotle, it is more pleasurable when food touches the throat than the tongue (2.2.11).⁴⁸ It is important to train children to chew their food slowly, in a way that is analogous to curbing their propensity for making quick judgments. For Giles, the two senses of *discretio*—discernment and moderation—are intertwined. As with Aquinas, there is more than a figurative link between taste and judgment. If the senses are not operating properly, if they are disturbed by gluttony or illness, then a person’s capacity to make practical judgments will be hindered as well, since “our knowyng bygynnep of þe wit of felyng” (2.2.14; cf. 2.1.20).

Hoccleve’s philosophical interest in prudence extends beyond the *Regiment*. The *Series* draws on Aristotelian theories of prudence as mediated by medieval thinkers such as Aquinas and Giles of Rome. Both Aquinas and Giles stipulate a close relationship between judgment and tasting. For Hoccleve, though, these theories would have been refracted through another, intersecting discursive tradition: texts that sought to train their readers in the art of discerning religious hypocrites.

How to Spot a Hypocrite

The ability to discern the hearts of others was at a premium in early fifteenth-century England. The spectre of Lollardy loomed large in the public imagination.⁴⁹ Alongside the development of an extensive judicial apparatus designed to identify and punish heretics came interest in related epistemological questions, such as “how one could know the internal workings of another’s mind, and how material evidence could reveal beliefs.”⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, 1231a12-16.

⁴⁹ The extent to which the Lollard movement actually represented a social and religious threat is debated. Paul Strohm has argued that contemporary propaganda exaggerated the threat and created a culture of surveillance in order to legitimize and solidify the Lancastrians’ contested claim to the throne. *England’s Empty Throne*. Richard Rex argues that the significance of the Lollard movement is frequently overstated by scholars. *The Lollards*.

⁵⁰ Forrest, *Detection of Heresy*, 1.

One of the main purposes of anti-Lollard literature was to train members of the laity to discern the thoughts and beliefs of their neighbours. Shortly after the appearance of the *Twelve Conclusions of the Lollards* in 1395, the Dominican Roger Dymmok wrote a lengthy refutation that he presented to Richard II. The intended audience extended beyond the court, though; Dymmok aimed at instructing a wide lay audience in the proper positions to take on contested issues such as the devotional use of images and the value of indulgences. In the final chapters, Dymmok offers advice on detecting Lollards. He argues that the best way to test a suspected heretic is through careful consideration of his words and deeds. He takes his cue from the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 7:15-20).⁵¹ Glossing Matthew's reference to wolves in disguise, he writes: "If therefore you see a Christian man, consider immediately if his confession agrees with scripture, and, if so, he is a true Christian; but, if on the contrary he is false, if he is a wolf covered by sheepskin, how will you recognize him except either by his word or deed."⁵² A person's fruits—his words and deeds—will give him away. Instead of merely looking with bodily eyes, the judge should attend (*attendere*) with spiritual vigilance.⁵³ According to Dymmok, a person can strengthen his powers of discernment through the performance of good works. Consequently, if a person fails to discern a hypocrite, it is because he too has erred and his eyes have been blinded by sin. Dymmok's position facilitates a kind of hermeneutic hegemony. As Fiona Somerset points out: "[i]f [his readers] disagree with Dymmok, then that shows, not that he might be wrong, but that they have erred [...] For they could only

⁵¹ Matthew 7:15- 20. "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in the clothing of sheep, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. By their fruits you shall know them. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit, and the evil tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can an evil tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit, shall be cut down, and shall be cast into the fire. Wherefore by their fruits you shall know them."

⁵² Dymmok, *Liber contra XII errores et hereses Lollardorum*, 309. "Si igitur uideris hominem Christianum, statim considera, si confessio eius conueniat cum scripturis, et, si sic, uerus est Christianus; sin autem falsus est, si quis lupum cooperiat pelle ouina, quomodo eum cognosces nisi aut per uocem aut per actum?"

⁵³ Dymmok, *Liber contra XII errores et hereses Lollardorum*, 308: "Non dixit 'aspicite' set 'attendite'; 'aspicere' enim est simpliciter uidere, 'attendere' autem est caute considerare, ubi enim certa est et indubitabilis, aspicitur, ubi incerta et dubitabilis, attenditur...quia non corporali aspectu attendendum est set uigilancia spirituali. Attendendum igitur est per opera bona." It was common for anti-heresy texts to stress the unreliability of visual appearance. See, Forrest, *Detection of Heresy*, 159.

have made their mistake because they were sinners already.”⁵⁴ The attention that Dymmok recommends threatens to make discernment contingent upon the observer’s own moral state and thus removed from debate and publicly-available evidence.

Anti-Lollard works were not alone in seeking to cultivate the laity’s powers of discernment. Many of the Wycliffite texts to which they responded emphasized the importance of exposing hypocrites, namely false priests. A work entitled *Of Dominion* explains how the laity has an obligation to scrutinize their priests. The author provides some guidelines to help his readers form appropriate judgments. He advises against judging too quickly, or relying too heavily on insufficient evidence or the testaments of authority, advice which he often contradicts in his eagerness to suggest that most priests are guilty.⁵⁵ Exploiting the figurative link between taste and judgment, *Of Dominion* compares judging a person to tasting food: “[S]um good iugement is of mennes out-wittis, as þei iugen whiche mete is good & whiche mete is yuel.”⁵⁶ The Lollards’ “Third Conclusion” recommends “experience” as a way to detect a priest’s true nature, which, the author alleges, likely runs toward sodomy: “The Experience for þe priue asay of syche men is, þat þei like non wymmen; and whan þu prouist sich a man mark him wel for he is on of þo.”⁵⁷ It is by the test of experience, as well as reason, that the suspected priest’s sins will become evident. When put to a “priue asay,” the secret sodomite will resist women and thus his actions will give him away. What precisely this “priue asay” consists of, however, remains unspecified. Carolyn Dinshaw identifies the implication behind the obscure phrase: “the secret test in the Lollard Third Conclusion may be simply the gaze of the accuser, discreet but probing, seeing what he in fact already expects to see.”⁵⁸ Both *Of Dominion* and the “Third Conclusion” are compromised by a structural desire to proclaim the suspicious party guilty in advance.

⁵⁴ Somerset, *Clerical Discourse and Lay Audience*, 103.

⁵⁵ On *Of Dominion* and its biases, see Somerset, “Mark him wel for he is on of tho.”

⁵⁶ *Of Dominion*, 291.

⁵⁷ *Twelve Conclusions of the Lollards*, 25.

⁵⁸ Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 77.

Hoccleve wades into the debate about probation and the secret sins of priests in his “Address to Oldcastle.”⁵⁹ In 1413, the knight John Oldcastle was imprisoned in the Tower of London on charges of heresy. He managed to escape and, while in hiding, was implicated in the organization of a failed armed rebellion against the king. He was eventually caught and executed in 1417. Written while Oldcastle was on the lam, “Address to Oldcastle” attempts to conjure the elusive figure in writing and subject him to orthodox correctives. According to Hoccleve, Oldcastle has been led astray by his presumption; he spends his time “ymagyn[ing]” metaphysical and theological matters beyond his purview.⁶⁰ Hoccleve accuses Oldcastle of blindness— “thy sighte is nothyng clear” (83)—but he also suggests that Oldcastle suffers from a disturbance of taste. To the “taast” of the heretic, the authority granted to priests seems “sour” (292-3). Hoccleve’s ventriloquized Oldcastle argues that sinful priests cannot confect the Eucharist. Hoccleve responds with the orthodox doctrine that the efficacy of the Eucharist does not depend on the state of the individual priest’s soul, since his words are supplemented by God.⁶¹ He then asks Oldcastle how he can detect these sinful priests: “How known yee what lyf a man is ynne?” (338) Oldcastle imagines that he can tell when inner belies outer. Hoccleve points out the folly of such a position:

Many man outward seemeth wondir good
 And inward is he wondir fer therfro.
 No man be iuge of þat but he be wood.
 To God longith þat knowleche and no mo. (353-6)

⁵⁹ For a nuanced reading of “Address to Oldcastle,” see Knapp, *Bureaucratic Muse*, 129-58. Tolmie argues that Hoccleve betrays an “anxious affinity” with Oldcastle, a character “in whom inside and outside, signifier and signified, refuse to coalesce.” “*Prive Scilence*,” 285. On Hoccleve’s broader position vis-à-vis Lollardy, see Strohm, *Empty Throne*, 141-52. Strohm argues that Hoccleve is complicit in the Lancastrian project of self-legitimization and models the position of a loyal subject by eschewing the counterfeit and the hypocritical and insisting that signs be used properly.

⁶⁰ Hoccleve, “The Remonstrance Against Oldcastle,” l. 173. References are cited parenthetically by line number.

⁶¹ On medieval debates about sinful priests administering the sacraments, see Minnis, *Fallible Authors*.

Hoccleve admits that inner and outer do not always match, but he warns against rushing to form these kinds of judgments. In the absence of “evident signs” to the contrary, we must operate from the assumption of their concord. As Aquinas puts it: “unless we have evident indications of another’s wickedness, we ought to judge him good by interpreting for the best that which is doubtful.”⁶² Hoccleve’s reservations about presumptively judging other people anticipate a persistent refrain in the “Complaint.”

“Taaste and Assay”

Like *De Regimine* and the Lollard and anti-Lollard texts, the *Series* aims to train the discernment of its readers. Hoccleve, though, does not advocate any kind of “priue assay.” On the contrary, he advises his readers to pay attention to the quotidian and the public. They can get a reliable picture of “what a man is” by attending to his words and actions as he goes about his day to day life. This discernment cannot happen from afar; it demands proximity, experience, and interaction. To capture these aspects of judgment, Hoccleve introduces and develops the motif of taste. I quote at length because these lines represent an important, and often overlooked, turning point in the poem:

I may not lette a man to ymagine
 Fer aboue þe mone, if þat him liste.
 Therby the sothe he may not determine,
 But by the preef ben thingis knowen and wiste.
 Many a doom is wrappid in the myste.
 Man by hise dedis and not by hise lookes
 Shal knowen be. As it is writen in bookes,

 Bi taaste of fruit men may wel witte and knowe

⁶² Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIa-IIae 60.4, trans. modified. “Et ideo ubi non apparent manifesta indicia de malitia alicujus, debemus eum ut bonum habere, in meliorem partem interpretando quod dubium est.”

What that it is. Othir preef is ther noon.
 Euery man woote wel that, as þat I trowe,
 Riȝt so, thei that deemen my wit is goon,
 As ȝit this day ther deemeth many oon
 I am not wel, may, as I by hem goo,
 Taaste and assay if it be so or noo.

Uppon a look is harde men hem to grounde
 What a man is. Therby the sothe is hid.
 Whethir hise wittis seek bene or sounde,
 By countynaunce is it not wist ne kid.
 Thouȝ a man harde haue oones been bitid,
 God shilde it shulde on him contynue alway.
 By commvnyng is the beste assay. (“Complaint” 197-217)

Hoccleve begins by chiding those who try to “ymagine” beyond the moon, a phrase that recalls Hoccleve’s criticism of Oldcastle. His peers have a certain image of him in their minds that they refuse to modify; he cannot shake the judgment that he is still mentally unwell. In these lines, Hoccleve asks them to test their preconceived images against experience. The moon is too far away, but he is not. As they walk by him, they should “Taaste and assay if it be so or noo,” a lines that echoes Psalm 33 (“Taste and see that the Lord is sweet”). To taste, a person must come close, something that Hoccleve’s peers have so far been reluctant to do.⁶³

⁶³ *De Regimine* underscores how taste requires contiguity: “For we may hire, se and smelle thinges þat bien fer from vs, but we may not taste and touche but thinges þat bien iiuned to vs” (1.2.15).

In *La Male Regle*, Hoccleve invokes the connection between taste and experiential knowledge. Reflecting on his misspent youth, a period characterized by excessive eating and drinking, he addresses himself in the second person: “What riot is, thow taastid haast and preeved / The fyr, men seyn, he dreedith that is brent, / And if thow so do, thow art wel ymeeued.”⁶⁴ He has experienced “riot” firsthand, but more particularly, he has tasted it – all of the gorging and disgorging has left a bad taste in his mouth, in much the same way that people who have been burnt retain a highly somaticized memory that moves them to avoid flame. The Scholastic philosopher Roger Bacon had used the example of placing one’s hand in a fire to demonstrate how experiential knowledge grants the mind more certainty than theoretical knowledge.⁶⁵ In the *Series*, we also see how experience is encoded as taste: according to Hoccleve, mental illness renders the sense of taste “wondirly bitter” (“Complaint” 325); it is, he says, like gnawing on a bone (“Complaint” 398). Having a bitter taste in one’s mouth was a well-documented sign that the humours were out of alignment; in some cases, medieval physicians would confirm such a diagnosis by tasting the patient’s blood or urine themselves.⁶⁶ Hoccleve wants his peers to test their diagnoses by tasting him.

The best way to do so, he explains, is by “communyng.” The word evokes the Eucharist, the shared taste at the heart of Christian worship, but the primary meaning of “communyng” here is “conversing.”⁶⁷ According to the Aristotelian tradition, the tongue performs two functions: taste and speech. In the model proposed by Giovanni, the two are closely interrelated: the tongue initiates the act of discernment that is manifested through speech. In *De Regimine*, Giles states that “communyng” reveals much about a person; through conversation, “we ben idemed whiche we ben” (1.2.28). A person’s conversational style should be appropriate to his or her rank in society. Giles makes this

⁶⁴ Hoccleve, *La Male Regle*, ll. 389-91.

⁶⁵ Bacon, *Opus Majus*, 6.1 (2.168).

⁶⁶ Eleazar, “With Us Ther Was a Doctour Phisik,” 115.

⁶⁷ *MED*, s.v. “communen.” “Communen” can refer to written, as well as spoken, communication. Cf. Brown, “Lo, Heer the Fourme,” 37.

point with a gustatory metaphor: a quantity of meat that is excessive for a sick person's appetite is regarded by a healthy person as insufficient. In the same way, a prince should demonstrate some degree of "homlichnesse" in his conversation in order to be amiable, but, if a "mene persone" exhibited this same level of "homlichnesse," he or she would be considered rude and aloof (1.2.28). Hoccleve explains how he is aiming for a homely tenor in his "communynges":

I mene, to commvne of thingis mene,
For I am but ri3t lewde, douteles,
And ignoraunt. My kunnyng is ful lene.

3it homely resoun knowe I neueretheles. ("Complaint" 218-221)

Readers of Hoccleve have long acknowledged his fondness for the dullness topos.⁶⁸ In the "Dialogue," Hoccleve explains how his dullness of mind is partly a result of his age. Describing his reasoning powers as a form of tasting, he writes: "And my conceit adaaies nowe not tastip / As it hath doon in 3eeris precedent" (250-1). But there is more to the above passage from the "Complaint." Hoccleve is making an appeal to ordinary, everyday modes of speech and thought that is consistent with his belief that a person's character is most clearly discerned when observed within his regular, habitual forms of life.⁶⁹ Hoccleve's claim to possess "homely resoun" is bolstered by his invocations of shared wisdom, such as his statement above that "Euery man woote wel [...]." By applying various maxims and commonplaces to his particular situation, he is in fact performing the core competency of practical judgment. He is also making the case that he understands and accepts the communal judgments that have been handed down and solidified over time.

⁶⁸ On the dullness topos, see David A. Lawton, "Dullness and the Fifteenth Century."

⁶⁹ According to Stanley Cavell, skepticism about other minds is connected to a dissatisfaction with ordinary language; such skepticism can be understood as "the capacity, even desire, of ordinary language to repudiate itself, specifically to repudiate its power to word the world, to apply to the things we have in common, or to pass them by." *Quest of the Ordinary*, 154. Cf. Medcalf, "Inner and Outer," 133.

