Medieval and Postmodern Virtual Realities: Purgatory, Disembodiment, and the Ends of Experience from Marie de France to Dante to Merleau-Ponty

By

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Franke, who taught me Dante's *Commedia* and who supplied the model of interdisciplinary criticism that has inspired the form of this project. Without his scholarly example, this project would not be conceivable.

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INTRODUCTION

OF KNIGHTS, PILGRIMS, AND COMPUTER SIMULATIONS

And when he had said these things, while they looked on, he was raised up: and a cloud received him out of their sight. And while they were beholding him going up to heaven, behold two men stood by them in white garments. Who also said: Ye men of Galilee, why stand you looking up to heaven? This Jesus who is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come, as you have seen him going into heaven.[1]

-Acts of the Apostles 1: 9-11.

En cele entente k'il esteit, / des oreisuns k'il feseit, / Jhesu Crist lui vint en present [...] (While he was thus / Deep in prayer, / Jesus Christ came into his presence [...])[2]

-*Le Purgatoire de Saint Patrick*

"A sense of presence, of *being there* in virtual environments is, perhaps, the ultimate aim of VR [virtual reality] research."[3]

-Murray and Sixsmith

At the dawn of the first century A.D., the God of the Jewish Bible became a man. Or so ancient Christian communities almost universally believed. He preached a message of God's universal love, was seized by religious and civic authorities, was put to death...and came back to life. Finally, this resurrected God-man ascended into the Heaven from whence he came. Strangely, this Ascension—as it came to be known in Christian dogma—had the effect of making Jesus *more present* to his followers than he had been in his earthly body.

This curious coupling of increased presence and bodily absence eventually found a new iteration in specific medieval Christian poetic accounts of Purgatory, such as Marie de France's *Espurgatoire seint Patriz*. As the citation above avers, Saint Patrick was visited by *Jhesu Crist* in a dream, yet even though Patrick encounters Christ in a dream state, the God-Man Jesus "came into Patrick's presence." This immaterial presence set the stage for the narrative's major plot in

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[1] Acts 1: 9-11. Scriptural citations taken from the Douay-Rheims Bible found online: http://www.drbo.org/chapter/51001.htm.

[2] Marie de France, *Le Purgatoire de Saint Patrick*, trans.by Miriam White-Le Goff (Paris: Champion Classiques, 2019), v. 285. All in-text citations for the *Espurgatoire* indicate line numbers from White-Le Goff's translation; English translations from Michael J. Curley, *Saint Patrick's Purgatory: A Poem by Marie de France*, (Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, vol. 94. Binghamton: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies), 1993.

[3] Craig D. Murray and Judith Sixsmith, "The Corporeal Body in Virtual Reality," *Ethos* 27, no. 3 (1999): 324.

which the pilgrim Owein traverses the dangers of Purgatory as an act of penance for his sins. Similarly, Dante Alighieri would describe the protagonist of his *Purgatorio* as a figure who dreamed on three occasions, each instance of which signaled a moment of leaving behind the material body. Nearly a millennium after the writing of Marie's *Espurgatoire,* the first "virtual reality" technologies gave their users an encounter with immaterial objects which, as these users regularly attest, feel as if they are actually present to the user.[4] Though the computer-generated culture of virtual reality stands at a far historical remove from medieval poetic writing, virtual reality (or VR) had become the site of a new experience of an old phenomenon: the sense of a subject's presence within an immaterial world.

In what follows, my aim is to chart a line of continuity that binds the various examples introduced above. I will argue that contemporary debates in media studies concerning virtual reality find one crucial antecedent in medieval Christian poetical explorations of the body, specifically the disembodiment that characterizes the extraordinary visionary experiences that form the basis of Owein the knight and Dante the pilgrim in the *Espurgatoire seint Patriz* and the *Purgatorio* respectively. In particular, I will show how these resonances may be elaborated on a predominately francophone stage, from the Old French poetry of Marie de France, to the anthropology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, to the so called-theological turn in the work of French-language phenomenologists such as Jean-Yves Lacoste and Louis-Marie Chauvet. In arranging these figures around a discourse of presence and reality, my primary goal is to elaborate a shared set of questions that, in my view, animate a group of medieval poets and a set of more contemporary theorists.

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[4] See especially Tyler Andrew Blackman, "Digital Worlds: Performativity and Immersion in VR Videogames," (University of Victoria, 2019), 100-106.

The purpose of this elaboration is to allow these two clusters of writers—medieval poets and postmodern theorists—to mutually elucidate one another, talking back and forth to each other from across the temporal interval of Modernity. In so doing, I present how these medieval poets intimate the concerns of current debates in media studies and phenomenology, while also suggesting ways in which such medieval poetry can contribute to the theorizing of presence, the body, and perception in these contemporary discussions.

What is most at stake in these claims is less a genealogical reading of cultural history and more a reconsideration of the specific use and value that disembodiment *may* serve in constructing experiences of the subject as a moving target, a fluctuating being defined by its always transitory movement toward novel horizons of identity. More specifically, I find that medieval studies and media studies alike are haunted by a common bogeyman, an exaggerated opponent made from an amalgam of cultural sources that are made to collectively signify Disembodiment (with a capital 'D') as a trope, experience, or concept that inherently denies the value of the material body. While these concerns are worth taking seriously, they often distort the various streams of intellectual tradition ('Platonism,' 'Cartesianism') that are forced to play the role of the Disembodiment straw man. These concerns animate interdisciplinary studies on religion as well as those in more straightforwardly digital domains. For instance, in her edition *Religion and the Body*, British philosopher and theologian Sarah Coakley observed that the modern body is "flaunted everywhere, yet continuously disappearing on the cybernet."[5] Fair enough. Yet what if the body's disappearance—its absence from a subject's momentary awareness—disclosed something positive, salutary, or desirable? What if the body's *temporary* fugitive escape from conscious awareness could foment valuable goals for the health of the human person? That is the question that animates this project.

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[5] Sarah Coakley, *Religion and the Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge U Press, 1997), 7.

What follows, then, is a particular affirmation of Denise Doyle's thesis when she writes, "As the real and the virtual, and the real and the imagined are no longer strangers (or opposites), it is also true that the physical and the virtual have become more firmly entangled."[6] Like Doyle, I perceive an entanglement of the real and the virtual in contemporary VR artists, notably the Quebecoise artist and scholar Char Davies. These entanglements precede the work of figures like Davies, however, in the purgatorial subjects of Marie de France and Dante. The work of this dissertation is to show the precise manner in which purgatorial poetry makes possible the challenge to a prematurely rigid distinction between real and virtual, physical and immaterial, sleeping and waking. Ultimately, the comparison between Davies's VR artistry and medieval poems of extraordinary visionary experience does not amount to a confused collapse of these categories. I will not, for instance, by arguing that either VR or purgatorial poetry merely troubles a set of binaries. Rather, the focus must be on the precise ways, means, and strategies by which Dante, Davies, and Marie variously confront these dyads such as the contrast between "virtual" and "real".

The pursuit of these questions requires close readings of medieval poems, while also enjoining those readings to modern philosophical debate. This method invites an obvious critique of anachronistic reading. Can the Middle Ages really "talk to" contemporary theory, and vice versa? Given the situatedness of cultural artifacts in their time and place, can one really hope to compare pre- and post-modern voices? Would not such a comparison necessarily fail to grasp the details of historical context and the ways that such contexts inform technology, ideas, and poetry alike? This warning presumes the importance—even the total importance—of historical context for assessing particular ideas and aesthetic objects.

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[6] Denise Doyle, "Avatar Lives: Narratives of Transformation and Identity," in *Boundaries of Self and Reality*, eds. by Jayne Gackenbach and Jonathan Brown (San Diego: Elsevier Publishers, 2017), 71.

One iteration of this warning finds a voice in the work of the philosopher Alasdair Macintyre, who asserted in his book *After Virtue* that ethical philosophy had seen a collapse in the modern era as a result of the failure to perceive how philosophical ideas respond to the times in which they are formulated. Without properly attending to the historical contexts in which ideas were developed, one might commit the dangerous error of considering philosophers of any era as "contributors to a single debate with a relatively unvarying subject-matter."[7] To guard against this possibility, the intellectual historian must properly situate philosophical ideas within the historical particulars from which they arose. Without this careful effort to situate ideas in time, any effort to compare concepts from distant epochs might become mired in a doomed comparison of apples and oranges.

Macintyre's point merits attention. Indeed, his argument has largely seeped into the common research methodologies of many humanistic disciplines, and rightly so: To be sure, a lack of attention to context *can* fail to grasp crucial differences that distinguish historically distant ideas, figures, and tropes. Yet there is also a symmetrical problem worth remarking, one that is equally undesirable, in which "context" becomes a shibboleth whose invocation immediately isolates cultural artifacts within overly fixed boundaries. When this problem prevails, there is no possibility to compare and contrast historically distant objects because the comparison has been deemed impossible out of hand. But this approach begins to beg questions that seem tortuous to answer: at what point can I, the researcher, identify a boundary of "context" that isolates a historical notion, idea, or figure from another? On what grounds can I consistently show the incommensurability of two distinct ideas as the components of a single line of speculative inquiry? A meaningful answer will surely avoid the suggestion that comparing historically distant objects is altogether impossible. Rather than enclose objects in the confines of

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[7] Alasdair MacIntre, *After Virtue, 2nd Edition*. (South Bend: Notre Dame U Press, 1984), 11.

historical periodization, it is possible to build bridges across historical gaps provided that attention is paid to the stakes, character, and limits of the bridge.[8]

In this project, I want to restore some porosity to the boundaries imposed by historical context. While I will invoke history at different junctures, I allow myself the opportunity to navigate quickly between the ideas and artifacts gathered here from across times. But this decision is not the result of a methodological fiat; instead, my hope is to demonstrate the particular affinity between the historically medieval and postmodern sources that I compare in this project. As Jeffrey Fisher has observed, "The Middle Ages seem to crop up a lot these postmodern days."[9] Why is this so? What about the medieval period is particularly interesting to scholars and artists in "these postmodern days"? What follows is my attempt to provide one answer to this question. As we will come to see, at least one tradition of virtual reality artistry—specifically the simulated environments known as *Osmose* and *Ephémère* created by Char Davies—presents an experience of the body that recalls the ethereality and ambiguity characteristic of the poetic subject's body in the medieval purgatory poems of Marie de France and Dante Alighieri.

The present comparison between medieval and postmodern sources—among art and ideas alike—is, thus, staked upon the hypothesis that the Middle Ages and Postmodernity share crucial perspectives, construals, and conceptions pertaining to the body. More specifically, the construction of purgatorial dis-embodiment realizes a form of subjective fluidity that resonates

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[8] My approach here finds inspiration from William's Franke's notion of "speculative philology" as articulated in his lecture given September 8, 2018 at the Newberry Library in Chicago, Illinois. Franke speaks of the literary critic as one who may remain "open to the unlikely kinds of combinations, contextualizations" that theoretical analysis of literature make possible. This openness is a crucial ingredient in the method that I take up here, and I am indebted to Dr. Franke's elaboration of speculative philology as a valid means of exploring temporally disparate kinds of texts and ideas. See 2:14 / 57:04 of "Dr. William Franke at the Newberry: 'Speculative Philology' September 8, 2018." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tg2CQjUitZE

[9] Jeffrey Fisher, "The Postmodern Paradiso: Dante, Cyberpunk, and the Technosophy of Cyberspace," in *Internet Culture*, ed. David Porter (London: Routledge, 1997), 111.

strikingly with the amorphous, transformed subjectivity that may characterize the virtual participant's experience of Char Davies's virtual worlds. Why single out Davies's work in this context? Since *Osmose* and *Ephémère* were released publicly in the 1990's, would it not be more prudent to focus a scholarly inquiry into VR perception on more contemporary immersive environments? While analysis of contemporary culture is always needed, so is a reappraisal of the past. Much as Dante and Marie de France have not ceased to inspire new thinking that speaks to the concerns of their future, so do Char Davies' works continue to provoke important considerations decades after their release.

Davies's virtual art is also in need of a fresh positioning within existing virtual reality scholarship. To wit, Michael Heim studies the "Third Wave" of virtual reality, which he dates to a genesis of fresh VR production beginning in 2015.[10] In contrast with earlier generations of VR artists, including Davies, the Third Wave of VR, Heim argues, is often characterized by virtual environments in which "the perceiver's proprioception can jump to a heightened level" which "fixes not on any particular form of contents of consciousness but on formless awareness or consciousness itself."[11] I believe this describes Davies's work, despite the fact that *Osmose* and *Ephémère* emerged in the 1990's well before the Third Wave. Davies's artistry, then, may be prescient in its demonstration of certain formal features that have come to define scholarship on more recent trends in virtual reality.

But if particular affinities of thought and representation justify a comparison of the body in purgatorial poems and virtual reality, there is another and more fundamental reason that arguably authenticates such a far-reaching comparative project. I am referring to the importance of the humanities' disciplinary prerogative to explore connections that scientific or philosophical

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[10] Michael Heim, *Virtual Realism* (Oxford U Press, 1998), 263, 261.

[11] Ibid., 263.

conceptions of method might otherwise foreclose. The ability to explore a particular connection

without a clear methodological justification in advance is perhaps the unique contribution that

the humanities can make among the several disciplines of the contemporary academy. This is not

to embrace a disregard for method altogether, nor to imply that a retroactive appraisal of one's

method is without importance. Rather, if the humanities offer any unique approach to method

next to the natural and social sciences, it is perhaps in the humanities' capacity to elaborate its

questions and themes *before* staking out a procedure that would shape the unfolding of the

research.

In recent scholarship, this account of the humanities has found a clear spokesman in

William Franke. He writes:

> The question of the kind of knowledge the humanities entail might be approached
> through exploring either the history or the method of these disciplines. *Logically, the*
> *question of method demands to be taken up first. But even to speak of "method" in the*
> *humanities betrays an, in some ways, inappropriate bias.* For knowledge in the
> humanities in not per se methodical. To the extent that we feel the need to establish at the
> outset the right method of research, our conception of the humanities is under the sway of
> the scientific disciplines . . . While in science a sound method supposedly guarantees true
> results and is theoretically necessary to arrive at certainty of the truth, the experience of
> truth in the humanities, for example, in and through a work of art, may be more likely to
> come about rather as an epiphany and in the most unmethodical, incalculable ways.[12]

Franke's celebration of the unmethodical invites a more daring approach to comparative literary

analysis. Instead of modeling humanistic inquiry after the scientific priority for working out

methodological procedures in advance, the humanist stands to disclose unexpected insights by

pursuing connections whose epistemic basis can be established retroactively. It is in that spirit

that I pursue the connections linking purgatorial and virtual bodies. Rather than naming and

addressing here the many methodological caveats that such a project raises, I intend to answer to

those concerns in the course of the argument itself. The validity of the comparison will, I hope,

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[12] William Franke, *The Revelation of Imagination* (Northwestern U Press, 2015), 3-4, emphasis added.

demonstrate itself through the results of the inquiry rather than through an exhaustive defense of comparative methodology.

As part and parcel of this particular approach, I will resist the move to define several of the work's key themes in advance. In a primarily philological project, it would be appropriate to establish clear, historically grounded definitions of the body, presence, subjectivity, dreams, vision and virtuality. But definitions are often the result, rather than the precondition, of literary research. To set out overly precise conceptual limits at the outset would undesirably constrain the required effort to compare and contrast my sources with the required flexibility. Naturally, it is still important to account for the central themes of my hypothesis. Yet those themes can be clarified in the course of the argument itself. For these reasons, I follow Carol Zaleski's precedent of deliberately using "such terms as *near-death experience, near-death vision, otherworld journey, otherworld vision, deathbed vision*, and *return from death* almost interchangeably."[13]

If the humanities ought to keep alive the possibility for a more inspired approach to method, the question of anachronism still stands. Does it not distort the medieval texts to discuss them alongside and within such a remote culture as virtual reality? Marie de France herself may provide the basis of a hopeful answer in the prologue to her collection of *Lais*. In this much-studied introduction, Marie famously grounds her literary translation of Breton lais in a particular understanding and practice of tradition. Citing Priscian specifically and "the ancients" more vaguely, Marie construes her poetry as an object within a tradition whose roots are self-consciously Roman (rhetoric), Celtic (storytelling), and Christian (the tropes of monastic wisdom

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[13] Carol G. Zaleski, *Otherworld Journeys: Accounts of near-Death Experience in Medieval and Modern Times* (Oxford U Press, 1987), vi.

in "Fresne", for example).[14] This dynamic sense of a literary tradition that crosses genres, languages, and periods is itself founded on what we would now call "anachronism." Indeed, the etymology of the word itself suggests "backwards" (*ana*) "time" (*chronos*).

In my view, such a notion of backwards time positively describes Marie's notion of tradition, one which looks backwards in time in view of the present to forge a literary project for the future. As she herself notes, the ancients practiced obscurity in their writing so that "those who were to come after / and study them / might gloss the letter / and supply its significance from their own wisdom."[15] I offer this project as a continuation of such a task. My application of phenomenologists and media theorists is not intended as an isogetical misconstrual of the past, as would be the case if this were an exclusively philological project. Instead, my method here (modeled on Franke's un-methodology) aims to treat Marie with the respect that her prologue invites: By bringing her work into a living conversation with more current discourses of phenomenology, writing, and extraordinary experiences, I hope to honor Marie's very notion of interpreting her work (and that of Dante) among "future generations." Indeed, her expectation is one of intellectual progress whereby future readers will be "plus serreient sutil de sens": subtler of sense.[16] To bracket developments in philosophical and literary discourses that might help to illuminate and expand Marie's own project would be tantamount to a rejection of the very task that she invites. Therefore, this project eagerly embraces a rehabilitated notion of *anachronismos* as the reinterpretation of Marie's medieval account of a living tradition.[17]

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[14] Marie de France, *The Lais of Marie de France*, trans. Robert Hanning and Joan Ferrante (Durham: The Labyrinth Press, 1982), 28, v. 9-16.

[15] Ibid., 28, v. 14-16.

[16] Cited in Sharon Kinoshita and Peggy McCracken, *Marie de France: A Critical Companion* (Gallica, v. 24. Cambridge: DS Brewer, 2012), 22.

[17] See William Franke's elaboration of tradition as reinterpretation in Franke, *Revelation*, 320.

If Franke establishes a crucial model for a method that postpones definition at the outset of analysis, my comparative approach sketched so far is not without particular precedent in medieval studies. In particular, Carol Zaleski has established a precise antecedent for the method I take up here. In her book *Otherworld Journeys: Accounts of Near-Death Experience in Medieval and Modern Times*, Zaleski set out to draw a clear set of parallels shared by medieval and modern near-death experiences. This dissertation follows Zaleski's intuition that medieval accounts of liminal and extraordinary cognitive experiences can be better understood when thrown into relief against similar but more contemporary forms of such experience. I share Zaleski's appraisal of the inadequacy of contemporary scholarly approaches to evidentiary analysis of extraordinary visionary experiences. "Clearly," Zaleski writes, "we need to find a middle path between the extremes of dismissing near-death testimony as "nothing but" and embracing it as "proof.""[18] Though my project is specifically focused on disembodied visionary experiences rather than those involving death, I have sought to articulate one form of the *via media* for which Zaleski hopes.

In what follows, I focus on the disembodied visionary's subjectivity as one that calls attention to the deep continuities that bind various forms of ordinary and extraordinary visions: dreaming and waking life, virtual reality and "Reality," an otherworldly vision and the vision of mundane experience. These dyads each break down, or stand to do so, within each of the medieval and postmodern sources studied here. Whereas Zaleski specifically focuses upon empirical research, witness accounts, and analysis deriving from the "modern" world of the twentieth century, I shift the temporal goalposts through my focus upon the distinctly *post-*modern work of the virtual reality artist Char Davies.

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[18] Zaleski, 182.

As a medievalist, then, Zaleski's comparative method looks forward to the twentieth century from a vantage point situated in the Middle Ages, but media theorists and scholars of virtual reality have also turned their gaze back in time toward Dante and other medieval cultures. Since the 1990's, scholarship across the humanities has shown a web of shifting critical interests in the various regions of overlap between virtual reality, medieval visionary experience, and religious and theological discourses. For instance, the broader connections linking religious custom to digital technologies and the Internet have not gone unnoticed, particularly by academic theologians. In the earlier days of this scholarly comparison, religious voices often formulated moral skepticism in the face of digital technologies even as those same scholars showed a fascination with unexpected affinities between religious phenomena and digital technologies. Writing in 1996, Stephen D. O'Leary hoped to "qualify the optimism of technology advocates by exploring potentially troubling questions about the future of religious institutions in an era of computer-mediated communication."[19] Similarly, near the turn of the millennium, theologians like George D. Ranels, Jr. showed an anxious wariness of the "Net" and its allegedly structural encouragement of an "inordinate focus on individualism" and an associated "fragmentation of self, society, and ethics."[20] This line of argument has its partisans today who decry social media's erosion of our faculties and communities.

Over the last two decades, these early scholarly occupations with religious discourse and digital technologies have proliferated in distinctive directions. Writing beyond a narrowly Christian context, Marianna Ruah-Midhar has recently considered the emerging interplay

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[19] Stephen D. O'Leary, "Cyberspace as Sacred Space: Communicating Religion on Computer Networks," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64, no. 4 (1996), 782.

[20] George D. Randels, "Cyberspace and Christian Ethics: The Virtuous And/in/of The Virtual," *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 20 (2000), 167.

between the Internet, cyberspace, and religious divinization rituals.[21] In recent Anglophone literary criticism, John Shanahan describes a form of "*digital transcendentalism*" in the spiritual dynamics on display in the bestselling novel *Cloud Atlas*.[22] Similarly, in *Medieval Saints and Modern Screens: Divine Visions as Cinematic Experience,* Alicia Spencer-Hall has argued, "divine visions of medieval saints are meditative experiences in which they access a similar kind of "digital heaven."[23] In these and other examples, humanists across academic disciplines elaborate an increasingly complex web of connections that largely coalesce around the *immateriality* that seems to unite virtual reality, mystical experience, and medieval religiosity.

Within this kaleidoscope of interdisciplinary projects, a small group of scholars have directly integrated Dante into their transhistorical engagements with virtual reality. In 2010, Anne Goldman reflected upon reading the *Commedia*'s first *cantica*: "To be transported to the *Inferno* is to experience a virtual reality more gripping than any created by computer graphics."[24] While Goldman does not clarify how the *Inferno* is an instance of virtual reality, her remark picks up the thread of a more expansive study from 1999, Margaret Wertheim's *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace: A History of Space from Dante to the Internet*. Wertheim has argued that a

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[21] Marianna Ruah-Midbar, "The Sacralization of Randomness: The Theological Imagination and the Logic of Digital Divination Rituals," *Numen* 61, no. 5/6 (2014): 620. In a different sphere of scholarly activity, certain cultural historians in varied disciplines found virtual reality to describe a new instantiation of realist aesthetics. This was the argument advanced by art historian Rebecca Leuchak in her 1997 study of The Cloisters museum in New York City. The Cloisters, an elaborate replica of medieval architecture designed in the 1920's, were a testament to an effort to accurately represent the material details of a culture from the medieval past. Like virtual reality, the Cloisters were intended to "evoke other times." Rebecca Leuchak, "Imagining and Imaging the Medieval: The Cloisters, Virtual Reality and Paradigm Shifts," *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 23, no. 3 (1997), 363. The architects accomplished this through imitation, "the ideology" shared by designers of "computer simulated video" worlds (363) as well as the architects of the Cloisters.

[22] John Shanahan, "Digital Transcendentalism in David Mitchell's Cloud Atlas," *Criticism* 58, no. 1 (2016), 116, emphasis in original.

[23] Alicia Spencer-Hall, "My Avatar, My Soul: When Mystics Log On," in *Medieval Saints and Modern Screens: Divine Visions as Cinematic Experience* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 195.

[24] Anne Goldman, "Questions of Transport: Reading Primo Levi Reading Dante," (*The Georgia Review* 64, no. 1 (2010): 75.

trio of cultural ideals ("Immortality, transcendence, omniscience"[25]) animate the projects of "cyber-immortalists" working in different spheres of digital and applied technologies.[26] In Wertheim's view, Dante originates this "cyber-religious imagination"[27] through the production of visionary experience in the *Commedia*.

I believe this genealogy risks a simultaneous misunderstanding of transcendence in Dante's work as well as the virtual environments of Char Davies. As I argue in detail in my fourth chapter, Dante's dreams, like Owein's visions in the *Espurgatoire*, are not characterized by the pursuit of omniscience. Rather, the purgatorial journeys of Owein the knight and Dante the pilgrim aim toward a kind of ignorance, one that coincides with a surrender of power rather than its increase. My goal is to chart a new map that locates Purgatory and virtual territories on the same terrain but with fresh criteria. As we will discover, the principal feature that binds these various cultural foci is the configuration of subjective transformations that amount to an erosion, rather than a reification, of identity. Drawing on medieval and contemporary theorists associated with apophatic thinking and deconstruction, I identify and elaborate the possibility of a genuine challenge to stable subjectivity in the visionary experiences of Owein the knight, the purgatorial dreams of Dante the pilgrim, and potential viewer responses associated with immersive experience in Char Davies's *Osmose* and *Ephémère.* Therefore, this dissertation seeks to extend the comparative approaches made possible by medievalists like Zaleski and scholars of virtual reality such as Margaret Wertheim, following the path of reciprocal comparison that they have instantiated within their transdisciplinary projects.

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[25] Margaret Wertheim, *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace: A History of Space from Dante to the Internet* (New York: Norton, 1999, 265.

[26] Ibid., 265.

[27] Ibid., 265.

In what follows, the first two chapters jointly consider disembodiment in the two purgatorial poems under study. In chapter one, I explore the visionary body of Owein the Knight, the literary protagonist of Marie de France's *Espurgatoire seint Patriz*. Whereas scholars tend to argue that Owein the Knight remains in his material body during his voyage through Purgatory, I develop a case that suggests the knight's disembodiment throughout the purgatorial portion of the narrative. Part of this case requires attention to the theological influence of Gregory the Great on the poem. As one of the two Patristic sources that Marie cites in the *Espurgatoire* (along with Augustine), Gregory's narrative accounts of disembodied voyages supply a crucial narrative antecedent for the sort of flight from the material body that I claim Owein experiences in Marie's poem. The *Espurgatoire* resists an interpretation of extraordinary experience that would assert the material body as the necessary basis of valid experience. One can be present to various Others (infernal, mundane, divine) without an empirical demonstration of the embodied status of the subjects and objects involved. To see how the poem unfolds this implicit understanding, I engage in a close reading of several passages in the *Espurgatoire* that collectively challenge the dominant scholarly trend of asserting the body's materiality as the litmus test for validating extraordinary visionary experience.

Chapter two turns to a consideration of Dante the pilgrim's three dreams described in the *Purgatorio*. Here, as Dino Cervigni has well established, the explicit disembodiment of the dreaming pilgrim works to liberate the poetic subject from the typical constraints of the material body. This liberation presages, and even clarifies, a crucial debate in media studies concerning the role of the body in cognition. Specifically, I argue that Dante's construction of the dream episodes illustrates an experience of disembodiment as a subjective experience of radical transformation. Such a construal of disembodiment, as we will see, need not erase the material

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body as a constitutive component of human experience. Yet Dante's construction of dreaming as leaving the body suggests the powerful potential that disembodiment holds as a heuristic description of leaving old identities and receiving new, challenging, and unexpected ones. To draw out the consequences of this argument for my overarching thesis, I contrast Dante's notion of transhuman identity with the contemporary transhumanism of the technocrat and entrepreneur Ray Kurzweil.

Chapters three and four sustain these lines of inquiry while invoking the work of VR artist Char Davies. Much of the scholarship on Davies's artistry has positioned her work as a conscious invitation to recover the fundamental importance of the material body for human experience. Many aspects of this thesis help scholars and VR participants alike to enrich participation with Davies's influential work. Yet there remains the possibility of a different approach to analyzing *Osmose* and *Ephémère*, one that locates disembodiment—rather than embodiment—as a possible interpretation of virtual user experience. In order to develop this argument, I look to various ways in which other scholars have turned to medieval figures in art, literature, and spirituality in order to couch their own emphasis on material corporality in Davies's work. Generally, my approach routes these sources in the opposite direction, showing the fruitful value medieval sources can supply to a new interpretation of leaving the body as a virtual subject in *Osmose* and *Ephémère*.

The fourth and final chapter inverts the interpretive direction of the third. By inter-articulating purgatorial journeys and virtual reality together, I establish the conditions for construing purgatorial subjectivity as a form of virtual reality.[28] This is clearly not a historical

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[28] The notion of interarticulation describes a process of formulating distinct themes, objects, or questions in such a way that illuminates critical paths for thinking that might have otherwise gone unexplored. For one productive illustration, see Nathalie Cecire who describes the "interarticulated ways" in which forms of theory have interacted

argument; it is a speculative one. The potential for considering Owein's purgatorial pilgrimage

and Dante's dreams in these anachronistic terms lies in the chance to appreciate freshly just what

sort of subjectivity Marie de France and Dante are offering in their imagined purgatorial

narratives. Ultimately, as I delineate more clearly in the conclusion, the disembodied subject of

the purgatorial pilgrim shares the virtual subject's opportunity to lose a fixed sense of identity in

favor of a more fluid experience. This always-expanding experience of subjectivity is tightly

associated with the intellectual freedom to assert presence without a material basis. Owein the

knight's extraordinary visions are asserted on the basis of their spiritual effects; Dante's dreams

are valid (within the poem and for the reader alike) because of the ways that the pilgrim's dreams

help him and the reader to interpret the pilgrim's waking life; virtual experiences of Davies's

Osmose and *Ephémère* can stimulate the impression of exiting the mundane material body

without begging the question of whether such a sensation is literally (that is "demonstrably")

possible. It is my sense, then, that what these various artifacts additionally share is a particular

approach to the epistemological evaluation of extraordinary forms of experience. Rather than

pointing to various proofs of bodily materiality as the basis of sound experience, Marie de

France, Dante, and Davies employ different modes of artistic representation to suggest the

inadequacy of material proof for assessing the value of extraordinary visions.

Davies's virtual realms suggest the bizarre, cathartic, and transformative atmosphere of a

medieval Purgatory, and Marie and Dante likewise supply worlds that evoke virtuality. In each

case, the virtuality characterizing these extraordinary experiences stands to communicate

something fundamental about ordinary experience. In other words, virtuality, dreams, and

religious vision heighten dimensions already present, whether explicitly or latently, within

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with the digital humanities. Nathalie Cecire, "Introduction: Theory and the Virtues of Digital Humanities," *Journal of Digital Humanities* Vol. 1 (1), 2011: no pagination.

waking life or "normal" conscious experience. At one level, this thesis has clear roots in existing scholarship pertaining to my three objects of study. For instance, Matthias Galler goes so far as to call into question the appropriateness of "otherness" as a description of visionary destinations in "otherworldly" literatures. Such tales do not "describe an 'other' world in the strictest sense of the word; the visions allegedly experienced beyond the boundary of death instead reflect life *in this world*."[29] In her wide-reaching study on the topic, Zaleski has argued for "a fundamental kinship between otherworld visions and the more common forms of imaginative experience."[30] Yet there is a pressing need to revisit these varied interpretations of extraordinary visionary experience. Despite the shared topos of symmetry between dream/vision and waking life/reality, these theses raise a recurring question: in what precise way and to what end are medieval otherworldly visions (such as Owein's and Patrick's) reflective of the world before and after the vision? If life is like a dream, *how* is it like a dream? I will argue that the affinity of disembodied vision with embodied life is reflected in the *symbolic awareness* that such visionary experiences convey to their subjects. Relying chiefly on the work of Paul Ricoeur and Louis-Marie Chauvet, I recover a hermeneutical account of the symbol as that which draws the subject forth to co-create and sustain forms of meaning that incite fundamental changes of identity in the interpreter.

This thesis, as I will argue, generates a fresh comparative way to speak about the purgatories of Marie de France and Dante, and the virtual reality environments of Char Davies. I return to Denise Doyle's thesis: "As the real and the virtual, and the real and the imagined are no longer strangers (or opposites), it is also true that the physical and the virtual have become more

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[29] Matthias Galler, "Transformations of Life and Death in Medieval Visions of the Other World: A Response to Fritz Kemmler," *Connotations* 20 1, (2010/2011), 13.

[30] Zaleski, 205.

firmly entangled."[31] If the virtual and the real are no longer strangers, they have been closely

related since at least the Middle Ages (and far more remotely in time as well). To study two

historically and culturally influential purgatory poems in concert with a contemporary virtual

artist substantiates Doyle's claim, while extending the temporal scope of her argument as far

back as the twelfth century. As dreams and otherworldly visions functioned for Marie and Dante,

so does virtual experience among certain participants in Davies's *Osmose* and *Ephémère*.

 This project assumes no imputation of authorial intent or direct cultural influence

between Marie de France and Dante on the one hand and Char Davies on the other. Instead, the

comparison offered here can elicit an exciting line of continuity between otherworldly voyages,

dreams, and contemporary virtual reality technologies as iterations of a perennial impulse. The

recurring gesture to construct and seek out experiences of disembodiment suggests a shared

project of forging paths toward the reinvention of identity. Such a particular relation to the body

and its absence, as I will argue, offers one compelling illustration of Jeffrey Fisher's thesis cited

earlier: "The Middle Ages seem to crop up a lot these postmodern days."[32] On reading this

project, I hope the reader will have a sense that the postmodern occupation with medieval culture

owes one portion of its interest to the role that purgatorial disembodiment can play in

constructing paths toward transformed subjectivity.

