

APPENDICES PULLED FROM A STUDY ON LIGHT

by

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## STATEMENT OF DISSERTATION APPROVAL

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## ABSTRACT

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

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

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

for Kathryn Cowles

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

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

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

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## SEE, THEY RETURN

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

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

*a blue and gold mistake*  
—Emily Dickinson

## BOTTLENECK, BOTTLE GLASS

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

## ISLAND OF APOLLONIAN LIGHT AND THE GOLDEN SPRING

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

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

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

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

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

\*\*\*

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

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

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



## KAMARES AT SUNDOWN

the sail says what lilacs say

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

\*\*\*

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

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

## §

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

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

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

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

## WHICH IS RAISING ITS LITTLE HAND

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

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

## LIFTED OUT OF THE SEA

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

\*\*\*

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

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

## NO NOTE

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

## SO IT SAYS TODAY

“there are millions of suns left”  
—Walt Whitman

your eyes  
with news

in sun whose whiteness  
will pull us through

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

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

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

\*\*\*

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

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

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



## SONNET

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

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

## OWN LITTLE INWARD SUN

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

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

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

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

\*\*\*

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

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

## §

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

Such a reading participates in superstition.

## DAWN IS A LONG TIME COMING

this here is Isis, is her statue  
crumbling—

tinoilmatch glass glass glass

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

the sun is bigger than its own light

glasstinoil match match match

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

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

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

\*\*\*

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

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

Sitting or, more often, standing on the branch.

Out over blue expanse. Locked in looking.

\*\*\*

A more modern Siphnos successfully thwarted a pirate invasion.

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

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

A small bridge now connects the island and peninsula.

## TOWARD A COMPASS ROSE

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

## BREACHES

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



\*\*\*

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

Revelers dance and drink until morning.

§

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

\*\*\*

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

§

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

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

## REST WHERE STREAMS

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

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

## IN THE GLOOM, THE GOLD GATHERS THE LIGHT AGAINST IT

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

—Job 19:23-26

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

—Roland Barthes

*God is growing.*

—Rainer Maria Rilke

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

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

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

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

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

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

## MATINS: PARHELION

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

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

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

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

\*\*\*

Language and light share familiar divine associations.

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

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

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

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

The world is the consequence of God speaking.

§

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

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

§

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



## ALL WITHIN EYESHOT

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

\*\*\*

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

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

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

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

## §

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

## PRIME: THOSE PAWS BUCKLE UNDER

mind the briar while bounding  
 through the underbrush—

—hunthunthunt the chirp—

the trail, the green—each gives way to

outlaw dogtrot: call the nurse, prepare the shot.

code: Vomit—scrawl change, collect

alms. alms. arms and arms.

rage now, dogtrout! rage

roll on, roll on to the asphodels—

light, give way to, give way to—

dogtrout running through the asphodels

shades can loosen tears onto asphodels;

foot joy over flower—

when dogtrout died I kissed his ear.

ears. each. each.

## OUTLINE YIELDS TO FIGURE

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

\*\*\*

Presence and proximity give way to increasing distance.

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

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

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

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

Distance increases.

§

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

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

The gap between humanity and the divine expands.

## TINY CHILDREN DANCING ON BELLS

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

\*\*\*

For an abyss is a condition of mysticism.

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

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

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

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

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

## §

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

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

## TERCE: EYE OUT OF THE AIR

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

across—what  
remains soft with slope  
and swelling, swept

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

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



\*\*\*

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

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

§

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

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

§

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

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

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

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

The sun helps us better see everything but itself.

## THE BRUSH REMINDS PAINT OF ITSELF

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

\*\*\*

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

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

## §

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

## ALL ALONG RESERVOIR ROAD

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

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

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

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

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

*the bird is my shepherd*

sun setting copper rose

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

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

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

\*\*\*

Let us consider the believer in a medieval context.

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

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

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

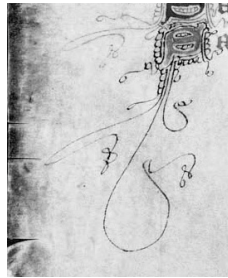
§

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

§

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

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



vines scritchd

onto vellum leaf

spiritual curl  
 of the vine

tending ultimately  
 toward the text—tattered edge

curling away from pull of the gutter

*orate pro nobis*

*ex verso*

burnished GOLDEN thetal "S"

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

part signature

part -scape

arc of the

Mopsus' cave's vine

*locus amoenus*

idle idyll

its tendrils round  
 with clustering flowers

appreciable superfluity occasions pleasure

who Augustine  
 who gets extra time

\*\*\*

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

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

§

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

Scribes keep God's speech acts going.

## SEXT: SCRIBAL IMPROMPTUS

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

## §

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

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



\*\*\*

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

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

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

Only the hand that inscribes is sufficient to shine.

NONE: HOMOEOTELEUTONIC TRANSCRIPTION  
OF REVELATIONS 7

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

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

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



\*\*\*

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

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

## §

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

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

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

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

## §

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

## VESPERS: TO KATHRYN

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

## COMPLINE: FOR THEOPHILUS

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

\*\*\*

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

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

## §

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

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

Burnished gold epitomizes the illuminating impulse.