The Perils of Physiognomy

In arguing that a person's countenance does not satisfactorily reveal his character, Hoccleve rejects the central premise of physiognomy, an ancient science that was transmitted to the Middle Ages through compendiums such as the popular pseudo-Aristotelian *Secretum Secretorum*.⁷⁰ In a rubric introducing Roger Bacon's gloss on the *Secretum*, physiognomy is defined as "the art of knowing the qualities of a person according to the exterior parts."⁷¹ Among other uses, physiognomy offered the potential to help overcome the epistemological gap present in the relationship between priest and penitent. Alain of Lille recommended that confessors use the technique to assay the disposition of penitents.⁷² Similarly, Robert Mannyng's pastoral manual *Handlyng Synne* includes a physiognomic interpolation that is intended to assist members of the clergy in determining whether their parishioners possess the proper disposition for receiving the Eucharist.⁷³ Having used the *Secretum* as one of the main sources for the *Regiment*, Hoccleve would have been familiar with the principles of physiognomy. In the *Series*, Hoccleve's peers are quite well versed in the practice. They claim to see signs of mental instability in the way he holds his head, walks, stands, and glances around ("Complaint" 120-33). The allegation that Hoccleve's "yen soghten euery halke" resonates with the description of the mad man's eyes in the *Secretum* ("Complaint" 133).⁷⁴ Hoccleve ultimately dismisses these judgments as deceiving. He points out how the person who

⁷⁰ On physiognomy in the Middle Ages, see Somerset, "Mark him wel for he is on of tho."; Ziegler, "Texts and Context,"; Resnick, *Marks of Distinctions*, 13-52.

⁷¹ Bacon, *Secretum secretorum cum glossis et notulis*, 164. "Incipit pars quarta Secretorum in qua docet phisonomia humani corporis, id est, de arte cognoscendi qualitates hominum secundum partes exteriores et de quibusdam aliis." On Bacon's text and his treatment of physiognomy, see Perkinson, *Likeness of the King*, 66-74.

⁷² Alain of Lille, *Liber poenitentialis*, 1.17: "The sinner's complexion must be considered, insofar as it can be examined from external signs, because a person is more inclined to one sin than another, according to various complexions [Complexio etiam peccatoris consideranda est, secundum quod ex signis exterioribus perpendi potest; quia secundum diversas complexionones, unus magis impellitur ad unum peccatum, quam alius]." Quoted in Resnick, *Marks of Distinction*, 29.

⁷³ Somerset, "Mark him wel for he is on of tho," 321.

⁷⁴ Gayk, *Image, Text, and Religious Reform*, 64. Gayk sees Hoccleve's dismissal of appearances as indicative of an "ocular skepticism" which she locates in relation to the thought of William of Ockham (67).

appears wise by countenance might turn out to be “a fooles peere” (i.e. peer/pear) when “tastid” (“Complaint” 240-2).⁷⁵

Skepticism about physiognomy was not unusual in the Middle Ages. In most versions of the *Secretum*, the section on physiognomy includes a well-known anecdote that acts as a caveat of sorts. According to the story, the disciples of Hippocrates draw his likeness onto a piece of parchment and then show it to Philemon, a famous practitioner of the technique. Philemon examines the portrait and declares the subject to be lecherous and deceptive. Outraged, the disciples return to Hippocrates, who surprises his disciples by praising the accuracy of Philemon’s diagnosis, but then explains that by exercising his will he has curbed and overcome his natural inclinations. In his commentary on the *Secretum*, Bacon makes explicit the lesson here: physiognomy judges “an aptitude for behaviour, not of actual existence.”⁷⁶ He warns that the science should be used with great care and prudence when making judgments about Christians, since God can overrule the bad disposition to which the soul naturally tends. For Bacon and other medieval Christians, the determinism embedded in physiognomic theory rubbed uneasily against the imperative of free will and the disruptive, intervening potential of grace.

Hoccleve rejects physiognomy because it privileges potentiality over “actual existence.” Physiognomy is closely related to prophecy, which Hoccleve dismisses as presumptuous “lewidnesse” (“Complaint” 101). Hoccleve maintains that God can intervene at any time in a person’s life and afflict even the most sound-looking with mental illness (“Complaint” 108-9). We are therefore on much sturdier ground basing judgments on actual words and deeds, rather than appearances and dispositions.⁷⁷ Hoccleve’s central

⁷⁵ As John Burrow glosses the line, a “fooles pere” is somebody thought no better than a fool, i.e. a fool’s peer, but he also points out a possible pun with “pere” (pear) given the reference to “taastid.” *Complaint and Dialogue* 81.

⁷⁶ Bacon, *Secretum*, 166. “Ex dictis Philimonis et responsione Ypocratis patet veritas judiciorum phisonomie, quia per hanc scienciam non potest judicare nisi de aptitudine ad mores, non de actuali existencia.”

⁷⁷ In interesting ways, Hoccleve anticipates Hegel’s critique of physiognomy in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Hegel argues that physiognomy reinforces the dualist separation of inner and outer by viewing the deed and its performance as the “unessential outer” (191, §319). What matters most for the physiognomist

complaint is that his peers have not heeded this lesson and do not pay sufficient attention to his actions:

In hem putte I no deffaute but oon.
 That I was hool, þei nat ne deeme kowde,
 And dai bee dai þei say me bee hem goon
 In hete and coolde and neiþir stille or lowde
 Kneew they me do suspectly. A dirke clowde
 Hir siȝt obscurid withynne and wiþoute,
 And for al þat were ay in suche a doute. (“Complaint” 288-94)

According to Hoccleve, his peers are so preoccupied with his external appearance and what they think it signifies that they overlook what he actually does – or, in this case, what he does not do (i.e. act “suspectly”). They have, it seems, made up their minds in advance that Hoccleve is still mad and, ignoring all evidence to the contrary, search out indicators to confirm this prejudice. Like the children in *De Regimine*, they “taken hede of few þinges and demen sone,” except unlike children, they are inclined toward suspicion, not trust (1.4.2). In the past, they have approached Hoccleve’s colleagues at the Privy Seal and asked them to report “with herte vnfeyned” the state of his condition (“Complaint” 297). They want the “vnfeyned” truth, but are blind to the truth of Hoccleve’s actions which is enacted for them on a daily basis. The thrust of Hoccleve’s argument is expressed well by the phenomenologists Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi: “to understand other persons I do not primarily have to get into their minds; rather, I have to pay attention to the world that I already share with them.”⁷⁸ According to Hoccleve, the

is the intention behind the deed, not the deed itself. The physiognomist thus overlooks the person’s true being, which, according to Hegel lies in the acts he performs: “the individual human *is* what the *deed* is” (194, §322). Remarking on the devaluation of the deed, Hegel quotes the scientist Georg Christoph Lichtenberg: “If anyone said, ‘You certainly act like an honest man, but I see from your face that you are forcing yourself to do so and are a rogue at heart’; without a doubt, every honest fellow to the end of time, when thus addressed, will retort with a box on the ear” (193, §321). By this logic, Hoccleve’s peers deserve a good box on the ear.

⁷⁸ Gallagher and Zahavi, *The Phenomenological Mind*, 191.

blindness of his peers occurs on two levels: “withynne and wiþoute.” Like Dymmok, Hoccleve suggests the inability to discern properly is a moral failing as well as an epistemological one.

Hoccleve points repeatedly to the consistency of his behaviour. He believes he has demonstrated his reasonability over time, in “hete and coolde.” One of the problems with physiognomy, and visual appraisals in general, is that they tend to base their conclusions on a single glance. Hoccleve suggests we are better off ruminating, chewing over the matter. The necessity of deliberating over time is one of the themes of Chaucer’s *Friar’s Tale*. When the Devil and his companion, the Summoner, come across a carter who, frustrated by his stuck cart, swears his horse and cart to the Devil, the two observers debate the meaning of his speech act. While the Summoner expects the Devil to collect his due, the Devil is more circumspect. He advises the Summoner to “stynt a while” and see if the carter’s subsequent actions are really in accord with this expressed “entente.”⁷⁹ Fiona Somerset argues that the *Friar’s Tale* models a mode of discernment that does not rely on supernatural revelation or clerical expertise: “the Devil does what even the humblest layman knows how to do: aware that people do not always mean what they say, he considers the sum of their statements and actions in different circumstances over an extended period of time.”⁸⁰ Similarly, in *De Regimine*, Giles advises taking the long view. Judges should consider the whole context of a person’s life, not just the particular act of wrongdoing: “For on caas he þat haþ now itrespased haþ tofore hond ido manye goode dedes, þanne a iuge scholde not so moch take heede to a party, as to þis particuler doying in þe whiche on haþ itrespased, as to þe hole, as to many goode dedes þat he dede tofore honde” (3.2.23). Viewed in the larger context of his life, Hoccleve’s bout of madness is simply an interlude or “party” surrounded by sustained periods of reasonableness. Towards the end of the “Dialogue,” Hoccleve chides the Friend for believing the second-hand accounts of his controversial translation of Christine de Pizan’s *L’Epistre au Dieu d’Amours*, entitled *Letter of Cupid*, and for failing to read the

⁷⁹ Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, III 1556-8.

⁸⁰ Somerset, “Mark him wel for he is on of tho,” 327.

text in its entirety: “For had yee red it fully to the ende, / Yee wolde seyn it is nat as yee wende” (“Dialogue” 783-4).⁸¹ A similar thing might be said about the narrative of his life: his peers are fixated on one chapter and fail to observe the larger patterns of the *decursus vitae*.⁸²

But, like all of us, Hoccleve is writing the narrative of life *in media res*. What about the possibility that in a future chapter he might embark on another pilgrimage of wits? His peers repeatedly bring up this possibility. Contingency weighs heavily on Hoccleve’s mind. Aristotle had argued that while it is always possible that a person may suffer misfortune at the end of his life, we do not need to wait for him to draw his final breath before we can consider him a happy person, provided that he has established a virtuous *habitus*.⁸³ For the medieval Christian, things were more uncertain. Hoccleve argues that God can intervene at any moment in a person’s life and drastically rewrite the script: “It happith often whan men weene it lyte” (“Complaint” 105). Nobody, not even the wisest, can predict these incursions. Only God can “woot euery hertes secree” (“Complaint” 100). In aligning the idea of the secret with an unpredictable, unforeseeable future, Hoccleve comes close to Derrida, who uses the “secret” as another figure of singularity.⁸⁴ Acknowledging the secret at the heart of the other—a structural secret that can never be

⁸¹ Hoccleve’s translation purports to follow the spirit of Christine’s work by criticizing male infidelity and defending feminine virtue. However, in the *Series*, Hoccleve recounts how female readers doubted the sincerity of his earlier work. Modern critics have likewise questioned Hoccleve’s commitment to Christine’s feminist ethos. For an account of the critical debate surrounding Hoccleve’s disputed feminism, see Knapp, *Bureaucratic Muse*, 48-50.

⁸² Hoccleve peers are thus like the Summoner, who, in Somerset’s words, is “fixated upon appearances and surfaces...to the exclusion of the long-term consistency of words and actions.” “Mark him wel for he is on of tho,” 327. Cf. Hegel: “though it is possible that men in an instance now and then may dissemble and disguise a good deal, they cannot conceal the whole of their inner self, which infallibly betrays itself in the *decursus vitae*. Even here it is true that a man is nothing but the series of his actions.” *Logic*, 199, §140.

⁸³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1.10-11.

⁸⁴ See Derrida and Ferraris, “I Have a Taste for the Secret.” As John Caputo explains, “For it belongs to the very essence of *venir* and *à venir* that what is coming be unknown, not merely factually unknown but structurally unknowable, which is what Derrida calls ‘the secret’ or the ‘absolute secret.’” *Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, 101.

made present—does not for Hoccleve mean abstaining from judgment.⁸⁵ Rather, it means forming provisional judgments about others, the kind of judgments that Kearney argues are a necessary complement to the ethics of alterity. Just as judgments need to account for the past, they need to be open to the future. At one point in the “Complaint,” Hoccleve admits that the kind of judgment he is proposing can best be verified retrospectively. Breaking off his argument for a moment, he exclaims, “preeue may the deede” (“Complaint” 223-4). Hoccleve turns toward the future here, deferring to the deeds-to-come as the (hopeful) guarantor of his present words.⁸⁶

A Shared Taste: “Communynge” in the “Dialogue”

The second part of the *Series*, which is more than double the length of the “Complaint,” consists of a verbal exchange between Hoccleve and an unnamed friend. The “Dialogue” begins with Hoccleve putting down his just finished work in order to answer a knock on his door. What we have just read—and imagined we were hearing directly from Hoccleve—is now revealed to be a document that Hoccleve has been writing inside of his home. The cinematic equivalent is something like a camera panning out to reveal a previously out-of-frame context. Hoccleve opens the door and responds: “‘Come in,’ quod I, ‘and see’” (“Dialogue” 13). The invitation echoes Hoccleve’s earlier imperative to “taaste and assay.” What follows is indeed an “assay,” as Hoccleve attempts to demonstrate his reasonableness through a lengthy, if occasionally strained, act of “communynge.”

The Friend’s initial response is less than enthusiastic. After prefacing his remarks with a profession of his “good entente,” he attempts to dissuade Hoccleve from circulating his work by arguing that nobody gossips about his mental state anymore (“Dialogue” 22).

⁸⁵ I do not mean to imply that Derrida devalues the act of judgment. Rather, following Kearney, I question whether his theory of judgment, with its opposition of rational calculation and what he calls the madness of the decision, limits the way we think about intersubjective judgment.

⁸⁶ Hoccleve’s insistence on his words being tested accords with Stanley Cavell’s understanding of confession: “In confessing, you do not explain or justify, but describe how it is with you. And confession, unlike dogma, is not to be believed but tested and accepted or rejected.” *Must We Mean What We Say*, 71.

Hoccleve insists otherwise. For him, the effects of the gossip continue to resonate. Diagnoses of madness in the Middle Ages were largely a matter of social consensus.⁸⁷ Hoccleve must thus find a way to counter what he sees as the entrenched, dominant narrative about his mental state. In the *Regiment*, Hoccleve had pointed to the permanence of the written record with a translation of the Latin tag *littera scripta manet*: “wrytynge wole endure” (2371). Writing, he goes on to say, can bear out a person’s character: “What a man is, it prest is for to preeve” (2372). By circulating the “Complaint,” Hoccleve can replace the lingering, fragmentary account of his peers with a fuller, more coherent narrative that delineates the relationship between Hoccleve’s past behaviour, his interval of madness, and the present.⁸⁸

Hoccleve is disappointed by what he perceives as a failure of attention on the part of the Friend. He is exploiting to the dual meaning of “entente” to stress how, while the Friend may very well harbour good intentions toward Hoccleve, he has not given Hoccleve’s words sufficient *attention*:

‘If 3e took hede, it maketh mencion
 That men of me speke in myn audience
 Ful heuily. Of 3oure entencioun
 I thanke 3ou, for of beneuolence,
 Woote I ful wel, procedeþ 3oure sentence,
 But certis, good frende, þat þing þat I heere,
 Can I witnesse and vnto it refeere. (“Dialogue” 43-9)

⁸⁷ Pfau, “Protecting or Restraining?” 94.

⁸⁸ Influenced by Aristotle, thinkers such as Kearney and Martha Nussbaum have argued that narratives activate and condition the process of practical judgment. The interdependence of practical judgment and narrative is clearly stated by Leslie Paul Thiele: “In everyday life, people operate much like jurors trying to interpret fragmentary evidence given in testimony. Achieving narrative coherence is crucial. To the extent that a story can be told about the world around us, sense can be made of its complex relationships, and judgments can be levied upon them.” *The Heart of Judgment*, 221.

A benevolent intention on the part of an interlocutor is important, acknowledges Hoccleve, but it must also be accompanied by attentiveness to the person's words. Against the Friend's invisible good will lies "þat þing," the product of Hoccleve's labour that, for him at least, proves who he is. Hoccleve wants "þat þing" to act as the kind of "suffisaunt euydence" that, according to *De Regimine*, leads an auditor to trust a person's spoken words (3.2.18).⁸⁹ For Hoccleve, as for Giles, "avisement"—attention, observation, deliberation—must precede judgments: "Beforn the doom, good wer auisement" ("Dialogue" 483). The Friend's alleged lack of attention recalls the way Hoccleve's peers ignore his daily behaviour in the "Complaint." And, for that matter, the critics of the *Letter of Cupid*, who, Hoccleve alleges, have given insufficient attention to the text itself. The Friend reads *through* his words, searching for signs of madness. In the words of James Simpson, he reads "diagnostically (looking... for signs of the narrator's ill health) and ironically (reading the professions of sanity as evidence of continuing mental instability)."⁹⁰ The Friend isolates studying as the precipitating causal factor for Hoccleve's madness ("Dialogue" 426); he also claims that Hoccleve's "disposicioun" inclines him to future outbreaks ("Dialogue" 377). Hoccleve, on the other hand, insists tautologically that his madness was caused by a "long seeknesse" ("Dialogue" 426). In Hoccleve's mind, the Friend's judgments and inquiries into psychological causes produce "smal fruyt" ("Dialogue" 432).⁹¹ Hoccleve warns the Friend not to presume that he knows more than he actually can know, a warning that echoes Hoccleve's rebuke of Oldcastle ("Dialogue" 479-83).