 This research is an offering for medievalists and media studies theorists alike. As a

comparative project, it will necessarily fail to satisfy all of the many concerns that variously

inform scholars in these two diverse fields. That said, I have taken pains to do justice to literature

and perspectives in both disciplines. My hope is that these reflections on disembodiment can

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[31] Denise Doyle, Doyle, Denise. "Avatar Lives: Narratives of Transformation and Identity," in *Boundaries of Self and Reality*, ed. Jayne Gackenbach and Jonathan Brown (San Diego: Elsevier Publishers, 2017), 71.

[32] Fisher, 111.

clarify existing debates in those who study medieval poetry and virtuality alike. Both fields stand

to gain in scholarly relevance, public appreciation, and novel research agendas by the sort of

interdisciplinary approach that studies pre- and postmodern sources together.

CHAPTER 1

BEYOND THE BODY (?): PURGATORIAL VISIONS IN MARIE DE FRANCE

Autres Qui Sunt Defors: Finding the Visionary Body in the Espurgatoire

Likely written between 1185 and 1190, the *Espurgatoire seint Patriz* is Marie de

France's Old French translation of the *Tractates de Purgatorio Sancti Patricia*.[33] The

Tractates was originally composed in Latin earlier in the twelfth century by a Cistercian monk

known to history as 'H' of Sal trey.[34] In Marie's vernacular *translation* of H's poem, the

author—traditionally identified by scholars as the same Marie de France who composed the

Lais and the *Scope*—adapts the tale of Owein the Knight.[35] A prologue establishes the history

of St. Patrick who comes to Ireland to evangelize the island's inhabitants. Though the Irish

have previously received the Christian revelation, their faith lacks the structural order and

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[33] Sonia Maura Barillari, "Un Purgatorio Al Femminile: Il Volgarizzamento Del Tractatus De Purgatorii Sancti Patricii Di Marie De France," in *Voces De Mujeres En La Edad Media: Entre Realidad Y Ficción*, ed. Díaz Esther Corral (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 175. As for the identity of Marie de France, scholars have proposed a variety of continental and insular figures as historical candidates. Ultimately, Howard Bloch's approach to the question remains the most compelling: "we may never know Marie from the outside, who the "real Marie" was in the way know who Marguerite de Navarre, Austen, Brontë, Sand, Woolf, or Duras were (that is to say, in a way allowing us to assign a biography to them with the fantasy, ultimately, of reducing their works to such an elusive category as the person," and yet, "we can nonetheless deal with the question of her anonymity internally, from the texts themselves, via common concerns uniting all three works associated with her name." R. Howard Bloch, "Other Worlds and Other Words in the Works of Marie de France," in *The World and Its Rival: Essays on Literary Imagination in Honor of Per Nykrog*, eds. Kathryn Karczewska and Tom Conley (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 1999), 42.

[34] Marie de France, *Le Purgatoire*, 1. In 2001, David L. Pike noted that scholarship treating the *Espurgatoire* had tended to construe Marie's act of vernacular translation as a rather perfunctory exercise in updating a Latin text into Old French. That trend, however, failed to grapple with possible "patterns of signification" that Marie brought to her project as an original writer and thinker. (Pike, 44) Following Pike, Myriam White-Le Goff observes Marie's use of "traits stylistiques" to craft an authorial "je" (209) that cannot simply collapse to the voice of the anonymous Cistercian author of the original Latin text. (209-210) Marie de France, as White notes, "utilise parfois le discours direct là où H. de Saltrey ne s'en sert pas." (210) Pike and White, then, are each invested in revealing the creativity involved in medieval *translatio,* a gesture that shows anything but a simple copying of Latin into vernacular idioms. A concrete example: Bonnie H. Leonard observes that Marie's chosen form of the octosyllabic rhyming couplet supplies an innovation on the Latin original, proving that Marie's craft in the *translatio* goes beyond a simple procedure of updating Latin verse into a vernacular idiom. (57)

[35] For a brief summary of the literary afterlives of Owein's story from Shakespeare to Calderón, see Zaleski, *Otherworld Journeys*, 35.

theological refinement of the continental Catholic Church.[36] This typology of the unrefined, semi-Pagan Irishman in contrast with the mature, faithful Christian plays out in the prologue when Patrick hears the confession of an old Irishman. The latter's piety is sincere, but he lacks the knowledge that murder is, in fact, a mortal sin. Patrick instructs the ignorant Irishman that he must make a fuller confession accordingly, which the old man does in haste. As Patrick subsequently propagates a more Roman variety of Christian ritual and belief in Ireland, he receives a vision from Christ himself. In a dream, *Jhesu Crist* indicates to Patrick where he may find the gate to Purgatory, both an underworld in which the dead await final judgment as well as a destination for living pilgrims to seek.

As a chivalrous knight seeking a quest, Owein travels through the dangers of Purgatory with the reluctant permission of the Cistercian priors who guard the subterranean entrance to Purgatory in rural Ireland. After a period of prayer and penance, Owein receives counsel from the monks that equip him for the psychical journey he will shortly undergo amidst the punishing fires of Purgatory. Once the knight travels beyond the gate and into Purgatory, he encounters visions of demons that punish souls figured as bodies in terrifying postures. Surrounded by the dreadful phantasmagoria of each vision, Owein must rely upon the advice given to him by the Cistercian priors: the knight must call upon the name of Jesus Christ as his deliverer. Often by the skin of his teeth, Owein manages to invoke Christ, which consequently frees the knight from the threatening demons. Each instance of such deliverance brings about the end of a given purgatorial vision and facilitates the knight's passage to the next vision. After several such episodes, Owein succeeds in crossing a treacherously narrow bridge that

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[36] Howard Bloch has persuasively argued that the *Espurgatoire* was composed amidst a cultural campaign on the part of Cistercian, Angevin, and Norman powers whose joint goal was the subjugation of Irish barons and bishops under the new Norman invaders. R. Howard Bloch, *The Anonymous Marie de France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 267-311.

bears him to the Earthly Paradise. He discourses there with figures who appear as members of the church's magisterial hierarchy (bishops, priests) before retracing his steps through Purgatory to arrive safely in Ireland once more. Having returned from his harrowing and edifying journey, Owein commits his visions to writing which he commits to the same priors whose guidance made possible his own visionary experience. During a subsequent quest to Jerusalem and other implied adventures that follow, Owein circulates the story of his trials in Purgatory far and wide for the salvific benefit of all. His principal mouthpiece for this circulation is the Cistercian monk Gilbert, who supplies the poem's coda through the recounting of a few anecdotes that aim to bolster the credibility of Owein's fantastical tale.

Historians and literary scholars have long taken interest in the status of Owein's body as he travels through Purgatory's macabre environs. In recent years, critics such as Bloch and White-Le Goff have observed the relation linking Owein's embodiment with related epistemological questions raised through the poem's exposition of writing, translation, and truth verification. While these themes have been raised several times by scholars of the *Espurgatoire* and its Latin predecessor, such efforts have not exhausted all that must be said on the topic. This is in part because scholars of the Latin original do not always address Marie's translation, and vice versa. Furthermore, analyses of both poems' accounts of embodiment and knowledge have emerged sporadically over the last century. Since Foulet published his article on ecstasy in Marie's poem in 1908,[37] other scholars have taken up this and related questions, but not in such a way that has produced an unbroken line of scholarly investment with a consistent set of interpretive categories and definitions. The result is a vital

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[37] Lucien Foulet, "Marie De France Et La Légende Du Purgatoire De Saint Patrice," *Romanische Forschungen* 22, no. 2 (1908), 599-627.

set of articles and books that communicate important ideas, but which invite clarification and expansion.

The recent French-language publication of Myriam White-Le Goff's critical edition of the *Espurgatoire* occasions an opportunity to revisit the poem's exposition of embodiment and its relation to interpretation and knowledge formation. Moreover, White-Le Goff is perhaps the only scholar in recent years to dedicate multiple articles to the exclusive study of the *Espurgatoire*. These studies have delineated new possibilities for researching Marie de France's work more broadly, and they have raised questions pertinent to my own treatment of embodiment in Marie's *Espurgatoire*.

Like many literary critics, White-Le Goff shares a tendency to construe Owein's journey as one that must be assessed according to two interpretive extremes: either the text presents Owein the knight within his material body during his otherworldly visions, or he lacked his body and travelled by some immaterial means. If the former, then the accounts of Owein's visionary experiences are understood as a reliable witness of Purgatory for the medieval reader. In contrast, if the knight was not bodily present in these otherworldly landscapes, it follows that his account is thrown into question, a dubious vision whose authenticity may be the object of medieval suspicion. This polarized set of interpretive choices allegedly describes the poem's presentation of the epistemological stakes involved in assessing the truth of Owein's claims to have experienced extraordinary visions of Purgatory. I aim to suggest the limits of this interpretation of the *Espurgatoire*, both as a claim about the text's own self-understanding and as a modern approach to reading the poem.

According to White-Le Goff, Owein's journey through Purgatory occurs while the knight still exists within his physical body: "dans son corps et en vie" (in his body and while

still alive).[38] Owein's material embodiment within Purgatory has been almost universally affirmed by the poem's critics. Dépinoy asserts that Owein's journey in Purgatory is "a very physical experience."[39] Commenting on the Latin original, Barbezat similarly maintains that Owein "does not dream or fall into an ecstasy."[40] Contrasting Marie's *Espurgatoire* with the Irish *fisi* tradition, Braga shares Barbezat's confident assertion that Owein the knight "does not suffer a visionary rapture or a mystical ascent of the soul; he does not lose his consciousness in a traumatic or lethal state."[41] As these examples show, critics of both the Latin poem and Marie's translation often share this undisputed premise concerning Owein's body.

At least one critic has articulated, if not embraced, a countervailing interpretation. In 1908, Lucien Foulet considered the possibility that Owein's voyage to Purgatory occurred while the knight was outside his body. "Était-il donc impossible," Foulet considered, "l'entrée une fois franchie, [Owein] fût tombé dans une sorte d'extase où il n'aurait vu l'autre monde qu'en esprit?"[42] (Was it then impossible that Owein, once he had crossed the entry, had fallen into a sort of ecstasy in which he would not have seen the otherworld except in spirit?) Admittedly, Foulet's question is speculative, and he ultimately answers in the negative. Foulet ventures the possibility of Owein's bodily ecstasy only in order to ventriloquize the assumed incredulity of the monastic community surrounding Gilbert. Nevertheless, the question points to the possibility that Purgatory remains more ethereal in Marie's poem than more recent

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[38] Miriam White-Le Goff, *"Péché et conscience de soi dans L'Espurgatoire seint Patriz de Marie de France,"* *Cahiers de recherches médiévales et humanistes* 12 (2005), 5. Translations are my own.

[39] Denis Dépinoy, "The Monstrosity Within: Spaces in L'Espurgatoire Seint Patriz of Marie de France," *Neophilologus* 98, no. 3 (2014), 359.

[40] Michael D. Barbezat, "A Conjuration of Patrick: A Legacy of Doubt and Imagining in Hamlet," in *Hamlet and Emotions*, ed. Paul J. Megna, Bríd Phillips, R. S. White (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 50.

[41] Corin Braga, "Fisi vs. Journeys into St. Patrick's Purgatory Irish Psychanodias and Somanodias," *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 12, no. 36 (2013), 181.

[42] Foulet, "Marie de France," 609. Translations are my own.

scholars have suggested. Foulet's question also attests to a particular reader response, showing that one can read Marie's account of Owein's journey and reasonably wonder if the protagonist's purgatorial journey was a disembodied one.

In White-Le Goff's work, the argument for Owein's embodied status partially relies on a crucial passage in the prologue. At line 31, Marie introduces her first of many allusions to Gregory the Great who supplied "[m]ulz essamples" (many examples, v. 31) of souls who experience an intimation of the pains that may await the visionary in the afterlife ("k'il averunt", v. 39). The implied subject of these visions (the plural *il*) seems to be those souls who are gifted a pre-mortem revelation of the post-mortem world to come. These intimations are sometimes the object of disembodied visionary subjects, other times embodied ones ("des espirez qui sunt es cors / et des autres qui sont defors," spirits who are in their bodies and others who are outside them, v. 33-34). White-Le Goff cites this crucial line from Marie's prologue before stating that in Owein's journey through Purgatory, "non seulement l'esprit voyagera avec le corps, mais encore dans le corps."[43] Yet there is no single passage in the poem's prologue or elsewhere that pronounces conclusively on the question of Owein's specific embodiment. The prologue itself leaves the question open-ended, leaving the reader without a clear authorial indication of Owein's status as a visionary who is in his body (*es cors*) or beyond it in some fashion (*defors*).

Before developing my own reading of Owein's embodiment, I turn to an extended citation from Barbezat's analysis of this question in the *Tractatus*, the highly similar Latin basis of Marie's poem:

> In addition to the demonstration of the usually unseen experience of souls, H. makes two
> other seemingly directly contradictory claims. First, that Owein's journey provides

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[43] "…the spirit will not only travel with the body, but still within the body." White-Le Goff, "*Les demons sont parmi nous : preuve par la chair et le sang.* L'Espurgatoire seint Patriz *de Marie de France*," 59.

evidence for the existence of corporeal torments for souls after death, likely in an actual space beneath the earth, and that these torments include a corporeal fire. The second point seems to dramatically undercut the first: that the knight, "a corporeal and mortal man," in fact, saw spiritual things "in a corporeal shape and form." A contradiction emerges: we have a material knight verifying the presence of material things in a material place in the afterlife; nevertheless, what the knight has seen are really immaterial representations that signify spiritual things. The apparent contradiction between these two points is so jarring that some commentators have felt that the prologue's logical deficiencies indicate that H. did not believe his own story.[44]

Barbezat goes on to argue persuasively that Henry of Saltrey's prologue reworks material borrowed from Hugh of Saint Victor's *De sacramentis christianiae fidei*. There, Hugh suggests that many features governing the experience of extraordinary visionary experiences are "unknowable."[45] The phantasmagoria reported by bodiless visionaries presents a difficulty because sense experience requires a body that the visionary has allegedly left behind. Hugh, argues Barzebat, determines that the sense impressions of the bodiless visionary are therefore to be interpreted as signs of spiritual realities.[46] This semiotic interpretation of visionary sense data is grafted from the Augustinian notion of the *visio spiritualis*, which Barzebat helpfully summarizes as the encounter with immaterial things as if they were material.[47] It is this notion of material significance of immaterial things that allegedly explains why an embodied subject like Owein is finally unable to see the Heavenly Paradise at the end of his Purgatorial journey, since this "is the narrative limit for those who live in bodies and know only corporeal things."[48]

Barbezat convincingly argues that Hugh acts as the implicit intermediary of Augustinian vision theology to Marie's poem, but this reading threatens to obscure the fact that neither H nor

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[44] Michael D. Barbezat, "'He Doubted That These Things Actually Happened': Knowing the Other World in the *Tractatus de Purgatorio sancti Patricii*," *History of Religions* 57, no. 4 (2018): 321-47), 330.

[45] Ibid., 331.

[46] Ibid., 332.

[47] Ibid., 334.

[48] Ibid., 341.

Marie ever cites Hugh, only Augustine. What is more, both H and Marie allude to Gregory the Great more frequently than they reference Augustine. In my view, scholarship has too often looked to Augustinian vision theory, mediated by Hugh and others, as the primary theological discourse through which the visionary bodies of the *Tractatus* and *Espurgatoire* should be interpreted. In contrast to this scholarly trend, I find that Gregory's wild narrative accounts of rapturous vision supply an alternative theological frame that can describe Owein's experiences in a way that seems well suited to the logic suggested in the poem's prologue. As a theologian invested in both dreams and visions, Gregory's account of these phenomena was crucially distinct from his predecessor, Augustine. As Moreira concludes,

> In terms of conveying doctrine, Gregory's interest in dreams and visions in the *Dialogues* was conceptually far removed from Augustine's intentions in book XII of the *De Genesi ad litteram* to establish a structure of cosmological thinking. But like Augustine and concerned churchmen before him, Gregory was concerned to establish a framework of authority for the visionary experience, as his allegory borrowed from Plato illustrates.[49]

Gregory's less systematic account of extraordinary visionary experience supplies a more ambiguous picture of the visionary's embodiment than we find in Augustinian dream theory:

> Gregory's official reluctance to believe in dreams aside, it is hard to encounter anywhere in the *Dialogues* an occasion where dreams and visions are not given the greatest weight and authority...In this way, Gregory shows himself to be the champion of a concept of extended visionary access which, in its similarity to Tertullian's ideas, shows how far removed his thinking is from Augustine's.[50]

Therefore, in order to advance a clearer picture of Owein's visionary body, I turn first to a consideration of Gregory the Great's *Dialogues* as a critical para-text for the *Espurgatoire*. This

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[49] Isabel Moreira, "Like scales from their eyes: Visionary experience in Western Europe from Augustine to the eighth century," (PhD diss., University of St. Andrews, 1992), 8.

[50] Ibid, 75. Dulay, whose study on dreams informs Cervigni's account of the dreaming subject in Dante's Commedia, shares Moreira's thesis.

look to Gregory will make possible a fuller consideration of those elements in Marie's poem that

are suggestive of Owein's more ambiguous embodiment as he sojourns through other worlds.[51]

Gregorian Authority in the Espurgatoire*:*
The Spiritual Ends of Interpreting Strange Visions

In scholarly treatments of the *Espurgatoire*, few studies have considered Marie de

France's explicit engagement with the theology of the Late Antique pope, Gregory the Great.[52]

Yet the pope's *Dialogues* were "more eagerly transcribed and read" than nearly any Patristic

text in the Middle Ages.[53] Marie's interest in Gregory, the sixth-century monastic bishop of

Rome, primarily emerges in the *Espurgatoire*'s prologue. In this passage, Marie develops two

distinct but related occupations with Gregory's thought. In line 31, the poet cites the sermons

of "seinz Gregoires" as a source of narrative accounts that attest to the reality of disembodied

visionary experiences (v. 30-35). This interest in Gregory's theological account of souls

outside their bodies persists throughout the first two hundred lines of the text (v. 1-188),

including another explicit reference to the monastic pope in line 151.

This initial section of the *Espurgatoire* frames and contains the poet's second interest in

Gregory as an authority on the Christian virtue of compunction (*compuncciün*). Translating her

Cistercian source, Marie asserts that God provides rapturous visionary experiences in order to

"mettre en compuncciün / e en greignur devociün / cel qui volent a Deu plaisir / e le suen

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[51] Given the half dozen allusions to Gregory and the fewer but crucial references to Augustine, it is somewhat strange to observe McCracken and Kinoshita presenting the *Espurgatoire* as a poem without "references to "the philosophers" and "the ancients." Sharon Kinoshita and Peggy McCracken, *Marie de France: A Critical Companion* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2012), 45.

[52] See Howard R. Bloch's brief discussion in *The Anonymous Marie de France*, 246.

[53] Francis Clark, *The 'Gregorian'* Dialogues *and the Origins of Benedictine Monasticism* (Boston: Brill, 2003), 8. Clark's book addresses the controversial and fascinating question of whether Gregory actually authored the *Dialogues* attributed to him. These concerns lie beyond the scope of my project, since the question of authorial attribution did not diminish the importance of the *Dialogues* as a text associated with *Seinz Gregoires* in the Middle Ages.

regne deservir (cause compunction / and greater devotion / among those who desire to please God, / and to merit his kingdom)." (v. 41-44) Marie then sets down the purposes of her own poem in terms that reflect the reasons for which God affords such visionary experiences: "Pur ço, plus ententivement, / pur amender la simple gent, / voil desclore ceste escripture / e mettr'i pur Deu peine e cure. (Thus, I want to disclose / this writing very carefully, / and to put effort and care into it for the sake of God, / in order to improve the simple folk." (v. 45-48) Thus, an analogy obtains between God's affordance of disembodied visions and Marie's retelling of Owein's tale: both aim at improving the soul on its journey to Christian salvation. These pastoral concerns reflect the didactic impulse that animates so much of Marie's poetry. As Root has recently argued, such didactic purposes prove to be one of the most reliably common features of the several poems attributed to Marie de France.[54] In view of this thesis, Marie's particular invocation of Gregorian compunction invites a closer look.

In his magisterial series on the history of mysticism, Bernard McGinn has noted that Gregory the Great never defines compunction. Instead, the monastic pope develops a complex account of compunction as a series of psychological responses to human sin and divine love. In its initial stage, compunction is the fearful self-awareness of one's status as a sinner in need of salvation (*compunctio timoris*). As the Latin term suggests, this preliminary phase of compunction consists of a fearful self-awareness of one's own failures and limits. In its more mature stage, compunction characterizes the soul's affirmative response to the love of God and God's holiness (*compunctio amoris*).[55] As a pair, these terms denote two phases in a process of the soul's salvific conversion. This conversion involves a comprehensive reorientation of

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[54] "The word *mustrer* helps us to understand Marie's writing project as a rhetorical and moral operation." Jerry Root, "Mustrer and the Poetics of Marie De France," *Modern Philology* 108, no. 2 (2010), 152.

[55] Bernard McGinn, *The Growth of Mysticism: Gregory the Great through the 12th Century*, (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1994), 49.

human attention from the exterior world to the interior world of the soul. McGinn aptly

summarizes this spatial dimension of Gregorian anthropology: "for Gregory only one *ascesis*

really counted, that by which the person turns away from the distractions of knowing about

things to the serious, even frightening, task of reflection on the inner self."[56] Consequently,

Gregory asserts a strong priority for valuing the inner world of intention, thought, and

affection over any occupation with the world that the senses investigate.

Such a Gregorian psychology of interiority resonates deeply with the didactic purposes

that Marie's prologue establishes. Through an attentive reception of the *Espurgatoire*, Marie

explicitly hopes that her audience may respond to her tale through an interior psychic process

modeled upon Gregorian compunction. By recounting the purgatorial visions of Owein the

Knight, Marie aims to inspire the same fear and love that compunction describes. This

suggests a particular attitude toward secular literature and its potentially productive role in the

life of the medieval Christian audience. In short, Marie shares her Cistercian source's belief

that her narrative account of Owein's adventures can contribute to the Christian's

sanctification. Thus, Gregory's emphasis on psychic interiority as the locus of compunction

aids Marie in framing the theological purposes for her *translatio* of Owein's adventures in

Purgatory.

If Gregorian compunction necessitates a dramatic reorientation of the subject toward its

own depths, this paradigm also helps to make greater sense of the epistemological dilemma

that Marie introduces in the second half of the prologue. In the lines following the first allusion

to Gregory, Marie implies that one cannot demand a philosophical demonstration of the

mechanics that make disembodied visionary experiences possible. When God raptures a soul

from its body ("quant eles sunt des cors ravies," v. 171), such a soul can merely report the

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[56] Ibid., 57.

content of the subsequent visionary experience (v. 105-110). Neither the disembodied soul nor anyone else may pronounce on the ontological conditions that make such experiences possible. As Gregory attests, many who hear of such visions "conveitent a saveir / des almes, ci nus dit pur veir, / coment eles issent des cors / e u vunt, quant eles sunt hors (desire to know / how souls leave their bodies, / and where they go when they are outside." (v. 94-96) As Marie goes on to elaborate, one must pass over these questions in silence: "Pur ço ke nus certeinement / ne savons nul aveiement, / devum plus cremer e doter / ke enquerre ne demander (But since we know / nothing for certain about them [disembodied souls], / we ought rather to remain in fear / than inquire or ask about them)." (v. 97-100) In these passages, Marie specifically forecloses the knowledge of two things: the mechanics of disembodied vision and the underlying nature of the geography that the soul inhabits.

If, as Marie maintains in the prologue, these two crucial forms of knowledge are unavailable, how then is one to assess the testimonies of disembodied visionary experience? It seems we are to look to the effects of the visionary experience among those who hear of the vision through its retelling in story. In Marie's words, "c'est solunc l'ovre k'ele ad faite (Everything rests on the work it [the soul] has performed)." (v. 108) Collectively, these verses of Marie's *Espurgatoire* propose a subtle account of the epistemological limits that constrain the evaluation of disembodied visionary experience.[57] This account may be summarized in the following terms: the soul's ambiguous dissociation from its body introduces a fundamental ambiguity into the subject's knowledge of the experiences he or she sustains while beyond the body. Since the soul typically exists in a profound association with the body, any perceptions that the soul experiences while outside the body cannot be taken as a valid object of physical

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[57] As Root observes, this passage shows Marie's occupation with the "poetic, ethical, hermeneutic, and epistemological consequences" of representation; Root, "Mustrer," 164.

or metaphysical inquiry. What *can* be said is that such visions inspire compunction in the visionary and those who hear the visionary's story. By contrast, such visions cannot communicate any certain knowledge about the scientific, material, or ontological status of their own contents or the preconditions of their initial perception. Simply put, what counts is not verifying the veracity of the experience so much as expounding its potential for inspiring compunction.

The Gregorian *Dialogues* offer one precedent for this construal of the epistemic limits of evaluating accounts of disembodied experience. Among the anecdotes comprising Book II of the *Dialogues*, a crucial exchange between Gregory and St. Peter illustrates the value of this intertext for Marie's epistemic program.[58] With a marked sense of delight, Gregory recounts the tale of an abbot who found himself raised upon a beam of light from which he saw the whole world. Somewhat bashfully, St. Peter admits that he cannot conceive "by what means the whole world can be seen of any one man."[59] Gregory's reply—a reassurance from one pope to another—does not offer an explanation. There is no account of efficient causality or natural mechanics that can conceptually clarify what made the abbot's visions of the world possible. In place of such an account, Gregory positions the abbot's vision of the world as a miracle requiring God's supernatural intervention.[60] And while Gregory explains to his papal predecessor that the abbot "could not see those things but in the light of God,"[61] it must be observed that Gregory's answer

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[58] In a footnote to his translation, Curley references Book IV of the *Dialogues* as source material for Marie's exposition of disembodied experience; Michael J. Curley, *Saint Patrick's Purgatory: A Poem by Marie de France*, (Binghamton: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1993), n49. I have also found that Book II offers a highly incisive intertext for Marie's project, which forms the focus on my analysis here.

[59] Gregory the Great, *The Dialogues of Saint Gregory,* trans. Edmund Garratt Gardner (London: P. L. Warner, 1911), 98.

[60] Ibid., 98.

[61] Ibid., 98.

does not supply any explanation at all, but instead postpones an explanation by invoking the natural impossibility of such a vision.[62]

As a literary precursor to Dante's *Commedia*, Marie's Gregorian account of visionary experience and compunction gains clarity when positioned in relief next to Dante's *Purgatorio*. In this middle portion of the *Commedia*, composed approximately a century after Marie's poem, Dante the pilgrim encounters several souls who variously interrogate the physical conditions that make possible Dante's appearance in Purgatory. As one group of interlocutors asks of Dante, "Di vostra condizion fatene saggi (Let us know of your condition)."[63] As in many other instances in the *Purgatorio*, Virgil's reply frustrates the rational appetite of Dante's inquirers. In lieu of revealing the mechanisms that explain the *how* of Dante's otherworldly appearance, Virgil simply supplies the fact that Dante is physically present in his body: "Voi potete andarne / e ritrarre a color che vi mandaro / che 'l corpo di costui è vera carne (When you go back / you may report to those who sent you: / this man's body is true flesh)."[64] Unlike the ambiguity surrounding Owein's embodiment described in the *Espurgatoire*, Dante the poets presents himself as experiencing a vision while still in his body.

Virgil's brief discourse, however, shares the underlying premise of Marie's Gregorian logic in her prologue. Like Marie de France, Dante's Virgil redirects his audience's attention away from the pursuit of a rational demonstration toward a simpler acceptance of extraordinary visionary experience. *How* Dante appears in the body (his *condizion*) is

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[62] Since Marie and her Cistercian source, allude specifically to the 'livres' (152) of St. Gregory, it seems reasonable to conclude that stories such as this one supply the narrative and didactic context for the *Espurgatoire*'s prologue.

[63] V. 30. All citations from *Purgatorio* are from Dante Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, trans. Jean Hollander and Robert Hollander (New York: Anchor Books, 2004).

[64] V, 31-33. Cf. *Purgatorio* III, in which Virgilio encourages Dante (and all humanity) to receive revealed truths, such as the doctrine of the Trinity, as they present themselves: "State contenti, umana gente, al *quia* (Be content, then, all you mortals, with the *quia*," III. 37, emphasis in original).

irrelevant: what matters is the fact of his appearing and the spiritual purposes that the appearance serves. As Virgil functions here for Dante the poet, so does Gregory the Great serve Marie. Each supplies an authority who can assert the supernatural conditions of the abnormal visionary experience while dismissing any need for further proof of the vision's possibility.[65]

But if the physical or metaphysical ground of visionary experiences like those of Owein cannot be reliably investigated by natural science or philosophy, Marie's text demonstrates an awareness that many of her readers may object to this investigative moratorium. As Howard Bloch has observed, **"Owein's fictional voyage to Purgatory shows a similar anxiety concerning origins and an anxiousness to establish, if not the truth, then a credible account of its own transcription and transmission."**[66] This anxiety is evident in a brief coda to the central plot of the *Espurgatoire*. Years after Owein's trials in Purgatory, the loyal Gilbert, a Cistercian monk, retells the story of Owein's adventures to an anonymous crowd. During this remediation of Owein's testimony, a man within the crowd voices his doubts concerning the veracity of Gilbert's testimony: "Un en i out ki ço oï, / duta qu'il ne fust mie issi" (Yet there was a man who hearing him [Gilbert] doubted / that the knight [Owein] had ever been in Purgatory," v. 2001-2002). Like St. Peter in Gregory's *Dialogues*, the doubting man acts as a figure for incredulity when faced with reports of uncommon visions. In his admonishing reply to the incredulous man, Gilbert assumes that the man's skepticism arises from the inability to believe that Owein the Knight could have seen such strange sights in the flesh:

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[65] Such a dismissal of mechanical explanation contrasts with Braswell's apt summary of Chaucer, whose dream visions in the *Canterbury Tales* invite the author to explore at least the dream-mechanisms that supply the specific contents of the vision; Laurel Braswell, "The Visionary Voyage in Science Fiction and Medieval Allegory," *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 14, no. 1 (1981), 129.

[66] Bloch, *The Anonymous Marie de France*, 249.

Gileberz en respondi tant
k'il n'erent mie bien creant
qui diënt k'espiritelment
veïent e nun corporelment,
quant il entrerent en la maison
que est de Deu espurgacion,
les granz peines e les tormenz
qui sunt establi la dedenz.

(Gilbert answered him, saying
that those people were not at all firm believers
who said that
when people entered the house
of God's purgation,
they saw spiritually rather than corporeally
the great pains and torments
which were established there.)
(v. 2003-2010)

As Barbezat has noted in his analysis of this passage in the Latin original, Gilbert's reply

makes an immediate assumption about the epistemic concern underlying the skeptic's claims.

Gilbert presumes that his skeptic must be tacitly calling into question whether or not Owein

"actually encountered the after life through the sense of the living body."[67] In the Latin

Tractatus (as well as the *Espurgatoire*), Gilbert's reply hopes to satisfy his skeptic's doubt by

invoking stories of spirits who have "made direct physical contact with the bodies of men."[68]

White-Le Goff discusses the corresponding episode in Marie's *Espurgatoire*. Like Barzebat,

White-Le Goff takes this passage to indicate the poem's overarching presentation of Owein as

a pilgrim who travelled in the material body ("dans sa chair").[69]

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[67] Barbezat, "A Conjuration of Patrick," 322.

[68] Ibid., 322.

[69] Miriam White-Le Goff, "Les demons sont parmi nous : preuve par la chair et le sang. *L'Espurgatoire seint Patriz de Marie de France*," 60.

In both these studies, the shared interpretation of Owein's embodiment elides Gilbert's interpretive position with the author's alleged position. This elision lacks the backing of the poem's evidence, as we may observe through a close reading of the syntax characterizing Gilbert's language. First, I note that Gilbert argues that Owein did indeed experience the objects of Purgatory *corporelment*. For Gilbert, the presence of Owein's material body in Purgatory grounds the truthfulness of the knight's story, and by extension, Gilbert's retelling of Owein's visions. But Gilbert's hasty assumption reveals an astounding irony. Gilbert's priority on the body as the basis of determining trustworthy testimony draws attention to the fact that his position stands in direct opposition to the Gregorian account with which Marie frames the narrative.

As I observed, the prologue invokes Gregory's account of disembodied visions in order to turn away from discursive investigations of the bodily or extra-bodily conditions of rapturous experiences (v. 95-113). In that passage, Marie describes these epistemological limits using a pair of adverbs whose syntax and meaning precisely invert (and challenge) Gilbert's position. According to Gilbert, one must accept that a reliable visionary witness saw things *corporelment* rather than *espiritelment*. In the monk's view, to believe such visions were seen only "spiritually" amounts to a vicious form of unbelief. By contrast, and once again relying on Gregory, Marie's prologue informs readers that disembodied visionaries "veient espiritelment / ço que semble corporelment" (see things spiritually / which appear corporeally, v. 77-78). The semantic reversal of the adverbs in both passages is striking. It suggests a corresponding reversal of Gilbert's position that only becomes clear to the attentive reader once the prologue is interpreted in view of the Gilbert passage near the poem's conclusion. Consequently, Marie's prologue seems to embrace the very model of spiritual vision that

Gilbert rejects in his response to the anonymous skeptic. One must, therefore, conclude that Gilbert himself would accuse Marie of weak belief. The prologue, then, articulates and prescribes the account of vision that Gilbert himself later rejects. Ultimately, Gilbert's epistemic anxieties are not Marie's anxieties.