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

*deus in adiutorium meum intende—*

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





## LATITUDE, STRATUM

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

\*\*\*

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

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

## §

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

VA

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

CAT

CHRISTMAS MORNING MATINS, FROM *OFFICIUM BEATAE*

*MARIAE VIRGINIS*, MADE FOR POPE LEO X

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

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



\*\*\*

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

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

## CODA

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

## SOUL MELTS INTO AIR

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

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

## SOUL MELTS INTO AIR: AN ESSAY

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

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

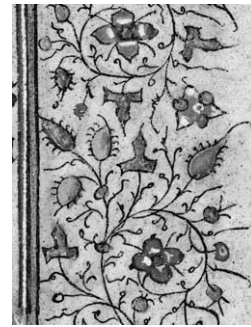


\*\*\*

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

\*\*\*

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



\*\*\*

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



\*\*\*

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

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

\*\*\*

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

BACKSIDE OF ILLUSTRATION OF THE NATIVITY



\*\*\*

all that glitters  
is aura, and il y aura  
beaucoup

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

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

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

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

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

prophetic wind shakes the golden leaves

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

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

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

## FOR ST. KHAG

house lights  
passageway of stairs  
street lit

crusts of rocks  
sun scratched

fingers scooping a white  
hand flowering open

filigree crow-lined  
rush hair looms blank

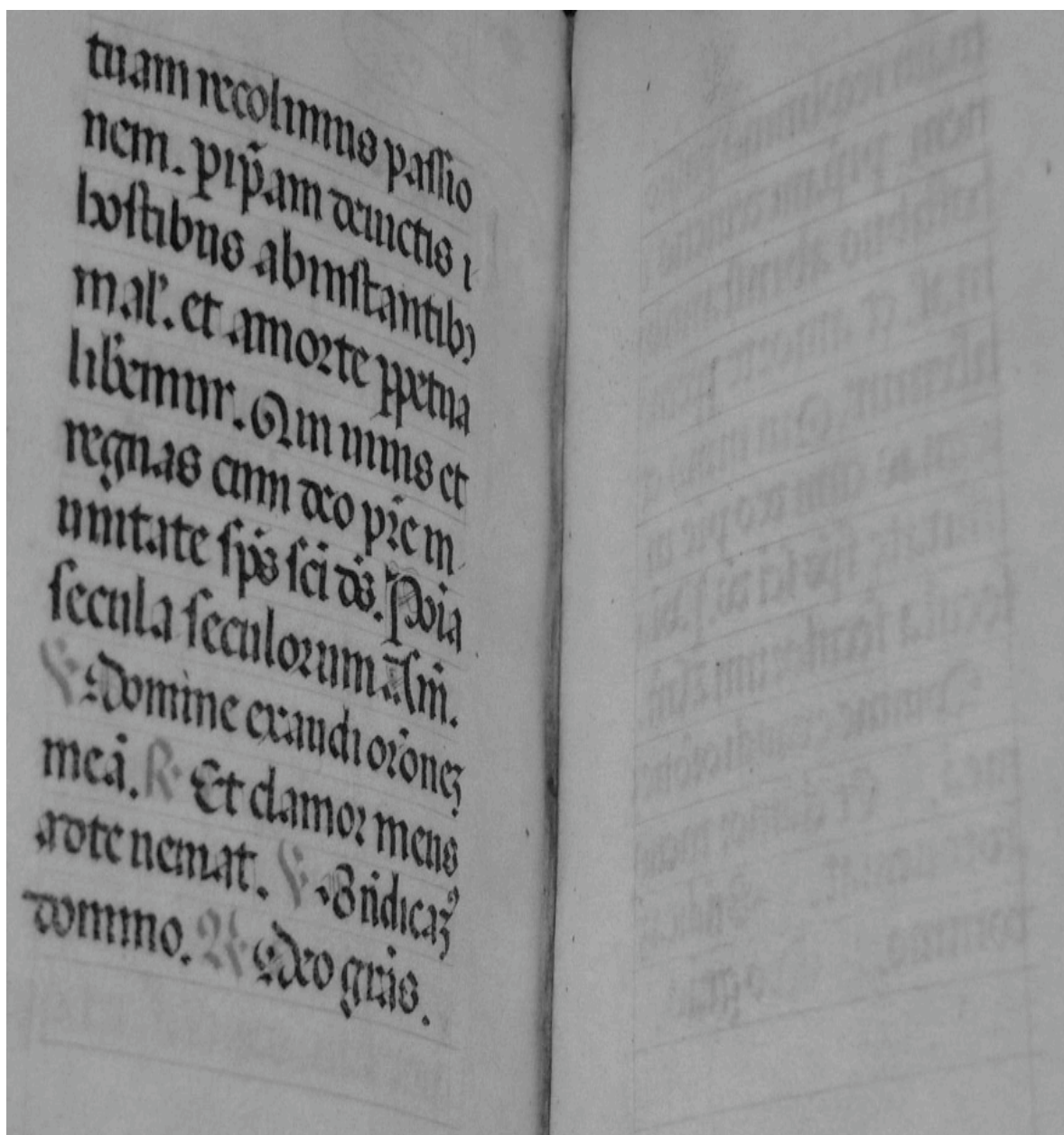
rippled sun curved  
lines shadow lines

white wings on one  
black window

smiles through lace  
body of strings  
rocking



## TEXT PRESSED ONTO THE OPPOSITE BLANK LEAF



(Tom's thumb)

\*\*\*

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

\*\*\*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

—“light boxes”—

\*\*\*

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