⁸⁹ According to John Burrow, the *Series* "is designed both to affirm his recovery and also, by its very existence, to prove it by showing that he can indeed talk sense again." "Hoccleve's *Series*: Experience and Books," 260. James Simpson pushes this observation further to argue that not only does the *Series* prove Hoccleve's reasonability, but it consolidates that very quality. "Madness and Texts: Hoccleve's *Series*," 25.

⁹⁰ Simpson, "Madness and Texts: Hoccleve's *Series*," 21.

⁹¹ As Medcalf puts it, Hoccleve "is not laying stress on a world of mental and emotional causation, as a psychologist would, nor primarily thinking of the possibility of cure through mastering the causes." "Inner and Outer," 130.

Hoccleve sees the Friend's penchant for diagnostic reading as constituting an ethical, as well as epistemological, breach. He questions whether the Friend's "entencioun" is really as good as he claims:

I pleyntly told yow haue the maneere
How þat it with me standen hath, and stant,
But of your trust to meward be yee scant. ("Dialogue" 467-9)

A true friend, explains Hoccleve, gives credence to whatever his friend says or writes ("Dialogue" 332-4). The Friend is again accused of forgetting: "Shuld we be now al neewe to aqweynte, / þat han so wel aqweynted be ful yore?" ("Complaint" 320-1). He has forgotten Hoccleve's past demonstrations of fidelity and trustworthiness. As Aquinas makes clear, it is often necessary to believe that what someone says is true, since we cannot wait until all of the evidence that would verify such claims has accumulated.⁹² Assuming otherwise would foreclose in advance the person's ability to establish her trustworthiness. But in Hoccleve's mind he has already proven himself to the Friend. Once again, Hoccleve is directing his interlocutor to take the long view. Hoccleve's eagerness to forestall prejudiced interpretations by pointing to the "pleyn" evidence of his words and deeds is tempered by his acknowledgment in the "Dialogue" that the correct interpretation of those words and deeds depends in part on the good will of his interlocutors. Yet, this good will does not emerge *ex nihilo*; it is predicated upon a history and context of mutual trust. The problem for Hoccleve is that his consistency of character, his *habitus*, has been ruptured by a period of madness. He argues that he cannot be held entirely responsible for his behaviour while mad, since his ability to act prudently was compromised. His peers and the Friend are less willing to see the period of madness as a temporary interruption and more as something indicative of his permanent disposition.

Eventually, after almost five hundred lines of dialogue, the Friend concludes that he has "tastid" Hoccleve sufficiently and found him to be sound, at least for now ("Dialogue"

⁹² Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Supplement 45.4. On this point, see Schwartz, *Aquinas on Friendship*, 98-100.

485). Hoccleve clearly expects his other readers to arrive at the same conclusion as the “prudent and wys” Friend (“Dialogue” 511). The Friend has paid closer attention to the “Complaint” than Hoccleve gives him credit for. By repeating one of the key words from the complaint—“taastid”—he shows Hoccleve that he understands what has been at stake throughout their “communynge.” Much of their conversation is occupied by the Friend trying to get Hoccleve to clarify his intentions concerning his literary endeavours. Readers of the *Series* do not have this opportunity. We cannot “commune” with Hoccleve extratextually. All we have is the book itself. This should be enough, according to Hoccleve’s reasoning. Towards the end of the “Dialogue,” Hoccleve gives the following advice to those who wonder what his intentions were in writing *Letter of Cupid*:

Looke in the same book. What stikith by?

Whoso lookith aright therin may see

Pat they me oghten haue in greet cheertee. (“Dialogue” 768-70)

Hoccleve’s intentions should be evident to the reader, he insists; in the case of the *Letter of Cupid*, he meant to defend the virtue of women, not slander them, and he should thus be commended. Yet the adverb “aright” in the second line complicates this straightforward picture. Hoccleve’s text is not as self-evident as it first appears; understanding his intention is not simply a matter of reading, but reading “aright.” By implication, readers who fail to discern Hoccleve’s intentions—for instance, those who hold that the *Letter of Cupid* is misogynistic—have failed to read “aright.”

How exactly does one read “aright”?⁹³ This is the pressing question raised by the “Complaint” and the “Dialogue.” His peers—and, to a certain extent, the Friend—have failed to read him “aright.” They have substituted “ymagynyng” for experience, overlooked the ordinary and the manifest in favour of decoding signs of the occult, and

⁹³ The question of what it means to read “aright” surfaces in the *Regiment* as well. The Prince is advised that the exempla provided “shal nat harme if they be herd aright” (2142). According to Nicholas Perkins, “Hearing ‘aright’ is the key to the texts that Hoccleve presents to Henry, not just because some of the advice in them may be regarded as dangerous, but because the ability of a ruler to hear and interpret is what the poem as a whole tries to teach.” *Hoccleve’s Regiment*, 77.

undervalued the larger narrative of his life. Blind “withynne and wipoute,” they are hobbled by failures of attention and intention. Yet, viewed from a different angle, one not so close to Hoccleve, the insistence on reading “aright” looks like a form of hermeneutic hegemony similar to that proposed by Dymmok. Those who fail to agree with Hoccleve’s assessments (about the *Letter*, about his state of mind) are accused of failing to read properly. Hoccleve leaves little room for the possibility that people might examine the right kind of evidence—his words and deeds—and yet arrive at a conclusion different from him. At times it feels as if Hoccleve expects from his readers something more like swallowing than tasting. Aquinas points out how judgments about contingent matters must take into consideration various conditions and circumstances and, in order to do so, it is helpful to collaborate with others, since “what occurs to one has escaped the notice of another.”⁹⁴ Hoccleve’s fear of being misread threatens to foreclose in advance the takes of others. Only those who read “aright” need apply. The problem is that Hoccleve appears to be the only one in the world of the *Series* who can read “aright.” He wants to ground his identity in actions and words that can be verified by others, but, in practice, he doubts the powers of discernment of these others.

In the *Series*, Hoccleve is doing more than just pleading his case before a jury; he is also attempting to educate the jury by advising them on what kind of evidence they should take into account and how they should interpret it.⁹⁵ Like Julian, Hoccleve seeks to train the attentiveness of his readers. The *Series* draws upon the methodology and arguments of didactic texts such as Giles of Rome’s *De Regimine* and Roger Dymmok’s *Liber* that train their readers in the art of discernment. For Hoccleve, discernment requires attentiveness and a willingness to suspend suspicion (at least provisionally). He likens

⁹⁴ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia-IIae 14.3. “Est autem considerandum quod in particularibus contingentibus, ad hoc quod aliquid certum cognoscatur, plures conditiones seu circumstantias considerare oportet, quas ab uno non facile est considerari, sed a pluribus certius percipiuntur, dum quod unus considerat, alii non occurrit.”

⁹⁵ In some sense the *Series* represents a reversal of the Boethian structure that informed earlier works like the *Regiment*: he is now the figure of wisdom trying to help others become “prudent and wys” (“Dialogue” 511). James Simpson observes that “[t]he real authority figure in the *Dialogue* is not the friend, but rather Thomas himself.” “Madness and Texts: Hoccleve’s *Series*,” 25.

discernment to taste in order to stress the experiential, interactive aspect of discernment and to distinguish these judgments from those based solely on visual evidence.

Judgments about others should take into account the wide angle of a person's life, while at the same time remaining open to future revision.

Chapter 5

Diversion in *Troilus and Criseyde*

In Chapter 1, we heard about how Trygetius zoned out at the breakfast table. What might appear to the modern reader to be a moment of distraction and unmindfulness is construed by Monica as a salutary, refreshing interval. The interval is productive because it affords Trygetius time and space to contemplate. But what if he were just letting his mind wander here and there, like a horse without a rider? What if he were daydreaming instead of thinking? Would the interval still be seen as useful? Mind wandering has become a hot topic within cognitive neuroscience. A recent *Scientific American* article on resting-state research ends with the question: “Are you most ‘you’ when you’re racing through work? Or when you’re simply sitting in a chair, mind adrift, just being?”¹ The basis for the rhetorical question comes from research demonstrating that there are areas of the brain that are actually more active during periods of so-called “rest” than they are when the subjects are performing the tasks assigned to them by researchers. The new paradigm of resting-state research proposes a “model of mental activity in which the potential for the designless, footloose, and aimless is converted into the purposive, generative, and aimful.”² For example, researchers now argue that daydreaming plays an important part in goal-directed planning. As Felicity Callard and Daniel S. Margulies point out, this research offers the potential to challenge orthodox models of subjectivity found both within the sciences and the humanities. The idea that “you are most you” when daydreaming is a radical departure from the Cartesian cogito and its most well-known counter-models of subjectivity, including Heidegger’s *Dasein*.³ Yet Callard and Margulies express an unease with how resting-state research is colonizing and

¹ Whitfield-Gabrieli and Gabrieli, “Idle Minds and What They May Say about Intelligence,” np. Quoted in Callard and Margulies, “The Industrious Subject,” 336.

² Callard and Margulies, “The Industrious Subject,” 338-39.

³ Of course, the notion that there is some ideal “you” that you are approaching most closely through daydreaming recapitulates a central tenet of Western metaphysics.

territorializing the very new ground it is uncovering by reducing complex mental phenomena such as memory to a calculus of productivity. As this research is disseminated into popular discourse, they argue, the picture of the brain as perpetually industrious, as working without interruption or the ability to stop, becomes equated with the neoliberal fantasy of the subject as perpetually industrious and no longer able to enjoy leisure-time uncontaminated by work-time. They suggest that the humanities—which includes scientific theories of attention that are no longer considered scientific, such as the work of Freud and William James—can play a role in helping to keep open the possibilities of the human brain as creative in ways that do not map directly onto the calculus of productivity so fundamental to the project of neoliberalism.

This chapter examines how *Troilus and Criseyde* takes up a question at the centre of Callard and Margulies' argument: what is the utility of distraction? The poem itself has long been read as participating in a late medieval court culture that developed increasingly sophisticated and intricate ways to pass the time.⁴ The frontispiece that opens the fifteenth-century Corpus manuscript represents the poem as being performed before a group of well-dressed nobles, arrayed in “elegant postures of attention and inattention,” who have gathered outside to listen to a figure standing at a pulpit.⁵ Positioned at the centre of the page, the figure is commonly taken to be Chaucer himself. Critics have cautioned against the assumption that the audience depicted in the frontispiece reflects the actual audience of the poem. Derek Pearsall argues that the frontispiece can be read more productively as a representation of the dynamic between speaker and audience cultivated within the poem itself.⁶ Indeed, the illustrator proves himself a perceptive reader of the poem. While most of the eyes in the audience are fixed

⁴ Lee Patterson refers to *Troilus and Criseyde* as “the preeminent courtly poem of the English Middle Ages.” He argues that, as a “maker,” Chaucer had a responsibility to provide “the materials of courtly diversion.” *Subject of History*, 51-2.

⁵ Pearsall, “The ‘Troilus’ Frontispiece,” 68.

⁶ Pearsall, “The ‘Troilus’ Frontispiece,” 70.

on the figure in the pulpit, there are some who are directing their attention elsewhere.⁷ In the bottom right foreground a couple mirrors one another's gaze and cupped head. Then there is the pair lurking at the left edge of the composition; the man leans toward the woman, staring searchingly, while she gestures toward his mid-section. They too only have eyes for each other. For these figures, ringed around the margin of the picture, the collective centre of attention—the orator in the pulpit—has receded into the background, become marginal. While the illustrator is no doubt mobilizing certain conventional tropes, such as the placement of lovers on the fringes of a crowd, he is also picking up on cues from the poem.⁸ In *Troilus and Criseyde*, love happens in the margins, away from the political and historical events on which the city's collective attention is focused. Moreover, it happens when the characters are themselves seeking out diversion. The narrator is concerned with those in his audience who are not paying attention, who prove resistant to the pleasures and, more importantly, to the demands of his narrative.

Whereas the preceding two chapters were concerned with forms of attention—beholding and tasting—that were defined largely in opposition to distraction, this chapter takes up a phenomenon that cuts across the attention-distraction binary: diversion. Diversion is not reducible to the either/or logic of the conversion-aversion structure that I have focused on in previous chapters. Deriving from Latin *divertere*, meaning to turn in different directions, to divert is to turn aside from an intended target.⁹ As the prefix *di-* implies, however, diversion accommodates the possibility of attention being directed at more than one object. The turn aside from the intended target is not so much severing of attention, but a suspension or transference of attention.¹⁰ The subject will return to the trajectory of

⁷ As Barry Windeatt points out, for Chaucer “the steady fixed gaze offers a way of representing through gesture a focusing of attention.” “Gesture in Chaucer,” 147. However, the direction of the eyes is not an infallible indicator of where the mind's attention is focused. One of the lessons of *Troilus and Criseyde* is that the eye of the mind is not always synched with the physical eyes. On the “mind-eye assumption,” see Underwood and Everatt, “The Role of Eye Movements in Reading.”

⁸ For the placement of the lovers, see Kendrick, *Chaucerian Play*, 168.

⁹ *OED*, s.v. “divert.”

¹⁰ Ross Chambers defines digression in a similar way: “Digression [...] is a discursive ‘slide’ or ‘slippage’ along a line of continuity that links one context and its other, so that the new position one reaches is both linked with the first and discontinuous with it.” *Loiterature*, 12.

her original intention, resuming the pilgrimage, to borrow Aquinas' metaphor, or, if she does not, it is because she has found her destination in the detour itself, which turns out not to have been a detour at all. Diversion is closely related to "digression," a word that appears in *Troilus and Criseyde*.¹¹ Chaucer understands digression as a turning aside, a diverting of focus from the "matere" to "thing[s] collateral" (1.262). Both digression and diversion operate according to a dialectic of the useful and the useless.

This chapter begins by surveying the medieval tradition that ascribed physiological and psychological benefits to diversion. I demonstrate how, following its source, *Il Filostrato*, *Troilus and Criseyde* draws on this tradition in Books IV and V. I argue that Chaucer wants to extend the possibilities of diversion beyond the medicalized discourse embodied by the figure of Pandarus. In particular, he wants to investigate how literature is distinct from other forms of diversion, such as hunting and games. After establishing digression as a localized form of diversion, I argue that Chaucer stages this investigation in the extensive digressions of Book II, where he veers away from *Il Filostrato*. This narrative space provides him with a locus in which to interrogate the theories of Boccaccio and other medieval writers and to imagine diversion as a form of receptivity that makes room for the marginal and the unexpected.

Loosening the Bow

In Chapter 2, we saw how Hilton insists that the contemplative should be praying at all times—if not actually, then virtually. Hilton makes no exceptions. He rejects the possibility that engaging in idle thoughts for a defined period of time will have salutary effects:

For thu schalt not sette in thyn herte a tyme, as thus longe thou woldest serve
God, and sithen to suffre thyn herte wilfulli to falle doun into veyn thoughtes and
ydel occupacions, wenande that it were nedeful to thee for savyng of thi bodili

¹¹ Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, 1.143. The noun "diversion" does not appear regularly until the seventeenth century. *OED*, s.v. "diversion,"; *MED*, s.v. "diversioun," The verb "diverten" is used by Lydgate in the fifteenth century. *MED*, s.v. "diverten."

kynde, levynge the keyynge of thy herte and gode occupacion, sekyngre reste and confort oughtward bi the bodili wittes or in worldeli vanytees, as it were for recreacion of the spirit, that it schulde be more scharp afterward to goostli travaile. For y trowe it is not sooth. (*Scale* 1.22.582-8)

Hilton does not specify why he thinks “it is not sooth,” but, as we have seen, he maintains that the mind is very good at wandering into distraction of its own accord. Hoccleve offers a quite different opinion on the value of “ydel occupacions.” He complains about the toll that writing takes on his mind and body. In the *Regiment*, he takes offense that some people consider his profession to be a “game” (989). He argues that writing requires the utmost of concentration:

The mynde al hool, withouten variance,
 On ye and hand awayte moot alway,
 And they two eek on him, it is no nay. (999-1001)

The alignment between heart and tongue—or, in this case, hand—that is so crucial in prayer is construed here as a burden. There can be no “variance,” no diversion of attention.¹² According to Hoccleve, the writer is not afforded the same ludic opportunities as other labourers, who may talk, sing, and “make game and play” while working (1011).