Marie's affirmation that Owein saw Purgatory *espiritelment* introduces the possibility that the knight may not have been bodily present to the range of phenomena that he witnessed in his vision. Yet for Marie, this seems to pose no challenge to discerning the veracity of Owein's story. As the poet maintains in her prologue, while spiritual vision and corporal vision may differ, there is nothing about disembodied (or ambiguously embodied) phenomenology that calls into questions the reliability of a visionary's testimony. As Marie's use of the adverbs *corporelment* and *espiritelment* suggests, Owein's vision consists of what Kinoshita and McCracken have termed "spiritual things seen in material form."[70]

My aim here has been to clarify the complex irony with which Marie pits the interpretive preferences of the prologue against those of Gilbert. If, then, Gilbert is a character of the poet's making, we may conclude that the poet has crafted this contrast between two ideologies pertaining to extraordinary visions, the body, and the verification of experience. Consequently, I argue that the figure of Gilbert may be interpreted as a poetic effort to signal the limits of a visionary hermeneutics that would require the demonstration of the visionary witness's embodied state. Such a hermeneutic implicitly identifies bodily *presence* as the precondition for proving the reliability of the visionary account.[71] Indeed, Gilbert stands for the *conteur*, reader,

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[70] Sharen Kinoshita and Peggy McCracken, *Marie de France: A Critical Companion*, 165.

[71] My reading of the *Espurgatoire* here contrasts slightly with that of Kinoshita and McCracken, for whom the poem's prologue announces a world of spiritual reality that becomes materially embodied: "In all these works [the *Espurgatoire* as well as the *Ysopë* and the *Lais*], the journeys and physical movements that the characters enact have meaning as embodied spaces. In the *Espurgatoire*, the journey is not merely a figure for a spiritual experience, it is physical experience of a spiritual truth" (140). This clarifying interpretation leaves room to emphasize how Marie

or auditor who insists on the fundamental importance of the empirically embodied witness in order to establish spiritual meaning. According to the logic of the poem's prologue, however, Gilbert's intellectual failure is his misplaced emphasis on the body's role in determining truthful experience.[72]

Presence Reconsidered: Proximity Without Nearness

The exposition of this contrast enables the reader to discern a subtle account of presence in Marie's prologue. Her presentation and analysis of visionary experience imply a notion of presence that does not require the material proximity of embodied subjects and objects as its defining principal. Something subtler is at work here, an assumed understanding of presence that is more noetic and mental. The purgatorial pilgrim may be present to things to which he lacks physical proximity.

Such subtle constructions of presence may hide a poetic engagement with medieval theologies of the Eucharist. Ann McCullough, in her article on the topic, has observed just how strange Owein's cries to Christ really seem within the theological framework of medieval Christian theology. After all, "Why, if God is omnipresent, does Owein have to call out to Him to be present?"[73] The answer, McCullough argues, is partly to be found in the text's relation to medieval debates surrounding Christ's presence in the Eucharistic elements. An analogy obtains

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uses Gregory to sidestep the whole question of materiality, spirit, and substance altogether. Kinoshita and McCracken claim that their treatment of the *Espurgatoire* does not aim "to evaluate the theology of Marie de France," but to parse her "poetics of embodiment" (165). At one level, my argument here has been to suggest that Marie's "theology" is inextricable from her treatment of embodiment, since it is Gregory's theology of visionary experience that supplies the form and content of Marie's notions of "embodiment."

[72] As Foulet aptly observes, for the world of the poem's characters, "ce sont les témoins oculaires qui comptent." (610).

[73] McCullough, Ann. "Another World: Marie's Espurgatoire Seint Patriz." *Le Cygne* 4 (2017): 53. McCullough's article develops the Eucharistic connections that Miriam White-Le Goff describes briefly in the introduction to her edition of the *Espurgatoire*: "De plus, l'époque de rédaction des premiers textes consacrés à la légende [d'Owein] est aussi le movement où se développe le sacrement de l'Eucharistie." (22)

between the ritual repetition of the Eucharistic rite and Owein's repeated cries to the (apparently) absent Christ. Within both the ritually blessed bread and the landscape of Owein's purgatorial visions, Christ's apparent absence requires an invocation of Christ's unseen presence.[74]

Marie's construction of presence and absence may anticipate—and derive clarity from—the work of certain contemporary phenomenologists working after the so-called theological turn. In his essay, "Presence and Parousia", Jean-Yves Lacoste supplies a meditation on Eucharistic "presence" that leads to a critique of narrowly empirical accounts of presence. He asks, "is locality—[...] understand in terms of geometric space, i.e., space which is non-living and which is not experienced--the essential trait of presence?" Lacoste implies a negative answer: "locality" understood with respect to "geometric space" cannot adequately frame a robust theological notion of Eucharistic presence. A more adequate idiom of sacramental presence would be "distinguished from objectivity." Only by understanding presence without recourse to impersonal, objective space can we hope to derive the "precise conceptual content" of sacramental presence.[75]

As Lacoste intimates, notions of Eucharistic presence can more broadly challenge prevailing notions that the materiality of subjects and objects guarantees the presence of the one to the other. On the basis of that implication, I argue that Lacoste's phenomenology of "*extraterritoriality*"[76] supplies one fitting description of Marie's Gregorian hermeneutics of disembodiment. Just as Lacoste suggests that God may be present to the Eucharistic elements

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[74] See especially McCullough's discussion of Owein's cries, 57.

[75] Jean-Yves Lacoste, "Presence and Parousia," in *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Graham Ward (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 395. For an empirical study of contemporary online experiences of the Eucharistic through digital streaming platforms, see Alicia Spencer-Hall's discussion of the interplay of virtuality and spirituality in the Eucharist in Alicia Spencer-Hall, "My Avatar, My Soul: When Mystics Log On." In *Medieval Saints and Modern Screens: Divine Visions as Cinematic Experience*, 193-242 (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 224.

[76] Ibid., 397, emphasis in original.

without the empirically verifiable contiguity of two material things (God, bread/wine), so does Gregory give to Marie a literary precedent for disembodied vision in which the visionary both experiences and witnesses Purgatory, but may do so without the material proximity of an embodied subject to a set of bodily objects.

Along with McCullough's treatment of medieval sacramental theology, my incorporation of Lacoste's account of presence suggests the particular creative energy with which Eucharistic theologies, pre- and postmodern, have surveyed the question of presence. The impetus for these creative meditations may arise within institutional traditions of theology, but their subsequent insights spill the boundaries of those communities. This much is clear in the work of Lacoste's contemporary Louis-Marie Chauvet, a fellow francophone intellectual who likewise sought to square away the deposit of medieval reflections on Eucharistic presence with philosophies of presence that Derrida, Merleau-Ponty, and other continental thinkers were pursuing in the mid-twentieth century.[77]

Like Lacoste, Chauvet was not content to simply assert the "presence" of God in the Eucharist. Some subtler formulation of the matter was required, and developments in French philosophy seemed to hold promise for formulating such an account. Whereas Lacoste emphasized non-spatiality as the key concept for such a theology of presence, Chauvet took a different (but complimentary) approach to Lacoste's. Steeped in Derridean categories, Chauvet coined the enigmatic expression "*the presence of the absence of God*"[78] in order to creatively

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[77] For a summary of Chauvet's particular reception of Heideggerean and hermeneutical voices, see especially Lieven Boeve's essay, "Theology in a Postmodern Context and the Hermeneutical Project of Louis-Marie Chauvet," in *Sacraments: Revelation of the Humanity of God: Engaging the Fundamental Theology of Louis-Marie Chauvet*, ed. by Bruce Morrill and Philippe Bordenne (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2008). See especially 8-14 for Boeve's summary of Chauvet's engagement with the question of ontotheology in Heidegger and adjacent hermeneutical figures.

[78] Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, trans. Patrick Madigan, S.J. and Madeleine Beaumont (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1995),178, emphasis in original.

approach the question of Eucharistic presence. The expression is a self-conscious contradiction. Chauvet means to signal how Christ has left Earth, leaving behind only the memory of his terrestrial ministry, deeds, and shocking resurrection from the dead. After this Ascension, as it is called in ecclesial dogma, Jesus is *not* present on Earth as he was during his life. He is, rather, absent. And rather than explaining away this absence in the ritual of the Eucharist, Chauvet is keen to double down upon the absence itself as a constitutive dimension of what the ritual mediates and even celebrates. The Eucharist does not, upon this account, manifest a hidden God in the fashion of a magic trick that suddenly pulls God from a hat like a rabbit. Rather, the Eucharist announces an absent God through the presence of a *symbol*. Hence, "it is precisely in the act of respecting his [Christ's] radical absence or otherness that the Risen One can be recognized symbolically."[79] Now, the value of this account for Chauvet's Catholic community is not relevant for the present argument. Chauvet himself seizes the ramifications of this proposal far beyond the Eucharistic polemics that occasion his work. His writings are steeped in reflections upon semiotics, in particular, and his rich citations from the leading structuralist and deconstructionist philosophers of his time constantly attest to his own conviction that presence-as-absence speaks to wider debates that cut to the very heart of human language as such.

The fundamental insight of Chauvet's schema is that symbols have a powerful mediating effect between what is present and what is absent to the human mind. In the context of the Eucharist, Chauvet suggests that the transcendent God of Jesus is clearly and obviously absent to the ritual's practicants: As a literally perceived material body, Jesus is nowhere to be found, and there can be no denying this. What *is* present is the symbol of that absent God, the bread and the wine themselves. Symbols, then, are not some casual mediation between signs and signifiers. A symbol is potentially that which mediates something absent in the form of something present.

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[79] Ibid., 178.

At the root of Chauvet's notion of the symbol is a deep respect of Derrida's critique of presence. This demands a note of clarification. For Derrida, "presence" describes an entire continuum of naïve pretenses to what is allegedly or obviously *there*, from the objects of sense perception to the bases of ideological schemas and networks of concepts.[80] In all these cases, Derrida wants to attend to the failure of notions of immediacy to secure the reality of a thing for the human mind. The foundation of an argument often depends upon other arguments that it cannot demonstrate; the object that my eyes disclose as a visual datum is more mysterious than what first "meets the eye." In these and countless other examples, the presence of a thing, whether a sensual or intellectual phenomenon, does not guarantee our knowledge of the object's ontological status. Just what *is* this thing, where it came from, and how to account for it remain open-ended questions, and the answers to these questions are not easily provided by any tacit or explicit appeal to the immediate presence of the thing in question. Ideas and images alike, argues Derrida, turn out to be built on sandcastles, and the tide is always rushing in more quickly than we would like to acknowledge.

Chauvet's valuable insight, then, is to consider symbols as signifiers of what is absent. The symbolic can mediate the absent without falling back into the naïve trap of presence. Chauvet takes Derrida's critique of presence too seriously to conclude otherwise. But it is not the case that Chauvet simply asserts symbols as mediators of absence in order to force a preconceived notion of the symbolic through the limits of Derrida's thought. Rather, Chauvet takes up Derrida's critique of presence to show something that, if correct, has always already been true of symbolic meaning and representation. Again, that alleged quality of symbols is their singular capacity to make certain signified objects available to human consciousness without rendering them "present" in the sense of the immediate. The mediating function of the symbol

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[80] Cullen, *On Deconstruction*, 93.

itself forecloses that possibility. The bread and wine of the Eucharist, to return to Chauvet's

primary example, do not suddenly cause something called "God" to make a (physical)

appearance. What the bread and the wine *do* accomplish is to induce a noetic experience of their

intended signified objects through the presence of the symbol itself. Something is communicated,

but not through the crass literalism of cause and effect. Instead, the symbol is a catalyst for the

human mind to encounter a something that is *there*, but not in the pedestrian or common-sensical

ways that humans regularly claim to perceive something. God remains absent when the symbols

of the Eucharist are invoked, but the absence is made present through the symbol. Hence,

Eucharistic presence can be construed as the presence (of the absence) of God. And the result is

an account of presence without *présence*.

Chauvet's wager is to magnify this understanding of symbols far beyond the Catholic

Eucharist. Wherever there are symbols, they facilitate a peculiar encounter between the

observing human and the object to which the symbol points. It is a mediated connection, one for

which the mediation is itself is a reminder of the absence of the implied object while,

paradoxically, communicating that object through the present symbol.

I believe that Chauvet's subtle positioning of symbols here is itself an intellectual

innovation that may inform a reading of presence and absence in Marie's poetic narrative.[81] To

begin, it is highly significant that Marie employs the French word *presence* to describe Jesus's

relation to St. Patrick when Christ approaches him in a dream vision: "En cele entente k'il esteit,

/ des oreisuns k'il feseit, / Jhesu Crist lui vint en present [...] (While he was thus / deep in prayer,

/ Jesus Christ came into his presence," (v. 285). The passage is thick with layers of ambiguity

that make Patrick's experience of Jesus as a vision-object into an event that is hard to explain in

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[81] I develop this line of reflection on symbols and presence in the subsequent chapters on Dante and Char Davies as
well.

its causal details. Above all, it is crucial that Christ appears to Patrick in a state of prayer, a psychic experience that presumes no material interaction between embodied persons. Despite encountering one another in such a state of prayer, Patrick and Jesus are nevertheless *present* to one another. This is not, however, the sort of *présence* which Derrida rightly targets in his deconstructive criticism. For that to be the case, Patrick's Jesus would have to supply some kind of ground to the poem's subsequent narrative, some form of revealed understanding that firmly establishes a certain set of conceptual categories that assure reader and character alike of what is going on in Purgatory. But that is precisely not what Jesus's strange visitation to St. Patrick supplies for the poem. The ethereal visionary context of Jesus's appearance to Patrick is, in my view, better described by the sort of presence that Chauvet elaborates in his account of the symbolic. The Jesus of Patrick's dream vision is the presence of an absence. After all, the poem takes pains to construct the scene as a phenomenon unfolding at several degrees of removal from the relative clarity afforded by the typical sense modalities of the waking, material body. Patrick is not awake here; he sleeps. The Christ he encounters is not a risen material body, but the object of a dream. Yet despite the fact that waking life and sense perception have been consciously denied to Patrick as a literary character, the resulting phenomenon of the dream-Jesus remains *present* to Patrick.

This brief episode from the poem's prologue deeply substantiates McCullough's call to attend the Eucharist dynamics of the poem. For just as Owein's cries to Christ seek the means of deliverance from an absent object, so does Patrick's initial dream-vision of the ethereal Jesus give us the image of a *present* object despite the many forms of mediation that interpose themselves between subject and object, between visionary and envisioned, between dreamer and dream.

In Patrick's Christ-vision alone, Marie configures presence as a description of cognitive experience that affirms a Derridean critique of *présence* well *avant la lettre*. For the visionary Jesus is, as I have argued, no crassly "present" object whose reality is grounded by some clear or obvious set of attending facts. As the object of a dream vision, Jesus does not offer his body for some kind of proof or empirical demonstration. Unlike the doubting Thomas of the Christian Gospels, this Jesus will not offer his physical body for the inspection of an empirical skeptic. *Jhesu* remains a character here shrouded in layers of cognitive intermediation. Yet the visionary object is nevertheless present to the visionary.

Where is Purgatory? Reconsiderations of Immaterial Space

The interpretation that I have advanced here aims to supplement and challenge aspects of the historical reading of the *Espurgatoire* supplied by a group of scholars represented by Howard Bloch, Jacques Le Goff, Myriam White-Le Goff, and Barbezat. In his book, *The Anonymous Marie de France*, Bloch articulates the role that Anglo-Norman poetry played in the colonization of Ireland by Norman forces on both sides of the English Channel. As a consequence of this political reading, Bloch asserts "with H's *Tractatus*, Purgatory is no longer a state. It becomes a place and spatialized in terms of an actual hole in the ground located at a specific geographical site."[82] Jacques Le Goff echoed this point in his own brief analysis of the *Espurgatoire*, arguing that the rise in pilgrimage around 1200 accounted for the innovative practice of assigning Purgatory a concrete, geographic location.[83]

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[82] Bloch, *The Anonymous Marie de France*, 287.

[83] Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 198.

Given the approximate date of the poem's composition around the same period, Marie's *Espurgatoire* would seem to be an exquisite illustration of this drift toward the materialized Purgatory. Yet certain textual details show traces of the earlier conception of Purgatory as a spiritual state rather than an embodied geography. For instance, the characterization of Purgatory's gate is crucially distinct from what immediately follows in the spatial narrative. To wit, when *Jhesu Crist* shows Patrick the site of Purgatory's entrance, Marie specifically describes "l'entree / de l'Espurgatoire" (vv. 309-310). There is no certain indication that Purgatory itself shares the materiality and geographic particularity of the *entree*. For if Purgatory's entrance is comprised of material substance here on Earth, Marie's Purgatory itself may remain an immaterial destination (a spiritual "state" in Bloch's idiom). The language describing Patrick's entrance into the gate suggests Purgatory's ethereality: "[C]um il plus va, plus est obscure ; / tute pert humaine veüe. (The further he went, the darker it became; he lost all human sight" (v. 676, 677). Having lost all of his sense faculties, Owein receives "[a]utre clarté (another light)" (v. 678) that guides him within this new realm. It seems highly suggestive that Owein is said to lose all *human* sight. The implication would seem to be that the knight is entirely deprived not just of his ocular vision but his intellectual faculties, for which sight consistently serves as a metaphor throughout medieval cultures. Consequently, the image of *autre clarté* seems to suggest divine grace, a dispensation afforded to the knight whose human vision has been suspended. Where the knight's capacities as a human now fail him, a new light will animate his cognition. These crucial lines characterize Purgatory's geography as fundamentally different from the mundane world and the gate that mediates the two. Whereas the world of rural Ireland is clearly a physical place, the total absence of Owein's typical sense

faculties and the novel source of foreign light in Purgatory are highly suggestive of an altogether distinct and immaterial environ.

Admittedly, Bloch posits Marie's Purgatory as a literary and symbolic invention,[84] but these considerations do not stop Bloch from asserting Purgatory's fundamental materiality in Marie's *translatio*. White-Le Goff joins Bloch in elaborating the symbolic functions of the gate (*fosse* or "pit") of Purgatory's entrance, but never in such a way that implies the immateriality of Purgatory as such.[85] On the contrary, White-Le Goff takes the physical description of Purgatory's gate and the key that opens it as signs of Purgatory's material constitution. The physical key serves "d'assigner une nature matérielle à l'au-delà" (to assign a material nature to the beyond).[86] White-Le Goff corroborates her thesis by pointing to the recurring trope of doors through which Owein must pass throughout Purgatory.[87] This claims may be insufficient to conclude decisively that Marie's Purgatory is a material space, however, since there is no shortage of spiritual, symbolic, or allegorical doors that populate medieval poetic imaginaries. In fact, White-Le Goff acknowledges that Owein's purgatorial journey ultimately requires keys that are both "matérielles et spirituelles"[88] in order to complete his otherworldly quest.[89] This recognition of the spiritual (that is, immaterial) character of some of Owein's visionary objects coincides with White-Le Goff's crucial observation that the various keys appearing in the poem

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[84] See especially Bloch, *The Anonymous Marie de France*, 247-248.

[85] "Clé du monde ou clé de soi. La Clé du Purgatoire de Saint Patrick," (*Les clefs des textes médiévaux, pouvoir, savoir, et interprétation*, dir. F. Pomel, Rennes, PUR, "Interférences," 2016), Section 2.

[86] Ibid., section 6.

[87] "Clé de la fosse," section 7-8.

[88] Ibid., Section 11.

[89] See also Bloch's reading of the symbolism of Purgatory's doors in *The Anonymous Marie de France*, 226.

also function as openings to "des pans non explorés de sa propre conscience" (unexplored

regions of his own consciousness).[90]

Among the scholars who position Owein as a materially embodied subject during his

visions, Corin Braga makes perhaps the most compelling case in her philological comparison

between the St. Patrick narrative and the Irish *fisi* tradition. The latter genre, as Braga explains,

recounted a "vision or revelation of the Christian otherworld."[91] Texts and tales of the *fisi* genre

consistently feature a protagonist whose "revelation is transmitted via a *raptus animae*"[92], the

rapturing of a soul from the body. In such stories, the central figure is often implicated in a

journey of moral purification.[93] The *fisi* recount elaborate landscapes of purgative regions,

hellish landscapes and terrains of judgment.[94] Pits and bridges are recurring tropes of these

geographies,[95] and these features alone evidence a strong connection between the older *fisi*

tradition and Marie's *Espurgatoire*. These similarities demonstrate the influence of the former

upon the latter, but they also reveal, according to Braga, a crucial difference distinguishing

Marie's *Espurgatoire* from the *fisi* stories: Whereas a *fis* features disembodied visionary

subjects, Marie's Owein is characterized as a visionary inhabiting his material body throughout

his purgatorial sojourn.[96]

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[90] Ibid., Section 14.

[91] Corin Braga, "Fisi vs. Journeys into St. Patrick's Purgatory: Irish Psychanodias and Somanodias," *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* (12) 36 (Winter 2013), 181.

[92] Ibid., 182.

[93] Ibid., 183-186.

[94] Ibid., 186-195.

[95] "In the *fisi*, the bridge is, rather than a test of courage and heroic skills, a moral ordeal that carries out the same selection function as the trial by angels and demons in the atmospheric sky, the purgatorial fire in the astronomical skies and God's Judgment of the souls." Ibid.,197.

[96] Ibid., 212.

The contrast between the literary particulars of the *fisi* genre with Marie's tale reveals much about both groups of texts. Yet Braga's compelling argument may not amount to a clear indication that Owein is an embodied subject while passing through Purgatory. The poetic and formal differences that contrast Marie's story from that of another genre reveal exactly that: a set of formal differences, in this case involving the *apparent* characterization of the literary protagonist's body. That said, this contrast does not prove that Owein inhabits his material body in Purgatory, only that Marie's particular construction of the knight's visionary body contrasts with the *fisi* tradition's specific modes of signaling disembodiment.

Braga's case relies upon the clear and literal description of specific geographical locations and places in tales that recount St. Patrick's Purgatory. "Unlike the insular visions," Braga explains, "the journeys of St. Patrick have a worldly and physical character."[97] This much is beyond dispute. A cursory reading of Marie's *Espurgatoire* will find abundant descriptions of material objects, bodies, and things, including Owein's body in Purgatory. Yet a note of caution is in order here. Literary description of material bodies does not necessarily imply a correspondingly literal material object in the world of the poem. This point is vital, and it can be appreciated through a comparison with Dante's own rendering of bodies in the *Purgatorio*. In an article devoted to this question, John Freccero observes Dante's specific and even realist description of bodies in the *Purgatorio*. Like Auerbach before him, Freccero draws attention to the degree of detail with which Dante's poetics endow the description of bodily materiality in Purgatory. To be sure, Dante the pilgrim's material visionary body is contrasted with the imagined materiality of the aerial bodies of the dead. The pilgrim is clearly embodied whereas the souls he perceives await their bodies for final judgment. Yet the spirits of the dead

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[97] Ibid., 212.

are still represented as material bodies.[98] Why this is so, in Freccero's view, has everything to do with Dante's use of realist detail to transform the body's matter into metaphor.

Freccero argues that Dante supplies the dead with bodily realism precisely to recover the material body as a polysemous signifier in the service of the text's broader allegorical tendencies. The wounds of Manfredo, an inhabitant of Purgatory, illustrate the point. Yes, Dante crafts several lines that recount Manfredo's scars in richly particular empirical details. But such scars are richly polysemic: they signify "the vicissitudes of history and the power of grace for the late repentant."[99] They also suggest the "survival of the Ghibelline ideal" in the scars' association with the battle of Benevento.[100] Or as Freccero summarizes more globally, "If Manfredo's real body is dispersed, then it is clear that his fictive body is a representation, bearing symbolic wounds [...]".[101] Dante's practice here is to describe a fictional body whose self-consciously constructed character intends to signify aspects of Manfredo's soul—his deepest moral, intellectual, and volitional self—that his historical body could not suggest through its historical details. The metaphorical body is truer to Manfredo's fullest identity than his literal, historical body.

This, in Freccero's view, is the underlying principle that animates Dante's practice of constructing a literary body that stands to signify more about a human person than a literal bodily surface can disclose. These adroit readings of the metaphorical body sensitize both reader and critic to a literary world in which physical description does not always imply

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[98] Marianne Shapiro, "Dante's Twofold Representation of the Soul," *Lectura Dantis*, no. 18/19 (1996): 49-90. This fundamental feature of the *Commedia* occasions all sorts of questions pertaining to the poem's logic of representation. For instance, as Marianne Shapiro asks, how is it that the bodies of the dead experience materially sensitive response when they are, in fact, not material bodies at all? (Shapiro, 50)

[99] Freccero, 197.

[100] Ibid., 197.

[101] Ibid., 199.

literally physical objects. Even realistic detail of material bodies can serve to reveal what is not

material. Bodies can signify what is not bodily. Realism as a literary strategy can aim to

disclose objects that cannot be empirically verified. This is the singular contribution of

Freccero's article. As a critic, he allows us to dissociate empirical description with a necessarily

empirical referent. Moreover, the spirit of Freccero's reading of metaphorical bodies resonates

with Zaleski's caution to avoid interpreting terms like 'body' and 'soul' in an overly literal way

within medieval otherworldly journeys. On the basis of her research into literature of

otherworldly visions, Zaleski confirms that the "split personification of body and soul is a

dramatic device that should not be interpreted as philosophical dualism."[102] For dialogue

poems, in particular, that depict a bifurcation of the disembodied subject's soul and body, the

resulting "dualism is dramatic and practical rather than metaphysical."[103]

I believe Freccero's interpretive strategy and Zaleski's hermeneutical caution should

jointly extend to a reading of Owein's subjectivity in Marie's *Espurgatoire*. Yes, Marie

constantly endows Owein's body with details that suggest the presence of his material flesh in

Purgatory. Yet Freccero's arguments in Dante criticism may show another way of interpreting

bodily description in Marie's *Espurgatoire*. *Narrative descriptions of bodily sensation do not*

necessarily confirm a poetic intention to present a correspondingly material body. This

awareness functions as a kind of leveling of the critical field, a premise from which the

question of Owein's visionary body can be posed afresh. The occlusion of Owein's sense

perception and the widely acknowledged spiritual dimensions of Purgatory's geography

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[102] Zaleski, *Otherworld Journeys*, 49.

[103] Ibid., 50. For a comparison that links the abnormal body of near-death experiences to the visionary bodies of medieval visions, see Zaleski, *Otherworld Journeys*, 102-103. See especially Zaleski's extended citation of Raymond Moody's twentieth-century research into contemporary near death experiences: "After a while, he collects himself and becomes more accustomed to his odd condition. He notices that he still has a "body," but one of a very different nature and with very different powers from the physical body he has lefty behind." (cited in Zaleski, 103)

commonly suggest the possibility of Owein's disembodiment in the other world. These amount to clear textual indications that the worlds on either side of Purgatory's gate belong to distinct domains of experience that depart from the ordinary rules and expectations that characterize daily life. For these reasons, it seems plausible that Owein is among those who are *defors* (outside) their bodies in the midst of purgatorial visionary experience.

If the knight does travel by means other than his material body, this begs the question of what sort of body it is that Owein inhabits in Purgatory. Barbezat recalls a scholarly tradition that introduces the term "somatomorphic soul."[104] The term describes the disembodied soul that nevertheless experiences material sensations. This is clearly the sort of territory in which Owein is made to sojourn by Marie de France. Yet the somatomorphic soul remains a philological category whose helpful heuristic potential lies in its ability to describe the medieval physics or metaphysics of visionary disembodiment. As I indicated in my exposition of the poem's Gregorian roots, the *Espurgatoire* is a poem more invested in extraordinary visionary experience as a phenomenon whose physical and metaphysical preconditions may be fundamentally unknowable. How then to describe Owein's visionary body in a way that is more than a literary device (which it is) and more than a particular kind of a sensing body (which it also is)?

John Caputo's Spectral Bodies

Marie's prologue frames disembodiment as something strange. That strangeness is essential to Owein's experience. With this fundamental strangeness in view, the knight's

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[104] Barbezat, "He Doubted These Things...", 332.

visionary body seems well described by John Caputo's notion of the "spectral body."[105]

Caputo's immediate interest is the strange flesh that characterizes the resurrected body of Jesus of Nazareth in the canonical Gospels of the New Testament. As a body, the resurrected Jesus at once eats food and seems to walk through walls. In short, this body seems to be continuous and discontinuous with normal, fleshly bodies. This body—similar and different from the typical human body—may index a broader Christian tradition of the "spectral body." In Caputo's view, such a body is not principally defined by some alternative set of mechanics or conditions than those that govern more normative biological embodiment. Rather, to theorize a spectral body in Christian literary tradition is to describe a body that can encounter what is impossible. In Caputo's words, "in the spectral body, like the biomechanical body, we imagine the body beyond the present, beyond the actual, beyond the possible. We imagine impossible bodies."[106] The ethical dimensions of such bodies will interest us again in later chapters; for the moment, I invoke Caputo's category to describe the sort of body that Owein seems to inhabit in Purgatory.

By sidestepping the ontological questions attending Owein's journey, Marie offers us the knight's visionary body precisely as the sort of body that Caputo describes: a vehicle for encountering what is impossible. To further pillage Caputo's lexicon, Owein's body is one that has "suffered the event of the divine."[107] Of course, Owein's body also suffers the infernal, but the showings of Hell are ultimately ordered toward the knight's arrival in the Earthly Paradise (and the hint of the Celestial Paradise that remains veiled). All the geographies of Purgatory consist in a single (divine) revelation of the extraordinary, the strange, the impossible. As a

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[105] John Caputo, "Bodies Still Unrisen, Events Still Unsaid: A Hermeneutic of Bodies without Flesh," in *Apophatic Bodies: Negative Theology, Incarnation, and Relationality*, eds. Chris Boesel and Catherine Keller (New York : Fordham University Press, 2010), 106. I return more fully to Caputo's essay in my conclusion.

[106] Ibid., 106.

[107] Ibid., 107.

body leaving its native home in the material world, Owein's visionary body hovers between the possible and the impossible.[108] Like Gregory the Great's abbot who soars above the world, Owein's immaterial body shares Purgatory's challenge to the expectations of mundane experience, both medieval and modern.

To say Owein's body is a spectral body is to affirm the epistemological ambiguities that such a body introduces through its literary presentation. As Caputo writes, spectral bodies "put on visual and narrative display all the ambiguity, paradoxes, dilemmas, disseminations, and undecidabilities of language and logic."[109] Caputo's meditation associates spectral embodiment with the limits of language. By describing such a strange form of embodiment, Caputo draws our attention to one tradition's literary efforts to realize the failure of language to encompass certain extraordinary experiences. Caputo's object of thought may principally be the resurrected flesh of the New Testament, but even Caputo recognizes that his insights extend to distant corners of literary history such as the otherworldly experiences of Lewis Carrol's Alice in Wonderland.[110]

The spectrality of Owein's body interacts in vital ways with the poem's overall exposition of writing, knowledge, and interpretation. Using Caputo's categories, I have underlined features of the *Espurgatoire* that suggest or realize the limits of language and knowledge, features which track with Caputo's spectral body. And yet, language abounds in the *Espurgatoire*. Owein may have a difficult time interpreting, processing, and recording his experiences, but those difficulties are not insurmountable. The penitent knight succeeds in

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[108] My argument distinguishes itself from White-Le Goff for whom Owein constitutes an "entre-mondes" (White-Le Goff, *Les démons,* 67). My more particular claim is that Owein's body achieves its liminal status between worlds in virtue of the ambiguous state of his body during his purgatorial journey.

[109] Caputo, 107.

[110] Ibid., 107.

traversing Purgatory, learning its lessons, interpreting them rightly, and passing them on in lucid form through written record and the oral storytelling of Gilbert. Nevertheless, these moments all constitute a very complex web of epistemic levels that inhere to Owein's extraordinary experience and the interpretation of that experience. Purgatory—as a journey sought, a destination achieved, and a lesson to recount and interpret—invites an elaborate, multivariate process of interpretation that defies the possibility of easy articulation at every turn.

The *Espurgatoire*'s vital uses of written and spoken language have been the subject of Howard Bloch's research.[111] A brief summary of his project will help to delineate my own thesis in what follows. Upon Bloch's reading, the prologue to Marie's *Lais* assigns a prominent "role of the individual psyche in the interpretation of his or her world."[112] In the *Espurgatoire*, however, the *Lai*'s emphasis on interpretation is intensified. In Owein's story, Marie now construes "language as a means to salvation."[113] Bloch further observes how Marie's many patristic allusions and inset storytellers function as participants in an expansive interpretive tapestry.[114] At the heart of this tapestry, Marie presents translation as the act of "opening up on another text."[115] This opening unfolds across several stages: Ancient authorities supply categories that direct the flow of the poem's events. Translators within the text move meaning across the divides of linguistic difference. Finally, past formulations of stories take on new

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[111] Indeed, Bloch finds the "drama of language" in Marie's corpus to be so nuanced and sophisticated that Marie should be esteemed as "the Joyce of the twelfth century." R. Howard Bloch, "Other Worlds and Other Words in the Works of Marie de France," in *The World and Its Rival: Essays on Literary Imagination in Honor of Per Nykrog*, ed. Kathryn Karczewska and Tom Conley (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 1999), 42.

[112] Bloch, *The Anonymous Marie de France*, 19-20.

[113] Ibid., 21.

[114] Ibid., 225-266.

[115] Ibid., 233.

terms. In each of these gestures, Bloch discerns Marie's art of "making the dead speak."[116] By implicating the dead in her literary landscape, Marie presents Owein as a protagonist occupied with the "ordeal of correct reading and, ultimately, of correct writing."[117]

With these insights, Bloch helps the critic to perceive how Marie's prologue in the *Lais* sets the stage for an emphasis on readerly interpretation that only expands throughout her dramatization of language in the *Espurgatoire*. There is, in my view, another and equally crucial resonance between these two texts, a connection of critical importance for deepening our understanding of exactly what Marie is doing in her construction of experience, language, and interpretation. When Owein arrives by the skin of his teeth at his journey's apparent end, the Earthly Paradise, he is greeted by a group of benevolent and ghostly archbishops who speak to the knight in a collective voice: "Des choses que veü avez / vus dirrons la senefiance." (v. 1686-87) The archbishops' subsequent discourse in the Earthly Paradise shows the boundaries of knowledge in the poem: While these ethereal clerics are able to unfold the *senefiance* of Owein's pilgrimage, they are unable to speak from experience about the Celestial Paradise that lies further beyond them. Specifically, the limits of their experience are expressed as a lack of *certainty*. "Par seint Esperit entendons / d'autre vie mes ne poüns / saveir le tut certeinement." (v. 1717-1719) With these pivotal words, the archbishops characterize their cognitive state as a mixture of partial knowledge and partial ignorance. They rely on the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to reveal to them the meaning and the shape of the Paradise for which they hope, but such holy inspiration still leaves them a bit in the dark. The epistemological presumption is striking: Even God's revelation does not imply certainty. Even a divinely inspired message does not yield certainty for the receiving human mind. Such is the logic of the bishop's remarks to Owein.

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[116] Ibid., 234.

[117] Ibid., 239.

In the limits on the bishops' knowledge, the reader may identify a synecdoche for the drama of knowing and interpreting that sculpts the entire poem. Knowledge without certainty: The *Espurgatoire* offers a series of uncertain revelations, flashes of knowledge that disclose the geographies of the self and the cosmos without claiming a demonstrable guarantee of the resultant knowledge claims. To this point, Marie's term *senefiance* is of the utmost importance. According to the *Dictionnaire Étymologique de l'Ancien Français*, the substantive *senefiance* and its many cognates appear in a variety of textual genres, from historical chronicles to the corpus of Chrétien de Troyes.[118] In Guillaume de Lorris's *Le roman de la rose, senefiance* communicates the capacity of dreams to signify "good and bad things."[119] *Senefiance* implies the determination of meaning, not fact. Cast in the language of twentieth century literary criticism, *senefiance* is a recognizably hermeneutical term, not a metaphysical or scientific one.

These dimensions of the word are equally clear from an immanent reading of Marie's text. Owein has seen (*vëu*) sights that are similar to the sense impressions experienced by an embodied subject. Nevertheless, sights alone as raw cognitive data do not immediately convey the various dimensions of meaning, value, and significance that these sights might latently contain or imply. To uncover those layers of *senefiance*, Owein must receive the insights of others. In this case, the strange figures of the ethereal bishops act as hermeneutes: They interpret Owein's record of experience.

This is the precise juncture at which one may observe a strong similarity that links the hermeneutical function of the bishops to the account of textual interpretation that Marie enjoins her readers to perform in the prologue of her *Lais*. As Jerry Root has recently underscored, the prologue of the *Lais* explicitly positions the reader as the co-producer of meaning in the task of

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[118] See online entry at Heidelberger Akadamie der Wissenschaften, "senefiance," Accessed January 20, 2020, https://deaf-server.adw.uni-heidelberg.de/lemme/senefier#senefiance.
[119] Hult, David F. "The Allegoresis of Everyday Life." *Yale French Studies*, no. 95 (1999): 212-33.

interpreting a poem. And this readerly process is reflected in the actions of Marie's characters within the *Lais* themselves: "For Marie's characters are also continually involved in a process of transferring things of the heart into the more objective language of the outer world, the court, and other species."[120] Marie, then, sets out the terms by which an ideal reader may approach her work in the *Lais*. Those terms describe a process of interpretation that involves the reader's self-conscious interpretive effort to derive *sens* from the text. Readers are thereby brought into the forefront of what makes a text important in the first place. The act of reading is explicitly thematized in the prologue. Its value for the text is placed front and center. Determining the text's meaning will have to result from a dynamic alchemy of active reading and authorial encoding. Consequently, Marie makes it abundantly clear that textual significance is not merely the work of authorial intentions, but the dividend of an interactive, intersubjective labor that implicates the reader in a cognitive process that is at once attentive and demanding.[121]

Marie's hermeneutical account of *sens* in the prologue of the *Lais* amounts to a critically similar notion of *senefiance* in the archbishop's discourse toward the conclusion of the *Espurgatoire*. A homology emerges between the meaning of text (in the *Lais*) and the meaning of experience (in the *Espurgatoire*). The *laïs* themselves yield meaning just as Owein's visionary experience promises *senefiance*. One difference is striking: As poet, Marie hides herself behind a veil of anonymity in the *Lais*, demanding a particularly exacting task from the reader to produce the text's meaning. The bishop, by contrast, offers an interpretation of Owein's experience without demanding much obvious involvement on the part of the knight. We have no intellectual

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[120] Root, 153.

[121] See also Root's account of translation in the poem: "Marie's translation of H. de Saltrey's text inserts itself in a series of representations, all of which respond to a moral imperative to disseminate the truth of purgatory, of the way to God." (Ibid., 167)

exchange here such as Dante pervasively experiences with various actors throughout the *Commedia*. This difference notwithstanding, Marie's authorial voice in the *Lais* joins the *Espurgatoire*'s archbishop in calling upon reader and character alike to develop layers of meaning that the immediacy of experience and text cannot communicate directly.

As I have shown, aspects of my argument here have clear antecedents in the work of Howard Bloch and Jerry Root, yet there has not yet been a scholarly effort in studies of the *Espurgatoire* to elaborate the hermeneutical dimensions of Marie's text in the terms of continental philosophical and critical schools of language. This signals a vital opportunity to begin considering Marie's poetics in the idiom of semioticians and hermeneutes whose work is particularly adapted to discussing the "hermeneutics of language"[122] that Bloch identifies in the *Espurgatoire*. I aim to affirm and expand Bloch's insights by summoning a trio of continental philosophical voices: Jacques Derrida, Georges Bataille, and Paul Ricoeur. Each of these figures has introduced fundamental insights about writing and interpretation that bear upon my thesis related to Owein's ambiguous embodiment. By drawing upon aspects of these twentieth-century projects, I hope to derive illuminating vantage points from which to formulate Marie's unique dramatization of writing, presence, and the body.

Marie's Interpretive Community: Interventions from French Theory

Owein's narrative can be interpreted as both an illustration and counter-illustration of Derrida's account of writing, logocentrism, and *différance*. In Jonathan Culler's *Theory and Criticism After Structuralism*, we are reminded that Derrida's critique of logocentrism begins with a reversal of the commonly held priority of speech over writing. Whereas everyday experience would seem to confirm that speech is historically and cognitively prior to writing,

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[122] Bloch, *The Anonymous Marie de France*, 223.

Derrida maintains that this appearance is ultimately a reversal of the facts. A closer look at the

phenomenon of speech actually shows it to be an instance of writing. In this schema, Derrida

redefines writing as the play of difference (*différance*) among signs in a way that is only possible

because of the arbitrary distinctions that separate particular verbal units (sounds or glyphs) from

one another. Once writing has been so defined, speech is seen to be an example of writing after

all. Like physical writing on a piece of paper or a computer screen, speech deploys concrete

signifiers that only function because they are distinct from one another. Hence, in the classic

example that Derrida draws from Saussure, the signifier *cat* is intelligible not because of its

definition, but because the sound or glyph *c-a-t* is different from other sounds or glyphs such as

b-a-t.[123]

Derrida's meditations on *différance* lead him to posit literary production in a very

particular way. Derrida understands imaginative literary making as a process that takes the writer

ever more deeply within the world even as such ecstatic movement implies leaving the known

world behind for a fundamentally new place. Derrida develops this account in a lengthy, crucial

passage within *L'écriture et la différance*:

> This experience of conversion, which founds the literary act (writing or reading), is such
> that the very words "separation" and "exile," which always designate the interiority of a
> breaking off with the world and making of one's way within it, cannot directly manifest
> the experience; they can only indicate it through a metaphor whose genealogy itself
> would deserve all our efforts. For in question here is a departure from the world toward a
> place which is neither a *non-place* nor an *other* world, neither a utopia nor an alibi . . .[124]

At this point in Derrida's argument, he presumes the exposition of *différance* as a fact about the

nature of language: Sounds and symbols signify other sounds and symbols in a potentially

unbounded exchange (or play) of meaning. On the basis of this insight, Derrida now suggests

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[123] Jonathan Cullen, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature Deconstruction* (Ithaca: Cornell U Press, 1981), 100-103.

[124] Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 9.

that literary production is marked by a fundamentally liminal intellectual activity, both for the reader and the writer. In other words, the facts about language lead to an insight about the facts of the imaginative production of literary worlds and the way that humans read them. To write and read literature is, in some sense, to magnify the playful conditions that are always already characteristic of how signs are able to signify. What Derrida calls here the *acte littéraire* is presented as a mental process of going forth and going within, a simultaneous ecstasy and inwardness. Critics are welcome to fault Derrida for his impulse to make sweeping generalizations about language with little attentiveness to particular linguistics traditions and cultures. At the very least, however, Derrida's propositions here concerning language and literature hold exciting promise for elaborating the interconnections of experience, writing, and meaning-making that Marie projects in Owein's narrative quest.

As Marie presents the knight's tale, Owein's journey neither presumes an absolute priority granted to writing, speech, or experience. Instead, Owein's experience (his *revelaciüns*) is only intelligible to the poem's reader because of an intricate process of interpretation, experience, and more interpretation. The last visionary subject's experience of Purgatory has been put into writing, which in turn supplies the verbal interpretation that the monks vocalize as a guiding intellectual framework for Owein's experience. The knight undergoes his experience, commits it to writing, and the process repeats itself. The result is a case of chicken and egg in which neither experience, speech, writing, or interpretation is able to assume a historical or epistemic priority. Granted, at the temporal outset of the presumed timeline of Purgatorial migrations, St. Patrick discovers the entrance to the otherworld through the vision of *Jhesu Crist*. But looking forward to the subsequent instances of pilgrims who journey into Purgatory, the cycle of interpretation-experience-interpretation is interminable. The poem gives no indication

that either Owein or his predecessors have provided the ultimate and accurate account of Purgatory, nor is this the purpose for any one pilgrim's effort to seek out Purgatory as an experience. The goals of Purgatorial journeys are ethical and spiritual. Moreover, the purposes of travelling to Purgatory are neither to grasp the conditions of the possibility of journeying forth, nor is the goal to derive a science of Purgatory. The conditions of Owein's ambiguous embodiment preclude these particular intellectual ambitions.

The relation of experience to writing here can be clarified by examining the two meanings that Derrida identifies with the category *supplément*. At one level, a *supplément* signifies the anxious fear of writing that Derrida diagnoses in so many western thinkers. As a supplement, writing adds an awkward form of mediation to (allegedly) more direct forms of sensual and intellectual experience. By committing experience to writing, the written (or spoken) word distances the interlocutor from the original objects to which the writing points. Derrida's own theories of writing resist this notion of writing as a supplement to some anterior domain of pure experience. As Cullen notes, Derrida redefines *supplément* as an inevitable feature of writing. The written text is not something that can be avoided in some effort to preserve unmediated, original experiences. As a supplement to experience, writing implicates the reader in an open-ended process of interpretation.[125] In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida wrote, "The supplement is neither a presence nor an absence."[126] By this, I take Derrida to mean that supplemental forms of experience, of which writing is the paradigm, are not a superaddition to pre-linguistic experience, but neither are they some new form of presence. Supplemental forms of experience cannot become the new target for some assured ground of a pretension to certainty.

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[125] Ibid., 104-105.

[126] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, (Fortieth Anniversary Edition. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U Press, 2016), 341.

Writing is no more able to guaruntee certainty than allegedly unmediated experiences. Like the "primary" experiences that supplements seem to add upon, the supplement is untethered from the many forms of immediacy that would putatively ground an experience, sense impression, or idea in some sure context of epistemic guarantee. In Marie's *Espurgatoire*, writing certainly supplies a supplement to experience, but not through any concomitant fetishizing of *présence* as a pre-critical cognitive experience. In Owein's world, writing (and speech) operates alongside experience from the beginning of the *Espurgatoire*. The enmeshed character of writing and experience is, in fact, so intimate in the poem that it becomes difficult to establish an epistemological priority for the one over the other. Vision, speech, interpretation—none can establish some fixed epistemic basis of the various kinds of truth that Purgatory portends. Nor does the combination of these cognitive experiences overcome the limits of the many. Yet the constant interdependence of writing, speech, and experience yields a viable dynamic of shared experience between pilgrim, monk, and community.

Admittedly, the interpretive itinerary of Owein's Purgatory originates in the distant event of Patrick's vision of Christ described in the story's prologue. What is more, Christ is described as "present" to the former. "En cele entente k'il esteit, / des oreisuns k'il feseit, / Jhesu Crist lui vint en *present* [...] (While he was thus / Deep in prayer, / Jesus Christ came into his presence" (v. 283-286).[127] The primacy of visionary presence does not last, however, in the poem's narrative. Even Christ himself deploys speech and interpretive categories that properly orient Patrick's mind to the objects of his revelatory vision. This indissoluble braid of experience and interpretation only intensifies during Patrick's own experience of travelling through Purgatory. Hence, the original "presence" that establishes the text's interpretive chain cannot be said to constitute the sort of pretense of unmediated experience that Derrida finds as the naïve object

[127] Emphasis added.

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sought by so much of western philosophical and artistic history. In Marie's poem, the presence of Christ already mingles with oral discourse and interpretation. This mingling of visionary presence with oral discourse eventuates in Owein's task of learning from other's writings and generating his own writing for the benefit of others who will follow him.

My thesis here serves to expand and also to adjust Bloch's claim that I previously cited: "Owein's fictional voyage to Purgatory shows a similar anxiety concerning origins and an anxiousness to establish, if not the truth, then a credible account of its own transcription and transmission."[128] To be sure, Bloch's thesis describes the dynamics of several figures within the narrative. I remain less convinced, however, that such anxiousness belongs to the poet. Within the story itself, the need for verification belongs primarily to Gilbert, a figure who embodies the drive to ground visionary experiences in a sure origin described by Derridean presence. In fact, Gilbert represents the voice of the philosopher or layperson crying out that an original presence must ground any claim to extraordinary visionary experience. Specifically, Gilbert craves an embodied presence that can substantiate Owein's narrative.

By tacitly demanding the material body as the origin of Owein's interpretive process, then, Gilbert enacts the tendency which Derrida describes as the effort to ground experiential claims in some original form of presence. In the substance of Gilbert's concerns, one may recognize elements of the craving for origins, presence, and grounding that Derrida summarizes in his essay "La structure, le signe et le jeu dans le discours des sciences humaines." As he famously argues, "The absence of the transcendental signified extends the field and the play of signification infinitely."[129] Derrida's explicit concern here is neither the material world nor the human body. His project locally pertains to conceptual and linguistic ideas upon which humans

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[128] Bloch, *The Anonymous Marie de France*, 249.

[129] Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 411 .

attempt to pin, ground, or substantiate a complete, hierarchical system of understanding. Yet

Jonathan Cullen has observed that Derrida's critique of presence also targets any effort to ground

understanding in "the immediacy of sensation."[130] For Gilbert, the *material* human body can be

said to function as a *signifié transcendental*. In other words, the physical character of the fleshly

body is the criterion upon which Gilbert stakes his method for evaluating the experience of

others, particularly claims to the sort of extraordinary visionary experiences that his knightly

friend allegedly undergoes. He evaluates Owein's experiential claims on the implied basis of

"the immediacy of sensation"[131] that Cullen observes in Derrida. Much like doubting Thomas in

the Gospels of the New Testament, Gilbert demands an account of an embodied witness in order

to substantiate that witness's experiential claims. In Derridean language, Gilbert's priority for

material embodiment constitutes an aboriginal longing for a "présence."[132] Materiality itself

becomes the ground of epistemological evaluation; physical presence becomes the implied

necessity for evaluating and receiving the testimony of others. Purgatory, in short, can only be

believed if it is shown to be the object of an embodied subject.

In the world after Derrida, Marie's *Espurgatoire* suggests the possibility of multiple

forms of presence, not all of them contained in Derrida's category of *présence*. It may be, as

Derrida argued, that "absence and misunderstanding"[133] necessarily plague both speech and

writing. Furthermore, it may be that such ambiguity makes it impossible to assert the reality of

some pure domain of experience that lies behind the mediating effects of language as *différance*.

Even so, Owein's journey shows the possibility of another way to frame the interrelatedness of

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[130] Cullen, *On Deconstruction*, 93.

[131] Ibid., 93.

[132] Ibid., 411.

[133] Cullen, 103.

writing, speech, and presence. Both fulfilling and surpassing Derrida's account, presence in the

Espurgatoire may be construed as the experience of *ungrounded intersubjective interpretation*,

but in such a way that does not require a claim to some basis of unchanging, fixed, or certain

knowledge. Hence, in Marie's poem, we might describe a variety of presence that prefigures

Yves-Lacoste's distancing of presence from notions of geometric proximity. Presence no longer

describes objects of body or thought that are locally near the subject, but describes the

experience of joining together interpretations of experience in community.[134] Patrick recognizes

Jhesu Crist as a present object of visionary experience, but this recognition portends no

knowledge of how Christ appears to Patrick, by what means, or in what ontological state.

Similarly, Owein experiences the "showings" of Purgatory as psychic phenomena, but the

ambiguous state of his body sets a limit on his own understanding (and the reader's) with respect

to the physical or metaphysical nature of his own visionary subjectivity and the objects he sees

under these conditions.

If the stated goal of travelling to Purgatory is to remit the sins of the traveler, that goal

cedes to a higher one in the poem. That higher goal is to better understand the human condition

by means of gathering the sorts of experiences that purgatorial travel discloses. These

experiences must be interpreted. As raw data that is simply the spontaneous flow of the

visionary's experience, the visions of Purgatory are—frankly—without value. As cognitive

objects, the visions only acquire their fullest value when they are interpreted. And this

interpretation occurs at several junctures in the narrative: in Christ's exposition to Patrick of

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[134] As Bloch notes, "Owen submits to an ordeal of silence and speech." The verbal nature of the ordeal results from "the absence of any physical contact between himself and either the devils, their instruments of torture, or purgatorial fire." Bloch, *The Anonymous Marie de France*, 221. My argument takes this observation to its limits by suggesting that Owein exists in a disembodied state during his otherworldly journey.

Purgatory's gate;[135] in the counsel which the priors communicate to Owein prior to the knight's entrance into the other world; in the codification of Owein's experience in writing which, we may infer, becomes fodder for orienting the experience of the next pilgrim's journey. Without these incisive moments of interpretation, the visions themselves are not only without meaning, but stand to literally destroy the visionary. It must be recalled that each of the showings eventuates in Owein's near death. As visions of a demonic afterlife, Owein's visions mean him harm. The demons themselves offer up their own infernal interpretation of what Owein experiences in Purgatory. Their counsel is, of course, insidious. They deliberately misconstrue Owein's visions in order to ensnare him in Purgatory. It is only in acting upon the reflections of past experience that Owein is able to properly orient himself to his present visionary experiences. In Dante's *Commedia*, Virgil, Beatrice, and St. Bernard of Clairvaux play the role of guide, a role shared in lesser degrees by many figures through the poem's three sections. Without them, Dante's experiences of Paradise would not disclose the illumination and healing that the pilgrim acquires there. Dante requires the reflection of those whose experience occurred prior to his. And thus, there is no pure experience, no immediacy unmodulated by the reflection and the experience of others.

In Marie's poem, writing is not some tragic dividend of the mind's limits that obscures the immediacy of pure experience. Rather, writing is a fully incorporated part of experience itself. It is a necessary interval that allows individual experience to move beyond its own limits. But this is not to describe overcoming some inadequacy in the individual mind toward the end of producing scientific knowledge, not in the sense of a stable, encyclopedic knowledge of essences, things, or dogmas. Within the interpretive world of Marie's Purgatory, writing supplies

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[135] Hence, Bloch's observation that "Translation is explicitly thematized in the *Espurgatoire* beginning with the identification of the place of entry." Bloch, *The Anonymous Marie de France*, 230.

the impetus for reflection on experience. Not even reflection is an end in itself. Reflection is always and already ordered toward the production of new experiences. In the poem, pilgrims had travelled to Purgatory before Owein; they had recorded their experiences in writing (though what they precisely recorded is not made clear in the poem). Subsequently, those recordings became the object of pondering, considering, and reflective analysis by the monks who guard Purgatory's gate. And finally, the fruits of that monastic reflection become the principles of orientation for the next pilgrim's experience. The resulting series of reinterpretations exemplifies what Franke finds essential to Dante's own journey through the Inferno, Purgatory, and Paradise: "Humanities texts [such as the *Commedia*] live by continually projecting the old stories into new historical contexts in which they take on new meanings and thereby interpret the present, illuminating it, revealing itself in ways that would never be possible without the historical perspective that tradition affords."[136] The *Espurgatoire* establishes former pilgrimage accounts as "old stories" which then accumulate meaning as they orient the "new historical contexts" of subsequent pilgrimages. Past experiences of Purgatory become, in Franke's terms, the "historical perspective" that informs the next pilgrimage, which in turn generates new links in the interpretive chain for the benefit of future travelers and those who hear their stories.

Why orient the next pilgrim's experience at all? Gregory the Great's invitation to psychological interiority might suggest a radical form of spiritual self-reliance rather than the sort of hermeneutical community that Marie fashions in the *Espurgatoire*. Put another way, the poem's emphasis on the intensely inward character of extraordinary visionary experience might suggest a related priority on the individual's unique ability to determine the value and nature of those experiences. In the age of French theory, George Bataille described an extreme form of such self-reliance in his own conception and performance of *expérience intérieure.* In his book

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[136] William Franke, *The Revelation of Imagination,* (Northwestern U Press: 2015), 320.

of the same name, Bataille approached inner experience as a domain of unstructured psychic play and experimentation. As a subject seeking novel horizons of psychic experience, Bataille championed a model of interiority that eschews preconceptions that might contaminate or influence the spontaneous desires of the human spirit and body. Bataille's ideal subject is one who pursues his or her urges "sans intentions."[137] Without intentions, the subject of inner experience wanders with a deliberately Nietzschean aimlessness. There is no "project" to set an itinerary in advance of the journey, for such a project would needlessly limit the possibilities of inner experience.[138]

On the one hand, Bataille's prescription for a form of wandering, psychic freedom demonstrates clear parallels to Owein's phenomenology of Purgatory. As a visionary who travels beyond the limits of the mundane world, Owein realizes Bataille's definition of inner experience as "un voyage au bout du possible de l'homme" (a journey to the edge of what is possible for man).[139] As Caputo's notion of the spectral body allowed us to consider, Owein's journey is a movement beyond the possible. Bataille pronounces by fiat that a divine vision can only disclose "l'appréhension d'un Dieu sans forme and sans mode" (the apprehension of a God without form or mode).[140] This notion is not necessarily inconsistent with Owein's itinerary since the knight never enters the Celestial Paradise.

The dissonance between Marie and Bataille is clearer on the question of a vision's potential for yielding insights that take on stable forms of meaning or reference beyond the individual visionary experience. Bataille flatly declares that "L'expérience ne révèle rien et ne

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[137] George Bataille, *L'expérience intérieure* (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), 9. English translations of Bataille are my own.

[138] Ibid., 18-19.

[139] Ibid., 19.

[140] Ibid., 17.

peut fonder la croyance ni en partir." [141] (Experience reveals nothing and cannot ground belief nor follow from it). The Gregorian tradition that Marie remediates might agree that inner experience, such as Owein's otherworldly visions, cannot engender a physics or metaphysics of the visionary body. We have seen, however, that the *Espurgatoire*'s enactment of a hermeneutical community realizes one model for how extraordinary visionary experiences accrue meaning through interpretation and reinterpretation. In Marie's poem, reinterpretation can even lead to compunction, that is, a different orientation of the interpreting subject to the Divine, the world, and oneself.

The clash between Bataille and Marie de France may hardly strike a modern reader as surprising. Most obviously, both writers are distinguished by the presence and absence of Christian religious commitments. Whereas Bataille sees religious dogma as a constraint that would limit inner experience, Marie's medieval Catholic milieu is steeped in the priorities of a Christian world picture relying upon Patristic theological authorities. It would be a mistake, however, to leave the matter there. The difference that divides Bataille's prescriptions of *expérience intérieure* from Marie's narrative exposition of visionary *revelaciüns* is not explained by invoking religious difference. More fundamentally, these two different accounts of extraordinary visionary experience spring from opposing conclusions about the role of the experiences of others in the evaluation of the self's experience. Put in the simplest (and most reductive) terms, Bataille illustrates the visionary subject for whom experience depends upon freedom from considering the thinking of others. The categories of the scholar, the testimony of others, and the experience of fellow visionaries ought not to influence the free play of the individual psyche's voyages into the impossible. True experience is unguided experience. Such is the perspective elaborated throughout *L'expérience intérieure*.

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[141] Ibid., 16.

As a contrasting vision of interior experience, Marie's poem may invite us to consider whether Bataille's radical freedom actually supplies what it promises in the end. By abandoning any constraining points of departure that might structure the expectations for his forays into extraordinary experiences (experiments of sexual ecstasy and drug use to name a few), Bataille might miss crucial preconditions that stand to enhance, rather than hinder, his efforts at ecstasy. Put another way, even an effort to bring about "pure" experience may be impoverished compared to experience that accounts for the interpretations of others.

To open oneself to the interpretation of others immediately posits a community rather than an individual. Zaleski has posited the otherworld vision as a "collaborative effort, produced by the interaction of the visionary with neighbors, counselors, the narrator, and other interested parties."[142] Here, I want to draw attention to the manner in which this communal, multi-layered process of interpretation is essentially related to the epistemological drama set forth in the prologue. It is the endgame of spiritual transformation of the many that necessitates the layered and intersubjective project of crafting the visionary experience as a deeply mediated, literary object. It is no longer a question of the Bataille-esque individual setting out bravely into the unknown without guides. When a subject such as Owein invites the other's interpretation to influence his own orientation to inner experience, a fundamentally social mode of experience has been achieved. This is the sort of paradigm on display in the *Espurgatoire*.

Crucially, the poem's social model of visionary experience and its reflection challenge the autonomy of either experience or interpretation as separate cognitive procedures. In Marie's poem, experience and interpretation are inseparable intervals in a single process. Specifically, the poem presents experience as that which constantly interweaves the resources and demands of individual experience with the communities that surround the individual and interpret its

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[142] Zaleski, 86.

findings: visionary subjects need other visionary subjects. They also require those who do *not* participate in the vision directly.[143] And this need requires a carousel of reading, writing, visionary experience, and more interpretation. Bloch seizes upon this dimension of Marie's Latin source, which he describes as a "collective project, an amalgam of oral and written sources, tellings, and retellings, writings and rewritings."[144] My aim has been to extend Bloch's insight by demonstrating how no one of these phases is adequate to itself. Without the monks' counsel, Patrick would not be able to escape the dangers that his visions threaten. Without the vision of Christ, Patrick would have been unable to locate the gate of Purgatory. Without the technology of writing, the testimony of Owein and other pilgrims could not have supplied the monks with the means to offer a synthetic account of Purgatory's dangers to future travelers. The result is cycle in which experience and its self-conscious interpretation become two intervals in a single process. My thesis here resonates with Bloch's adroit observation that Marie conflates "hearing and reading"[145] in the *Espurgatoire*. As we have seen, Marie dramatizes the indissociability of experience and interpretation. (v. 262)

As the intellectual and historical peer of Derrida and Bataille, Paul Ricoeur conjured a vision of hermeneutics as an interpretive community. Throughout the writings gathered in *Le conflit des interprétations*, Ricoeur emphasizes the act of interpretation as a process that often invokes figures beyond the individual subject. As the book's title suggests, the fact of multiple interpretations introduces the need for arbitration, discernment, or synthesis. The ultimate form of interpretation is what Ricoeur understands as the basic task of philosophy: "La philosophie a

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[143] This interdependence of complimentary forms of different cognitive experiences is further reflected in the relationship between the dreaming Dante and the vigilant Virgil. I discuss this in my second chapter.

[144] Bloch, 256.

[145] Ibid., 261.

vocation pour arbitrer non seulement la pluralité des interprétations, [...] mais la pluralité des expériences." [146] (The vocation of philosophy is not only to arbitrate among the plurality of interpretations, but the plurality of experiences). Ricoeur's vision is noteworthy here because he avoids any suggestion that good interpretative arbitration aims at some univocal master account of the underlying realities that differing experiences mediate. Interpretation is not able to secure the one, true, unchanging and objective account of a thing; rather, interpretation takes the widest possible purvey of relevant experiences and learns what can be learned based on that inclusive intellectual frame.

Several features of Ricoeur's essays on hermeneutics bear out these approaches to interpretation. Among these, I wish to focus on Ricoeur's distinction between "intuition" and "interprétation."[147] The former is a first order task that generates the raw data of psychic experience, but it requires the added efforts of interpretation to sort out the relation of one subject's experience to another's. Ricoeur's notion of intuition shares something profound with Bataille's notion of inner experience and Marie's Gregorian exposition of extraordinary visionary experience. Like Owein's experiences, Ricoeur's intuition describes a region of cognition that evades a simultaneous understanding of what exactly is happening to the subject. Whatever intuition discloses, however, requires the synthetic refinement of reflection.[148] Self-reflective interpretation, then, aims at a task much more significant than determining the objective truth of matters grasped partially through intuition. By advancing from intuition to self-reflection, the subject comes to a self-awareness that transcends the desire for objective

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[146] Paul Ricoeur, *Le conflit des interprétations: essais d'herméneutique* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1969), 233. Translations are my own.

[147] Ibid., 438.

[148] Ibid., 438-439.

knowledge by reaching instead for "notre désir d'être" (our desire to be).[149] Ricoeur does not

explicitly invoke community here, but its necessity is crucially implied. For it is ultimately an

intersubjective process which demands that "réflexion doit devenir interpretation" (reflection

must become interpretation).[150] As intuition yields to reflection and ultimately to interpretation,

individual experience must finally learn to integrate itself into a multiplicity of "méthodes" and

disciplinary "présuppositions."[151] The invocation of many disciplines and methods assumes the

voices of many kinds of thinkers, much like the monks, benevolent spirits, and poets whose

corporate work makes possible Owein's story. The result may not be a univocal account of an

unchanging truth, but the resulting interplay of accounts allows for a productive form of the

ungrounded intersubjectivity that I have described through reliance on Derrida's categories. In

other words, the monks and the pilgrims like Owein may not triangulate some unchanging

account of reality, but they can mediate forms of meaning to one another that result in truly

shared forms of experience.

This particularly communal model of hermeneutical interpretation may owe something to

the specifically Cistercian identity of the monastic figures populating Owein's story. Bloch has

especially elaborated the political role of the Cistercians in the *Espurgatoire*. Because the

Cistercians served the Norman project of subjugating the Irish clergy and feudal order, Bloch

perceives Marie's text (and its Latin predecessor) as a historical witness to Cistercian

participation in the colonization of the Irish.[152] I suggest that the recurrent emphasis on

Cistercian monasticism also emphasizes this order's peculiar structural relationship to medieval

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[149] Ibid. 441.

[150] Ibid., 441.

[151] Ibid., 441.

[152] Bloch, *The Anonymous Marie de France*, 267-311.

laity. Medieval historian Kevin Madigan has observed that the Cistercian order, founded in 1098, made possible an "opening of the religious life to very large numbers of peasants through the institution of the lay brotherhood."[153] This lay brotherhood consisted of ordinary Christians who served the material needs of the monastery while also participating to differing degrees in the spiritual life of the brothers.[154] Diarmaid MacCulloch underscores how these brotherhoods made possible new forms of spirituality for the specifically *illiterate* laity. Hence, "by passing the everyday work of their houses on teams of lay brothers sworn to a simpler version of the monastic rule than the fully fledged monks, they [the lay brothers] opened the monastic life once more to illiterate people."[155] Clearly, these arrangements served the expanding labor needs of the new order's fast growing network of monasteries. Yet MacCulloch and Madigan suggest how lay brotherhoods brought those unable to read into the full spiritual apparatus of the monastery.

In Owein's relation to the Cistercian guardians of Purgatory, one may perceive features of such lay brotherhoods. The text does not address the question of Owein's literacy, but his dependence upon the monastic act of writing and conveying the writing of others implicates him in the life of his monastic guardians as a partial participant. Furthermore, before entering Purgatory, he must prepare himself in fasting and prayer in a way that imitates monastic practice. In each instance, the text shows a lay knight caught up in the broader mechanics of prayer, reading, writing, and interpreting. The distinctive Cistercian emphasis on lay incorporation may, then, suggest more than monastic complaisance in Irish subjugation. Without negating these historical dynamics, we should observe that Cistercian community life structured its relation to

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[153] Kevin Madigan, *Medieval Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 166.

[154] 169. For an account of the similar and related origins of these lay brotherhoods among the Carthusians, see 159.