Hoccleve’s defense of play was shared by a number of medieval thinkers. The twelfth-century Benedictine Guibert of Nogent likened intervals of diversion to “holidays” that prevent the attention from growing cool: “when the mind has been fixed exclusively on one subject, we ought to give it relaxation from its intensity, so that after dealing in turn with different subjects we may with renewed energy, as after a holiday, fasten upon that

¹² Of course, like any scribe, Hoccleve made errors that would appear to be the result of “variance” between hand, eye, and mind. For instance, a holograph copy of “Lerne for to die” (San Marion, Huntington Library, HM 744) substitutes “freendes” for “feendes” in the following description of Purgatory: “horrible feendes and innumerable / Awayte upon my soule miserable” (671-2). Ashby Kinch suggests that the error might be an example of parapraxis, given Hoccleve’s strained relationship with his “freendes” in the *Series*. Kinch, *Imago Mortis*, 99. I offer a way to think about parapraxis in Chapter 2.

one with which our minds are most engaged.”¹³ He reflects ruefully that his childhood teacher failed to heed this wisdom and forced him to concentrate on tasks without interruption. Mental holidays were also recommended by Thomas Aquinas. In his discussion of play and games in the *Summa*, Aquinas recounts an anecdote told by John Cassian about John the Evangelist (IIa-IIae 168.2). According to the story, a hunter comes across John, who is occupying himself by stroking a partridge. The hunter is surprised that a person with such an esteemed reputation would spend his time engaged in this kind of frivolous pursuit. John responds by asking the hunter why he does not always keep his bow taut, to which the hunter explains that doing so would ruin the bow’s tensile strength, rendering it incapable of delivering a powerful shot. John points out that the soul’s *intentio* would also break (*frangeretur*) if it were not occasionally relaxed.¹⁴ The aptness of the analogy derives in part from the submerged, but still operative, meaning of *intentio* as “tension.” Aquinas agrees that the mind needs periodical refreshment because, like the body, it has a finite and fixed capacity. The mind is refreshed by pleasure, which slackens the tension of study. It is thus sometimes necessary to make use of playful words and deeds that have no purpose other than giving delight. Aquinas goes on to qualify this endorsement by stating that games should not be indecent or injurious and should be used in moderation. The person who plays moderately exercises the virtue of *eutrapelia*, “well-turning.”¹⁵ He knows when to turn aside from serious matters, and how to turn a witty phrase or two.

¹³ Guibert of Nogent, *Self and Society in Medieval France*, 47. Quoted in Olson, *Literature as Recreation*, 116.

¹⁴ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 168.2. “Unde beatus Joannes subintulit quod similiter animus hominis frangeretur si nunquam a sua intentione relaxaretur.” Cf. *Conferences* 24.21.1. “If by a certain relaxation [the mind] did not occasionally lighten and loosen its taut tension, it would not be able to harken to the power of the spirit when necessity demanded, since it would be weakened by its unrelenting exertion [Nec nostri, inquit beatus Iohannes, animi te offendat, o iuuenis, tam parua haec breuisque laxatio, quae nisi remissione quondam rigorem intentionis suae interdum releuet ac relaxet, inremisso uigore lentescens uirtuti spiritus, cum necessitas poscit, obsecundare non poterit].”

¹⁵ Hugo Rahner defines *eutrapelia* as follows: “This refined mentality of *eutrapelia* is therefore a kind of mobility of the soul, by which a truly culture person ‘turns’ to lovely, bright and relaxing things, without losing himself in them: it is, so to speak, a spiritual elegance of movement in which his seriousness and his moral character can be perceived.” *Man at Play*, 94.

In the *Series*, the Friend worries that Hoccleve's bow is on the verge of snapping again. He wonders whether Hoccleve is spending too much time engaged in extra-curricular study and whether the attention he devotes to his literary productions might exacerbate what he sees as a fragile mental condition. Medieval medical treatises identified excessive studying as a precipitating cause of melancholy, a term that was applied to a variety of states, ranging from dysthymia to the kind of full-blown depressive episode described by Hoccleve.¹⁶ According to Galenic humoral theory, melancholy resulted from an excess of black bile, which is cold and dry in form. Dryness was thought to be responsible for the mind's fixation on the sorrowful images that clog the imagination. According to Avicenna, an important authority on melancholy, the intellect of the melancholic is distracted (*distrahitur*) by sense and *phantasia*:

In the melancholy man, the strength of the imagination of sorrowful things makes them appear to him, so that the thing whose likeness is represented in his soul seems to be really there, and therefore he persists in his continual sorrow. Now the strength of the imagination comes from the dryness of the spirit... And it also happens because the intellect is distracted [*distrahitur*] from rational actions by sense and *phantasia*, on account of the bad complexion of the spirit.¹⁷

The melancholic subject cannot forget; even when physically absent, the object of his sorrow is perpetually before his mind's eye and, more troubling, cannot clearly be distinguished from reality.

¹⁶ On studying and melancholy, see Heffernan, *Melancholy Muse*, 18. On Hoccleve and melancholy, see Knapp, *Bureaucratic Muse*, 99-110; 159-84. On melancholy in medieval thought generally, see Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*; Joutsivuo, "Melancholy in Scholastic Medicine"; Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy*.

¹⁷ Avicenna, *De viribus cordis* 1.5. "[I]n melancholico fortitudo imaginationis contristantium rerum facit ei apparere, quod iam sit in actu res cuius similitudo animae representatur: et idcirco in continua perseverat tristitia. Fortitudo autem imaginationis erat propter siccitatem spiritus, quamvis rectificet motum eius. Et etiam quia intellectus a sensu et phantasia distrahitur ab actionibus rationis propter corruptionem complexionis spiritus." Quoted in Wells, *The Secret Wound*, 39.

Closely related to melancholy was lovesickness or *amor heros*.¹⁸ Commenting on Constantine the African's important eleventh-century treatise known as the *Viaticum*, Gerard of Berry writes: "[Love] is very similar to melancholy, because the entire attention [*intentio*] and thought, aided by desire, is fixed on the beauty of some form or figure."¹⁹ Love, like melancholy, is a disturbance of attention. According to the *Viaticum*, the etiology of lovesickness takes two primary, conflicting forms: the natural need to expel excess humours, which is exacerbated in those born with certain biological constitutions, and the excessive contemplation of beauty. Once afflicted, the patient will exhibit certain physical symptoms, including rapid eye movements and an unsteady pulse. He will become preoccupied by his thoughts to destructive consequence: "If the patient sinks into thoughts, the action of the soul and body is damaged, since the body follows the soul in its action, and the soul accompanies the body in its passion."²⁰ This chiasmic formulation points to the close interaction between body and soul that is characteristic of the discourse of lovesickness.

Those who suffered from melancholy, lovesickness, and other pathologies of attention were advised to seek out forms of diversion as cures. Arnold of Villanova argues that the best remedy for distraction is distraction: "People who are distracted [*distrahuntur*] by many cares and troubles and who are frequently harassed should take time out for cheerfulness and for proper recreations, so that their minds may flourish anew and their spirits be reinvigorated."²¹ Recreation affords an interval of respite that renews the mind. Gerard of Berry recommends a slightly different tack for those suffering from lovesickness: "Occupy the patients with various things, so they are distracted

¹⁸ On lovesickness, see Wells, *Secret Wound*; and Wack, *Lovesickness*.

¹⁹ Gerard of Berry, *Glosses on the Viaticum*, 199. "Est enim plurimum similis melancolie, qui tota intentio et cogitatio defixa est in pulchritudine alicuius forme uel figure desiderio coadiuuante."

²⁰ Constantine the African, *Viaticum*, 189. "Si in cogitationibus profundatur, actio anime et corporis corrumpitur, quia corpus animam in sua accione sequitur, anima corpus in sua passione comitatur."

²¹ Arnold of Villanova, *Opera medica*, f. 81. "Qui vero multis curis et sollicitudinibus distrahuntur et crebro punguntur gaudio sepe vacare debent et honestis solatiis vt animus refloreat et spiritus recreentur." Quoted in Olson, *Literature as Recreation*, 49.

[*diuertantur*] from what they love.”²² As alternative objects of focus, he recommends consorting with other women, as well as hunting and games. Berry’s logic presupposes a “hydraulic model” of desire, in which the diversion of desire down one channel weakens or cuts off the flow down another.²³ The hydraulic model is closely associated with the work of Freud, but variations go back at least as far as Plato. In the *Republic*, Plato writes: “When someone’s desires incline strongly for one thing, they are thereby weakened for others, just like a stream that has been partly diverted into another channel.”²⁴ As we have seen, Aquinas has a similar understanding of the hydraulics of *intentio*: “when the attention is strongly focused on one thing, it is weakened in regard of other things or totally withdrawn from them.”²⁵ For Aquinas, the goal of spiritual practice is to reroute attention away from bodily pleasure, which tends to monopolize it, and direct the force toward God. For Gerard, on the other hand, the objective is to redirect attention from its blockages by whatever means necessary, including channeling it toward another object of desire.

Diversion Therapy

In Books IV and V of *Troilus and Criseyde*, Pandarus attempts to divert Troilus from his thoughts about Criseyde by employing the logic of substitution and many of the techniques surveyed above. Upon hearing that parliament has decided to exchange Criseyde for Antenor, one of Troy’s most renowned soldiers, Troilus is distraught. Pandarus begins his consolation speech with a Boethian bromide – “Ne trust no wight to fynden in Fortune / Ay propretee; hire yiftes ben comune” (4.391-2) – but then pursues a line of argument borrowed largely from Ovid’s *Remedia amoris*, a work intended to help

²² Gerard of Berry, *Glosses on the Viaticum*, 203. “Fac eos occupatos circa res diuersas ut ab eo quod diligent diuertantur.”

²³ Hydraulic models of sexuality have been critiqued by Foucault and other theorists. See, for instance, Vicinus, “Sexuality and Power.”

²⁴ Plato, *Republic*, 485d6-8.

²⁵ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia-IIae 33.3, trans. modified. “Quia, sicut jam dictum est, ad ea in quibus delectamur multum attendimus; cum autem intentio fortiter inhaeserit alicui rei, debilitatur circa alias res, vel totaliter ab eis revocatur.”

cure those suffering from lovesickness. Citing the Ovidian proverb, “The newe love out chaceth ofte the olde” (4.415), he tries to convince Troilus that Criseyde is replaceable. Novelty, observes Pandarus, is the engine of forgetfulness:

“For also seur as day comth after nyght,
 The newe love, labour, or oother wo,
 Or elles selde seyng of a wight,
 Don olde affeccious alle over-go.
 And, for thi part, thow shalt have oon of tho
 T’abregge with thi bittre peynes smerte;
 Absence of hire shal dryve hire out of herte.” (4.421-7)

Just as day follows night, argues Pandarus, a new love or labour will inevitably arise to dislodge Criseyde from his heart. According to Ovid, if a person is unfortunate enough to devote himself to one particular woman, he should remedy the situation by taking another mistress, or, if he is strong enough, several. Ovid makes this point with a hydraulic metaphor: “when the attention, parted in twain, shifts from this one to that, one passion saps the other’s force. Great rivers are diminished by much channelling.”²⁶ As further evidence, he recalls how Agamemnon vanquished his desire for Chryseis – a particularly apt exemplum for our discussion, since Chryseis is partly the inspiration for the character of Criseyde. After commenting on the similarity of their appearances and names, Agamemnon replaced the departed Chryseis with Briseis, and, as Ovid puts it, “his passion was allayed, for the new drove out the old.”²⁷ The two women are interchangeable. As Suzanne C. Hagedorn notes: “In the masculine world of the Trojan War, as Ovid presents it, one woman is as good as another; they are chattel, without identities or subjectivity of their own, property to be traded or exchanged by men.”²⁸

²⁶ Ovid, *Remedies of Love*, 209.

²⁷ Ovid, *Remedies of Love*, 211.

²⁸ Hagedorn, *Abandoned Women*, 152.

Although the narrator gives us the impression that Pandarus is throwing out lines of argumentation in a desperate attempt to save his friend's life, and may not fully believe his own "unthrift," there is something deeply unsettling about the ease with which he imagines Criseyde's substitution (4.431).²⁹ It is a moment when the private drama between Troilus, Criseyde and Pandarus intersects with the larger social reality of Troy—and, in particular, its legitimization of the trafficking of women—that the narrative tends to shy away from.³⁰

Pandarus believes that a new care will emerge to help Troilus forget about Criseyde. His advice accords with the basic principles of mnemotechnics as practiced by thinkers like John Cassian. Describing Cassian's attempts to expunge from his memory the traces of the pagan literature he learned as a child, Carruthers explains how forgetting requires "particular acts of concentrated attention, during which one 'drives out' one set of memory 'topics' and replaces them with another."³¹ The mind is ceaselessly in motion; it cannot be stopped or emptied, only diverted down a more productive channel. For Cassian, it is a matter of replacing pagan stories with Christian teaching; for Pandarus, of replacing Criseyde with another woman. Troilus fails to grasp the principles of active forgetting when he reduces Pandarus' argument to the imperative "Thynk nat on smert, and thow shalt fele non" (4.466). Pandarus does not tell Troilus to stop thinking about Criseyde; he tells him to start thinking about someone else. The difference, although subtle, is significant.³²

²⁹ For a perceptive analysis of Pandarus' "unthrift," see Edwards, "Pandarus' 'Unthrift.'"

³⁰ Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, 60.

³¹ Carruthers, *Craft of Thought*, 89.

³² The psychologist Daniel M. Wegner's well-known "white bear" experiments demonstrate how difficult it is to intentionally stop thinking about a particular thought. Subjects were instructed to try *not* thinking about a white bear; their attempts backfired, as thoughts of white bears ended up intruding with even more frequency. Subjects who distracted themselves by focusing on another object of thought had more success. As Wegner writes: "If we wish to suppress a thought, it is necessary to become absorbed in another thought." *White Bears and Other Unwanted Thoughts*, 70.

Despite Troilus' protestations, Pandarus continues to prescribe a therapy of diversion. In Book V, Troilus waits in agony for Criseyde, who promised she would find a way to return to Troy in ten days' time. He wonders whether it would be better to die than continue to suffer "in langour" (5.42). Pandarus's solution is to distract Troilus from the present moment:

"Ris, lat us speke of lusty lif in Troie
 That we han led, and forth the tyme dryve;
 And ek of tyme comyng us rejoie,
 That bryngen shaloure blisse now so blyve;
 And langour of thise twyes dayes fyve
 We shal therwith so foryete or oppresse
 That wel unneth it don shal us duresse. (5.393-9)

By occupying their minds with memories of past happiness and anticipations of future pleasure, Pandarus and Troilus can forget their current misfortune. Mary Wack argues that Pandarus "recommends oblivion instead of recollection," but I think what he recommends—perhaps ill advisedly—is oblivion *through* recollection.³³ They will "forth the tyme dryve," and the ten-day interval will contract. Pandarus repeats variations on this phrase three times over the course of fifty lines (5.351-2; 5.389-90; 5.404-5). Their flight from the present moment is abetted by a relocation of place. They travel to the residence of King Sarpedon, which, Pandarus assures him, is the best place in town to "pleye" (5.431). Indeed, as Wack notes, Sarpedon provides many of the therapeutic diversions recommended by medical treatises on lovesickness, including unfamiliar surroundings, food, music, beautiful women, and dancing.³⁴

³³ Wack, "Memory and Love," 194.

³⁴ Wack, "Memory and Love," 111. See also Brown, *Making of Optical Space*, 304.

Troilus remains unmoved by these allures. He would prefer it if nobody made any music at all (4.461-2). The presence of the other women remind Troilus of the absence of Criseyde, upon whom his thoughts remain fixed:

On hire was evere al that his herte thoughte,
 Now this, now that, so faste ymagenynge
 That glade, iwis, kan hym no festeynge. (5.453-5)

Like the melancholic man described by Avicenna, the strength of his imagination does not allow him to forget. Troilus also experiences the blurring of perception and hallucination characteristic of the melancholic's disturbed imagination. He addresses Criseyde as if she were in front of him: "O lufsom lady bryght, / How have ye faren syn that ye were here? (5.465-6) Troilus' apostrophe does, in some way, "forth the tyme dryve." The phantasmatic conjuring of his beloved contracts the present, intolerable interval of absence. He hallucinates her return, imagines the "tyme comyng" that Pandarus suggested he focus on.³⁵

When not imagining that he and Criseyde are reunited, Troilus is lost in recollection. Instead of the shared reminiscing proposed by Pandarus, though, Troilus retreats into his own private memory theatre. Disobeying Ovid's advice to shun old love letters, Troilus uses Criseyde's letters as a stimulus for his recollection (5.470-6). Upon returning to town, Troilus continues his obsessive recollection, only, instead of using the love letters as stimuli, he uses landmarks:

Fro thennesforth he rideth up and down,
 And every thyng come hym to remembraunce
 As he rood forby places of the town
 In which he whilom hadde al his plesaunce. (5.561-4)

³⁵ Troilus' response to Criseyde's absence, his recourse to apostrophe, resonates with the psychoanalytic theory of melancholy, as described here by Marion A. Wells: "The melancholic response to loss... works by producing a phantasmic world so vivid and absorbing that the reality of objective loss need not be fully experienced." Wells, *Secret Wound*, 116. Wells is drawing on the work of Jonathan Lear.