[155] Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), 390.

lay persons in a way that allowed for a porous connection that linked the literate from the illiterate, the bookish folk from those for whom manuscripts were foreign. Against the backdrop of this historical picture, Owein's journey may encapsulate the Cistercian interdependence of the literate and the illiterate. By way of historical context, this points once again to the value that division of labor holds between Owein and his Cistercian allies. The monks simply do not venture into Purgatory. They do not quest in this way. The knight performs this role. As a member of the laity, he relies upon the bookish learning of the Cistercians and the interpretive deposit that the monks encode in their books. Likewise, the monks need sentinels of adventure, those willing to perform certain duties. The resulting hermeneutical community draws laity and monastics into a tight circle, a deep rapprochement in which the interpretive potentials of monastic literary both nourish and seek nourishment from the more immediate experience impressed upon the lay knight during his quest. Thus, Owein's relation to his guardians may yet recapitulate the wider Cistercian commitment to establishing porous forms of interconnectedness with common folk.

By presenting Marie's elaborate exposition of language as a communal phenomenon, I aim to invite a fresh consideration of the ambiguous body of Owein. Like the liminal body of Dante the dreamer, Owen the knight's corporality gives his reader no certain indication of its materiality. In my view, the most helpful interpretive strategy for assessing this ambiguity is to receive it as a constitutive clue of the poem's grander drama of epistemic concerns. Owein's spectral body introduces a mystery that cannot be solved through any intellectual procedure aiming at certainty. The Purgatory of Marie's poem, after all, is not an ecclesial dogma. It is a poem, not a doctrine. And while it would be mistaken to drive too firm a wedge between dogma and poetry in the Christian Middle Ages, it is crucial to preserve the distinction. As a poem,

Marie's exposition of Purgatory can only occur through the testimony of those who have been there. "There," as it turns out, is not any location that can be positioned on a map that exists independently of the journey. Neither does the immediacy of the journey suffice for promulgating the compunction that the story aims to spread. Owein receives the written reflections of those who have come before, and he contributes for the benefit of those who come after.

With this hermeneutical interpretation of witness verification in the *Espurgatoire*, I am amplifying a key dimension of Carol Zaleski's thesis about the importance of edification for authenticating stories of otherworldly visions. For medieval audiences, she writes, "there is no better index of an account's validity than its edifying qualities and its conformity to tradition."[156] One can certainly observe traditional conformity in Marie's invocations of Augustine and Gregory. The greater emphasis, in my view, should fall on how those traditions, notably Gregory's corpus, establish the expectation that the visionary tale's value is in the transformation that occurs *in the audiences*. Edification, to use Zaleski's term, involves a crucial transference of meaning from the initial subject of experience to a widened community of subjects. These figures, crucially, did not experience the inciting vision. This gap between mutually unshared experiences occasions the dynamics of speaking, reading, and writing that forms the basis of the poem's interpretive community.

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[156] Zaleski, 85. And as Zaleski observes of the *Dialogues*, Gregory embeds textual clues in his stories that require them to be "understood symbolically" (30) Furthermore, while Zaleski claims that one can observe the origins of "empirical verification" as an evaluative criterion for otherworldly stories in the *Dialogues*, Zaleski also notes how Gregory is dominantly invested in corroborating stories through gathering evidence that attests to the character of the original witnesses. This practice is crucially distinct from a straightforwardly forensic approach to narrative verification. Norris J Lacy has also characterized the *Espurgatoire* as a "work of moral edification." (Norris. J Lacy, "Marie de France: *Chevrefeuil, Laüstic, Biscalvret* (c. 1150-1200)," in *Writings by Pre-Revolutionary French Women: From Marie de France to Elizabeth Vigée-Le Brun*, ed. Anne R. Larsen and Colette H. Winn. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 11.

Ultimately, the interpretive community becomes a kind of extended body for the visionary. Owein's flesh is spectral, much like the Christ whose spiritual appearance to Patrick catalyzes the entire narrative. Nevertheless, Owein's spectral body offers its own inner experience to a network of writers, visionaries, and interpreters who jointly implicate the individual visionary within a practice of social interpretation. By invoking voices from the continental philosophical tradition, the consequences of Owein's ambiguous body are thrown into relief. As a body that cannot establish certain knowledge of its own experience, Owein requires the writing of others as a *supplément* to his immediate experience. But to speak in Derridean terms, the experience is no less a supplement to monastic reflection. Each presumes and requires the other, neither grounding the other while nevertheless making possible viable forms of shared meaning. Because the dangers of Purgatory threaten the integrity of his psyche so completely, Owein needs the accumulated wisdom of his predecessors lest he fall into the dangers that Bataille's *expérience intérieure* imposes. Similarly, because the knowledge of Purgatory and its spiritual geography remains always unfinished, Owein must enter into a community of reflection that embodies Ricoeur's self-reflexive interpretation.

This chapter has advanced both philological and philosophical arguments. In the first case, I have endeavored to show the limits of a common interpretation of Owein's embodiment in Purgatory. This objection has allowed me to advance an alternative account of Marie's literary rendering of (dis)embodiment. With these arguments in place, I turn now to the dreaming body of Dante's poetic subject in the *Purgatorio*. As a dreaming pilgrim, Dante exhibits liberation from the normative conditions of embodied subjectivity that recall his predecessor Owein on his knightly quest.

CHAPTER 2

THE PILGRIM FROM THE FLESH—DANTE'S BODILY ECSTASY IN SLEEP

> "The poets dream, but, as they dream, they always keep their eyes open."[157]
> —Giuseppe Mazzotta, *Dante's Vision and the Circle of Knowledge*

> "In the poet's disembodied afterlife, flesh is all."[158]
> —Peter Hawkins, "Our Bodies, Our Selves"

Like Marie de France, Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) fashioned a poetic geography of

Purgatory. Unlike Marie's *Espurgatoire*, however, Dante's *Purgatorio* has inspired an

extraordinary following in popular culture and literary criticism from the Middle Ages to the

twenty-first century. Dante's poem, according to Jacques Le Goff, "is the noblest representation

of Purgatory ever conceived by the mind of man."[159] Any critic is welcome to dispute this claim,

but Le Goff's superlative judgment stands as a reminder of Dante's total success in establishing

the dominant images by which western cultures have imagined Purgatory.

At the close of the *Inferno*, Dante (the subject of his own poem) reverses the direction of

his infernal descent by escaping with his guide, Virgil, along the back of Satan himself. This

suspenseful getaway ultimately leads the pair of poets to the shores of a mysterious mountain. In

a new terrain marked by an atmosphere of renewal and healing, Dante the poet introduces his

readers to the second setting of his sprawling poem: the *Purgatorio*. During his subsequent

ascent of Mount Purgatory, Dante the pilgrim will continue to encounter the souls of

magnanimous royals and wretched laymen, civic figures of the pagan and Christian past as well

as men and women of Dante's time. Whether anonymous peasants or legendary statesmen, all

these figures share a common identity as sinners. Unlike their condemned counterparts in the

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[157] Giuseppe Mazzotta, *Dante's Vision and the Circle of Knowledge,* (Princeton: Princeton U Press, 1993), 139.

[158] "Our Bodies, Our Selves: Crucified, Famished, and Nourished," in *Vertical Readings in Dante's Comedy: Volume 3*, ed. George Corbett and Heather Webb (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2018), 29.

[159] Le Goff, 334.

Inferno, however, the sinners of Purgatory are inexorably bound for Paradise. However late their repentance may have come during their earthly lives, the souls of Purgatory sought God's forgiveness before their mortal death, and they are therefore admitted to this medial realm of penance. On the slopes of Mt. Purgatory, the dead must participate in the purging of their vices before each soul finds its eventual and inevitable union with God in Paradise. Hence, Dante's Purgatory is a zone of transition, aptly described by White-Le Goff's term "entre-mondes."[160]

As Dante the pilgrim winds his way up the mountain, his encounters with souls are structured according to the vices that are purged from his fellow climbers (much like the vices being punished in the *Inferno* structure the geography of the underworld). Before he can begin this arduous climb as a spiritual visitor to the mountain, however, Dante must receive seven imprints of the letter *p* on his forehead as a sign of the sins (*peccatum* in Latin) whose roots he must learn to acknowledge in himself. As he climbs, Dante converses with the shades of the repentant dead. The details of their purgative journeys catalyze Dante's own moral transformation, signified by the gradual removal of each *p* from his forehead at the moment in which the pilgrim seems to have internalized the lessons of the Purgatory's many ascending zones. Throughout these experiences, benevolent figures guide the pilgrim unlike the demons of Marie's Purgatory.[161] At the summit of the mountain, Dante arrives at the Earthly Paradise where Matelda invites Dante to forget his sins and remember his good deeds, ritualized in the drinking of Lethe's waters. Dante's beloved Beatrice appears along with a triumphant (and vexing) procession of allegorical symbols that announce the church's triumph. These events, however,

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[160] White-Le Goff, "Les démons," 67.

[161] Jacques Le Goff does not explicitly compare the two poems, but he does signal out Dante's literary decision to depict the "good angels" as a poetic answer to an unsettled theological question. "The scholastics wondered whether demons or angels attend to the souls in Purgatory. Dante is in no doubt as to the answer: it is the good angels, the angels of Heaven, God's angels who are responsible for souls purging their sins" (354). This keen observation affirms Le Goff's broader claim that the medieval Catholic Church never pronounced a particular set of images as a single dogmatic expression of Purgatory's "imaginary content" (357).

are marked by the poignancy of Virgil's departure. Dante's beloved mentor cannot pass into these upper regions of Purgatory and into the Paradise beyond. Such is the narrative arch of the *Purgatorio*.

Marie wrote the *Espurgatoire* over a hundred years before her Florentine successor scribed the *Purgatorio*, and yet comparison between these two poems has been scant in contemporary literary criticism. One of the richest similarities linking the poems is their mutual exposition of two pilgrims who undergo extraordinary journeys toward the end of achieving new orientations of the subject to the world, to God, and to the self. Marie's Purgatory is a subterranean cavern; Dante opts for the image of a mountain. The geographic differences, however, disclose a functional similarity: In both settings, Purgatory is an obstacle to overcome. At the journey's end, the reward is the subject's transformation into someone newly vulnerable to fresh self-insights and re-configured relations with divine and human subjects.

As the poetic protagonists of such journeys, Owein is a knight whereas Dante is an aristocratic man of letters. Though as Marco Santagata's recent biography of Dante reminds us, the historical Dante served among the *feditori*, a cavalry corps populated by the Florentine aristocracy. While the position was not precisely equivalent to that of the knight, the mounted soldier rank in which Dante served nevertheless remotely connects him to knighthood.[162] Dante's role as a would-be chevalier is not explicitly developed in the *Commedia*. Nonetheless, Dante's historical status as a mounted soldier links his own purgatorial journey to Owein the knight's pilgrimage in an unlikely way. Both protagonists can be said to undertake quests, journeys that radically reframe the expectations of knightly activity against the backdrop of two religious, poetic imaginations.

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[162] Marco Santagata, *Dante: The Story of His Life*, (United States: Harvard U Press, 2018), 62-65.

This basic similarity signals the poems' shared occupation with the status of each protagonist's bodily materiality. The body is a pervasive theme in the *Commedia*, taking on particular prominence in the *Purgatorio*. As discussed in the previous chapter, it is in the *Purgatorio* that the dead directly address the question of Dante's corporality. It is likewise in this portion of the *Commedia* that we find the dead recounting their deaths, in some cases, as the disintegration of body and soul.[163]

Whereas the status of Owein's body in Purgatory is controversial, as I have argued in chapter one, Dante's physical presence is explicitly thematized in the *Purgatorio*. This is not merely to observe that Dante renders the physical environment of Purgatory in empirically realistic detail. Rather, the poet decisively depicts the materiality of Dante's visionary body during several conversations between Dante and various interlocutors: The poetic subject's embodiment in *Purgatorio* is an uncontroversial fact of the poem's plot. There is, however, a deeper continuity between Marie de France's and Dante's articulation of the visionary body. Dante the pilgrim may largely remain in his physical body throughout his ascent of Purgatory, but he explicitly escapes his body during the ecstatic experience of dreams. This is apparent in the language by which the poet introduces the initial dream sequence in *Purgatorio* IX. In the clause that transitions the narration toward the pilgrim's experience of dreaming, Dante writes that dreams occur when "la mente nostra, peregrine / più de la carne e men da' pensier presa, / a le sue visïon quasi è divina (our mind, more pilgrim from the flesh and less caught up in thoughts, is more prophetic in visions)."[164] The mysterious phrase "more pilgrim from the flesh" announces a departure from the normal relations that unite a subject to a body. Dreaming in the

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[163] See especially *Purgatorio*, V. 130-136.

[164] IX. 16-18.

Commedia is to wander from the body, and in so doing, to acquire some sort of novel phenomenology.

Because dreams occasion Dante's disembodiment, the *Purgatorio* invites a critical inquiry that considers the status of the dreaming body for Dante's broader journey in this middle portion of the *Commedia*. Ultimately, Dante's focused episodes of disembodiment demonstrate many of the same concerns with language, meaning-making, and the body that characterize Owein's journey in the *Espurgatoire*, though not without crucial differences.

Philology and Its Alternatives: The Critics' Concerns

Dante the pilgrim experiences three dreams during his ascent of Mt. Purgatory, each one marking a crucial shift in the terrain of the pilgrim's mountainous trek.[165] In canto IX, Dante sleeps just before his decisive entrance through the mountain's gates. During the ensuing dream, a terrible marvel unfolds when an eagle seizes Dante in its clutches, wresting the pilgrim high into the heavens. The intensity of the vision makes for a short-lived dream, and Dante continues his ascent of the mountain in waking life. In canto XIX, the pilgrim succumbs to sleep for a

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[165] Studies that treat Dante's dreams often allude to a vast range of articles on the topic. Yet a review of the literature reveals that the majority of these works address the question of Dante's dream episodes only tangentially or briefly, often in the service of other related or far-reaching critical questions. Indeed, just before Cervigni began to publish on the topic in the 1980's, Warren Ginsberg was able to write that "a detailed figural reading of the first of Dante's three dreams has not, despite Auerbach's hint, been advanced." (41, Ginsberg, Warren. "Dante's Dream of the Eagle and Jacob's Ladder." *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, no. 100 (1982): 41-69.) There is, then, an underdeveloped opportunity for a critical tradition devoted to the question of oneiric representation in the *Commedia*.

As I explore below, Cervigni and Cappozzo are nearly unique in their sustained scholarly focus on the dreams as primary objects of study, a fact that signals the need for an expanded investigation into this fascinating domain of the *Purgatorio* and its relations to the *Commedia* more broadly. Among examples of brief scholarly engagements with the dreams, in whole or in part, see Charles Singleton's exposition of Dante's first dream as part of a larger study on conversion (182); Barbara Nolan's analysis of Victorine theologies of dreaming and their influence on Dante's oneiric representation in the *Vita Nuova* in "The "Vita Nuova" and Richard of St. Victor's Phenomenology of Vision." *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, no. 92 (1974): 35-52; Joan Ferrante's brief allusion to the dream of the eagle in her article focused on the politics of Dante's *Commedia* in ""Why Did Dante Write the Comedy?"" *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, no. 111 (1993), 13; see also Marguerite Chiarenza's commentary of the *femmina balba* in her broader discussion of Franciscan tropes of poverty in "Dante's Lady Poverty," *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, no. 111 (1993), 162, 166.

second time. In the ensuing dream, he encounters the mysterious *femmina balba*, the stammering woman whose transformation into a beautiful figure under Dante's gaze precedes her self-identification as a siren who caused Ulysses to stray. The sudden presence of a holy woman surprises both Dante and the reader; she cries out to Virgil to identify the siren, though Virgil appears swiftly in the dream just long enough to rip the siren's clothes about her belly. This act reveals a putrid, rotting midsection that seems to disclose the nefarious intentions of the siren. The nightmare concludes and several cantos pass before the third and final dream (*Purgatorio* XXVII): an encounter with the Biblical figure of Leah. One of the wives to the Israelite patriarch Jacob, Leah discourses to Dante about her act of gathering flowers, a gesture that renders her beautiful. In contrast, she tells Dante that her sister Rachel, Jacob's second wife, contemplates herself always in a mirror. The contrast sets up two models of self-reflective vision, which resonates with Dante's expectation of Beatrice's gaze in the Earthly Paradise that concludes the *Purgatorio*.

As Cervigni has argued, Dante the poet's introduction of dreams creates a visionary space that exceeds the already extraordinary environs of the Purgatorial vision.[166] Dante the poet claims the narrative of *Purgatorio* to be a "*visio* of things ultramundane which the narrator-protagonist claims he has experienced while in his mortal body."[167] Because the poetic subject claims to have experienced Purgatory while existing in a material body, Dante the poet introduces the dream as a device that enables the pilgrim to separate from that body. In so doing, the pilgrim becomes able to achieve certain rarified forms of experience that are not available to

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[166] Dino S. Cervigni, "Dante's Poetry of Dreams," *Pacific Coast Philology* 17, no. 1/2 (1982), 24-26.

[167] Ibid., 24.

him in his fully embodied condition.[168] Cervigni's observations are grounded in the aforementioned passage in which Dante introduces the pilgrim's initial dream as a form of disembodiment: "la mente nostra, peregrina / più de la carne e men da' pensier presa, / a le sue visïon quasi è divina, / in sogno mi parea veder sospesa / un'aguglia [...] (our mind, more a pilgrim from the flesh and less captive to thoughts, is in its visions almost divine, I seemed to see, in a dream, an eagle [...])"[169] Dante's construal of the sleeping mind uses pilgrimage as a metaphor to describe a new degree of disembodiment, suggesting the profound continuity between bodily peregrination (travelling) and visionary experience (dream-vision).

Cervigni's assessment of disembodiment suggests that Dante shares a presumption similar to Marie de France's Gregorian belief that certain forms of spiritual vision elude the embodied subject, and thus require a degree of disentanglement from the material body in order to appear. Put another way, Marie establishes disembodiment as the condition for certain forms of moral self-knowledge and interpretive struggle; Dante does the same, as Cervigni notes, but since the Florentine poet concretely establishes the protagonist's material body at the outset of the *Commedia*, Dante requires the added literary intervention of the dream in order to achieve the sort of disembodiment that characterized, in my view, the entirety of Owein's journey in the *Espurgatoire*.

Exploring the value of the body within Dante's dreams requires passage through the work of two Dante scholars: Valerio Cappozzo and the aforementioned Dino Cervigni. The latter's interest in the *Purgatorio*'s oneiric episodes led to the only book-length project on the topic to

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[168] Ibid., 24. Cervigni's point is echoed by Jeremy Tambling who wrote that "The whole *Commedia* could have been dream poetry along the lines of *Roman de la rose*; its quality of realism enables there to be a sudden increase of psychological truth when he *does* dream." Jeffrey Tambling, *Dante and Difference: Writing in the 'Commedia,'* (Cambridge: Cambridge U Press, 1988), 103.

[169] *Purgatorio*, IX. 16-20.

date: *Dante's Poetry of Dreams* (1986). Cervigni is keen to demonstrate the relevance of Dante's visionary experiences in dreams for the overall account of vision that characterizes the poem as a whole.[170] For Cervigni, defending this thesis begins with an exposition of how medieval science and theology presented theories of the dream to Dante's cultural milieu, above all through the intermediation of Macrobius's *Commentary on Scipio's Dream*.[171] As a popular theorist of dream varieties, Macrobius proposed five kinds of dream experiences: somnium, visio, oraculum, insomnium, and visium.[172] Cervigni translates the last two categories as "nightmare" and "apparition." Macrobius, we are reminded, found little of interest in these subcategories of dreams since they "derive from some physical or mental cause."[173] Among the remaining varieties, *oraculum* is characterized by the appearance of a holy figure, whether human or divine. Whereas a *visio* is predictive of future events, the *somnium* is a dream that "conceals under various shapes and veils with ambiguity the meaning of the revelation which has to be understood by way of interpretation – a dream we need not explain since everybody knows from experience what it is."[174]

Cervigni helpfully notes that the three varieties of reliable dreams are united by their "prophetic"[175] dimension. That is, each of these dream varieties reveals something that was previously hidden. The prophetic quality of the dreams invites an interpretation of the contents of

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[170] Dino Cervigni, *Dante's Poetry of Dreams* (Firenze: Biblioteca dell' "Archivum Anticum,"1986), 10.

[171] Ibid., 17.

[172] Ibid., 18.

[173] Ibid., 18.

[174] Ibid., 18-19. Cited by Cervigni. For one engagement of Ciceronian accounts of visionary experience, see Guy P. Raffa whose article is focused on the figure of Cacciaguida in *Purgatorio*: Guy P. Raffa, "Enigmatic 56's: Cicero's Scipio and Dante's Cacciaguida," *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, no. 110 (1992), 121-34.

[175] Ibid., 19.

the oneiric episodes, both on the part of Dante within the *Commedia* and the critic reading the poem. In short, dreams inspire interpretation: This notion is central to many scholarly readings of the Purgatory's dream sequences. Giusseppe Mazzotta expresses this succinctly when he writes, "the experience of the dream compels the dreamer to *interpret* whether it is an empty fantasy or a wondrous, enigmatic sign to be explicated."[176] In the *Espurgatoire*, we similarly observed that interpretation also connoted an ethical dimension: To interpret well is both an intellectual and moral task.

In the case of Dante's dream episodes, the imperative to interpret—shared by protagonist and reader alike—has led to a critical tradition that largely focuses on identifying the symbolic referents of the ambiguous objects that populate the pilgrim's dreamscapes. Examples of this critical practice abound. Cappozzo, for instance, seeks to identify the figures populating Dante's dreams with their historical referents within the poem or in broader medieval cultures. To take one uncontroversial example, Cappozzo refers to Leah, the protagonist of Dante's third and final dream, as a "simbolo della vita attiva [symbol of the active life]."[177] Cappozzo also valuably investigates Dante's use of astrological terms, tropes, and concepts to layer his dream episodes with meaning.[178]

In Cervigni's work, approaching the contents of Dante's dreams in this way often aims at adducing the relations that link the dreams to the schema of vices and virtues that characterize the cantos in which the dream episodes occur. In that spirit, Cervigni is able to claim, "The dream of the golden eagle epitomizes and brings to culmination the main theses underlying the

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[176] Mazzotta, 139.

[177] Valerio Cappozzo, "La strada dell'imaginazione porta al centro della realtà. Sogni medievali nell'inconscio contemporaneo," *H-ermes*. *Journal of Communication*. 13 (2019), 203. Translations are my own.

[178] Cappozzo, "Libri," 218-221.

first eight cantos."[179] Alternatively, Cervigni carefully marshals textual examples to clarify how the physiology of the *femmina balba* relates to the vices of pride.[180] This approach to analyzing Dante's dreams has the obvious benefit of demonstrating possible connections between the dream episodes and the anthropology of vice and virtue in the *Purgatorio*. This same critical approach can also magnify an impulse to exhaust the text's meaning through historical context. This is the methodological danger that Peter Hawkins describes. By looking to Dante for "enigma codes to be cracked,"[181] philological readings can bolster an expectation that the *Commedia*'s truest or most useful meaning is primarily or exclusively found in a precise correspondence between the signs of Dante's text and a set of historical referents.

The merits and challenges of these approaches notwithstanding, these critical practices point to a consensus that Dante's dreams introduce a figurative idiom that differs from the passages describing Dante's waking (and embodied) life. Because the figurative language of dreams necessarily implies the ambiguous, the question of ambiguity occasions a fresh consideration of the symbolic in Dante's dreams as it relates to the status of the dreamer's body.

Degrees of Difference: Sleeping and Waking Life on Mt. Purgatory

The symbolic contents of Dante's dreams raise a fundamental interpretive question: how does the poem come to relate the experience of dreaming to being awake? As different states of cognition, are they opposites, or related in some more nuanced way? Cervigni stresses a variety of ways in which dreams bear upon the wider structure of the *Purgatorio*. Nevertheless, he ultimately argues that the pilgrim's dreaming "differs from the rest of the purgatorial

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[179] Cervigni, *Dante's Poetry of Dreams*, 182.

[180] Ibid., 127.

[181] Hawkins, 12.

experience."[182] This perspective seems to have the benefit of obviousness on its side. Is not the experience of phantasmagorical dreaming clearly distinct from waking life? As evidence, Cervigni points to Dante's use of the verb *parea* in the dream episodes.[183] The term suggests appearances, explicitly thematizing the ambiguity that inheres to Dante's perception in dreams. The contents of Dante's dreams appear as phenomena whose precise shape, form, and identity are rarely clear. For Cervigni, the verb stresses the "peculiar inwardness"[184] typical of the pilgrim's dreaming. This association does, indeed, suggest Dante's literary construction of the dream as a space of introspection. This ordering of sleep and sight recalls the Gregorian program animating Marie's poem, in which the ecstatic experience of moving beyond the body into other worlds ultimately brought Owein more deeply "into" himself.

Emphasizing the apparently opposite perspective, Barricelli has showed that the dream episodes suggest the poet's "willed confusion, or fusion, of waking and sleeping"[185] in the overall landscape of the *Commedia*.[186] Boyde, in his book on sense perception in Dante, agrees: Dante configures dreams as experiences whose content is similar to the sense impressions we receive in waking life.[187] Which thesis prevails? Are the dream episodes mostly distinct from or mostly similar to waking life? To advance my own hypothesis, I note that Barricelli does not

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[182] Cervigni, 195.

[183] Hollander has impressively delineated Dante's similar lexicon of appearance in the *Vita Nuova*. See Hollander, Robert. ""Vita Nuova": Dante's Perceptions of Beatrice," *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, no. 92 (1974), 1-18.

[184] Cervigni, 195.

[185] Jean-Pierre Barricelli, "Sogno and Sueño: Dante and Calderón," (*Comparative Literature Studies* 9, no. 2 (1972), 135.

[186] Hans Urs Von Balthasar fleetingly posits the dream of the *Vita Nuova* as a phenomenon marked by an "aesthetic reverie, whose distinctive charm is the deliberate failure to distinguish between dream and reality." (41) See Balthasar, Hans Urs Von. *The Glory of the Lord, Vol. 3: Studies in Theological Style: Lay Styles.* Translated by Andrew Louth, Rowan Williams, John Saward, Matin Simon, San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986. 9-104.

[187] Patrick Boyde, *Perception and passion in Dante's* Comedy (Cambridge: Cambridge U Press, 1993), 119-120.

discuss the use of *parea* (and related appearance verbs such as *sembleva*) as specific evidence supporting his argument for the confusion of waking and sleeping states in the *Purgatorio*. This is noteworthy because the use of *parea* is *not* exclusively limited to the dream episodes, and its presence cannot therefore indicate anything unique to Dante's literary construction of dreams.[188] *Parea* also describes Dante's waking perception of the third step leading to Purgatory's gate (IX. 101): The step *seems* to consist of porphyry. *Parea* also describes what Dante believes he has heard in line 140, specifically the chanting of the *Te Deum laudamus* (IX. 140). Dante recounts the experience of hearing the liturgical hymn as akin to listening to singers who are "ch'or sì or no s'intendon le parole (sometimes clear and sometimes lost)" in the midst of an accompanying organ.[189] Clearly, the qualities of uncertainty introduced by *parea* are adequate to describe Dante's visionary phenomenology in waking life as well as well as his dreams in sleep. Put another way, if the objects of dreams "appear" with a certain degree of attending ambiguity, this is also true of several objects populating Dante's waking life in the *Purgatorio*. The lexicon of appearance, then, challenges the alleged opposition of sleeping and wakefulness as cognitive states in the poem.

The sustained presence of the appearance lexicon outside the dream passages suggests the fundamentally uncertain and unsettled status of *all* that Dante experiences in the *Commedia*. Granted, the poet often features interlocutors who disclose the ontological status of the poem's plot or its characters. One need look no further than the infamous moment in *Purgatorio* XXV in which Statius attempts to explain the physics that allows Dante, a materially embodied subject, to perceive the disembodied souls of *Purgatorio* as bodies (XXV. 97-108). Yet even this

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[188] See also Andrew Matt John, who draws attention to instances of "Dream Similes" (226) and "Dream Metaphors" (227) that occur in episodes beyond the dream narratives. Andrew John Matt, *The poetics of dreaming: Virgil, Ovid, and Dante* (PhD Dissertation, University of California, Davis, 2006), 226-7.

[189] IX. 144-145.

explanation may not adequately answer the question. Marianne Shapiro persuasively argues that the embodiment of the dead souls ultimately fails to align entirely with Statius's description. The poem's events may not unfold quite as neatly as Statius suggests in his phenomenological explanation, a fact which stresses the "status [of Purgatory's astral bodies] as images."[190] Simply put, "The shades represent persons or their souls but are neither entirely one nor the other."[191] This insight troubles the notion that Dante's inset explanations for the poem's perceptual logic always give the most accurate or settled account of the matter. The dreamlike quality of the entire vision persists.

Other features of the poem stress the continuity of sleeping and waking life in Dante's construction of the pilgrim's consciousness. For instance, in describing the pilgrim's dream perceptions, Dante uses the same strategies of epic simile by which he describes his experiences during the waking portions of his purgatorial journey. This is evident in Dante's first dream in which the pilgrim recalls the first impression within his dream as similar to "dove fuoro / abbandonati i suoi da Ganimede, quando fu ratto al sommo consistoro (the very place where Ganymede abandoned his own kind when he was caught up to the highest council)."[192] The passage alludes to the story of a superlatively handsome boy, Ganymede, who is raptured to the heavens by an eagle to serve the Olympian gods. At this point in the *Commedia*, Dante's reader is entirely accustomed to the poet's practice of casting his own experiences in terms derived from classical literature.

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[190] Marianne Shapiro, "Dante's Twofold Representation of the Soul," (Lectura Dantis, no. 18/19 (1996), 59.

[191] Ibid., 70.

[192] IX. 22-24.

What is striking is the way that Dante's specific allusion to the Ganymede story implies some continuity between the pilgrim's cognitive experience in sleep and in waking life. In fact, as if to attune the critical reader to this feature of the poem, Dante also uses an epic simile to describe the pilgrim's first *waking* impression after sleeping. Specifically, the pilgrim likens his disorientation upon waking to a similar experience endured by Achilles, who found himself "non sappiendo là dove si fosse (not knowing where he was)."[193] This passage demonstrates how epic simile affords some common degree of communicative success to Dante the poet in conveying both the sleeping and waking cognitive states of the pilgrim's always-extraordinary vision. Whether sleeping or waking, epic simile serves as a common poetic stratagem for expressing the stuff of the pilgrim's journey. The only implication can be that dreaming and waking retain some fundamental psychological affinity in the poet's construction of the pilgrim's otherworldly journey.

The continuity of waking and sleeping vision is reinforced by the adverbial phrase that marks Dante's transition into the sleep of his final dream: "Sì ruminando e sì mirando in quelle, / mi prese il sonno; il sonno che sovente, / anzi che 'l fatto sia, sa le novelle. (Amidst such sights and thoughts, / I was seized by sleep, / which often knows / what is to be before it happens.)"[194] The business of thinking and seeing bleeds into dream consciousness without a complete demarcation of the two. Here, Dante announces the prophetic quality of dreams to come. But he also drops a crucial hint about how to interpret his dream episodes. I note that the Hollanders have rendered "sa le novelle" as "before it happens." The poetic license of the English here is welcome, but it is also worth dwelling on the literal sense of Dante's words: *le novelle*, or, the news. Crucially, the news of what is to come (*le novelle*) is semantically related to the novelty

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[193] IX. 36.

[194] XXVII. 91-92.

(*novella*) by which Dante characterizes his second dream vision. The association suggests that dreams bring new visions, whether in the form of unexpected moral and intellectual insight, as in the dream of the stammering woman, or news of what will happen. In both instances, Dante weaves a semantic connection that associates dreams with novelty.

<p align="center">*The Unforgotten Body: Dante's Dreams as Digital Medium*</p>

Dante's initial dream, sometimes known as the dream of the eagle, has attracted much attention. Among the many features of this initial oneiric episode, one notes the importance of Virgil for activating the purposes of the dream for Dante's climb. To be sure, Virgil does not straightforwardly interpret Dante's dream of the eagle. In fact, the poet gives no indication that Virgil is precisely aware of the phenomenological contents of Dante's first dream. Instead, Virgil recounts the arrival of Lucy, a saintly woman who literally carried Dante's sleeping body to the gates of Purgatory while the poet-pilgrim was dreaming.[195] As a description of what was happening to Dante's body while the Florentine poet slept, Virgil's brief story offers little by way of a deeper understanding of Dante's oneiric experience. And yet—the facts of Virgil's story and the conditions of his storytelling ultimately communicate a similar paradigm of extraordinary visionary experience compared to what we observed in Marie's poem.

My aim in drawing attention to Lucy's action is twofold. First, I note that Dante could have no knowledge of Lucy's actions without the intermediary of Virgil's perception and narration. As someone who keeps watch over Dante's body, Virgil is uniquely able to observe in waking life what Dante cannot in dreams. Accordingly, the Roman poet's vigilance also embodies a kind of love. He observes and reports what Dante cannot see. This orientation of the older poet to the younger—one in which the bystander is given a certain perspective that the

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[195] IX. 52-62.

<p align="center">94</p>

dreaming visionary lacks—recalls Marie's own construal of the Cistercian monks vis-à-vis

Owein. The monks who guard the entrance to Marie's Purgatory do not go forth into the region

that they protect. As I suggested, this restraint is crucial for the success of the epistemic role the

monks play in the interpretive chain issuing from the experience of pilgrims, like Owein, in

Purgatory. Because the monks do not share a common experience of Purgatory's extraordinary

visionary sights, the Cistercians supply a kind of triangulation that I described through invoking

Ricoeur's implicit notion of hermeneutical communities.

In the case of Dante's first dream, the hermeneutical circle moves in both directions. Just

as Owein and the monks need one another to produce the most compelling, integral, and

evolving account of the soul's purgation, so do Dante and Virgil require one another. In

dreaming, Dante sees what Virgil cannot; while awake, Virgil also sees what is hidden to his

dreaming companion. Both experiences are only possible in virtue of the phenomenological

limits that constrain what each poet can experience. However—and this is crucial—those

constraints also form a pair of reciprocal freedoms and capacities. What the dreamer and waking

subject cannot see forms the basis of what each can uniquely experience. This complementarity

of experience is (literally) illustrated in William Blake's painting that depicts the relevant scene.

The title of the painting alone, "Dante and Statius Sleeping, Virgil Watching," seizes the

reciprocity that links the phenomenal experience of the sleeping pilgrim and the waking

watcher.[196] Or more precisely, sleeping and waking each posit different modalities of cognitive

experience that reveal the symbolic character of each to be mutually informative. The "willed

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[196] 116. Rodney M. Blaine explores Blake's visual depictions of the *Commedia* in "Blake's Dante in a Different Light." Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society, no. 105 (1987), 113-36. See especially Blaine's discussion of "Dante and Statius Sleeping, Virgil Watching" (116).

confusion, or fusion, of waking and sleeping"[197] observed by Barricelli reveals itself to be caught up in Dante's broader initiative to present symbolism as the fundamental language of waking and sleeping alike, the digital and the analogue, the embodied and the astral.

The limits and delimits of dreaming and waking—as complimentary forms of consciousness—directly engages questions of the body's role in knowledge formation. This has been a persistent theme in contemporary media studies, with one group of scholars emphasizing the essential function of the body for all thought. "No thought, cultural production, or human activity can take place without the body as its source."[198] Wegenstein's assertion reflects her disciplinary concerns as a media studies theorist. Standing in the tradition of Marshal McLuhan, for whom the medium was the message, Wegenstein reminds us "the body" is "the indispensable *medium* of experience."[199] St. Lucy's actions would seem to presage the media studies position staked out in Wegenstein's essay. The saint's manipulation of Dante's sleeping body seems to necessarily presume the urgent importance of Dante's material body for his journey, even during sleep. Despite the appearance (and possible fact) of disembodiment in sleep, the pilgrim's material body remains in the poem's view.[200]

It is remarkable that many of the leading voices gathered in *Critical Terms in Media Studies* share a sense that disembodiment—as a discourse, alleged experience, or trope—bears the negative trace of an Enlightenment-era effort to derive knowledge from the mind without acknowledging the intermediation played by the body in knowledge formation. For example,

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[197] Barricelli, 135.

[198] Bernadette Wegenstein, "Body," (In *Critical Terms for Media Studies.* Edited by W.J.T. Mitchell and Mark B.N. Hansen. Chicago: U Chicago Press, 2010), 19.

[199] Ibid., 19, emphasis in original.

[200] See also Wertheim's discussion of cyberspace as a challenge to reductive materialism in *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace*, 40-41.

Caroline Jones writes about the "ocular fantasies of unmediated knowledge"[201] on display in certain practices of museum exhibition. Such fantasies, she maintains, forget how "[a]bstraction from the body's senses also allowed for an ideological forgetting of the sensory path to knowledge."[202] Elsewhere, this wide-sweeping cultural forgetting of the body's essential role in mediating all knowledge is attributed to particular figures in philosophical history, such as Descartes.[203] These accounts of material mediation may not do justice to the Aristotelian heritage that Dante appropriates in the *Commedia*. Broadly speaking, Aquinas's metaphysics followed Aristotle by identifying the soul as "the form of the body."[204] For such a tradition, the soul was a description of the body's capacities, powers, and potentials. If theoretical knowledge was ultimately spiritual in character, Aquinas and Aristotle insisted that all knowledge derives from sense experience and, therefore, the body. But this tradition's bodily realism seems largely unexplored to date in media studies, which often focuses on Plato as the progenitor of a troubling trend toward disembodiment that reaches its zenith in Descartes before finding new forms in the world of digital media.[205]

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[201] Caroline Jones, "Senses," (In *Critical Terms for Media Studies.* Edited by W.J.T. Mitchell and Mark B.N. Hansen. Chicago: U Chicago Press, 2010), 98.

[202] Ibid., 93.

[203] See Wegenstein, 23-24.

[204] Denys Turner, *Thomas Aquinas: A Portrait*, (New Haven: Yale U Press, 2013), 73.

[205] For example, see Bernard Steigler's discussion of Plato's alleged opposition of "soul versus the body" in his essay, "Memory" in *Critical Terms for Media Studies*, ed. W.J.T. Mitchell and Mark B.N. Hansen (Chicago: U Chicago Press, 2010), 72. Even studies that show an awareness of the medieval emphasis on the person as body *and* soul often project a modern dualism on this medieval anthropology. I explore the consequences of this situation in media studies more directly in chapter four.

Bill Brown develops a compelling rejoinder to this genealogy. Brown describes a "melodrama of besieged materiality"[206] that has led to what he terms "The Dematerialization Hypothesis"[207] in media studies. According to the partisans of this hypothesis, the proliferation of digital and electronic technologies has obscured an awareness of the necessary role that material objects, above all the human body, play in the mediation of sense, cognition, and knowing.[208] As a historical claim, this thesis misses the mark. As Brown compellingly argues, such a line of thinking mistakenly identifies a devaluation of the body wherever a particular technology or medium seems to increase the degree or stages of mediation between the body and the objects it encounters.[209] This hasty conflation of distance with denigration results from a longer line of sociological thinkers who overzealously saw the "increase in abstraction to be a chief characteristic of the modern world."[210] The emphasis on intellectual abstraction as a denial of material mediation has led to a kind of fetishizing of an allegedly lost form of immediate relation to the material body and other bodies. But it need not be so. In Brown's terms,

> You can concur with Mark Poster that "the material infrastructure of the sign"—both the relation between signifier and signified and the relation between sign and referent—has been drastically reconfigured by new media without bemoaning or celebrating the loss of some aboriginal materiality.[211]

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[206] Bill Brown, "Materiality," in *Critical Terms for Media Studies*, ed. W.J.T. Mitchell and Mark B.N. Hansen (Chicago: U Chicago Press, 2010), 51.

[207] Ibid., 51.

[208] Ibid., 51.

[209] Ibid., 51.

[210] Ibid., 52.

[211] Ibid., 55. In his reflections on the broad philosophical and technological history of mediation, John Lachs introduces an interpretation of a hyper-mediated culture that exemplifies an anxiety over technological mediation in contemporary cultures. "The dark side of our productive, integrated chains is the broken world of shriveled selves." John Lachs, "Six Consequences of Mediation," in *The Cost of Comfort* (Bloomington, Indiana, USA: Indiana University Press, 2019), 26. Brown's approach to thinking materiality strikes me as both more optimistic and more realistic than the blanket opposition between technological connectivity and self-harm.

Hence, the innovation of new communication mediums—like the telegraph—has often incited

reactionaries to assert that a new degree of tactility has been lost between humans using the new

technology. But Brown wisely points out that any innovative medium just as readily affords a

new degree of tactility: The user of the telegraph, for instance, must use her material body to

interact with the technological components that make possible the sending of telegraphic

messages.[212] The materiality of the body is not lost or forgotten at all in this scenario.[213]

Materiality is reconfigured and remediated, neither denied nor devalued.

       I argue that Dante's entire poem illustrates Brown's challenge to the Dematerialization

Hypothesis, but perhaps nothing accomplishes this rebuttal *avant la lettre* so well as the

Purgatorio's oneiric episodes. Lucy's role in the first dream makes this clear: The

disembodiment that Dante experiences in his dreams never implies the concomitant erasure of

the dreaming subject's body in the wider context of the poem. The pilgrim will eventually

"return" to this body after each dream, just as I have argued occurs to Owein the knight in his

return from Purgatory. Yet Dante goes further than Marie here, dramatizing the pilgrim's

sleeping body as the precondition of his soul's nocturnal flight from that same body. In other

words, the Lucy episode effectively denies the putatively necessary connection between claims

to disembodied experience and a denial of the body's role in mediating experience more broadly.

Dante's dreams may even be construed as a digital process whose analogue component is

identified in the work of Lucy and Virgil, the figures who vigilate over Dante's material body

even as the pilgrim temporarily leaves the body behind in dreams.

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[212] Ibid., 57.

[213] Margaret Wertheim makes a similar argument in the introduction to *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace*. "There is a sense in which, with cyberspace, we have manifested an electronic space of mind. When I "go" into cyberspace, my body remains at rest in my chair, but some aspect of me "travels" into another realm." (41)

The invocation of digital and analogue media here helps to pitch Dante's dreams as components of a single cognitive process, one that admits of a bodily basis (waking life) but which allows for the intrusion of disembodiment (dreams). Whether Dante's dreams intend to signify a literal going forth from the body is neither an immanent concern here, nor is it important for grasping the value of the digital-analogue heuristic in this context. Ultimately, it is the poet's presentation of bodily ecstasy that counts. For the conceit of bodily ecstasy is the condition that makes possible the encounter with the symbolic world of dreams.

For Dante, then, acknowledging the material body as one fundamental medium of human knowledge does not foreclose the possibility of disembodiment as an isolated phenomenon. This, at any rate, is the aggregate effect of Dante's particular construal of dreams. Oneiric wandering is described as wandering forth from the body, a pilgrimage from the flesh. Nevertheless, such ecstasy always leads to a reintegration with the body. The simultaneity of the dreaming subject's embodiment (evident in Lucy's actions) and disembodiment (realized in the poet's construal of the pilgrim's dream consciousness) may anticipate the very tension that scholars such as Joohan Kim have attributed to digital objects. Writing in 2001, when digital technologies were still in their infancy, Kim observed how a digital object is both a thing and "not a thing, because it is not constrained by spatio-temporal conditions."[214] Upon Kim's account, digital objects resist identification as *things* to the extent that they are freed from the conditions of space and time. To be some*thing* (we might extrapolate to say some*one*) is to be subject to time and space. This presumption recapitulates the deep logic of Dante's own description of dreams: They are cognitive experiences in which the mind temporarily surpasses the limits of space-time (the body).

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[214] Joohan Kim, "Phenomenology of Digital-Being," *Human Studies* 24, no. 1/2 (2001), 89.

Digital technology offers the promise of new degrees of information exchange, consolidation, and transmission. This is the potential that Kim presciently observed in the World Wide Web.[215] This potential is, again, oddly resonant with the potential in dreams observed by Cervigni and others. Consider Kim's claim about the Internet: "The Net is a new kind of space where our "words and deeds" exist in the forms of digital-being, which opens up new possibilities of "in-between."[216] In seeking to understand anew the function of dreams in the *Purgatorio*, one could worse than to replace "The Net" with "dreams" in Kim's claim. It is exactly the novelty of "new possibilities" that emerges from the "in-between" afforded by Dante's construction of disembodied dreaming.

What is gained by viewing Dante's three dreams from the vantage of contemporary discourses of the digital?[217] For one thing, new categories allow for old insights to speak again. This practice is valuable in its own right, but it also enacts William Franke's invitation to the kind of "situational reality"[218] that Dante himself presumes in his writing. To use the categories of a contemporary discourse for reading old texts (the *Commedia*) is a way of hermeneutically appropriating Dante's project for a new era. In the time of this writing, the digital age has reached a new apogee. Digital technologies define modes of economic production, saturate the leisure of the world, and supply the metaphors by which common speech expresses a host of mundane experiences. It is, therefore, striking that figures like Kim can articulate the ontology of digital objects in a way whose terms are so similar to the function of dreams in *Purgatorio*. And

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[215] Ibid., 100-102.

[216] Ibid., 104.

[217] Recently, Alicia Spencer-Hall has productively used the categories of the digital and the corporal to construe the relation of medieval spirit to flesh. (Alicia Spencer-Hall, "My Avatar, My Soul: When Mystics Log On," 217.) I believe this same heuristic is well suited to seize the integrity of Dante's sleeping and dreaming self in the *Commedia*.

[218] William Franke, *Dante's Interpretive Journey*, (Chicago: U Chicago, 1996), 67.

this unlikely affinity yields at least two potentials. First, by casting Dante's dreams as digital phenomena, critics living in the digital age might seize upon the literary value that Dante saw in dreaming. Much as Kim construed the hopes that the Internet afforded many in the early 2000's, Dante's literary construction of dreams imagines the disentanglements from material flesh as the conditions for accessing the fundamentally new and even the impossible.

Secondly, to note the heuristic potential in speaking of Dante's "digital" dreams is to observe the possibility of something truly perennial. Indeed, it is to suggest that Dante's literary venture in dream construction taps into a recurring impulse in human consciousness. This is not to assert something banal such as, "Dante intimates or presages the digital era." Even if that were historically true in some remote way, it might not tell us much about Dante or about digital media. However, Dante's dreams arguably serve functions for the production of delimited forms of consciousness that the digital realm has concomitantly made possible, too.

A caveat: *has* the digital age made new forms of consciousness possible according to Kim's metrics? At one level, the question is moot in the same way that it is beyond the scope of this project to ask whether Dante "literally" dreamed outside his body. Whether the Internet has allowed for transcendence of the body or whether Dante actually dreamed his way beyond the brain in symbolic landscapes of unanticipated meaning—either way, one may observe the expectations that such possibilities project. Margaret Wertheim's research is especially germane here. She signals the cultural need to respect the experience of our subjectivities in ways that seem to transgress what the natural sciences claim are possible. Human subjectivity admits of diverse phenomena that do not easily conform to the categories of reductive materialisms. As Wertheim persuasively argues, the need to validate those experiences partially fuels a western

cultural fascination with virtual and digital experiences.[219] Dante, like the denizens of the digital

age, experiences a novel orientation to his usual embodiment in dreams. Such novelties still

require hardware: the dreaming body remains just as servers still anchor the "Cloud." Yet the

wandering *mente* experiences novel psychic experiences whose value cannot reduce to a

description of the material substructures of the dreaming subject.

 The parallelism of the role that material bodies play in each of these schemas supports a

challenge within media studies to the outmoded contrast of "Old Media" with "New Media." As

Anna Everett observes, this contrast often implies "a distinct privileging of the latter [that is,

New Media.]"[220] The privileging of the New implies a dubious set of Hegelian assumptions

about technological progress. More importantly, valorizing so-called New Media obscures the

kinds of recognizable affinities that link otherwise different historical phenomena (e.g. Dante's

dreams, the Internet). Is Dante's literary construction of dreaming a New Technology, or is

Kim's vision of the web simply older than it would seem? Either heuristic is helpful, but a third

interpretation might simply dispense with the distinction of Old and New Media altogether.[221]

The digitality of Dante's dreams conspires to reveal a perennial human tendency to imagine

disembodiment as the condition for radical forms of transformation. What sort of

transformation? Margaret Wertheim sees Dante as the precursor to a dangerous desire for

"cyber-immortality"[222] associated with the digital age, an argument to which I return in chapter

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[219] Wertheim, *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace*, 40.

[220] Anna Everett, "Click This: From Analog Dreams to Digital Realities," *Cinema Journal* 43, no. 3 (2004), 93.

[221] See, for example, media theorist Tom Gunning's challenge to the increasingly outmoded distinction between old and new media. Tom Gunning, "To Scan a Ghost: The Ontology of Mediated Vision," *Grey Room*, no. 26 (2007), 97.

[222] Wertheim, *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace*, 41.

four. For now, these reflections on disembodiment and the digital set the stage for a reevaluation of the symbolic and its role in the oneiric episodes.

Dreaming in the First Person: Approaching Oneiric Symbolism

I have noted that scholarship on Dante's dreams often attempts to locate the stable historical or cultural referents that the objects of the oneiric episodes may signify. In addition to this philological tradition, Michael VanderWeele notes a critical occupation with the dreams as extensions of inner phenomena.[223] In surveying both these interpretive approaches, I observe a more fundamental similarity. Both strategies are focused on the objects of Dante's dreams as concrete items seeking identification. Yet as valuable as both approaches are for enriching a critical understanding of the *Purgatorio*, they may prematurely pass over the subjective basis of Dante's experience as a dreamer in the poem. By this I mean that Dante the pilgrim, much like the poem's reader, experiences the dreams as something initially ambiguous. The pilgrim and critic face the common challenge of confronting strange signals, overwhelming messages, and cryptic lessons (Just what does the figure of Leah mean to tell Dante in the third dream anyway?). Unlike the critic, however, Dante the pilgrim lacks a sustained philological apparatus to help him make immediate sense of his oneiric experience. As a literary construction, the phenomenon of the three dreams is first and foremost a subjective experience that always imparts some degree of cognitive ambiguity.

By approaching the oneiric episodes in this way, I follow Mark Musa's critical invitation to explore the dreams "not as a vehicle for allegorical images and themes but as a part of the narrative, as an event, as an experience accorded the Pilgrim."[224] The pilgrim's bewilderment in

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[223] Michael VanderWeele, "The Siren and the Admiral: A Contest of Identity Formation," *REN* 70.2 (Spring 2019), 91.

[224] Mark Musa, "The Sensual Pilgrim: Dream I of *Purgatory*," *Rivista di Studi Italiani*. 1 (2) (1983), 1.

the world of the poem is opposite to the Barthian pleasure of the academic critic teasing out

riddles in the comfort of a library, even if Dante the poet may have occasionally fit this

description in his own act of composition. On the contrary, Dante the pilgrim experiences the

dreams as fleeting, troubling challenges to his capacity to make meaning. And so before any

discussion of what his dreams signify (either to us as critics or to Dante the pilgrim in his overall

narrative itinerary), one must first appreciate the riskiness that results from the dreams'

ephemerality. Much like the reader who encounters the *Purgatorio* for the first time, Dante the

pilgrim's own experience of dreaming is much more like our own experience of dreams: They

present phenomena whose ambiguity is the only assured quality. Whether a concrete and settled

form of meaning can be derived from them is a radically open question.

    With these reflections, I am not suggesting that the aforementioned critical approaches

are improperly focused on the problem of identification in Dante's dreams. That said, both the

philological and psychoanalytic approaches to reading Dante's dreams may easily skip over an

acknowledgment of the unsecured and unstable outcome of the pilgrim's own interpretive

process.[225] Yes, Dante's dreams invite interpretation from the pilgrim and the critic alike.

Nevertheless, this invitation implies no promise of success, no assured outcome wherein Dante

the pilgrim or his readers will finally tease out the univocal, "correct" interpretation of the

protagonists three nocturnal reveries. The imperative to interpret does not promise the critical

results that philologists and analysts variously seek with their altogether valuable tools.

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[225] Since I am invested in understanding how symbolic encounters form the preconditions of interpretive experience, this project's focus offers a kind of intellectual prequel to William Franke's *Dante's Interpretive Journey*. Franke's book gives a compelling elaboration of how Dante comes to develop understandings of his own experience throughout the *Commedia*. Much like Mark Musa's rare engagement with the dreams as a narrative experience, Franke expands that critical instinct to form an analysis of the entire pilgrim's journey on the basis of the protagonist's subjectivity. My project shares these impulses by isolating the function that dreams specifically perform for Dante's reception of symbolic awareness.

Approaching Dante's dreams in the way I am proposing invites a reappraisal of a term that permeates many studies of Dante's dreams: symbols. Discussions of the 'symbolic' are hardly in short supply in Dante studies, and it would be impossible to rehearse the vast fullness of that scholarly tradition here.[226] However, my focused goal for the present is to suggest that Dante the pilgrim's subjective experience of his dreams as symbols is best characterized by the specific account of the symbolic that Paul Ricoeur develops in the conclusion to his *The Symbolism of Evil*. This is clearest in Ricoeur's attempt at a definition of hermeneutics:

> Then there opens before me the field of philosophical hermeneutics properly so called: no longer an allegorizing interpretation that pretends to find a disguised philosophy under the imaginative garments of the myth, but a philosophy that starts from the symbols and endeavors to promote the meaning, to form it, by a creative interpretation.[227]

This account of symbolism follows from Ricoeur's adage "the symbol gives rise to thought,"[228] an expression which forms the title of Ricoeur's conclusion to *The Symbolism of Evil*. In Ricoeur's presentation of symbolic thinking, symbols are carefully distinguished from the objects of allegorical exegesis. In the latter case, Biblical exegetes, philologists, and certain critics go looking for hidden meaning that is latently waiting to be discovered. In that model, symbols are cloaks. Symbols become images that hide a deeper meaning to be resolved through identificaiton.[229] We can see a clear instance of this model in the prologue to Marie de France's *Lais*. The poet describes her own poetic practice as one modeled on the ancient custom of

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[226] Cervigni invokes the symbolic toward the conclusion of *Dante's Poetry of Dreams*. He argues that the dreams offer Dante "an enhanced state of consciousness of himself and his destiny, namely, a unified, though symbolic, vision of his past, present, and future." (203) The surrounding section of Cervigni's book does not go on to develop this notion of the symbolic, opting instead for a detailed consideration of the allegorical dimensions of the dreams. In what follows, I distinguish a particular account of the symbolic associated with Paul Ricoeur that I adopt as the basis of my specific construal of symbols in Dante's dreams.

[227] Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 355.

[228] Ibid., 348.

[229] "We have already insisted that the symbol does not conceal any hidden teaching that only needs to be unmasked for the images in which it is clothed to become useless" (348).

obscuring meaning so that "future generations" may uncover what the author has actively

covered. In the *Lais*, the poet claims to consciously endow figures, tropes, and words with

hidden forms of meaning that the exegete clarifies through careful analysis of text and context.

Ricoeur is invested in a form of reading that resists the effort to decode symbols according to the

objective criteria of philology, history, or the excavation of authorial intent. Instead, Ricoeur

invites us "to think with the symbols as a *starting point*, and no longer *in* the symbols."[230]

Symbols are now the point of departure for a process of elaborating unexpected ideas.

If dreams offer wisdom, it is not primarily because they bring Dante the knowledge

gained through deriving a single, univocal and "correct" interpretation to the exclusion of others.

In short, the knowledge that the literary critic strives to elabroate will not save Dante. His dreams

do not fully interpret themselves within the poem's narrative. Despite the apparent clarity of

Leah's discourse in the third dream, no character arrives to convey to Dante a clear

understanding of what his three dreams variously mean for his journey. No dominant

interpretation arrives as an object ready for Dante to receive as a catalyst for a specific and

premeditated form of personal enlightenment. What then do the dreams *do*? If they do not offer

Dante a comprehensive, singular account of their contents that advances his journey toward

sanctification, how do they advance his journey?

I believe that the dreams advance Dante's journey precisely insofar as they quicken his

mind toward the sort of interpretive processes that Ricoeur describes in his account of the

symbolic. Put in the simplest formulation, the dreams advance Dante's journey of sanctification

by radically catalyzing his interpretive faculties, opening the pilgrim's entire sensorium and

mind on to a visionary landscape that admits of no sure explanation. The strange, uncanny, and

ambiguous objects of Dante's dreams prepare him for the symbolic world that he encounters

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[230] Ibid., 355.

while awake. By dramatically accentuating the ambiguity of his visionary phenomenology, the dream episodes at once condense and amplify the necessity to interpret that Dante finds in his waking (embodied) visionary experience. The dreams, in this way, act like yeast, fomenting a process that extends beyond the catalyzing agent but which is hardly possible without it.

None of this approach should be taken to oppose the extraordinary contributions of philologists to a critical study of Dante's dreams. Valerio Cappozzo's philological investment in medieval dream theories has revealed a wealth of compelling possible ways to identify certain objects in Dante's dreams.[231] Patrick Boyde has observed how some of the appearances in the pilgrim's dreams will be recapitulated in the images of the allegorical pageantry that Dante contemplates in the Earthly Paradise.[232] These careful approaches to intratextual resonances and extratextual philological connections will continue to be crucial for deepening a reading of the dreams. Yet I believe the dreams also establish an interpretive model that sustains and appreciates ambiguity alongside clarity. My concern is to highlight the further value that the dreams impart *beyond* fodder for the pilgrim's allegorical interpretation of his experiences. Specifically, I find that the dreams radicalize the indeterminacy inherent to symbolic interpretation. Before a given interpretation of the dreams reveals a particularly decisive understanding that may influence Dante's journey, the pilgrim must learn the subtler lesson that all interpretation is, in Ricoeur's terms, a "wager."[233]

The value of Ricoeur's notion of the symbolic wager for interpreting Dante's dreams should be clarified in multiple ways. To begin, a thought experiment: one may consider what it

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[231] Cappozzo has also brilliantly explored the way in which astral bodies in the *Purgatorio* seem to cause corresponding forms of dreaming in the pilgrim. See Cappozzo, "La Strada," 201-202.

[232] Boyde, 132.

[233] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 357.

feels like to engage the objects of dreams upon waking from sleep. Surely each of us is familiar with the experience of trying to recall the form-defying and strange objects populating a dream occurring in the hour before dawn (as it occurs explicitly for Dante). We may struggle to remember and retain what we "saw" in the phenomenology of dreams, and the effort to do so may immediately tax language to its limits. If I attempt to explain a dream's events to my friend with the same urgency that I experienced while sleeping, I often run up against a failure of language to accurately represent (to give again) the impression that I am straining to articulate.[234] What this ubiquitous pattern reveals is the way in which the ambiguous symbols of dreams invite an interpretive process whose goal may never be reached.[235] However much I wish to understand what my dream signified in some transcendental and singular way ("But what did it *mean*?"), I may be forced to set aside this approach in favor of something at once more humble and ambitious. I may, in short, have to develop an understanding based on my best available interpretation rather than holding out for the one, unchanging "truth" of the dream. In other words, I must give up (or set aside) my desire to interpret my dream like a philologist. Instead, I

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[234] For another engagement with Ricoeur, though focused on the *Paradiso*, see William Franke *Dante and the Sense of Transgression*, 57. "The trace in which experience is first registered and retained is not subsequent to but rather coeval with experience itself, and in this sense there is no original experience to be remembered that it not itself already a trace or a retention of forgetting. To this extent memory is itself is always already a form of forgetting." (57)

[235] I depart here from Cervigni's assessment of the dreams. For Cervigni, the dreams are fundamentally intelligible within the framework of the *Commedia*. "Nowhere in connection with them [the dreams] does the text suggest that the content of the dreams overpowers the Pilgrim (except for the fire in the first dream), or that he cannot remember them, or that the Poet is incapable of recounting them, as the case is in many instances of the heavenly experience." (204) I would note that the fire that terminates Dante's first dream, which Cervigni identifies as an exception to his reading, is precisely predictive of the fire that will characterizes the conditions and content of Dante's experience of overwhelming vision both in *Paradiso* I and XXXIII (which I take up directly later in this chapter). The intensity of the first dream's overwhelming fire strikes me as a confirmation of a pattern rather than an exception to a rule. The intensity of the *femmina balba*'s smell, coupled with Virgil's swift intrusion in *Purgatorio* XIX, cause a violent end to Dante's dream in a way that continues the perceptual tenuousness that the *foco* first introduced in the initial dream episode. Finally, though the pilgrim may remember the dreams with sufficient clarity to record them, his rendering of the dreams is marked by a styled emphasis on the perceptual ambiguity that characterizes his oneiric phenomenology. The constant present of "seeming" verbs attests to the poet's concerted effort to dramatize the difficulty he experienced in the act of witnessing his dream contents, a difficulty which is carried forth into the poet's linguistic rendering of the recalled dream event.

may more plausibly approach my dream on the model derived from the Ricoeurean hermeneutics of the symbol. To seize any stable form of meaning from the experience, I need "an interpretation that respects the original enigma of the symbol, that lets itself be taught by them, but that, beginning from there, forms the meaning in the full responsibility of conscious thought."[236]

With these considerations, my goal is not to oppose the philological or psychoanalytical approaches to dream analysis with the insecurity topos that I am sketching here. In fact, the Ricoeurean model of symbolic interpretation is not an alternative method among others. I would argue that it is the often unspoken presumption of both methods. The critic's effort to identify the ambiguous objects in Dante's dreams, and the related task of discerning their specific value for the narrative more broadly, must acknowledge the indeterminacy of this critical task.[237] To both discover and frame such an acknowledgement, the critic may begin by paying attention to the psychological conditions that characterize Dante the pilgrim's own experience of interpreting his dreams in the poem. As I have argued, the pilgrim never arrives at the univocal account that we might hope for. Yes, Matelda will help to unfold the various meanings of the pageantry that wait in the Earthly Paradise. Yet no corresponding figure in the *Purgatorio* emerges to be play the role of the psychoanalyst or the literary historian. None of Dante's guides through the cosmos—

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[236] Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 349-350.

[237] In prioritizing the symbol, I intend to sidestep the longstanding debate between those who see the *Commedia* modeled upon Biblical allegory (associated with Charles Singleton and Robert Hollander; see "Dante "Theologus-Poeta," *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, no. 94 (1976), 115-116) versus poetical allegory (associated, for example, with Paul Priest in "Allegory and Reality in the "Commedia"," *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, no. 96 (1978), 127-44). My development of a Ricoeurean symbolism as the basis for interpreting Dante's dreams could be brought to bear upon this debate in vital ways, but that extension of the existing argument will have to wait for another context to receive the detailed analytical treatment it would deserve. In the meantime, Cervigni has offered a thorough philological exposition of the dreams under the aspect of theological allegory. Cervigni ultimately argues that the three dreams unfold a clear exposition of the poet's strategy of encoding the four layers of theological exegesis in his poem as announced in the letter to Can Grande. "In brief," Cervigni writes, "allegory, both as a poetic mode of expression employed by the poet as well as an interpretive tool to be exploited by the reader, lies at the very core of Dante's oneiric world." (208) This claim is well defended. My project, however, is focused on the symbolic rather than the allegorical as a new avenue for exploring the dreams.

neither Virgil nor Beatrice nor Bernard of Clairvaux—ever addresses the pilgrim and analyzes the three dreams on the model of a Freud or a Jung or a historian of classical and medieval cultures.

The absence of an omniscient interpreter is especially compelling given that Matelda, who receives Dante in the Earthly Paradise at Purgatory's end, would seem to be a likely candidate for such an interpreter: "venni presta / ad ogne tua question tanto che basti. (I have come ready to answer every question you might have.)"[238] With these lines, Dante the poet engineers Matelda as an oracular source of answers to the questions that the pilgrim's journey has generated up to this point. While we might expect Matelda to unfold the one true account of Dante's dreams, no such enunciation arrives. What comes instead is a very lengthy discourse on the nature, history, and purposes of the Earthly Paradise in which Dante now finds himself. Yet in all these lines (v. 88-144), Matelda's purpose is clearly to identify the novel geography that Dante has found at the end of his quest; the dreams go unmentioned.

The same lacuna characterizes Beatrice's commanding entrance in *Purgatorio* XXX. Unlike Matelda, however, Beatrice does mention dreams, even identifying them as the mechanism of her efforts to draw Dante's soul to God:

> Né l'impretrare ispirazion mis valse,
> con le quali e *in sogno* e altrimenti
> lo rivocai: sì poco a lui ne calse!
>
> (useless the inspiration I sought and won for him,
> as both *with dreams* and other means
> I called him back, so little did he heed them.)
>   (*Purgatorio*, XXX. 133-135, emphasis added)

It is remarkable that these lines disclose no explanation of Dante's dream contents. Beatrice offers the pilgrim no effort to dispel the ambiguity of his particular dream experiences by helping

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[238] XXVIII. 83-84.

Dante to identify essences, meanings, or connections that are latent in the dream. What she *does* make clear, however, is the capacity for holy figures to mobilize dreams as a vehicle for Dante's conversion. The verb *rivocai* is saturated with the semantic implications of conversion. To be called back is the very form of conversion, a turning toward an orientation now lost (which is richly signified by the context of the Earthly Paradise in which Beatrice's discourse unfolds).[239] So with Beatrice's testimony in these verses, dreams are the potential device of calling Dante back to his highest purposes. In these lines, it seems that Dante the poet allies himself closely with the spirit of the Gregorian theology of dreams that we observed at the heart of Marie de France's theoretical frame for the *Espurgatoire*. Just as the extraordinary visions attested in Gregory's *Dialogues* form the sound basis of a viable experience, so do dreams serve Beatrice's holy purposes for Dante.

The ephemerality of dreaming forces a strategy of interpretation that, once again, powerfully amplifies the insecurity inherent to interpretation itself. To explore this thesis in more detail, I want to move into a brief digressive engagement with Gregory Stone's analysis of that other great dream of Dante's corpus: the appearance of Beatrice in the *maravigliosa visione* of Dante's *Vita Nuova*. These considerations will set the stage for my effort to situate Dante's configuration of dreaming within the *Commedia*'s overarching interesting in transforming Dante's humanity as described by the term *trasumanar* (*Paradiso* I).

A Detour: Gregory Stone on Dreaming in the Vita Nuova

As scholars of Dante are well aware, Beatrice's appearance within Dante's *maravigliosa vision* in the *Vita Nuova* stands out as one of Dante's most beguiling literary inventions. For

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[239] For one elaboration of conversion in dialogue with continental philosophies of language, see William Franke, *Dante's Interpretive Journey*, 196.

considerations of scope and space, the *Vita Nuova* cannot enter fully into consideration in this study; the aim of this project requires a restricted focus on the comparison between two visions of Purgatory. Nevertheless, the comparison of purgatories can benefit from a brief consideration of one specific critical reception of dreaming in the *Vita Nuova*. The details of this reception, most notable in the work of Gregory Stone, parallel the approach that I adopt in my approach to Dante's *Purgatorio*. It is my suggestion that Stone's scholarly treatment of the *Vita Nuova* can advance the study of dreams in *Purgatorio* through a fruitful cross-pollination of textual criticism.