Unlike the narrator of *Il Filostrato*, who, in the proem, explains how his eyes “have spontaneously turned away from looking at the temples and the loggias and the squares and the other places” where he formerly expected to see his now-absent beloved, Troilus’s attention gravitates to the various loci associated with Criseyde.³⁶ The *remembraunce:plesaunce* rhyme ironically recalls Pandarus’ “unthrift[y]” prediction concerning the durability of Troilus’ love: “For syn it is but casuel plesaunce, / Som cas shal putte it out of remembraunce.” (IV.419-20). As it turns out, Troilus cannot put anything related to Criseyde “out of remembraunce.” He suffers from what Carruthers calls an “excess of remembering.”³⁷ The diversion to Sarpedon’s residence has not weakened his fixation on Criseyde. If anything, it ends up returning him to his obsession with renewed intensity.

Chaucer follows *Il Filostrato* fairly closely in describing Pandarus’ various ineffectual attempts at diversion therapy. Chaucer highlights Pandarus’ failure through ironic verbal echoes, as well as the narrator’s explicit declaration that Pandarus’ advice consists of “unthrift.” But Books IV and V do not represent the entirety of the poem’s investigation into the mechanics and potentialities of diversion. In Book II, Chaucer explores the possibility of diversion not as an indirect way to achieve certain predetermined goals, but as an openness to contingency and alternate points of view. As we will see in the next section, part of what makes reading a book of poetry or listening to a song different from taking a bath or drinking wine is the way in which literature opens us, sometimes overwhelmingly so, to the suffering of others.

Literary Diversions

Literature was regarded by medieval thinkers as a particular efficacious remedy for states of tedium and sadness, as well as more protracted cases of melancholy and lovesickness. In his important study *Literature as Recreation in the Later Middle Ages*, Glending Olson

³⁶ Boccaccio, *Il Filostrato*, 7.

³⁷ Carruthers, *Craft of Thought*, 89.

examines the widespread influence of Horace's dictum that art should both amuse and instruct. While much of the literary theory that emerged from the Middle Ages privileged the latter objective over the former, or argued that amusement is necessary only in so far as it makes instruction easier to swallow, Olson demonstrates that there was also a tradition of valuing the pleasure (*delectatio*) derived from reading and listening to literary works as useful. Works intended primarily or even solely to delight their readers could be justified as useful because it was believed that delight had valuable physiological and psychological effects. In proper doses, *delectatio* could relieve sadness and alleviate mental and physical fatigue.

The most influential medieval account of the recreational and consoling power of literature is Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*. The *Consolation* begins with Lady Philosophy entering and driving out the muses that have been attending the Prisoner, apparently signaling the rejection of poetry in favour of philosophical instruction. However, as both medieval and modern readers have pointed out, Lady Philosophy herself uses song and fable to mollify and soothe.³⁸ Lady Philosophy explains how the sweetness of song can prepare a person to receive the medicine of reason: "But now is tyme that thou drynke and ataste some softe and delitable thynges, so that whanne thei ben entred withynne the, it mowe maken wey to strengere drynkes of medicines" (2.pr1.37-41). Ingested and internalized, song acts like an aperitif. These diversions into verse have the effect of galvanizing the Prisoner's attention. Like Book II, which we

³⁸ There has been much written about the interaction of the prose and *metra* in the *Consolation*. Elaine Scarry emphasizes the mediating function of the *metra*, which, she argues, associates them with the faculty of the imagination. Unlike prose, which progresses straight ahead and is the proper medium with which to grasp universals, verse, as its etymology implies, moves back and forth, a zigzagging that Scarry links back to the way the imagination shuttles between the particular and the universal. "The Well-Rounded Sphere," 104-5. Gerard O'Daly sees the role played by the meters as more significant to the overall scheme of the work. Verse, he argues, "is a serious part of the philosophical enterprise." He argues that prose is understood by Lady Philosophy as capable of dispensing the rhetorical sweetness characteristic of verse. O'Daly's argument calls into question any sharp division between prose and verse. *The Poetry of Boethius*, 34-5. Commenting on Boethius' general theory of music, Henry Chadwick argues that Boethius sees music as something more than "cheerful entertainment": "The theory of music is a penetration of the very heart of providence's ordering of things. It is not a matter of cheerful entertainment or superficial consolation for sad moods, but a central clue to the interpretation of the hidden harmony of God and nature in which the only discordant element is evil in the heart of man." *Boethius*, 101.

looked at in the Introduction, Book III opens with a moment of attentive silence following the conclusion of one of Lady Philosophy's songs: "By this sche hadde ended hir song, whan the swetnesse of here dite hadde thurw-perceved me, that was desyrous of herkynyng, and I astoned hadde yit streyghte myn eres (*that is to seyn, to herkne the bet what sche wolde seye*)" (3.pr1.1-5). The song's sweetness has entered the Prisoner, pierced him through. He is eager to hear what will come next. The *Consolation* represents a particularly complex and nuanced intermingling of delight and instruction.

Boccaccio was one of the medieval readers who pointed out the *Consolation's* methodological and structural reliance on poetry.³⁹ He explores the consolatory function of poetry in the *Decameron*, which Giuseppe Mazzotta describes as a "playful twist" on the *Consolation*.⁴⁰ In the prologue, Boccaccio explains how the collection of stories is written with the intention of providing diversion for women who are suffering from excessive longing.⁴¹ He targets lovesick women exclusively because their lives are marked by enforced idleness, as they sit around their rooms wishing for one thing and then its opposite (*volendo e non volendo*).⁴² Men, on the other hand, have a variety of diversions at their disposal, including traveling, hunting, riding, and gambling. "Each of these pursuits," writes Boccaccio, "has the power of engaging men's minds, either wholly or in part, and diverting them from their gloomy meditations, at least for a certain period: after which, some form of consolation will ensue, or the affliction will grow less intense" (3). Boccaccio reminds the reader of his target audience in the epilogue, where he addresses the potential objection that the stories are too long. For those who read in order to "pass the time" like the lovesick women he is addressing, the length of the narratives does not matter (801). Those who have better things to do, such as students, are advised

³⁹ Boccaccio, *Genealogy of the Gods*, 15.20.

⁴⁰ Mazzotta, *World at Play*, 38. Mazzotta argues that Boccaccio plays with the etymological connection between *consolatio* and *solatium* (play, leisure) to signal the importance of diversion in *Decameron*.

⁴¹ Mazzotta argues that Boccaccio develops a "metonymic contiguity" between lovesickness and the plague, both of which necessitate the same treatment, namely, the pursuit of pleasant diversions such as singing and gaming. *World at Play*, 32-4.

⁴² Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 4. Subsequent references to the English translation are cited parenthetically by page number.

by Boccaccio to direct their attention elsewhere. In the prologue, though, Boccaccio makes it clear that the stories are not intended simply to “pass the time”; they instruct as well. They teach the women “what should be avoided and likewise what should be pursued” (3). It is this process of recognition that leads to the removal of their affliction (*noia*). Yet, as Olson points out, the didactic potential of the *Decameron* is enabled by its diversionary effects: “Literature not only distracts one from ‘noia’ but in doing so engenders a sensibility that is in turn able to gain greater pleasure and profit from it.”⁴³ According to Olson’s study, it is comic literature that offers consolation. As an exception that proves the rule, he mentions Filostrato, the story-teller in the *Decameron* who decrees that the fourth day be taken up with love stories that end unhappily. Filostrato wishes to hear stories that relate to his own misfortune in love, believing that such tales will quench the fire of his own anguish. While Filostrato may find comfort in misery, the rest of the company is saddened by the day’s theme, which leads Filostrato to apologize for diverting the group from the established mood of levity. For Olson, the fourth day represents an aberration, a detour that allows Boccaccio to expand the scope of his work by incorporating pathetic fictions.

Earlier in his career, Boccaccio had explored the consoling power of tragedy in more detail. His *Elegy of Lady Fiammetta* is written from the point of view of a noblewoman who must deal with the prolonged absence of her secret lover. She recounts the various techniques of distraction and diversion that she employs in an effort to displace her obsessive thoughts and suspicions. She is powerless to dispel her thoughts; at best, they can be replaced: “they did not leave when I wanted them to, but sometimes I would forget them when others took their place.”⁴⁴ She takes solace in narratives. She enjoins her maids to tell her stories—the more fabulous, the better—and often finds herself laughing despite her melancholy. But she is also attracted to tales of woe: “And if for some legitimate reason this pastime was not possible, I looked in various books for other

⁴³ Olson, *Literature as Recreation*, 211.

⁴⁴ Boccaccio, *Elegy of Lady Fiammetta*, 43. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically by page number.

people's miseries, and by comparing them to mine, I felt as if I had company, and so the time passed less tediously" (49). When in a group, she is diverted by comic stories; when alone, she turns to the tragic to find "company." By the end of the text, Fiammetta states that comparing her misfortune to others is the only consolation that helps her to bear her sorrow. It has two advantages: "one is that I do not see myself as the first and only one in my miseries [...] and the other is that, in my opinion, and after weighing carefully all aspects of other people's anguish, I judge my own misery to be much greater than that of everyone else" (142). These two functions are rather contradictory. Reading stories of other lovers' suffering makes her feel less alone, but also confirms that her own suffering is unparalleled. What follows is a catalogue of misfortunate lovers in which this same pattern is repeated: Fiammetta will describe their suffering and express her compassion for their plight, only to break the rapport by insisting on the exceptionality of her own situation. For instance, she imagines the scene of Hero of Sestos discovering the dead body of her lover Leander and weeping. Fiammetta is deeply affected: "Oh, what deep compassion binds me mentally to this lady! To be truthful, I felt for her so much more deeply than for any of the ladies already mentioned that sometimes I forgot my own grief and wept for her" (145). This forgetfulness is only temporary. Fiammetta severs the bond of compassion by going on to argue that her own grief outweighs that of Hero because, unlike her ancient counterpart, she must live continuously with the anxious possibility that her lover may one day return to her. The arguments she deploys to demonstrate her exceptionality are not always convincing and threaten to sever the bond of compassion established between her and her reader. In the prologue, however, she states that eliciting compassion from her audience is not her primary goal; their compassion is useful in so far as it encourages her to lament more vigorously. Fiammetta does not write down her sorrow with the intention of purging it. On the contrary, she wants to increase her sorrow, to prevent it from diminishing due to the dulling effect of time. As Augustine might put it, she wants to express her grief in order to inflame it, so that she might continue to scratch it. The idea that expressing one's grief will "ese youre herte," as the narrator of

the *Book of the Duchess* puts it, is common in many medieval texts.⁴⁵ The *Elegy of Fiammetta* cynically questions the value of such expression, as well as the possibility of forming compassionate bonds with literary characters.

Chaucer considers the consolatory effects of tragedy in one of his early works too. The *Book of the Duchess* opens with the narrator complaining about his inability to sleep. The lack of sleep has rendered him insensible and inattentive: “I take no kep / Of nothing” and “I have felynge in nothyng” (6-7; 11). He can no longer experience joy or sorrow. One night, he decides to read a “romaunce”—Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*—hoping it will “drive the night away” (48-9). He considers perusing a romance better “play” than chess or backgammon (50). He is struck by one tale in particular: the story of Alcyone and Ceyx. It is not exactly light reading. Ceyx dies in a shipwreck that leaves no survivors and thus no one to tell his wife Alcyone what happened. Eventually, after pleading to Juno for a vision or at least news of her husband’s fate, Alcyone is visited in a dream by Morpheus, the god of sleep, who delivers Ceyx’s dead body to her bed and then animates it so he can say goodbye to his wife. Upon waking, Alcyone exclaims “Allas!” and dies shortly thereafter (213). The narrator is deeply moved by Alcyone’s grief:

Such sorowe this lady to her tok
 That trewly I, that made this book,
 Had such pittee and such rowthe
 To rede hir sorwe that, by my trowthe,
 I ferde the worse al the morwe
 Aftir to thenken on hir sorwe. (95-100)

The narrator imagines that he will still be thinking about Alcyone’s suffering tomorrow. It is not entirely clear whether the narrator considers this a good thing. Readers of the poem have argued that his engagement with the story of Alcyone and Ceyx has a

⁴⁵ Chaucer, *Book of the Duchess*, 556. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically by line number(s).

therapeutic effect on his own condition. Peter Brown argues that it does more than just pass the time and help him to fall asleep:

Earlier he had stated that joy and sorrow were all the same to him in his melancholic state, but now a story in a book has stimulated an emotion which drives out his existing preoccupations to replace it with empathy for someone else's predicament. Thus the temporal distance between the grieving Alcyone and the despondent narrator is bridged by an act of imaginative sympathy and the narrator's horizons enlarge so that his own self-absorbing unhappiness is placed in a larger context and thus forgotten.⁴⁶

Feeling sorrow is surely better than feeling nothing at all, but I don't think that the narrator's act of "imaginative sympathy" is as robust as Brown would have it. Like Fiammetta, the narrator goes on to complicate his identification with the classical figure. Desperate for sleep, he decides to try his hand at pagan prayer by petitioning Morpheus and Juno. Before beginning, though, he points out the ideological and historical distance that separates him from Alcyone: "I ne knew never god but oon" (237). His prayer will be unserious, merely a "game" (238). He disingenuously offers Morpheus and Juno luxurious gifts if they are able to help him fall asleep. Identification veers into parody.

Although in the end both the *Elegy of Lady Fiammetta* and the *Book of the Duchess* are rather skeptical about the possibility of identifying with literary characters, these texts point to the way in which literature can divert us outside of ourselves and help us to forget our own sorrow or emotional deadness, if only temporarily, as we feel the thoughts and tears of others, as Fiammetta puts it (144). Augustine was deeply puzzled by this phenomenon. In *Confessions*, he describes how as a youth he was riveted by the performance of tragedy. "Why," he asks, "is it that a person should wish to experience suffering by watching grievous and tragic events which he himself would not wish to

⁴⁶ Brown, *Chaucer and the Making of Optical Space*, 182. Rosenfeld similarly argues that the tale of Alcyone and Ceyx plays a critical role in the narrator's "movement from numb despair at the vagaries of fortune to a productive empathy and narrativity." *Ethics and Enjoyment*, 102. See also Heffernan, *Melancholy Muse*, 49; Burlin, *Chaucerian Fiction*, 59.

endure?”⁴⁷ Watching tragedy generates a peculiar form of pity (*miser cordia*), which allows the spectator to share the joy or sadness of the characters on stage. Using a hydraulic metaphor, he goes on to argue that aesthetic pity is a perversion of ordinary pity: “This feeling [*miser cordia*] flows from the stream of friendship, but where does it go? Where does it flow to? Why does it run down into the torrent of boiling pitch into which it is transformed [*mutatur et vertitur*]?”⁴⁸ According to Marcia Colish, this turning is an introversion: theatre turns “outgoing compassion” inward, as the spectator revels in the intermingling of pleasure and suffering he is experiencing.⁴⁹

Augustine’s question about why we are attracted to tragedy has been taken up by subsequent generations of thinkers. In recent years, motivated by the so-called “affective turn,” literary scholars have taken a renewed interest in how literature makes readers feel and, in particular, how readers come to form affective and compassionate bonds with literary characters and their authors.⁵⁰ While many of the studies investigating these questions have focused on the literature of the eighteenth century and later, medievalists are well-positioned to contribute to this conversation. For instance, Sarah McNamer has demonstrated how the habituation of compassion was a primary goal of late medieval devotional writers such as Nicholas Love.⁵¹ Recent work by Jessica Rosenfeld and Eleanor Johnson has drawn attention to *Troilus and Criseyde*’s strategies of encouraging

⁴⁷ Augustine, *Confessions*, 3.2.2. “Quid est quod ibi homo vult dolere cum spectat luctuosa et tragica, quae tamen pati ipse nollet?”