In his reading of the pivotal dream that frames the *Vita Nuova*, Stone observes that Dante seems to communicate the expectation of interpretive refinement over time. "Here, at the end of the *Vita Nuova*'s third chapter, Dante appears to bear witness to a temporal or historical hermeneutic "progress": the passage of time is also the passage from a diverse plurality of incorrect readings (*diverse sentenzie*) to the singular correct one (*lo verace giudicio*)."[240] As Stone points out, this vision of dynamic interpretive accumulation resonates with Marie de France's prologue to the *Lais* wherein she invokes a process of hermeneutical improvement across generations of readers.[241] Yet this reading of Dante's attitude toward dream interpretation in the *Vita Nuova* is, in Stone's view, a crucial misreading of the text. The *Vita Nuova*'s "*first audience has no idea what it* [the dream] *means*," a position that distinguishes itself from the radical philologist's reading which approaches Dante's dreams as material for gradually more accurate exposition through the tools of historical analysis.[242] Not only does the singularly

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[240] Gregory B. Stone, "Dante's Averroistic Hermeneutics (On 'Meaning' in the "Vita Nuova")," *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, no. 112 (1994), 134.

[241] Ibid., 136.

[242] Ibid., 135, emphasis in original.

correct interpretation of Dante's dream elude others, but Dante himself seems to lack such an interpretive advantage within the *Vita Nuova*: "What is more," writes Stone, "Dante himself does not originally, immediately, intuitively understand his own words."[243] Contra the particular philological school of criticism associated with Charles Singleton, Stone reveals the irony with which Dante seems to subvert his alleged assertion that "the true interpretation (*lo verace giudicio*) of Dante's dream has been revealed."[244]

The incisive evidence for Stone's argument is his remarkable observation that many interpreters of the *Vita Nuova* have been mistranslating a crucial passage typically taken to mean that the one true meaning of Dante's dream is now readily evident "*even to the simplest*" of folk.[245] Yet this is not at all what the relevant passage suggests in Italian. What is at stake in this alleged error of translation? Stone writes, "Dante's text very clearly says that the correct interpretation [of his dream] is perfectly obvious to the simplest persons; at the same time, it clearly *does not* say that the correct interpretation is perfectly obvious to the most sophisticated persons."[246] The result is an indictment of those professing the one true interpretation of Dante's dream. "Dante is *not* saying that the text (the dream, the sonnet) now is simply, understandable, clear, or obvious *even to the simplest* (persons, readers, audiences), but rather he is saying that *to simple persons, the true meaning is perfectly obvious*—or, *now that you have said that the text's meaning is completely clear, you are simple*."[247] The resulting account of interpretation is summed up in Stone's assertion that "*the simplest are those for whom meaning is always*

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[243] Ibid., 135, emphasis in original.

[244] Ibid., 137.

[245] Ibid., 143, emphasis in original.

[246] Stone, 144.

[247] Stone, 144.

perfectly obvious."[248] Again, we need not concern ourselves with the details of the dream episode

itself in the *Vita Nuova*. The dream vision of Beatrice in that text is a fascinating object of

critical inquiry in its own right, but the immanently useful insight for the present derives from

Stone's careful exposition of Dante's own attitude toward the interpretation of his dream. Dante

eschews claims to the one true interpretation, either from himself or from others. Robert Harrison

in *The Body of Beatrice* also finds that the text offers no *verace giudicio*, but instead leaves the

Dante and the reader commonly confronted by a kind of "hermeneutic provocation."[249] In lieu of

a definitive interpretation, the dream "provoke[s] and frustrate[s] hermeneutical desires to unveil

its meaning."[250]

In my view, this self-orchestrated pageant of Dante's own incomprehension is equally

descriptive of the pilgrim's relation to his dreams in the *Purgatorio*. And it is precisely this

subjective incomprehension of the dreamer seeking to interpret his own dreams that is the

unspoken, shared basis of both philological and psychoanalytical readings of the dreams in

Purgatorio IX, XIX, and XXVII. Just as Stone argues that the *Vita Nuova* ultimately eschews the

notion of a *verace giudicio*, so do I maintain that any singular and authoritative interpretation is

absent in the exposition of dreams in the *Purgatorio*.

But here I want to take special care to qualify the unique character of my own assertion.

The facts are not so simple that one may simply see a kind of immediate equivalence between

Stone's reading of the dreams in the *Vita Nuova* and the corresponding absence of a *verace*

giudicio in the *Purgatorio*. As important as this similarity is, I ultimately want to draw attention

to the specific way in which the dreams of the *Purgatorio* thrust Dante the pilgrim into a desire

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[248] Stone, 144, emphasis in original.

[249] Robert Pogue Harrison, *The Body of Beatrice* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 20.

[250] Ibid., 11.

for understanding whose lack of guarantee is a function of the fleeting and ambiguous qualities characterizing the dream phenomena. Again, the dreams catalyze an interpretive *form of awareness*, a sense that the waking vision requires a similar degree of alertness combining active cognitive engagement as well as passive receptivity to unexpected forms of insight and inspiration. Dante's own experience of the dreams can, as I have suggested, generate a critical model that supplements the work of figures like Cervigni. To follow Dante in the subjective immediacy of his dreams is to approach their content as Ricoeurean symbols—ambiguous objects that initiate an interpretive chain that proceeds from the symbolic object rather than working backward through the object to excavate some aboriginal intention.

My goal is to expose the value that the self's relativization in dreams discloses for the pilgrim's journey. Contrasting Calderón's *La Vida es Sueño (Life is a Dream)* and Dante's *Commedia*, Barricelli has argued that the two writers differ in their construction of the fundamental relation between dreams and human life more broadly. "Life," writes Barricelli, "is, for Calderón, the impenetrable ambiguity of the self, while for Dante it is the potential realization of the self."[251] This comparison positions Dante in a false binary. The dream episodes in *Purgatorio* certainly supply a theater for the self's becoming, unfolding, and constructive change; however, this positive potential in dreams does not contrast with an emphasis on the self's fundamental ambiguity in dreams. The ambiguity of the self, in my view, can go hand in hand with the self's "realization."[252] Ultimately, the dreams' apparently paradoxical conjunction of self un-determination and self-realization lays at the heart of the poem's discourse of *trasumanar* in *Paradiso* I to which I turn now.

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[251] Jean-Pierre Barricelli, "Sogno and Sueño: Dante and Calderón," *Comparative Literature Studies* 9, no. 2 (1972), 138.

[252] Ibid., 138. I explore this thesis again in the context of virtual reality in my forth chapter.

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Trasumanar: *How Dreams Prepare Dante to Transcend the Human*

As no shortage of scholars have observed, Dante himself originated the term

"transhumanism."[253] Specifically, Dante introduced this neologism as the infinitive verb

trasumanar. It appears one time in the *Commedia* during the pilgrim's introduction to *Paradiso*.

With Beatrice recently installed as the poet's guide, Dante orients himself toward the

consummation of his sanctifying journey in Paradise:

> Trasumanar significar *per verba*
> non si poria; però l'essemplo basti
> a cui esperïenza grazia serba.
>
> (To soar beyond the human cannot be described
> in words. Let the example be enough to one
> for whom grace holds this experience in store.)
>   (*Paradiso*, I. 70-72)

In *Paradiso*, to "soar beyond the human" elicits Dante's famed ineffability topos: Whatever it

means to transcend the human in this context is something that will be difficult for the poet to

say. Instead, he will have to show by example through the poet's experience. The notion of self-

validating experience as the measure of knowledge echoes Marie de France's Gregorian

paradigm for accepting visionary accounts on the basis of wonder. Where a direct verbal strategy

may fail to convey and to persuade, poetry just might succeed.

These are the poetic conditions that characterize Dante's mysterious notion of soaring

beyond the human, but what exactly does the term mean? Where does the transhuman subject

"soar" and in what sense does this gesture go beyond humanity? Heather Webb's recent

monograph, *Dante's Persons: An Ethics of the Transhuman*, has taken up this question. To soar

beyond the human ultimately means that the subject must develop into a person (or *persona*).

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[253] For instance, Andrew Pilsch shows a critical awareness of the term's Dantean origins in one of the most prominent recent monographs on transhumanism: *Evolutionary Futurism and the Human Technologies of Utopia* (Minneapolis: U Minnesota Press, 2017), 40.

Whereas anyone may be identified as a human being, a *person* is someone who has become conformed to the love that governs all human and divine interaction in the *Paradiso*. By undergoing penance, the human subjects of the *Purgatorio* gradually learn how to express a super-human (divine) form of love that will only fully characterize human interactivity in the Empyrean.[254] To become a person, then, is to fulfill and surpass some elemental understanding of what it means to be human. We might repurpose Simone de Beauvoir's adage to say, "A *persona* is not born but made." In Webb's view, the penitent souls of *Purgatorio* are becoming persons, and in so doing, transcending their humanity. And this process of acquiring personhood is what Dante means to signify by going beyond the human.

There is an obvious moral or ethical dimension to Webb's characterization of the transhuman in Dante. Becoming more than human is to become someone characterized by mutual recognition of others.[255] In short, to become more than human is to experience the sanctity that Dante's journey portends, but it is also to realize that sanctity as something that is profoundly social. Becoming a *person* means to relinquish a goal of a privatized salvation, a desire to become a good individual. Rather, to be a person is to become incorporated into community with others in a way that is increasingly characterized by the "Love that moves the sun and all the other stars."[256] In Webb's instructive reading of the *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, then, to soar beyond the human is to join an utterly new way of relating to oneself, human others, and the Divine. And this new way is characterized by that simplest and most abused of words: *amore*.

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[254] Webb, 28-30.

[255] Webb, 180. Webb's account of mutual transformation through the gaze resonates with William Franke's Levinasian reading of ethics in the *Commedia,* which I discuss in my conclusion.

[256] *Paradiso*, XXXIII. 145

Webb's thesis is not without precedent in Dante studies. In an article written early in his career, John Freccero noted—albeit briefly—that the notion of *trasumanar*, a "spiritual experience that transcends the human,"[257] must refer the reader to the intensely metaphorical spaces of the *Paradiso*'s final cantos in the Empyrean. Only there beyond all time and space do we find the fullest expression of Dante's "creation of a totally new reality out of elements so disparate as to seem contradictory by any logic other than that of poetry."[258] Freccero's contribution here has been to consider the pilgrim's experience of the Empyrean's "new reality" as part and parcel of the pilgrim's transhumanization. Hence, the experience of transhumanization announced at the *cantica*'s beginning is only fully manifested at the poem's end. On the basis of this reading, one might say that to transcend the human in the way that Webb describes is only possible through a poetics of a highly ambiguous phenomenology that scrambles the poet's effort to clarify what he saw and what it meant. Whatever moral dimensions that transhumanization entails, one *condition* for the pilgrim's reception of those moral dimensions is the attenuation of his phenomenological capacities to forms of vision that surpass all the rules of non-contradiction that are typical of normal embodied experience. Soaring beyond the human means learning to see one's self, one's neighbor, and the Infinite in a startling strange way.

With Freccero's argument in view, I argue that Dante's three purgatorial dreams intimate and initiate the pilgrim's experience of *trasumanar*. This initiation is qualitatively distinct from the parallel journey of *trasumanar* that Webb describes in the aerial bodies of *Purgatorio*. Webb's incisive exposition of *trasumanar* as an act of becoming a person revolves around

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[257] John Freccero, "Paradiso X: The Dance of the Stars," *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, no. 86 (1968), 85.

[258] Ibid., 86.

careful analysis of the gestures and actions of the shades that Dante encounters throughout the *Purgatorio* (e.g., Belacqua's decisive sitting posture or Manfredo's manual gestures).[259] What I am doing here is to reciprocally consider how Dante the dreamer seems to engender a parallel process of soaring above the human. This process begins in dreams and then continues through the topoi of fire and vision that pass through *Paradiso* I and XXXIII in particular. This trajectory, as I argue, emphasizes bodily ambiguity and confusion rather than particularity and specificity. For the spiritual traveller observing the refinement of persons, the same journey of soaring beyond the human will unfold by other means. This symmetrical journey of the *pilgrim*'s transhuman journey toward personhood involves a loss of bodily control and specificity. Yet to interpret Dante's journey in these terms does not contradict the emphasis on embodiment that Webb observes. We must constantly bear in mind that Dante is a stranger to the afterlives that he observes in the *Commedia*. It is therefore unsurprising that the pilgrim's experience of *Purgatorio*'s spiritual transformation will occur in a way that is unique to his status as a visitor. Whereas the astral bodies that Dante observes in *Purgatorio* journey beyond the human through a process of acquiring and refining a hyper-embodied form of social relations, Dante the pilgrim must submit to a process that invites him to lose his body. The road to Dante's personhood eventuates in the Empyrean just as it will for all the dead who presently toil in *Purgatorio*. Unlike the penitent dead, however, Dante receives preparation for the Empyrean in dreams.[260]

To spell out the connections linking dreams to the transhuman, I return to *Paradiso* I in which Dante introduces the verb *trasumanar*. Dante's always-precise use of language establishes a connection between the dream of the eagle and the dynamics of *trasumanar*. In *Paradiso* I,

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[259] Webb, 52-52, 47-48.

[260] Despite a brief reference to Harrison's book on dreaming in the *Vita Nuova*, Webb does not engage the dreams in her treatment of personhood in the *Purgatorio*.

Dante observes Beatrice orienting her gaze to the sun. In order to describe the difficulty of

sustaining such a gaze, Dante recycles the image of the eagle from the pilgrim's first dream:

"aguglia sì non li s'affisse unquanco (never had eagle so fixed his gaze on it)".[261] In *Purgatorio*

IX, the eagle was the agent of psychic ambiguity, the force that challenged Dante's

phenomenology in sleep. In *Paradiso* I, the eagle has become a metaphor to signify the limits of

vision in Paradise.

Dante deepens the connection between *Paradiso* I and the first dream in *Purgatorio*:

When the pilgrim imitates Beatrice by making his own brief effort to look directly at the sun,

Dante once again recycles the familiar dream-image of fire as a metaphor that expresses the

limits of Dante's perceptual capacities. The intensity of the sun's sight, we are told, was "com'

ferro che bogliente esce del foco (like liquid iron flowing from the fire)."[262] In the dream of the

eagle in *Purgatorio* IX, the poet describes the dreaming pilgrim in the eagle's clutches.

Crucially, the eagle raptures Dante "*al* foco."[263] Beyond the lexical connection immediately

established by the word *foco* in both cantos, the shift in preposition is highly instructive. During

his dream, Dante's vector of motion moves *toward* a celestial fire (*al* foco). In his waking

experience at the outset of the *Paradiso*, Dante observes the light emanating from the sun (*del*

foco). The pilgrim's direction of movement relative to the sun (fire) has been reversed. A new

distance between subject and *foco* has been achieved since the initial dream.[264] The sun is no

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[261] *Paradiso*, I. 48.

[262] Ibid, I. 60.

[263] *Purgatorio*, IX, 30, emphasis added.

[264] The distance implied by these prepositional shifts illustrates *la distance* that Chauvet identifies at the heart of symbolic exchange. "The symbol cannot carry out this task," he writes, "except in its role as witness to the founding faith of humanity: *the law of distance*, of lack, of otherness…" (Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 117, emphasis added.) In Chauvet's writing, "distance" sounds a distinctly Derridean note. Some kind of difference must emerge between others and myself for the symbolic to communicate the frame of awareness that it does.

longer dangerously enmeshed with the pilgrim's disembodied unconscious. In the dream, the

fire's intensity causes the dream to end. The pilgrim's vision and cognition mutually end as the

dream "si rompesse" (IX. 33). Here in Paradise, the sight of the sun may be difficult to sustain,

but some new degree of contemplation has been made possible in virtue of a distance that is

signified by the shift in preposition. Whereas the *foco* as the object of conscious experience was

too intense to sustain in dreams, the celestial *foco* before Dante in Paradise no longer terminates

his visual and cognitive experience. Thus, the visionary experience of *Paradiso* I tells the second

chapter in a story that began in *Purgatorio* IX. No longer thrust *al foco*, Dante now demonstrates

a tenuous but real ability to lift his gaze and receive light *del foco*.[265]

Let us return a final time to Freccero's guiding interpretation: the process of transcending

the human announced at the *Paradiso*'s outset find its consummation in the Empyrean. There are

well-established connections that expectedly link the first and final cantos of the *Paradiso*, a fact

that substantiates Freccero's reading. Whereas *Paradiso* I actively dramatizes the limits of the

pilgrim's visionary capacity, so does *Paradiso* XXXIII capitulate those limits to their extreme in

the pilgrim's vision of Mary, the faithful, and above all, the Holy Trinity. The drama of visionary

limitation bookends the *Paradiso*. This is not a new observation in and of itself, yet among all

the verses in *Paradiso* XXXIII that describe the shifting limits of the pilgrim's *visïon*, one stands

out for its explicit mention of dreams:

> Qual è colüi che sognando vede,
> che dopo 'l sogno la passione impressa
> rimane, e l'altro a la mente non riede,

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[265] Significantly, *foco* also appears in the narration of Dante's third dream featuring Leah in *Purgatorio* XXVII. In the adverbial phrase that describes *how* the pilgrim fell into sleep, Dante notes the time as the hour "de l'orïente / prima raggiò nel monte Citeria, / che *di foco* d'amor par sempre ardente (when Cytherea, who always seems *aflame* with fire of love, first shone on the mountain from the east…)" (XXVII.94-96). Here, love is construed as a source of illumination describing the timing of Dante's dream. Clearly, the repeated instances of *foco* form a discourse. Fire is associated with illumination and love, and these tropes converge, of course, in Dante's phenomenological visions of God (that is, the unknown) in the Empyrean.

cotal son io, ché quasi tutta cessa
mia vision, e ancor mi distilla
nel core il dolco che nacque da essa.

(Just as the dreamer, after he awakens,
still stirred by feelings that the dream evoked,
cannot bring the rest of it to mind,

such am I, vision almost faded from my mind,
while in my heart there still endures
the sweetness that was born of it.)
        (*Paradiso*, XXXIII. 58-63)

"Just as the dreamer" works to recall the fullness of a dream's contents upon waking, so

does Dante the poet now labor to recall his final vision in Paradise. An analogy of proportion

emerges here: Dreams are to the waking dreamer what the entire visionary journey of the

Commedia is now to Dante the poet. The implications are striking. First, the very process of

sweet (*dolce*) recollection that the poet undergoes to retrieve memory and description of the

Empyrean *has already occurred* within the poem itself. Dante's experience of dreaming and his

subsequent recollection and interpretation of those dreams turns out to be a synecdoche for the

interpretive dynamics of the whole enterprise of poetic creation. As a pilgrim, Dante must

respond to the intensity of his dreams with the interpretive wager characterized by the

Ricoeurean symbol. As a poet, Dante must similarly attempt to put down in writing what may be

impossible to write. With this explicit recollection of the dreamer near the *Commedia*'s

conclusion, we can discern a common thread that binds the theme of visionary experience from

Paradiso XXXIII to *Paradiso* I and finally back to the three dream visions of *Purgatorio*.

The ambiguity of individual bodies becomes another key feature implicitly linking the

Purgatorio's dreams with *Paradiso*'s final cantos in the Empyrean. Leaving the body is the

mechanism by which dreams convey rarified forms of experience to the dreamer. This

disembodiment prefigures the bodily ambiguity that saturates the pilgrim's perception of souls in the Empyrean cantos of the *Paradiso*. Even in the lower levels of the Empyrean, "the light from the bodies of the blest is so blinding that Dante's mortal eyes cannot discern in them any bodily form."[266] Bodily form, as Balthasar puts it, is troubled in the Empyrean. This breakdown of bodily individuality is intimately associated with the limits of Dante's perceptual capacities. At this precise juncture, Freccero's and Webb's shared emphasis on *trasumanar* as a change in perception and the topos of bodily ambiguity converge: The pilgrim, who was once himself a dubiously intact body during his dreams, now experiences in his perception what was previously the precondition of his own subjectivity during the cognitive experiences of dreamful sleep. In dreams, Dante's body is altered and made strange; In the Empyrean, the bodies that Dante contemplates are made strange. Hence, bodily ambiguity—the absence or confusion of bodies— significantly connects the altered states of consciousness that characterize the pilgrim's experience of dreaming and paradisiac contemplation.

By extension, I argue that the dreams prefigure and even initiate Dante's movement beyond the human. As Freccero helps to clarify, such moving beyond the human finds its completion in the form-defying contemplation of the Empyrean. On the basis of this reading, I argue that the dreams form the clear antecedent for Dante's phenomenology of vision in the Empyrean. To return to this chapter's central question, how do the dreams prepare the pilgrim for the remainder of his voyage? Once the affinity between dreaming and the poem's conclusion has been established, we may discern in the dreams a preparation for the forms of consciousness that Dante will have to sustain in order to contemplate the Divine, the Christian sanctified, and the whole company of Heaven. Going beyond the human means seeing things in a very strange

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[266] Balthasar, 72.

way, one that strains typical facultative experiences to their limits; the dreams provide Dante

with a taste of what awaits him more fully in the Empyrean.

As such, I submit that the dreams are neither exclusively predictive of Dante's journey

nor merely consolidations of what has already come to pass (though the dreams certainly

accomplish each of these goals in the poem). Neither do the dreams seem to give the pilgrim any

information that dispels the ambiguities of his waking visionary experience. Rather, dreams give

Dante the opportunity to submit to what he cannot fully understand, a kind of dress rehearsal that

will become utterly radicalized in Dante's contemplative experience of God in the Empyrean.[267]

The "hermeneutical provocation"[268] that Harrison identifies in the *maravigliosa visione* of the

Vita Nuova is, then, equally present to the pilgrim's relation to his own dreams in the *Purgatorio*.

There will be no one true interpretation of any of the three dreams. In the *Commedia*, this

provocation stimulates an interpretive process whose goal may not be a discursive chain of

thinking, either on the model of philological or psychoanalytic refinement. Instead, the dreams

provoke and challenge the pilgrim's assured sense of identity associated with mundane

embodiment while concomitantly preparing the pilgrim for the strange form of consciousness

that awaits him in the Empyrean.

Webb writes of the "common misconception that bodies are absent or de-emphasized in

Paradiso."[269] While this certainly describes an undesirable trend in some scholarship, I find

enduring value in acknowledging how the body is challenged or relativized in the *Paradiso*. The

body is certainly not de-emphasized in the final *cantica*, nor is it devalued. Nevertheless, the

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[267] In my forth chapter and conclusion, I take up the psychological dynamics of ecstatic contemplation in purgatorial journeys and virtual reality.

[268] Harrison, 20.

[269] Webb, 165.

bodies of the Empyrean are unambiguously ambiguous, communities of light that resist the pilgrim's (and reader's) effort to categorize comprehensively what is seen and reported according to the experiences of mundane embodied life. It is surely the case, as Webb claims with characteristic precision, that Paradise "is viewed through the gaze of an embodied Dante who witnesses it and reports it as an embodied and desiring poet, conscious of the fact that his readers are likewise embodied, desiring creatures."[270] And yet the pilgrim's experience of the Empyrean is characterized by a similar troubling of bodily particularity that was first experienced in the *Purgatorio*'s dreams. In dreams, Dante tastes something of what it is like to journey forth from the body; in the Empyrean, Dante sees others doing the same (or something similar) as they anticipate the return of their bodies at the Resurrection of the Blessed.

The provocations of dreams, to extend Harrison's term, prepare the pilgrim for what he cannot possibly anticipate while still a visitor in *Purgatorio*. Virgil, of course, cannot foretell Paradise to Dante. He lacks any precise knowledge of Paradise—what it looks like, how humans feel like when they experience its environs, what awaits the pilgrim at its farthest reaches. Insofar as the dreams prepare Dante for Paradise's consummation, this propaedeutic function is not apparent to either pilgrim or reader until the poem's conclusion. In dreaming, then, Dante receives nothing less than a foretaste of the Kingdom of Heaven that he will contemplate in all its strangeness in the final *cantica*. In other words, Dante receives a lesson in the art of dreaming while awake. He receives what the name of the second purgatorial dream always portended: a *novella visïon*, a new vision. In dreams, Dante first experiences a seminal form of soaring above the human.

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[270] Webb, 127.

Biotechnical Transhumanism: Ray Kurzweil's Computer-Body

Transcending the human in Dante's poem seems like a far cry from the discourses of "transhumanism" in the twenty-first century.[271] In contemporary media studies, popular culture, and scientific contexts alike, the term "transhumanism" conjures images of cyborgs and singularities, efforts by technocrats to transcend some aspect (or the entirety?) of the human condition. Exactly which aspects of the human condition are to be transcended is a controversial question, admitting of diverse answers in different cultural contexts. Tirosh-Samuelson has observed the heterogeneity of transhumanist projects. Because "transhumanists do not speak with one voice,"[272] it is difficult to advance general claims about any putatively singular movement that might bear the transhumanist name.[273]

Despite these contingencies, the term "transhumanism" only seems to loom larger and larger in the contemporary imaginaries of the academy, the cinema, and the marketplace. By turning to just a few of these contemporary currents, we can better refine our understanding of Dante's *trasumanar* while also situating its connotations within the pressing contemporary debates surrounding scientific transhumanism. In France, none other than a former national minister of education, Luc Ferry, has dedicated a book to the question *le transhumanisme,* a movement that Ferry summarizes in ominous terms:

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[271] Myra J. Seaman has asserted that contemporary efforts to transcend the human find roots in medieval cultures: "the contemporary popular posthuman is (perhaps unsurprisingly) tied to the premodern," she writes. Myra J. Seaman, "Becoming More (than) Human: Affective Posthumanisms, Past and Future," (*Journal of Narrative Theory* 37, no. 2 (2007), 250. In Seaman's view, medievals produced all manner of "hybrids" in imaginative literatures, and it is these hybrid persons that show a clear precursor to the trans- and posthumanist movements of our time. Ultimately, I will argue for a different approach that largely opposes Dantean transhumanism to the contemporary variety developed by Kurzweil. For one thing, the non-human element that Dante is grafting himself to is God, and since God is undetermined, ineffable, and infinite in Dante's cosmos, God is not a *thing* that can form a "hybrid" with Dante's humanity.

[272] Hava Tirosh-Samuelson, "Engaging Transhumanism" in *Transhumanism and its Critics*, eds. Gregory R. Hansell and William Grassie, Metanexus Institute (2010), 29.

[273] Ibid., 19-22.

> [L]es transhumanistes militent, avec l'appui de moyens scientifiques et matériels considerables, en faveur d'un recours aux nouvelles technologies, à l'usage intensif des cellules souches, au clonage reproductif, à l'hybridation homme/machine […][274]

Ferry's list grows longer, each entry elaborating unforeseen alterations of the human condition.[275] Amidst this cultural diagnosis, Ferry posits a shift from "l'Antiquité grecque"[276] to the present, an epochal change in how western societies once privileged "l'idéal thérapeutique" but now favor an ideal based on "augmentation/amélioration"[277] of the human body. These terms correspond to a pair of English terms that Ferry invokes as well: "improvement" and "enhancement."[278] The object of these goals is often the human body. The transhumanists seek to "[l]utter contre la vieillesse et la mort"[279] through the use of artificial intelligence, elaborate surgeries, and other methods that seek to expand the capacities of the human body.[280]

The principal target of Ferry's description is the infamous techno-giant Ray Kurzweil, a figure whose storied career across sectors of science and entrepreneurship have associated his

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[274] Luc Ferry, *La révolution transhumaniste : Comment la technomédecine et l'uberisation du monde vont bouleverser nos vies*, (Éditions Plon, 2016), 9. Jerry Aline Flieger takes a Lacanian approach to identifying three varieties of responses to contemporary transhuman movements: "'doomsday', 'celebratory', and critical.'" (Flieger, Jerry Aline. "Is There a Doctor in the House? Psychoanalysis and the Discourse of the Posthuman," (*Paragraph* 33, no. 3 (2010): 354). The value of Ferry's exposition of transhumanism is partly located in his refusal to align himself narrowly with one of these attitudes. His work, like my own sensibilities, contains both critical and hopeful dimensions that attempt to respond to the nuances of transhumanist cultures.

[275] It should be clarified that Ferry rejects a paranoid account of transhumanism just as readily as an insufficiently wary interpretation: "Parler du « cauchemar transhumaniste » est aussi profondément stupide que de parler d'une félicité ou d'un salut transhumaniste." (15)

[276] Ibid., 11.

[277] Ibid., 10.

[278] Ibid., 12.

[279] Ibid., 16.

[280] In Anglophone scholarship, Andrew Pilsch develops a similar genealogy of transhumanist projects in premodern and modern varieties. For instance, Pilsch summarizes Noble's position that contemplation gradually gave way to technology as the mechanism for achieving spiritual transcendence in western cultures. (7) That thesis deserves renewed appreciation in this appraisal of Davies's work vis-à-vis medieval purgatorial journeys. Andrew Pilsch, *Transhumanism: Evolutionary Futurism and the Human Technologies of Utopia*. Minneapolis: U Minnesota Press, 2017.

name indelibly with the sort of enhancement-based transhumanism that Ferry describes. Kurzweil's 2012 book on the brain, *How to Create a Mind: The Secret of Human Thought Revealed*, offers a current example of Kurzweil's assessment of human potential and the hope for transcending the human situation as he understands it. While the term "transhumanism" does not appear in the index, the text nevertheless telescopes Kurzweil's dominant theses on the human person and his hopes for expanding human capabilities through technological interventions.

Kurzweil understands human intelligence as that which is capable of "transforming the world in its own image." [281] This intelligence, we are told, is a capacity that "takes place in a brain structure called the neocortex…"[282] For Kurzweil, the human being *is* a body, and the many human capacities of mind, intelligence, intention, and feeling are reductively identified with the body's parts (e.g., the neocortex). As a result, Kurzweil has set about theorizing and creating objects that model human consciousness, such as the "digital neocortex"[283] that aims at overcoming the limits of information storage in the brain. Information storage and processing is largely described by "computation,"[284] an activity common to brain and computer alike. And while Kurzweil warns against prematurely declaring the obsolescence of the idea of "consciousness,"[285] his overarching theory of the brain allows him to look forward to a time when certain machines will "share in the spiritual value ascribed to consciousness."[286]

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[281] Ray Kurzweil, *How to Create a Mind: The Secret of Human Thought Revealed* (New York: Penguin, 2012), 1.

[282] Ibid., 3.

[283] Ibid., 123.

[284] Ibid., 185.

[285] Ibid., 212.

[286] Ibid., 223.

Even in this brief summary of *How to Create a Mind*, we already find a vexing consequence of Kurzweil's transhumanist pretensions. The material basis of mind implies the possibility of replicating human consciousness in machines.[287] Following from this premise, Kurzweil believes that we can anticipate the development of machines that will achieve and surpass our human conscious capacities, even attaining something approximating "spiritual value." Yet spirituality, for Kurzweil, is tantamount to a capacity for computation. Human consciousness at its most sublime remains merely an expression of an ever more elaborate function of calculation on the model of a computer's basic functions. Even if we were to grant the philosophical basis of Kurzweil's materialism, it would seem a strange leap in logic to reduce all consciousness to computational processes. Dante's dreams already challenge Kurzweil's tidy account of human-as-machine. For the kind of "soaring" beyond the human that Dante describes cannot be meaningfully described as an amplification of computational processes. Why not? Because the kind of form-defying phenomenology that Dante acquires in the dreams (and which come to fruition in the Empyrean) is not the outcome of an increase in information. *Just as Dante's dreams do not yield one true interpretation in the* Purgatorio*, so is Dante's oneiric visionary experience irreducible to an increase in the pilgrim's information capacity and processing*. Much of this chapter has been devoted to showing how Dante's dreams fail to supply the pilgrim with more information. It is even a strain to say that Dante acquires wisdom from his dreams, which would still imply a shift in his rational knowledge *of* anything. Instead, dreaming offers Dante a new mode of vision, one approximated most closely by Franke's notion of

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[287] For an excellent study of the body's role in contemporary transhumanist movements, see Andrew Pilsch, 110-111. This section contains Pilsch's focused analysis of the materialistic basis of many transhumanist projects in the twenty-first century.

experience that "precipitates into what is best described as non-experience."[288] The dreams

communicate an entirely novel mode of awareness, not merely the informational content that

populates a given mode of awareness.

We now come to the major distinction that sharply opposes Kurzweil's mode of

transhumanism from Dante's *trasumanar*. Kurzweil's materialist account of consciousness leads

to the hope that machines will exceed humanity in their supra-human capacities for information

acquisition, storage, and processing. In this story, machines are the primary subjects of

trasumanar, and they accomplish this transcendence through acquiring and connecting ever-

greater quantities of information. In nearly total contrast, Dante's pilgrim goes beyond his own

humanity (there are no machines to be found in the *Commedia*) by submitting to a received

expansion of his entire frame of vision. This is not to suggest (absurdly) that Dante's poem is

unconcerned with truth. In fact, Dante must submit to regular examination of his understanding

throughout the *Paradiso*, a process that only extends the sort of tutelage that Dante receives from

Virgil in *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*. The exams, however, are only one side of the story, only one

dimension of Dante's itinerary toward the Infinite. Beneath this explicit dimension of the story is

the trajectory of psychic formation that begins in dreams and carries into the Empyrean, a

process of expanding perceptual and interpretive capacities to contain the sight of self, other, and

God in a single perview that transcends what any truth (rational, scientific, or philosophical) can

represent or convey. Dante's dreams, like the dreamy environs of *Paradiso* 33, are greater than

the sum of a set of parts, even "parts" as noble as the truths communicated by holy figures in

Paradise like Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure.