⁴⁸ Augustine, *Confessions*, 3.2.3. “Et hoc de illa vena amicitiae est. sed quo vadit? Quo fluit? Ut quid decurrit in torrentem picis bullientis, aestus immanes taetrarum libidinum, in quos ipsa mutatur et vertitur per nutum proprium de caelesti serenitate detorta atque deiecta?”

⁴⁹ Colish, *The Mirror of Language*, 22-3. On the relation between “ordinary” pity and aesthetic pity in Augustine, see Munteanu, “Aesthetic and Ordinary Emotion.”

⁵⁰ See, for instance, Feagin, *Reading with Feeling*; Ablow, ed. *The Feeling of Reading*; Vermule, *Why Do We Care about Literary Characters?* The work of Martha Nussbaum, especially *Love’s Knowledge*, is also relevant. Within medieval studies, see Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*; Watson, “Desire for the Past”; and, for a critique of affect-centred historiography, Smith, “The Application of Thought.” As Michael Clune observes, the waxing influence of poststructuralism has coincided with the popularity of cognitive approaches to literature, which “replace the deconstructive focus on the theoretical difficulty of aligning textual artifacts and mental states with wonder at the mental capacity that enables millions of readers to slip inside the minds of fictional characters every day.” *Writing Against Time*, 29-30.

⁵¹ McNamer, *Affective Meditation*.

compassion in its readers, as well as the poem's thematic interest in ethical questions surrounding identification and empathy.⁵² *Troilus and Criseyde* presents a more sustained inquiry into the relationship between writing, reading, and compassion than the *Book of the Duchess*, and experiments with the possibility of literature as effecting an extraversion of the reader, a turning outside of the self, even if in the final stanzas the poem disavows this experiment in a way similar to the *Book of the Duchess*, ending with a view of tragic compassion closer to Augustine's. Before turning to Book II, though, I want to look more closely at how diversion operates on the level of the text through the movement of digression.

“Thing[s] Collateral:” On Digression

Troilus enters the poem in a playful mood. He has come to observe the springtime rituals at the temple as a form of “pleyng” (1.267). Taking umbrage at his mocking attitude toward the gathering lovers, however, Cupid strikes him with an arrow. Beginning with the apostrophe, “O blynde world, O blynde entencioun!” the narrator moves from the freshly-wounded Troilus to an excursus on the dangers of pride (1.211). It is the first time that the narrative swerves away from *Il Filostrato* for any length of time. After some fifty lines, the narrator returns to his “matere”:

But for to tellen forth in special
Of this kynges sone of which I tolde,
And leten of other thing collateral,
Of hym thenke I my tale forth to holde,
Both of his joie and of his cares colde;

⁵² Drawing on Aristotelian ethical theory, Rosenfeld argues that “the poem works to bridge the gap between complicity and compassion by making mutuality a central aspect of happiness.” *Ethics and Enjoyment* 152. Johnson argues that the narrator employs strategies of “affect-shepherding” to provoke compassion in his readers, thereby manipulating and delimiting their responses to the text. She sees the narrator's interventions as replicating the function of the meters in Boethius' *Consolation*. *Practicing Literary Theory*, 102-14.

And al hi werk, as touching this matere,

For I it gan, I wol therto refere. (1.260-6)

In this *reditus ad propositum*, the narrator reminds us—and himself—of the “entente” guiding his narrative: to tell us about Troilus’ “joie” and “cares.” Much like the person who prays inattentively, the narrator comes back to himself, pricked by the “entente” which he has previously set. His narrative trajectory has been circumscribed by this initial intention which now acts as a principle of selection, determining where, and for how long, he can direct his gaze. In what becomes somewhat of a refrain, he states that he will continue only because he has already started. It is curious, and as far as I know unremarked upon, that the digression itself begins with an extended metaphor that recapitulates the central movement of digression: a turning aside that is then chastised and corrected. The narrator compares the proud Troilus to Bayard the horse, who

[...] gynmeth for to skippe

Out of the weye, so pryketh hym his corn

Til he a lasshe have of the longe whippe. (1.218-20)

According to J. D. Burnley, the Bayard exemplum was used by medieval writers to demonstrate the potential negative consequences of imprudent action.⁵³ The parallel between the horse and the narrator’s divergence from the “weye” raises the question of whether this digression was executed with forethought. Has the narrator measured out and plotted each stage of his work in advance, as Pandarus recommends at the end of Book I (1065-71)?

Chaucer’s understanding of digression as a turning aside to engage with “thing[s] collateral” reflects his familiarity with medieval rhetoric. Along with the related terms *dilatatio* and *descriptio*, *digressio* was considered by rhetorical handbooks to be a principal way of amplifying the orator or poet’s subject matter. And, by choosing which aspects to

⁵³ Burnley, “Proude Bayard.”

amplify or abbreviate, the author could put his own stamp on the “matere.”⁵⁴ In a prefatory letter attached to his *Moralia on Job*, Gregory uses the figure of a stream to explain how and why a preacher should digress:

The expositor of the Holy Writ should imitate the way a river flows. For, when a river flows through its bed, hitting on both sides on open valleys, it immediately changes [*divertit*] its course. And when it has filled those open spaces sufficiently, it all of a sudden returns to its bed. In the same manner the expositor of Holy Writ, when discussing any subject whatever, should be willing to change the course of his speech towards a nearby valley if he comes across a suitable occasion for edification. And after he has filled the field of extra instruction sufficiently, he may return to the main course of his exposition.⁵⁵

Geoffrey of Vinsauf deploys a similar metaphor. Defining digression as a “turn aside from the material at hand,” Geoffrey compares the digressing author to a walking person who sometimes leaps off the road to the side and then eventually returns to the main road.⁵⁶ Whereas Gregory values digression for its ability to expand the topics of edification, Geoffrey sees digression and *amplificatio* more generally as ways to refresh the mind by providing variety and pleasing ornamentation. Geoffrey warns that

⁵⁴ Kelly, *The Art of Medieval French Romance*, 298.

⁵⁵ Gregory the Great, *Dedicatory Letter to Leander*. “Sacri enim tractator eloquii morem fluminis debet imitari. Fluvius quippe dum per alveum defluit, si valles concavas ex latere contingit, in eas protinus sui impetus cursum divertit, cumque illas sufficienter impleverit, repente sese in alveum refundit. Sic nimirum, sic divini verbi esse tractator debet, ut, cum de qualibet re disserit, si fortasse iuxta positam occasionem congruae aedificationis invenerit, quasi ad vicinam vallem linguae undas intorqueat et, cum subiunctae instructionis campum sufficienter infuderit, ad sermonis propositi alveum recurat.” Quoted in Pranger, “Killing Time,” 324-5.

⁵⁶ Geoffrey of Vinsauf, *Poetria nova*, 3.527-36. “If it is desirable to amplify the treatise yet more fully, go outside the bounds of the subject and withdraw from it a little; divert your pen, but no so widely that it will be difficult to find the way back. This technique demands a talent marked by restraint, lest the bypath be longer than decorum allows. A kind of digression is made when I turn aside from the material at hand, bringing in first what is actually remote and altering the natural order. For sometimes, as I advance along the way, I leave the middle of the road, and with a kind of leap I fly off to the side, as it were; then I return to the point whence I had digressed [Si velit ulterius tractatus linea tendi, / Materiae fines exi paulumque recede / Et diverte stylum; sed nec divertere longe / Unde gravet revocare gradum: modus iste modesto / Indiget ingenio, ne sit via longior aequo. / Est etiam quaedam digression quando propinqua / Transeo, quod procul est praemittens ordine verso. / Progressurus enim medium quandoque relinquo / Et saltu quodam quasi transvolo; deinde revertor / Unde prius digressus eram.”

digressions should be undertaken with restraint, so as to avoid making the bypath longer than decorum permits. Excessive digression runs the risk of turning the pleasure of leisure into the boredom of tedium. Medieval romances are replete with narrators who explicitly forgo a lengthy description or a tangential bit of exposition because they fear their audience will find such detours tedious.⁵⁷ The digressive tendency of medieval romance is tempered by these promises of abbreviation and concision. According to Quintilian, promises of concision can be used to revive a listener's flagging attention.⁵⁸ Skilled rhetoricians like Pandarus know how to modulate and manipulate the attention of their audience by dilating and abbreviating their speech.⁵⁹

According to Geoffrey's *Poetria Nova* and its medieval commentaries, there are two main ways to "turn aside" through digression. The author can deviate from the natural chronology of the "matere" by introducing or glancing at events that occur before or after the present moment of the diegesis. He can also deviate by moving to a different subject matter. This second form of digression comprises the interlace technique so common in medieval romance.⁶⁰ In her study of commentaries on the *Poetria Nova*, Marjorie Curry Woods notes that one important anonymous thirteenth-century commentary draws a further distinction between *digressio inutilis* and *digressio utilis*:

[Digression] is made in one way when the poet, interrupting the subject, treats something else that comes up by chance [*forte*], like the description of a place, or the nature of some thing, or by some expression of praise and the like, and after this he returns to the subject he had dropped. The other way digression is made is

⁵⁷ Kelly, *The Art of Medieval French Romance*, 296-7.

⁵⁸ Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, 4.1.34.

⁵⁹ Von Moos argues that rhetoric is one of the few areas of thought in the Middle Ages that thematized involuntary attention. "Aufmerksamkeit im Mittelalter," 94. Derek Attridge argues that when we read a narrative, we are constantly monitoring the extent to which the words represent a digressive or progressive moment vis-a-vis the mainline of the narrative: "Although we do it unconsciously, this activity of classification influences the rhythm and tempo of our reading, the degree of concentration at any given point, the selective operation of our short-term memory, and the formation of mental constructs relating to already held schemata of 'character,' 'plot,' 'theme,' and so on." *Peculiar Language*, 218

⁶⁰ Kelly, "The Rhetoric of Adventure," 174.

when the subject is interrupted and another topic introduced which is far off, but in the end is applied to the subject.⁶¹

Both forms interrupt the main line of the narration, but *digressio utilis* manages to incorporate the digression back into the subject matter, as Gregory's tributaries blend back into the stream, whereas *digressio inutilis* breaks off abruptly from the secondary subject to return to the main subject. The movement of *digressio inutilis* is centrifugal: the secondary subject comes up "by chance" in the course of the narration, but by the time the poet abandons it to return to the main subject, the tangential association between the primary and secondary subjects has dissolved and the point of the diversion is no longer evident.⁶²

Troilus and Criseyde contains numerous digressions, many of which are framed by the narrator as such.⁶³ Ross Chambers points out that digression tends toward self-theorizing, toward "speculation about its own discursive status."⁶⁴ In the following sections, I look at a few episodes from Book II that are digressions from *Il Filostrato*. I argue that these episodes speculate on the nature of digression and diversion. More particularly, they dramatize contrasting views on the extent to which digression and diversion are useful.

The Light Sleep of Pandarus

In *Il Filostrato*, after Pandaro promises to help Troilo, he heads directly to Criseida's house, where he is greeted by her and the two engage in a tete-a-tete. What takes place in

⁶¹ Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek Clm 4603, f. 132r. "Hec autem digressio, sicut ipse dicit, fit dupliciter: vno modo fit quando poeta, intermissa materia, de alia re agit que forte incidit, sicut de situ alicuius loci uel de natura alicuius rei, uel de laude aliqua et de similibus, et post hec redit ad materiam quam reliquerat. Alio modo fit digressio quando relictam materiam aliud inducitur, quod longe remotum est, sed in fine adaptatur." Quoted in Woods, "Poetic Digression," 619.

⁶² Woods, "Poetic Digression," 619.

⁶³ Many critics comment on the digressive nature of the poem, but there have been few sustained studies of digression in *Troilus and Criseyde*. See Schaar, *Some Types of Narrative*; Jordan, "The Narrator in Chaucer's *Troilus*"; Woods, "Poetic Digression," 622; Spearing, "Time in *Troilus and Criseyde*"; Koff, *Chaucer and the Art of Storytelling*, 122-5.

⁶⁴ Chambers, *Loiterature*, 91-2.

one stanza is stretched into some three hundred lines in *Troilus and Criseyde*. When Pandarus leaves Troilus, he does not visit Criseyde immediately. He takes his time, mulling over Geoffrey of Vinsauf's advice to "caste his werk ful wisely or he wroughte" (1.1071). Straddling the division between Books I and II, an indeterminate amount of time passes before he wakes up one morning from a dream and decides to visit Criseyde. I will examine the dream sequence shortly, but for now I want to focus on his conversation with Criseyde.

Arriving at Criseyde's house, Pandarus finds his niece sitting in the parlour as a "romance" about Thebes is read aloud (2.100). Eugene Vance argues that Criseyde and her co-readers are "ingenuously diverting themselves with the romance of Thebes," by which, he means, they are amusing themselves: "the narration of the great wars of history is welcomed by the courtly ladies of Troy not as moral edification but as a mere pastime to amuse them while the men are away."⁶⁵ As I have already indicated, medieval readers did not necessarily consider edification and amusement to be mutually exclusive. In his preface to *Morte Darthur*, Caxton describes Malory's text as well suited for leisure reading: "And for to passe the tyme thys book shal be plesaunte to rede in." But Caxton goes on to claim that it also has an edifying purpose: "al is wryton for our doctryne / and for to beware that we falle not to vyce ne synne / but textcersyse and folowe vertu."⁶⁶ There is no suggestion in *Troilus* that Criseyde is reading the romance purely "for to passe the tyme." It is Pandarus who is keen to change the subject from the romance and its potential lessons in the history of violence. He drops an allusion to the *Thebaid*, implying a familiarity with the more authoritative account found in Statius' twelve-book epic. But in the discussion with Criseyde that follows the interruption of the reading circle, Pandarus reveals that he is not above reading the occasional romance.⁶⁷ Their conversation picks up stylistically where the romance left off. He adopts the rhetorical

⁶⁵ Vance, *Mervelous Signals*, 285.

⁶⁶ Caxton, *Prologues and Epilogues*, 95.

⁶⁷ Pandarus later recounts to Criseyde the story of "Wade," a romance hero about whom little survives (3.610-5).

strategies of digression and delay that are characteristic of the romance genre. In her seminal study of the romance genre, Patricia Parker defines romance as “a form which simultaneously quests for and postpones a particular end, objective, or object [...] which necessitates the projection of an Other, a *projet* which comes to an end when the Other reveals his identity or ‘name.’”⁶⁸ Pandarus’ speech is similarly marked by false starts, indirection, circumlocution, and the strategic withholding of Troilus’ name.

Pandarus begins by teasing Criseyde with the possibility of some momentous news. He refuses to tell her, though, which only increases her desire to know:

Tho gan she wondren moore than biforn
 A thousand fold, and down hire eyghen caste;
 For nevere, sith the time that she was born,
 To knowe thyng desired she so faste.⁶⁹ (2.141-4)

Criseyde averts her eyes. As John P. Hermann observes, “Criseyde does not want to reveal her desire. Desire shows in the gaze, so she husbands it carefully. Yet it shows in the custody of her gaze as well.”⁷⁰ Criseyde must look away because staring at Pandarus, insisting that he reveal his secret without further delay, would be indecorous. She has little choice but to follow the circuitous route set down by Pandarus. She must play the game, but it is a game where the playing field is uneven, where women cannot fall in love suddenly or state their desire directly without fear of shame and censure. So, instead of talking about what she really wants to talk about, they talk about “this and that” (2.150).

⁶⁸ Parker, *Inescapable Romance*, 4.

⁶⁹ As Vance points out, “Pandarus’s incendiary success in exciting Criseyde’s curiosity...is only intensified by the interruptions, the digressions, the ‘diffusion of speche,’ with which he delays the recounting of his ‘good news.’” *Mervelous Signals*, 291.

⁷⁰ Hermann, “Gesture and Seduction,” 148.

After more delays and an aborted exit attempt, Pandarus finally agrees to reveal the news. Criseyde lowers her eyes again in anticipation. She is forced to wait, as Pandarus launches into another digression:

“Nece, alwey—lo!—to the laste,
 How so it be that som men hem delite,
 With subtyl art hire tales for to endite,
 Yet for al that, in hire entencioun
 Hire tale is al for som conclusioun.

“And sithe th’ende is every tales strengthe,
 And this matere is so bihovely,
 What sholde I peynte or drawen it on lengthe
 To yow, that ben my frend so feythfully? (2.255-63)

It is a digression on the utility of digression. For Pandarus, digression and dilation are useful in so far as they advance the “conclusion.” There is little room in his rhetorical catalogue for digressions that might be *inutilis*, that might wander from the main line and end up somewhere unexpected. As Paul Strohm observes, Pandarus is good at following his own advice: Pandarus is “a master of narratives that are both episodic and highly configured: they possess beginnings, middles, and ends, and feature incidents and observations selected to support predetermined conclusions.”⁷¹ When Criseyde asks about Hector as part of their conversation about this-and-that, Pandarus uses the opening to transition to a secondary subject of principal interest to him—the prowess of Hector’s brother, Troilus. At this point in the conversation, the mention of Troilus has no particular salience for Criseyde; the subject appears to have arisen by chance, a turn in a wide-ranging conversation naturally suggested by the previous topic. In reality, of course, the digression from Hector to Troilus has been orchestrated by Pandarus with the aim of

⁷¹ Strohm, *Social Chaucer*, 121.

furthering his “conclusion.” Once Pandarus finally reveals that Troilus desires her—an announcement that is itself couched in multiplying descriptors—Criseyde recognizes how Pandarus has been advancing his conclusion the whole time: “Is al this paynted proces seyde—allas!— / Right for this fyn?” (2.424-5). Despite Pandarus’ lecture on the purposiveness of rhetoric, Criseyde is caught off guard by the fact that the twists and turns of their conversation have been leading up to this “fyn.”

The lengthy, digressive conversation between Pandarus and Criseyde follows on the heels of a scene whose “fyn” is stubbornly indeterminate. Pandarus dreams an enigmatic dream that he promptly forgets. The dream and his response to it call into question Pandarus’ theoretical justification of the purposiveness of digression and his tactical deployment of the device. On a beautiful May day, Pandarus is lying in bed at home, suffering from “loves shotes keene” (2.57). The cause of his lovesickness remains obscure. Half asleep, Pandarus enters a kind of dream state:

The swalowe Proigne, with a sorowful lay,
 Whan morwen com, gan make hire waymentyng
 Whi she forshapen was; and evere lay
 Pandare abedde, half in a slomberynge,
 Til she so neigh hym made hire cheterynge
 How Tereus gan forth hire suster take,
 That with the noyse of hire he gan awake,

 And gan to calle, and dresse hym up to ryse,
 Remembryng hym his erand was to doone
 From Troilus, and ek his grete emprise; (2.57-73)

Circulating in various forms and contexts during the Middle Ages, most notably in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, the Procne-Philomela myth tells the story of Philomela’s rape and subsequent mutilation at the hand’s of Procne’s husband Tereus. Tereus cuts out

Philomela's tongue to prevent her from telling anyone what happened, including her sister Procne. Philomela weaves a representation of the rape into a tapestry, which is accurately deciphered by her sister. In an act of revenge, Procne murders her infant son and feeds him to his unwitting father. When Tereus discovers this, he chases the sisters, but they are transformed into a swallow and nightingale. Chaucer likely borrowed the image of the early morning swallow song from Canto IX of Dante's *Purgatorio*.⁷² Dante alludes to the Procne/Philomela myth in his description of the pre-dawn setting of his dream of the golden eagle:

At the hour near morning when the swallow begins her sad lays [*tristi lai*], perhaps in memory of her former woes, and when our mind, more a pilgrim from the flesh and less captive to thoughts, is in its visions almost divine.⁷³

The idea that early morning dreams are more likely to be divine because they are less influenced by physical processes such as digestion was common in medieval dream theory. But Pandarus does not seem interested in the provenance of his dream. Or anything about it, for that matter. He turns away from the swallow and back to the "erand" at hand. The dream is a digression, but to what end? What, if anything, is its purpose?

The causes and significance of dreams was much debated throughout the Middle Ages.⁷⁴ With the introduction of Latin translations of Aristotle's treatises on sleep and dreams in the thirteenth century, dream theory increasingly prioritized the somatic etiology of dreams. Aristotle argued that dreams sometimes consist of the muddled perception of faint bodily or environmental disturbances that occur while the dreamer is asleep.⁷⁵ He

⁷² Chance, *Mythographic Chaucer*, 123-4.

⁷³ Dante Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, 87. Dante takes the swallow to be Philomela, whereas Chaucer follows the more common version of the myth that identifies the swallow as Procne. Chance points out how Dante's spiritual ravishing is juxtaposed with Philomela's physical ravishing. *Mythographic Chaucer*, 123-4.

⁷⁴ The secondary literature on medieval dream theory and literary dream visions is considerable. See, for instance, Kruger, *Dreaming in the Middle Ages*; Spearing, *Medieval Dream-Poetry*; Lynch, *High Medieval Dream Vision*; Brown, "Middle English Dream Visions."

⁷⁵ In *On Dreams*, Aristotle begins with the claim that sleep and perception are mutually exclusive. He points to the fact that the eyes are closed in sleep and therefore cannot see anything; taking vision to be the

gives the example of a slight ringing in the ears that transforms into a thunder storm in a dream.⁷⁶ As Steven Kruger has demonstrated, Aristotle's emphasis on the somatic etiology of dreams was highly influential, but it did not entirely supplant the tenets of earlier dream theory, especially since Aristotle rejected the possibility that dreams could be divinely inspired.⁷⁷ For many medieval thinkers, the origin of dreams was not an either/or proposition. In his highly influential *De Genesi ad litteram*, Augustine argued that even dreams that are internally-generated by illness could be inspired by divine or demonic agencies.⁷⁸ The dreamer should thus pay close attention to her dreams so she could interpret whether or not they were meaningful or not.

The intertwining of somatic influence and meaningful dreaming is a characteristic of the hypnagogic state that Middle French poets called *dorveille*. They valued this state for its creative potential. Machaut's *Fontaine amoureuse* opens with the poet lying in a *dorveille* while overhearing a lover complain.⁷⁹ Although the source of the voice is initially difficult to pinpoint—is it internal to the room or external?—Machaut is so struck by the beauty of the complaint that he begins to transcribe it. According to Michel Zink, one of the phenomenological features of *dorveille* is the “the overlapping and the interaction, within consciousness, of the perception of the exterior world with the perception of meaningful revelation.”⁸⁰ Zink mentions a *dit* by Watriquet de Couvin in which the speaker wanders through an orchard listening to a singing bird; he experiences a dream-vision in which he finds himself at a castle named Bec d'Oiseau. The chirping

paradigmatic sense, he claim that this is also true of the other senses. Aristotle goes on to modify his opening position by clarifying that perception does not happen in sleep in “any ordinary way.” Rather, there is a quasi-perception at work. And it is through this quasi-perception that dreams arise. *On Dreams*, 459a8—22.

⁷⁶ Aristotle, *On Divination through Sleep*, 463a12-6.

⁷⁷ Kruger, *Dreaming in the Middle Ages*, 84-122.

⁷⁸ Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram*, 12.22.44-5. Cf. Kruger, *Dreaming in the Middle Ages*, 40-1.

⁷⁹ Machaut, *La Fontaine amoureuse*, l.63.

⁸⁰ Zink, “Allegorical Poem,” 123.

bird and orchard trees have been transposed into his dreamscape. Zink argues that in this tradition the allegorical dream arises in response to the dreamer's subjective experience: "an impression or a preoccupation which haunts the wakeful poet at the poem's beginning, finds its correlative, its prolongation, its fulfilment or its explanation in the vision which comes to him."⁸¹

We can see in Pandarus' waking dream the "overlapping of the perception of the exterior with the perception of meaningful revelation." The "cheterynge" of the swallow turns into the "waymentynge" of Procne. A digression of our own might help to illuminate this transformation. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud proposes that one of the functions of dreams is to prolong sleep, and, in order to do so, the mind incorporates external stimuli into the narrative of the dream. Freud gives the example of a dream in which the dreamer wanders around a churchyard and hears church bells; the bells are so piercing that the dreamer awakes, only to realize that the ringing was actually his alarm clock.⁸² When the external stimulus becomes too pressing, too distracting, it exceeds the mind's ability to integrate it into the dream and the dreamer wakes up. One way to read Pandarus' dream would be along these lines, to see Procne as the guardian of his sleep. The nonsignifying sound of birdsong—the "cheterynge"—is incorporated into the dream world and as a result Pandarus is able to prolong his sleep. The tropic trajectory that originally turned human into bird is temporarily reversed. Until the stimulus becomes too loud—Procne comes "so neigh"—and Pandarus wakes, turning the "waymentynge" back into "cheterynge."⁸³

This reading of the dream is one that Pandarus could conceivably support. The dream is concocted to realize a specific, predetermined goal: getting more sleep. There is more to

⁸¹ Zink, "Allegorical Poem," 110.

⁸² Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 60.

⁸³ Marvin Mudrick describes the process of awakening in similar terms, while arguing that Procne acts in the dream as his "personal succubus": "When 'hire cheteryne,' too close to be taken for anything but the 'noyse' of a bird, dissipates the myth's grandiose pattern (and Pandarus's personal incubus) of betrayal and doom, the swallow withdraws—only a bird—into the featureless background of Pandarus's morning." "Chaucer's Nightingales," 95.

the scene, though. Pandarus does not wake only because of the “cheterynge”—the line continues: it is her “cheterynge / *how* Tereus gan forth hire suster take.” This crucial distinction can be clarified by turning briefly to Lacan’s analysis of a well-known dream recounted by Freud, in which a bereaved man falls asleep while his son lies in the next room awaiting burial. In the dream, the son appears to the man and asks “Father, can’t you see that I’m burning?” The man wakes up to discover that a candle has fallen in the next room and his son’s coffin is alight. According to Freud, the dream fulfills the father’s wish to see his dead son alive again, but, by interweaving the stimulus of the fire into a narrative, it also functions as a way for him to snatch a few more moments of sleep.⁸⁴ Lacan questions whether it is the external stimuli (the sound of the candle falling, the light of the fire) that wakes the dreamer or whether the son’s question is what jars him awake: “Is there not more reality in this message than in the noise by which the father also identifies the strange reality of what is happening in the room next door.”⁸⁵ Žižek provides a useful gloss on Lacan’s reading of Freud:

The subject does not awake himself when the external irritation becomes too strong; the logic of his awakening is quite different. First he constructs a dream, a story which enables him to prolong his sleep, to avoid awakening into reality. But the thing that he encounters in the dream, the reality of his desire, the Lacanian Real – in our case, the reality of the child’s reproach to his father, “Can’t you see that I am burning?, implying the father’s fundamental guilt – is more terrifying than so-called external reality itself, and that is why he awakens: to escape the Real of his desire, which announces itself in the terrifying dream. He escapes into so-called reality to be able to continue to sleep, to maintain his blindness, to elude awakening into the real of his desire.⁸⁶

For Lacan and Žižek, the traditional privileging of waking life over the digression of dreaming is reversed: the dream is the site of the Real and waking is an attempt to swerve

⁸⁴ Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams*, 570.

⁸⁵ Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*, 58.

⁸⁶ Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 45.

away from the intense feelings that it provokes in the subject. The Lacanian reading of the dream of the burning son encourages us to reconsider Pandarus' dream. It is at the most critical moment in Procne's narrative—just as she is beginning to relate the rape of her sister—that Pandarus awakes. It is not so much the intensity of the noise that jars him awake, but the intensity of the message, to use Lacan's terms. The lament has touched him too closely.⁸⁷ The precise circumstances of his love affair, or lack thereof, remains obscure, but his desire to abet Troilus in his goal of sleeping with Criseyde implicates him in an "erand" that coerces Criseyde to consent.⁸⁸ Like the father who wakes to escape his guilt, we might say Pandarus wakes in order to continue sleeping.

Pandarus is quick to resume waking life and its various "erands." The stanza break neatly divides dreaming from waking, preventing the dream from spilling over. The first thing Pandarus does when he awakes is cry out—not in response to Procne's lament—but to his attendants to help him get dressed and ready for the day's business. It is a truly bathetic response. He exhibits none of the hermeneutic curiosity exercised by the dreamers in the tradition surveyed by Zink, or for that matter by Troilus who is unsettled by the possible meaning of his dreams. Nor does he demonstrate any of the affectedness that the narrator of the *Book of the Duchess* experiences when he listens to another tragic Ovidian female lament.⁸⁹ Rather than look backward, he looks forward, plotting and calculating his next move. That Pandarus should ignore his dreams is not out of character. In Book V, we discover that Pandarus holds a rather low opinion of the value of dreams. He surveys a range of medieval theories about the nature and significance of dreams before telling Troilus to "leve no drem" (5.378). But his rejection of dreams is called into

⁸⁷ My reading of this scene has benefited from Patricia Ingham's argument that Philomela's wound is repeated and passed down through language by Pandarus and other characters in the poem. "Chaucer's Haunted Aesthetics."

⁸⁸ Aranye Fradenburg points out how the reference to Procne is one of many ambiguous allusions to rape that haunt *Troilus and Criseyde*. *Sacrifice Your Love*, 226.

⁸⁹ As Jessica Rosenfeld points out, the *Book of the Duchess* foregrounds the way that dreams intersect with waking life: "In waking with the book 'of Alcione and Seys the king' in his hand, the narrator asks his audience to consider how the book they have just heard or read will change their dreams and thoughts. And he returns to the question of what Alcione and Ceyx have to do with the poem's Black Knight, White, and dreaming narrator himself." *Ethics and Enjoyment*, 105.

question by the fact that Troilus' dreams prove prophetic. The Dantean intertext of Pandarus' dream also suggests that it has a certain importance, and should not be dismissed as simply the result of bodily or environmental "impressiouns" (5.372). More importantly, Pandarus' disavowal of the dream is conspicuous because it re-enacts the traumatic wounding at the heart of the Procne-Philomela myth. The recounting of the sexual violence inflicted upon Philomela is once again suppressed. By failing to hear Procne out, Pandarus silences Procne and, in doing so, rewounds Philomela. Pandarus treats the dream as a *digressio inutilis*, as a nocturnal deviation that is abandoned without being integrated into his waking life. Despite Pandarus' turn away from the dream—or perhaps because of it—the dream nonetheless seems to provoke him into action by somehow reminding him of his promise to Troilus. The grounds for the association are unclear, but palpable. Even if he does not acknowledge it, the dream exerts a pull on the ever calculating, perpetually productive Pandarus.

Criseyde in the Garden

After Pandarus leaves, Criseyde retreats into her bedroom in order to reflect on the situation in which she finds herself enmeshed. She begins to "argue" with herself, weighing the benefits and drawbacks that would come from reciprocating Troilus' affection (2.694). The image of Criseyde cooped up in her room, turning over the matter in her mind, alternating between warmth and coolness, recalls Boccaccio's description of the women to whom the *Decameron* is addressed: those who sit in their bedrooms, "wishing one thing and now wishing another, turning over in their minds thoughts which cannot always be pleasant ones" (2). However, unlike those women, Criseyde has no problem finding a suitable diversion. Suspended between hope and dread, desire and aversion, she breaks off her meditation: "Now hoot, now cold; but thus bitwixen tweye, / She rist hire up, and went hire for to pleye" (2.811-2). She goes outside to "pleye" in the garden. *Il Filostrato* does not contain any such interlude; the narrator leaves Criseida deadlocked in her room and returns to Pandaro. Following the advice of Guibert of Nogent and others, Criseyde knows when to take a break. The garden interval does not however serve to refresh her mind so she can return resume the argument with increased

productivity; rather, by providing an unexpected, highly affective encounter with song, her sojourn in the garden fundamentally alters the very terms of the debate.

Accompanied by her nieces, Criseyde strolls through the garden, the *locus classicus* of repose and diversion. There she makes “many a wente,” as she is occupied by the diverse pleasures of the garden – its pathways, boughs, and benches (2.815). No longer turning over the matter of Troilus in her mind, she is instead turning herself as she wends along the garden paths. Her mobility in the expansive garden contrasts with the way she sat in her room “style as any ston” (2.600). Troilus later associates being cooped up “in muwe” with a proclivity towards formally impressive but empty argumentation (4.496-7). As Criseyde is walking “arm in arm,” her niece Antigone begins to sing. The song, which runs for seven stanzas, is addressed to the God of Love. Like the romance she was reading earlier, the song is strangely pertinent to her own situation. The song speaks directly to the matter she was previously debating in her room, particularly the final two lines: “Al dredde I first to love hym to bigynne, / Now woot I wel, ther is no peril inne” (2.874-5). Criseyde is deeply affected by the song. She asks Antigone a few questions about the song afterwards, but she breaks off the conversation so she can concentrate her attention on printing the words into her memory:

But every word which that she of hire herde,
 She gan to prenten in hire herte faste,
 And ay gan love hire lasse for t’agaste
 Than it dide erst, and synken in hire herte,
 That she wex somewhat able to converte. (2.899-903)

It is not only the song’s propositional content that moves Criseyde; she is struck by its beauty. She asks Antigone how lovers are able to compose so beautifully: “Lord, is ther swych blisse among / Thise loveres, as they konne fair endite?” (2.885-6) The word “endite” recalls Pandarus’ lecture on rhetoric and his argument that linguistic ornament—the “subtyl art”—is at best subordinate to the author’s “conclusion.” Criseyde’s question foregrounds the song’s “subtyl art.” Antigone’s song draws Criseyde’s attention to a

benefit of being in love that she had not considered in her argument: the ability to compose beautiful songs.

Critics have pointed out how Criseyde's reception of Antigone's song enacts certain Boethian tropes. Ardis Butterfield argues that the song has an effect on Criseyde similar to the effect the songs have on the Prisoner: just as the diversion into verse helps the Prisoner become more receptive to Lady Philosophy's argument, Criseyde "suddenly receives through song the very impetus toward love which she had so far restrained and constrained in argument."⁹⁰ There are important differences, though, between Antigone and Lady Philosophy's songs. As vital as the meters are to the overall architecture of the *Consolation*, they remain preliminary to the prose sections, in which Lady Philosophy engages the Prisoner in rational debate. The ratio between prose and meter decreases as the text progresses, and the final book does not end with a meter as the previous four do.⁹¹ Criseyde, on the other hand, does not resume her internal debate after Antigone's song. It functions more as conclusion than interlude, and demonstrates that verse can be more affecting and persuasive than argumentation. There is another important difference between the songs: Antigone sings in the first person. When Criseyde lets the song sink into her heart, she is internalizing an "I" that has been voiced not only by Antigone, but by the first maker of the song, "the goodlieste mayde / Of grete estat in al the town of Troye" (2.880-1). The theme of internalization is raised by the song itself. The "I" declares that the heart of her lover is growing within her and vice versa, an image that anticipates Criseyde's dream about the eagle (2.872-3). Criseyde is curious about the history of the song's "I." She asks about its composer and sighs when she hears that the maid leads a life of honour and joy. The song allows her to occupy—and be occupied

⁹⁰ Butterfield, *Familiar Enemy*, 302. Johnson makes a similar comparison: "Evidently, it is only after Criseyde hears Antigone's song that she grants her love to Troilus; she needs to hear Antigone's song in order to become permeable to love, before Pandarus's dialogic suit can move her, much as Boethius needed to hear Philosophy's singing before he could be open to her arguments about divine providence and truth." *Practicing Literary Theory*, 97. Rosenfeld also sees Antigone's song as Boethian in its effects. *Ethics and Enjoyment*, 154-5.

⁹¹ Scarry argues that "it is clear why the fifth book does not, like the previous four, end with a meter: music, the exponent of the imagination, is not an end in itself but a vehicle to a higher faculty, a faculty that in the *Consolation* is represented by the medium of prose." "The Well-Rounded Sphere," 103.

by—the maid’s consciousness. As George Poulet puts it in his study of the phenomenology of reading, she is “on loan to another, and this other thinks, feels, suffers, and acts within [her].”⁹² Criseyde’s desire does not travel in a straight line; it is curved by and routed through the figure of the maid.

In addition to the *Consolation*, the garden scene invokes another well-known late antique text, one which also features a conversion in a garden. In *Confessions*, Augustine recounts how, after an anguished period of internal debate filled with willing and counter-willing, he retreats into a garden where he overhears a voice that provides the impetus he needs for his eventual conversion.⁹³ For Augustine, the voice in the garden comes as a gift of grace. For Criseyde, Antigone’s song arrives as an “aventure,” an unpredictable event that shifts the co-ordinates of her desire.⁹⁴ During his earlier discussion with Criseyde, Pandarus told her that she was about to become the lucky recipient of some “goodly aventure”:

For to every wight som goodly aventure
Som tyme is shape, if he it kan receyven;
But if he wol take of it no cure,
Whan that it commeth, but wilfully it weyven,
Lo, neyther cas ne fortune hym deceyven,
But right his verray slouthe and wrecchednesse;
And swich a wight is for to blame, I gesse. (2.281-7)

Pandarus argues that Criseyde should receive with “cure” the “goodly aventure” bestowed upon her by fortune. His advice accords with his own tendency to look for

⁹² Poulet, “Phenomenology of Reading,” 57.

⁹³ Bankert points out how Criseyde’s conversion to love follows an Augustinian model. “Secularizing the Word,” 206.

⁹⁴ I am indebted here to Allan Mitchell’s discussion of “aventure” and the event in *Ethics and Eventfulness*, especially 11-46.

openings that he can exploit, such as Criseyde's casual mention of Hector. On the other hand, there is something ironic about the passage. Pandarus attempts to manufacture or at least shape "aventures" for Criseyde, including orchestrating the seemingly serendipitous moment when Troilus rides by Criseyde's window for a second time. Antigone's song, on the other hand, is a genuinely fortuitous event. Unlike Pandarus, who fails to pay sufficient attention to Procne's lay, as I argued above, Criseyde receives Antigone's song with the utmost "cure." The song arrives, though, when her attention is suspended from any particular object of thought. In this respect, Criseyde's sojourn in the garden resembles Troilus' "pleyinge" in the temple, where, as Carruthers notes, he is "just looking about in a crowd" with an "unplanned, unmotivated" gaze.⁹⁵ In both cases, diversion ends in conversion or at least semi-conversion. Against Pandarus' advice that she should be scanning the horizon, eager to "[c]ache" her opportunity, Criseyde disposes herself to distraction, which in turn opens her up to contingent and unexpected turns (2.292).

What's the Use? The "Fyn" of *Troilus and Criseyde*

For many modern readers of the poem, the garden scene invokes another intertext that I discussed briefly at the beginning of the chapter: the Corpus frontispiece. The frontispiece depicts a performance in a garden setting. Antigone's song encourages us to reflect on the performance and reception of the poem as a whole. What's the use of *Troilus and Criseyde*? What is it supposed to do for its audience? Or, better yet, what is it supposed to do *to* its audience? Laura Kendrick argues that the poem, like the *Decameron*, is written to console a group of "frustrated lovers."⁹⁶ The narrator does begin Book I by invoking Tisiphone, the Fury, to help him act as a "sorwful instrument" to express the complaints of lovers (1.10). But he then turns to another segment of the audience:

But ye loveres, that bathen in gladnesse,

⁹⁵ Carruthers, "Virtue, Intention and the Mind's Eye," 82.

⁹⁶ Kendrick, *Chaucerian Play*, 43.

If any drope of pyte in yow be,
 Remembreth yow on passed hevynesse
 That ye han felt, and on the adversite
 Of othere folk. (1.22-6)

He is more concerned about the happy lovers in his audience. He worries that they may lack “pyte” for those who have been less successful in their amatory adventures. The narrator directs these lovers to remember their suffering, as well as to consider the adversity of other people. The narrator does not promise his audience that they will be consoled by the story he tells; on the contrary, he exhorts them to pray for unhappy lovers so that they (the unhappy lovers) may receive “solas” in heaven (1.31). The narrator declares his intention to write the woe of three unhappy lovers in particular—Troilus, Pandarus, and Criseyde. He desires “to have of hem compassioun / As though I were hire owne brother dere” (1.50-1). He will exercise his compassion through writing. Like the reader of a passion narrative who places himself at the scene of Christ’s crucifixion, the narrator will imagine himself “as if” he were close to the three lovers, if not spatially, then at least emotionally. Any consolation that the poem affords its readers is predicated upon them acting first as consolers.

The proem to Book II picks up the narrator’s concern about his audience’s capacity for compassion. The narrator raises the possibility that his audience might struggle to bridge the historical distance between themselves and the characters:

And forthi if it happe in any wyse,
 That here be any love in this place
 That herkneth, as the storie wol devise,
 How Troilus com to his lady grace,
 And thenketh, “So nold I nat love purchace,”
 Or wondreth on his speche or his doynge,
 I noot; but it is me no wonderynge. (2.29-35)

The narrator worries that some of the lovers in his audience might suspend their identification with Troilus and begin to think about their own romantic strategies and

how they are superior to the “forme of speche” deployed by their ancient counterparts (2.22). He fears that the historical differences in language and custom might inhibit his audience’s ability to feel compassion for Troilus and Criseyde. The language of the two lovers is too unfamiliar, too strange. They lovers in the audience would have trouble getting any use out of them. Unlike the lovers’ songs that Fiammetta overhears, or Alycone’s lament, they cannot be appropriated and repurposed for their own amatory purposes.

There is also in this passage a recognition that lovers do not always make the best listeners. Andreas Capellanus comments on the selective attention of lovers:

[I]f someone broaches a topic with him, he does not listen closely to his words, and normally fails fully to understand any entreaty unless the other makes reference to his love, in which case the talk could continue for a month without the lover’s forgetting a scrap of the whole conversation. He listens to anything told about his beloved with such eagerness that his ears are never tired, even if the talking goes on and on.⁹⁷

Troilus and Criseyde talk *ad infinitum* about each other to each other and to Pandarus, but they have little interest in “collateral” topics. In Book I, Pandarus tries, in the manner of Lady Philosophy, to distract Troilus from his state of “litargie” with a series of proverbs and exempla. Troilus responds peevishly: “What knowe I of the queene Nyobe? / Lat be thyne olde ensaumples” (1.759-60). Given how the narrator repeatedly frames Troilus and Criseyde as exempla themselves (e.g. 1.232), we might then imagine a lover in the audience expressing a similar impatience with the “olde ensauple” of Troilus and Criseyde.

⁹⁷ Andreas Capellanus, *Andreas Capellanus on Love*, 3.37. “Negotia namque amorusus sua nec ullius curat amici nec, si aliquis ei de quocunque facto loquatur, ipsius dictis intentas adhibet aures, nec precantis solet ad plenum verba percipere, nisi aliquid de suo referendo loquatur amore. Tunc etenim si continuo secum uno mense loquatur non unum iota de omni fabulatione dimitteret. Tanta namque aviditate suscipit verba de coamante relata quod assiduitate quoque multa loquendi eius nunquam fatigatur auditus.”

On the other hand, the narrator imagines that there will be members of the audience who cannot get enough of the lovers, who want to reconstruct each glance and word passed between them, no matter how long it takes or how many pages it would fill up (3.491-505). A. C. Spearing has recently argued that the amplification and digressions of Book II are motivated not by a “foolish narrator’s infatuation with Criseyde,” as some critics have supposed, but by a “sympathetic imagining of Criseyde’s feelings and motives.”⁹⁸ One of the questions the poem raises is whether it is so easy to distinguish infatuation from sympathy, *eros* from *agape*.⁹⁹ Augustine wonders at the transformation that converts friendly compassion into the boiling pitch of desire. When does witnessing cross into the kind of obsessive archiving that characterizes the lovesick? In Book IV, the narrator breaks away from his description of Criseyde’s lament about being forced to leave Troy:

How myghte it evere yred ben or ysonge,
 The pleynte that she made in hire destresse?
 I not; but, as for me, my litel tonge,
 If I discryven wolde hire hevynesse,
 It sholde make hire sorwe seme lesse
 Than that it was, and childisshly deface
 Hire heigh compleynte, and therefore ich it pace. (4.799-805)

Of course, he has spent the previous six stanzas doing precisely what he says cannot be done – attempting, with his “litel tonge,” to describe “hire hevynesse.” The narrator turns aside from Criseyde’s grief, but only after dwelling on the subject at length. Such is the

⁹⁸ Spearing, “Time in *Troilus and Criseyde*,” 68.

⁹⁹ Rosenfeld argues that *Troilus* “appears to slide very deliberately between vicariousness and empathy, voyeurism and consolation.” *Ethics and Enjoyment*, 152. I wonder at the extent to which this slippage is in fact deliberate. The line between infatuation and compassion is explored in Donald Howard’s 1970 essay, “Experience, Language, and Consciousness: ‘Troilus and Criseyde,’ II, 569-93.” Howard claims that after reading the poem “I have *been* Criseyde, have experienced the world as she experienced it, have had my mind and being subsumed in hers [...] because we understand through empathy, through entering her mind, our understanding results from closeness” (177). His essay is influenced by Poulet, as the following claim makes clear: “The greatest poetry is always a miracle, but the miracle here is that of evoking what is itself miraculous, the ability of one mind, closed within its little world of thought, to enter the mind of another” (171). However, Howard’s essay does not acknowledge the alienation and disorientation that is constitutive of the literary experience for Poulet.

basic structure of *occupatio*, which J. Douglas Kneale defines as “a turning away that is also a dwelling.”¹⁰⁰ *Occupatio* is highly conventional in medieval narratives, yet here it accrues a kind of ethical force. The narrator archives Criseyde’s words and then “deface[s]” that very archive, acknowledging, albeit after the fact, that the act of presuming to represent another person’s words, and in particular the recounting of trauma, can be damaging. In this case, distance functions to safeguard closeness.

The narrator performs a much different turn at the end of the poem.¹⁰¹ The narrator defaces, as it were, the preceding five books, striking them through. The historical distance that the narrator sought to bridge in the proem to Book II reasserts itself forcefully. If the narrator of the *Book of the Duchess* off-handedly notes that he is not a polytheist like Alcyone—an admission that subtends his misappropriation of Alcyone’s prayer—the Troilus-narrator loudly proclaims his Christianity and abjures the “forme of olde clerkis speche” he has been using (5.1854). This *aversio* is also a *conversio*. He exhorts his readers to direct their attention toward God instead. The invocation of Christ’s passion suggests that the audience would be better off reading a meditation on the passion, which, much more so than romance, was the genre associated with the cultivation of compassion.¹⁰² But perhaps the narrator’s exhortation is better understood as a *diversio*. After all, he is asking us to replace the lovers with Christ: “For he nyl falsen no wight, dar I seye, / That wol his herte al holly on hym leye” (5.1845). Once again Criseyde is framed as an object to be replaced. Like Pandarus consoling Troilus, the narrator tells us to redirect our desire and compassion elsewhere. Is this, then, the purpose of *Troilus and Criseyde*? A preliminary imaginative exercise that generates certain affective responses that can be transferred to higher ends? Literature as propaedeutic for prayer instead of, as in the *Consolation*, philosophy? Or, to use Augustine’s language, can “feyned” compassion be diverted into real compassion? Perhaps. But *Troilus* is

¹⁰⁰ Kneale, *Romantic Aversions*, 3.

¹⁰¹ For an overview of how critics have approached the poem’s conclusion, see Windeatt, *Oxford Guides*, 298-313.

¹⁰² On passion meditations, see McNamer, *Affective Meditation*.

skeptical about the possibility of regulating and diverting desire for predetermined ends. If there are members of the audience who have become infatuated with Criseyde—and the narrator suggests or at least wishes that there are—they too might struggle to turn aside from their “feyned loves.”

In his influential study of *Troilus*, Lee Patterson argues that the poem reveals the inadequacy of reducing subjectivity to intentionality. Instead of self-identical, self-present individuals, they should be read as matrices of various intentions.¹⁰³ This chapter has demonstrated that we can also see the characters as matrices of different forms of attention. Pandarus embodies an instrumental view of diversion, one in which attention is carefully managed and directed toward pre-determined conclusions. His digressions are always *utiles*. The dream of Procne, on the other hand, has no clear purpose. Or rather it has no purpose beyond the voicing of a trauma that Pandarus would rather not listen to. Pandarus turns away from Procne’s request to be heard. Antigone’s song shares something of the aleatory quality of Pandarus’ dream. Criseyde connects it back to the mainline of her narrative easily enough, but the detour through the voice of another shifts the trajectory of her desire. Criseyde receives the song while exercising a kind of free-floating attention, one that suspends its engagement with particular objects of thoughts and remains willing to follow the twists and turns of the contingent. This form of attention views the world much differently than the hyper vigilant prospection of Pandarus or the melancholic fixation of Troilus. While the narrator has a fixed destination, he too finds himself straying, following oblique paths, turning and returning throughout the poem. He worries that his readers will be unwilling or unable to dispose themselves to hear the lovers’ songs without thinking about their own amatory strategies, without temporarily suspending the “erands” that occupy their waking hours.

Troilus interrogates the diversionary purpose of literature. The poem does not function solely or even primarily to console its readers and listeners. Rather, it asks them to suffer with the characters. Of course, playing the consoler can be pleasurable. Augustine refers

¹⁰³ Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, 142.

to the strange pleasure that arises when watching a tragedy with a metaphor that implies the difficulty of determining when compassion ends and cupidity begins. The poem's ending forces us to consider this confluence: as the narrator turns to us, we must give an account of which direction our eyes tend.

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