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[288] Franke, *Dante and the Transgression of the Sign*, 142. My argument here illustrates the broad critique that Ferry develops against contemporary transhumanisms: "Ce transhumanisme d'un second type se pense lui-même comme un héritier des Lumières que comme un avatar du matérialisme en rupture totale avec l'humanisme classique, un matérialisme aux yeux duquel le cerveau n'est qu'une machine plus sophistiquée que les autres et la conscience son produit superficiel." (Ferry, 52)

To return to Kurzweil, the technocratic account of the transhuman seems to lack the conceptual vocabulary to even approximate this more integral shift in interpretive capacity that Dante conveys in his poem. Here, I am affirming and moving beyond Ferry's insight that I invoked earlier, the notion that premodern transhumanist varieties identified contemplation as the mechanism of going beyond the human.[289] The effort to fuse biology and technology in the domain of computational hardware can never, it would seem, amount to what Dante aspires in his dreams. In *Purgatorio*, dreams form no bridge from information to wisdom, from wisdom to expanded visionary capacities. Oneiric visions do not yield an increase in "greater complexity, greater knowledge, greater intelligence"[290] that Kurzweil associates with the evolutionary processes that will eventuate in the mechanical overcoming of humanity. The visionary capacity that Dante's dreams instill is not the emergent result of an accumulation of data. Dreams may catalyze interpretation, but they do so by quickening the pilgrim's entire frame of experience to receive what issues from beyond the rational and the expressible. *How* dreams achieve this for Dante is just as mysterious to the pilgrim and reader as the contents of the dreams themselves.

For the medieval poet, becoming something more than human is the result of a psychic process that is just as passive as it is active. The infinite God—well defined as that which transcends human understanding—is the mysterious, remote agent of the spiritual transformations signified in Dante's neologism *trasumanar*. Moral and intellectual revolutions must occur, the likes of which constitute the narrative of Dante's tumultuous journey from Hell to Heaven. But the details of Dante's God are not the most salient feature of this paradigm for our purposes. The greater point lies in recognizing that for Dante, and arguably for Marie as well, the pilgrim becomes something trans-human by opening himself up to processes that

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[289] Ibid., 10-11.

[290] Kurzweil, 233.

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challenge the autonomy, control, and individuality of the pilgrim. Indeed, the dream of the eagle itself is a clear example of the surrender that Dante's transhumanism enacts.

Neither Dante nor Owein manifest the symptoms of the disembodied technocrat who manipulates the limits of human flesh in order to seek mastery and possession of the subject over himself and his world. Neither pilgrim nor knight fashions technologies that extend the powers of the subject's material agency. Losing the purgatorial body always entails a loss of control. To accept that loss amounts to success in the *Espurgatoire* and the *Purgatorio*. As I have argued, the process of transcending the human in the *Commedia* begins with the sort of interpretive wagers that dreaming introduces, a wager that prepares Dante for the even riskier forms of phenomenology that characterize the eventuation of his *trasumanar* in the Empyrean.

What is more, neither Owein nor Dante loses his body as the result of an agential, willed action that seeks permanent disembodiment. Both pilgrims give themselves over to a cognitive process that catches them up in a riptide of changes that they cannot fully anticipate, orchestrate, or (above all) control. For this reason alone, the order of bodily priorities that Kurzweil assumes is inverted in the purgatorial schemas of Marie and Dante: For the biotechnical transhumanist, a focused engagement with material bodies (both artificial and biological) precedes an eventual existence without biological bodies as we currently posses them.[291] In more concrete terms, Kurzweil's use of hardware like servers and cybernetics serves a goal of freeing the human mind from its own embodiment. The opposite is visible in our two purgatorial poets: both knight and pilgrim find their embodiment challenged in dream and vision, but this temporary disembodiment forms a brief interval that precedes a return to the body.[292]

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[291] Kurzweil welcomes the age when "we will merge with the intelligent technology we are creating." (279)

[292] In chapter four, I will consider the contrast of temporary disembodiment with the hope for eternal embodiment expressed in the medieval expectation for the Resurrection of the Body.

But if Dante's medieval variety of transhumanism contrasts starkly with the materialist tendencies of Kurzweil's vision for the future of humanity, there is at least one variety of contemporary transhumanism that partially approximates the emphasis on the unknown that defines Dantean *trasumanar*. In Anglophone scholarship, Ioannis Mazarakis shares Ferry's estimation that many transhumanist movements aim at "the creation of a new type of being: the posthuman."[293] Picking up from Lyotard's discussion of the sublime, Ioannis Mazarakis suggests an intriguing alternative to techno-centric transhumanism. Mazarakis argues that many contemporary discourses of transhumanism are mired in a problematic scientific metanarrative that overly determines the purported outcome of a given effort to transcend the human. Even a slogan that might speak for most contemporary transhumanisms ("[A]lter the human being through technology")[294] falls prey to an outdated strategy of using modern rationality or reason to engineer some specific outcome. But in an age after the collapse of metanarratives, this approach should no longer be compelling. In place of these outdated approaches, argues Mazarakis, we should lean upon Lyotard's emphasis on the riskiness of the unknown as the basis for a postmodern transhumanist movement. "Because the need to legitimize the transhumanist prescriptions according to metanarratives of emancipation or efficiency is abandoned, pagan transhumanism would be open to an experimental approach with the sublime quality of the posthuman."[295] Mazarakis's goal is not to condemn transhumanism but to embrace a particular variety with a kind of Nietzschean affirmation. A sort of moral imperative results: "[T]ranshumanists," it is argued, "should embrace its sublimity and reevaluate their modernist

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[293] Ioannis Mazarakis, "Pagan Transhumanism: A Lyotardian Approach to the Sublimity of the Posthuman," *Journal of Posthuman Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (2017), 225.

[294] Ibid., 234.

[295] Ibid., 234.

visions of humanity's destiny."[296] The emphasis on the radically unknown here contrasts subtley but significantly with Kurzweil's transhumanism. While Kurzweil admits that machines will ultimately surpass human capacities in unexpected ways, his emphasis on the computational still presumes some rational basis for what we humans can expect from our future cyborg successors. Mazarakis helps to throw into relief how pretensions to transcend the human are often dogged by a deeply modern conception of what future humanity should expect. My aim here is to draw attention to Mazarakis's insight that a deep rationalism lurks in many transhumanist quarters. Instead of seeking to transcend our humanity according to fixed designs, why not invite a more experimental acceptance of the novel horizons that our human futures might bring?

As the progenitor of transhumanism (at least as a neologism), Dante offers a third way, one that affirms Mazarakis's call for an embrace of the radically unknown as well as the call to abandon the priority for technical efficiency. In the *Commedia*, the pilgrim's phenomenology in dreamscapes and the Empyrean dramatizes a radically open form of symbolic generation and interpretation. But—and this is the crux of my argument—the riskiness in oneiric symbolism is a risk to identity. A risk pertaining to the mind's capacity for building understandings, construals, and accounts of itself and the world it encounters. To put it plainly, Dante's most phantasmagoric visionary experiences in the *Commedia* (particularly the dreams) never approach the kind of material self-tinkering that is so central to Kurzweil's transhumanist efforts. Without denying the body's centrality to human life (even in extraordinary visions), Dante's sense of surpassing the human means surpassing our current identities as staked in our current accounts of the world, the divine, and ourselves.

Thus, it could be said that Dante's transhumanism contrasts with Ray Kurzweil's insofar as the former seeks a figurative and temporary transcendence of the (mundane) body whereas the

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[296] Ibid., 235.

later seeks to engineer a literal and permanent transcendence of the body. Kurzweil's late modern anthropology locates consciousness not merely in the brain but *as* the brain. Once the human person has been reduced to its neurological substrate, Kurzweil is able to imagine new ways of modifying that substrate in order to forestall mortality and enhancing the efficiency of human activity. But whereas Dante's *mente* is allowed to become a pilgrim to the flesh without the aid of machines, Kurzweil's transhuman subject requires the artifice of computational technologies that are joined to the human body. None of this is to strike a moralizing tone, but the contrast does reveal a critically divergent pair of attitudes toward the body and its relation to symbolic forms of consciousness.

In this chapter, I have explored the hermeneutical function of the *Purgatorio*'s dreams as an invitation to the sort of open-ended symbolic interpretation associated with Paul Ricoeur. This reading contrasts with the emphasis of many philological approaches to the dreams, though as I have hastened to emphasis repeatedly, this implies no contradiction between these critical approaches. My aim in all this has been to signal how Dante's representation of dreams and the pilgrim's relation to them suggest that the dreams themselves are a synecdoche for the pilgrim's entire experience of the *Commedia*. Simultaneously, the dreams invite Dante's readers into the same daring wager, a process of making meaning from his poem that models itself on the elaboration of the dreams' ambiguous objects in Dante's waking visionary experience. Reading dreams in this way is also, I have argued, Dante's own preparation for the sort of visionary experiences that he will sustain in Paradise. Yet this affinity between dreams and paradisiac vision does not amount to a superficial apprehension of some formal connection. My engagement with Heather Webb's work on the transhuman in Dante has shown how the dreams concretely prepare Dante for the necessarily strange forms of consciousness that his

sanctification will require. If he wishes to become a *person*, as Webb presents the term, then the pilgrim will have to learn to see in a new way. That education requires a leap from his body, a leap that corresponds to the leaping bodies of light that the pilgrim observes in the heights of Heaven. Finally, I have sought to contrast this picture of Dante's transhumanism with a contemporary technocratic version of transhumanism in the work of Ray Kurzweil. With this contrast in view, I turn now to Char Davies, a contemporary figure whose artistic work in the domain of virtual reality is, I believe, an inheritor of the purgatorial phenomenologies at work in the tales of Owein and Dante.

CHAPTER 3

LEAVING THE BODY IN DIGITAL SPACE: CHAR DAVIES'S VIRTUAL REALITY AS
DANTEAN *NON FALSI ERRORI*

> Personally, when I first experienced virtual spatiality in *Osmose* I thought that my odyssey was one-directional – that I was only ascending to the different worlds I was encountering. I seemed not to notice that the descents were there, too. In fact, I confess that some time went by before I could appreciate Davies' referral to some of these worlds as 'underworlds' or 'subterranean' worlds because the worlds in question were quite beautiful and hardly evocative of what I imagined a subterranean world to be. To me an underworld was something that belonged to the descent of Christ into hell, to Dante's hell in the *Divine Comedy*, or to Persephone's descent into the netherworld.[297]

> It is as though Davies has travelled back in time and embraced a medieval sense of spatiality, one that is physical and spiritual in its dual connotations of terrestrial and celestial worlds.[298]

> —Laurie McRobert, *Char Davies's Immersive Virtual Art and the Essence of Spatiality*

Much like Dante's depiction of dreaming, the artistic exhibitions, digital projections, and technologies gathered under the term virtual reality (VR) call into question the distinction between Old and New Media.[299] The use of headsets that still appear "futureseque," the projection of an artificial sense environment, and the replacement of one sensorium for another: These characteristics of virtual reality suggest something fundamentally new, but what exactly is new? Under scrutiny, the novelty of virtual reality appears more dubious than one might expect. Like Dante's dreams, virtual reality environments project imaginative spaces whose sense details are similar to those of ordinary experience but which introduce a novel phenomenological field in which events and relations can emerge which might not otherwise appear. A confluence of the

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[297] Laurie McRobert, *Char Davies's Immersive Virtual Art and the Essence of Spatiality*, (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2016), 77.

[298] Ibid., 86.

[299] See Frances Dyson, *Sounding New Media: Immersion and Embodiment in the Arts and Culture* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: U California Press, 2009), 110.

expected and the unexpected typifies virtual environments. This is no less the case for the dreams

of Dante's pilgrim and the visions of Marie's knight.

The leap to a critical study of virtual reality objects is staked on this fundamental

similarity. Owein's visions and Dante's oneiric wandering supply novel forms of consciousness

to their literary protagonists, a novelty that bears a strong qualitative affinity to a tradition of

virtual reality design and associated user experience. To trace the form of this similarity will

ultimately position me to argue that the virtual reality of artist Char Davies is appropriately

construed as a contemporary form of purgatorial vision, a *novella visiön* to use the idiom by

which Dante describes his second dream.

Virtual Reality: From Space Training to the Fine Arts

In 2017, a conferenced called Wired Live gathered "[h]undreds of leaders from the

worlds of technology, art, business and design" for a showcase of innovations in various

fields.[300] Among them was Dado Valentic. Valentic's initiative, Acute Art, had focused on

developing the "First Virtual Reality Art Gallery," which included a simulated environment

designed by Olafur Eliasson entitled, "Rainbow." During a ceremony detailing the principles

animating the environment's design, Eliasson said this: "The VR gave a really radical answer to

a physical relationship to your own body and an interface. The work encourages the user to

become active and produce your own world."[301] The VR designer, it seemed, was celebrating the

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[300] Wired UK, "Welcome to the First Virtual Reality Art Gallery," YouTube video, 5:01, April 19, 2010, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7SDNsd6SzPw. It is fascinating to note that Miriam White-Le Goff also uses the French word "interface" to describe the door to Patrick's Purgatory: "Le Purgatoire de saint Patrick présente la particularité de constituer une interface entre ce monde et l'autre et par là, entre l'humain et le divin" (*Le Purgatoire*, 33). White-Le Goff does not discuss virtual reality or digital technologies in the cited passage, a fact which suggests how the lexicon of digital interface has permeated academic as well as popular consciousness.

[301] Wired UK, "Welcome to the First Virtual Reality Art Gallery."

capacity of his work to generate a new kind of interactive relationship between the participant's body and the virtual worlds it could encounter.

In fact, the origins of participatory virtual reality had emerged over two decades before Eliassion's remarks. At the conclusion of the 1980's, Nicole Strenger created the "first immersive Virtual Reality movie": *Angels*.[302] Produced from 1989-1991, the brief video positions a viewer in a black space interrupted by the presence of multi-colored, unidentifiable objects. A disembodied hand floats among these objects. The hand does not so much inspect the objects with its digits so much as hover among them. The hand, it seems, is not quite a hand at all, not a manipulative force that extends the power of an embodied subject. Because the hand is detached from a body, it becomes an ambiguous object. Does the hand "stand for" the viewing subject's power to manipulate the contents of psychic experience? The strange object became an index for the possibilities associated with virtual reality as a form of art.

Fig. 1. Nicole Strenger's Angels*.*

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[302] lasiemaime, "Nicole Stenger ANGELS A Virtual Reality Movie 1989-1991," YouTube, 2:19, November 17, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RhSzFDFe8KU.

The title of the film, *Angels*, demonstrates the constant fascination among VR artistry with religious categories and images. The origins of VR artistry, then, show an early occupation with the angelic.

Shortly after the production of *Angels*, Char Davies brought the artistic use of VR to new degrees of technological and aesthetic expansiveness. In 1995 and 1998, Davies produced two virtual immersive environments: *Osmose* and *Ephémère*, respectively. Working as both an artist and a scholar in English and French, Davies designs virtual reality in practice and engages her work as a theorist. Like Nicole Strenger, Davies was among the first artists to create virtual reality environments. Her computer simulations have been the subject of much academic research, attracting the attention of phenomenologists, media studies scholars, and even philosophers of education. Even as virtual reality (and augmented reality, or, AR) technologies have developed to new degrees of technical prowess, Davies's pioneering work continues to fascinate scholars from every corner of the humanities.

In 2007, Laurie McRobert dedicated a book-length project to Davies's work in *Char Davies's Immersive Virtual Art and the Essence of Spatiality*. McRobert details the origins of Davies's work in the late 1980's and early 1990's. These were the years during which NASA was developing head-mounted display technology. This head-mounted display (HDM) consisted in a "wide-angled, stereoscopic display system powered by a host computer and external hardware, such as graphics and sound synthesizing equipment, to create a digitally immersive space."[303] The HDM was developed to serve technical needs, but figures like Char Davies saw aesthetic potential in these headset technologies. Eventually, the same technology that had expanded the capacities of astronauts became Char Davies's paintbrush. The results were *Osmose* and *Ephémère*.

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[303] McRobert, *Char Davies*, 4.

As immersive virtual reality environments, Davies's *Osmose* and *Ephémère* invite the

headset-user—or the "immersant," following McRobert's term—to experience an artificial visual

environment. To orient viewers to the premises of her own work, Davies included descriptions of

both projects on her website. These authorial glosses construe the work of *Osmose* and

Ephémère as "grounded in 'nature' as metaphor."[304] Davies's description serves as a sort of gloss

to her virtual artistry, establishing an expectation that the phenomenal objects populating her

worlds are closely affiliated with the metaphorical.

Upon their initial release, Davies's virtual environments were available to the public

through installation events in which a single subject would wear the VR headset while standing

before an audience. A large screen behind the subject, or "immersant," would display the visual

content of the immersant's view.

Fig 2. An immersant dons a headset to interact with Davies's virtual environment Osmose *1995.[305]*

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[304] Ibid., 5.

[305] All screenshots taken from Immersence, "Osmose (1995) - Char Davies - 16 min.," 16:55, June 3, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=54O4VP3tCoY&t=515s.

Fortunately for audiences and researchers alike, those initial immersive installation events were captured on film, allowing feature viewers a limited form of access to first-person immersant experience. In the video archiving the former work, a text card appears that sets the stage for the work:

> Osmose is an immersive virtual environment utilizing a head-mounted display and motion tracking of breath and balance. As in the scuba diver's practice of buoyancy control, one breathes in to float upwards, breathes out to fall, and leans gently to change direction.

As we watch the immersant position the headset, an epigraph appears:

> "...by changing space, / by leaving the space of one's usual sensibilities / one enters into communication / with a space that is physically innovating... / For we do not change place, we change our Nature."[306]

The immersant's breath, then, is the mechanism by which the immersant changes position within the virtual environment. In *Osmose*, objects can emerge from within the space that seems to be simultaneously occupied by the immersant's body. Much as a camera can apparently pass through walls in a computer-generated film sequence, so can a tree-like object suddenly appear directly from the "eyes" of the immersant before floating away. This phenomenon can give rise to the awareness that the material body is absent. Other objects are able to pass through the immersive body, suggesting that the objects themselves may be more material or substantial than the perceiving body itself.

Char Davies also identifies the "semi-transparency and translucency"[307] that typify the visual objects in both *Osmose* and *Ephémère*. It remains, I believe, just as crucial to focus on

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[306] Immersence, "Osmose." Filmed August 1995. YouTube video, 16:55. Posted June 3, 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=54O4VP3tCoY&t=4s.

[307] Char Davies, "Virtual Space," in *Space: In Science, Art and Society*, ed. by François Penz, Gregory Radick and Robert Howell, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), Section: "The virtual environments *Osmose* and *Ephémère*." http://www.immersence.com/publications/char/2004-CD-Space.html.

Davies's avowal of the amorphous virtual body, which we might call the translucent subject.[308] It is not the case that Davies's virtual objects are physically amorphous in contrast to a defined, material immersive body. The subjective body allows objects to pass through it. In Davies's words, "The immersant can glide through this realm, floating among and through its various elements. . ."[309] There is no depiction of virtual objects bumping off the imagined surface of the immersive body, no representation of translucent objects finding a source of inertia through contact with a materially opaque subject. On the contrary, the immersant quickly realizes that his or her virtual body is qualitatively the same as the objects whose porosity defines the environments of *Osmose* and *Ephémère*. The immersive body is just as ethereal as the objects that confront the virtual body.

There are two pivotal factors working together here: the transparency of the immersive body and its lack of appearance to the immersant. The later point—the absence of the virtual body—has been the object of Heli Puhakka's research involving drawing within virtual environments. Puhakka discusses "Moire's theory of leaving the body behind" and Popat's account of "the missing body."[310] In Puhakka's estimation, these two scholars' descriptions each describe constitutive aspects of "disembodiment as the sensation of being unable to view the physical body in VR."[311] Observing the immersant's experience of *Osmose* and *Ephémère* shows a crucial absence of bodily representation. There are no hands, arms, or legs that meet the

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[308] In a brief article, Davies and Harrison allude to the subject's capacity to "pass through things". Char Davies and John Harrison, "*Osmose*: Towards Broadening the Aesthetics of Virtual Reality," *ACM SIGGRAPH Computer Graphics* 30, no. 4 (1996), 27.

[309] ", "Virtual Space," Section: "A journey through the virtual realm of Osmose." http://www.immersence.com/publications/char/2004-CD-Space.html

[310] Heli Puhakka, "From Analogue to Digital: Drawing the human form by examining creative practices, techniques and experiences of practitioners within immersive technology," M.A. thesis, (Queensland University of Technology, 2019), 100.

[311] Ibid., 100.

viewer's gaze. The viewer's visual capacity operates in isolation from any appearance of the sensing body.

In research focused on the use of VR technologies for drawing, Puhakka came to observe the possible simultaneity of disembodiment and embodiment. As part of her work, Puhakka created drawings while experiencing a VR sensorium in which she could not see her hands while at work. The result was an experience in which "embodiment and disembodiment can occur at the same time when drawing in the virtual environment."[312] This account of simultaneous embodiment and disembodiment resonates with Char Davies's interpretation of her own virtual worlds: "feelings of disembodiment can coexist with those of embodiment."[313] Davies, then, takes a less rigid stance than some of her critics on the question of the immersant's body during VR experience. She leaves open both embodiment and disembodiment as valid responses to immersion within *Osmose* and *Ephémère*.

The status of the body in Davies's virtual environments reflects a more longstanding debate in scholarship on VR: When engaged in a virtual reality experience, is the VR subject outside of the material body or within it? As early as 1999, the year after the release of Davies's *Ephémère*, Murray and Sixsmith drew attention to this problem when they posed the question in its simplest possible iteration: for the VR subject, is experience characterized by "Dis-embodiment or Embodiment?"[314] Sixsmith and Murray summarize the drift of early VR scholarship on the question of the body in virtual environments. In the earliest scholarly

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[312] Ibid., 100.

[313] Char Davies, "Changing Space: Virtual Reality as an Arena of Embodied Being," In *The Virtual Dimension: Architecture, Representation, and Crash Culture*. Edited by John Beckmann (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998), 149.

[314] Ibid., 318.

criticism, developed by figures like Bogard, VR was often understood as a "disembodying medium," one that freed the subject's "wandering mind into cyberspace."[315]

Later scholars came to distance themselves from the disembodiment interpretation. Such a construal of experiencing VR reinforced a nefarious "mind/body" division.[316] At stake in this scholarly disagreement was the perceived need to recover and even protect the indissolubly fundamental role of the body in all conscious experience. As Sixsmith and Murray summarize the thought of one scholar, "We cannot understand who or what we are, or explicate lived experience, without reference to embodiment."[317] Mark Hansen has similarly described an impulse among virtual artistry toward "perfect simulation and the lure of disembodiment."[318] Oliver Grau likewise opens his chapter on Davies's virtual projects with the observation that "[m]any virtual environments reduce the observer to a disembodied state within a Cartesian space."[319] In concert with this critical tradition, Char Davies herself frequently claims the importance of material embodiment for her own artistic intentions:

> Rather than approaching the medium as a means of escape into some disembodied techno-Utopian fantasy, I see it as a means of return, i.e., of facilitating a temporary release from our habitual perceptions and culturally-biased assumptions about being in the world, to enable us, however momentarily, to perceive ourselves and the world around us *freshly*.[320]

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[315] Craig D. Murray and Judith Sixsmith, "The Corporeal Body in Virtual Reality," *Ethos* 27, no. 3 (1999), 318.

[316] Ibid., 318.

[317] Ibid., 320.

[318] Mark Hansen, *Bodies in Code: Interfaces with Digital Media* (London: Routledge, 2006), 113.

[319] Oliver Grau, *Visual Art: From Illusion to Immersion*, trans. by Gloria Custance, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 193.

[320] Davies, "Virtual Space," Introduction, http://www.immersence.com/publications/char/2004-CD-Space.html.

Davies's comments construe disembodiment in terms of a broader desire for transcending the body altogether. By way of resisting a culture that would escape the body, Davies's glosses her work as a form of experience ordered toward a reappraisal of the body and the bodily world.

In public comments, the artist has consistently reaffirmed these priorities. In an interview with Penny Rafferty, Davies asserted the connection between a realist aesthetic and design features that favor user control. She went on to state that these elements "reinforce a disembodied, controlling and often aggressive stance towards the world."[321] The claim is that the undesirable features of VR that focus on user control have a causal relationship to an experience of disembodiment: According to Davies, the urge toward virtual disembodiment goes hand in hand with a toxic drive to manipulate environments. Davies's priority for encouraging an immersive encounter with the material body (as opposed to disembodiment) would seem to find support in Frances Dyson's narration of her own immersion experience in Davies's VR environments. Dyson recalls wearing the cumbersome, heavy vest that the immersant must wear to transmit information from the immersant's breath to the computer system that modulates the virtual environment. The vest's unwieldiness consistently brought the immersant's focus back to her material body.[322]

Yet for all these reminders of the body's materiality, and perhaps in spite of the artist's explicit intentions, immersants within *Osmose* and *Ephémère* may still report feelings of disembodiment, much as Laurie McRobert observed upon completing her initial immersion in Davies's virtual worlds. McRobert reports such an initial experience of leaving behind her body,

[321] Penny Rafferty, "Virtual Reality // Healing Practice: An Interview with Char Davies," Interview January 4, 2017. https://www.berlinartlink.com/2017/01/04/virtual-reality-healing-practice-an-interview-with-char-davies/.

[322] Dyson, 116-117. See also Anne Francis Wysocki since the immersant's breath is the single factor that changes the immersant's movement through virtual space, the immersant may become especially attuned the reality of their material breathing; Anne Frances Wysocki, "Unfitting Beauties of Transducing Bodies," in *Rhetorics and Technologies*, ed. by Stuart A. Selber, (Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 2010), 97.

but she subsequently rejects this interpretation. Throughout her book, McRobert posits the notion that Davies's work communicates a heightened sort of encounter with the human body. By participating in Davies's virtual immersive environments, the immersant stands to reconnect to "a deeply rooted, archaic biological sense of humanness which is instinctive and grounded in our bodies."[323] And yet McRobert's analytical emphasis on the material body contrasts sharply with her initial experience as an immersant within Davies's *Ephémère*: "At first I believed *I had undergone a disembodied spiritual experience*, but some months later I was to agree with the artist that it had been what she intended it to be: an embodied experience with the senses fully engaged with this artificially produced, three-dimensional space."[324] In this case, the immersant's spontaneous impression of disembodiment did not prevail.

McRobert describes here a shift in her evaluation of her own experience. Whereas she initially interpreted her immersion within Davies's virtual environments as a kind of disembodied state, McRobert ultimately set aside this perspective in favor of one that was allegedly more consonant with the writings of the environment's creator. McRobert's shift in self-evaluation may not merely index a difference between an artist's intent and a user's subjective interpretation of her own experience. At a deeper level, the tension between McRobert's perception of her own disembodiment and Davies's stated emphasis on the subject's embodiment signals the difficulty of dismissing claims to disembodiment within *Osmose* and *Ephémère*. This is made more complex by the fact that, as I noted earlier, Davies herself maintains a complex view toward disembodiment. In at least one instance among her writings and interviews, Char Davies explicitly acknowledges the validity of disembodiment as a

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[323] McRobert, *Char Davies*, 37.

[324] Ibid., 23, emphasis added.

meaningful immersive response. "Here [in *Osmose*], ephemeral virtuality coexists with an apparent three-dimensionality of form, and feelings of disembodiment can coexist with those of embodiment (given the use of an embodying interface as in *Osmose*)."[325] Neither Davies's complex intentions, nor the reports of immersant experience, can decisively dismiss the impression of disembodiment that accompanies certain immersive subjects as they sojourn within *Osmose* and *Ephémère*.

To frame my own thesis on the question of the virtual body in Davies's worlds, I engage in a detailed reading of the work of Laurie McRobert, the only scholar who has produced a monograph entirely dedicated to a study of Davies's virtual artistry. McRobert frequently approaches Davies's VR environments through comparisons to various forms of premodern media, such as medieval Carmelite spirituality and Byzantine iconography. I frame my own narration of disembodiment in *Osmose* and *Ephémère* in conversation with McRobert's discussion of icons, dreams, and the symbolic. This dialogue with McRobert's work precedes my own constructive claim that the symbolic ambiguity that typifies Davies's work invites an experience of disembodiment, an experience that valuably recovers a medieval relation between symbols and reality on display in Marie's *Espurgatoire* and Dante's *Purgatorio*.

Postmodern VR, Premodern Antecedents: New Directions and Course Corrections

Scholars of Davies's work have begun to explore unlikely affinities linking various virtual realities to specific premodern traditions in aesthetics, religious practice, and ideas. Some scholars, such as Cami Nelson, see prefiguration as the appropriate model for understanding this affinity. Nelson's research focuses on Leonardo da Vinci's practice of "sfumato, the presentation

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[325] Davies, "Changing Space…," 149.

of objects without lines or borders."[326] Vinci's exercise of sfumato, we are reminded, was motivated by a polemical distrust of linear perspective, specifically the alleged capacity of linearity to represent "reality as accurately as possible."[327] In Nelson's view, the practice of depicting objects without subjection to linear perspective prefigures the computer era's capacity for representing space in similarly non-linear fashion.[328] Davies's VR environs foreground "the increasingly blurred lines between lived and virtual experiences."[329] Furthermore, *Osmose* "emphasizes the intersecting permeations between viewer and viewed as underscored in VR."[330] Much like McRobert, Nelson ultimately articulates a form of support for the thesis that Davies's VR subject is altogether embodied. In contrast to a "static, disembodied" state, Davies's immersant is an embodied one.[331] The formal features of this embodied subject's environment, Nelson maintains, recall DaVinci's practice of challenging modern perspective.

Laurie McRobert also locates one antecedent of Davies's challenge to Cartesian space in premodern culture. Specifically, McRobert invokes the tradition of Byzantine Orthodox iconography to help describe the effects of Davies's virtual environments on the immersant.[332] At the outset, let me say that my own view is that McRobert incorrectly contrasts the Byzantine iconographic tradition's emphasis on personhood with a contemplative goal of transcending the temporal. To valorize the personal necessarily implies a focus on time, space, and the here-and-

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[326] Cami Nelson, "From Sfumato to Transarchitectures and "Osmose": Leonardo Da Vinci's Virtual Reality," *Leonardo* 42, no. 3 (2009), 259.

[327] Ibid., 259.

[328] Ibid., 259.

[329] Ibid., 261.

[330] Ibid., 261.

[331] Ibid., 262.

[332] McRobert, *Char Davies*, 58.

now. I propose an alternative. By recovering the iconographic tradition's emphasis on transcending the temporal, we can more fruitfully construe *Osmose* and *Ephémère* as inheritors of the iconographic contemplative tradition.

McRobert builds her reading of icons on the contemporary Greek Orthodox scholar, John Zizioulas, whose *Being as Communion* develops an account of Being as fundamentally personal. By invoking Zizioulas, McRobert suggests that Eastern Orthodox notions of Being as communal resonate with Heidegger's notion of *Dasein*.[333] In both cases, McRobert finds the elaboration of a "substantial essence" as personal, a revelation of some fundamental reality that is disclosed in the experience of human relationality.[334] How does Davies's work dramatize any of this? In the first place, the non-linear configuration of space in Davies's virtual worlds echoes the same artistic representation of space in the Byzantine icon. This inversion of linear perspective in *Osmose* and *Ephémère* "produces the effect of converging and unifying all the figures and objects in the icon."[335] On the basis of this effect, McRobert concludes that Davies's work, like the Eastern Orthodox icon, "is meant to ground the viewer in time and not in an idea of eternity."[336] This assessment of Eastern iconography invites a historical and philosophical objection. McRobert's claim that the icon places emphasis on time at the expense of eternity strikes me as neither consistent with much Orthodox reflection on icon theology, nor does McRobert's thesis here seem to me an inevitable consequence of those geometric features that she rightly observes in both icons and Davies's virtual environments.

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[333] Ibid., 59.

[334] Ibid., 60.

[335] Ibid., 60.

[336] Ibid., 60.

It is exactly the *commensurability* of time and eternity—the immanent and the transcendent, the material and the immaterial, the known and the ineffable—that Orthodox writers and art historians alike have historically associated with the contemplation of Byzantine icons. For example, Bissera V. Pentcheva speaks to the icon's traditional function as a window to the immaterial: "In saturating the material and sensorial to excess," she writes, "the experience of the icon led to a transcendence of this very materiality and gave access to the intangible, invisible, and noetic."[337] This historical construal of iconic contemplation never denies the importance of the material. Rather, the material component of the icon signals an occasion for a noetic act that leaps beyond the details of the object's materiality. Materiality becomes an occasion for the contemplative visionary to experience what is immaterial, and therefore, invisible.

This last point has been reinforced by Johnannes Hoff in *The Analogical Turn*: *Rethinking Modernity with Nicholas of Cusa*. Like McRobert, Hoff investigates common elements shared by pre- and post-modern theories of visual perspective. In Hoff's reading of the Byzantine icon tradition, he cites Marie-Anne Vanier's account of "inverted perspective."[338] As the viewer contemplates the icon, the fixed gaze of the depicted saint determines the space in which the viewer exists, not the other way around. Thus, the perspective of the viewer reveals itself not to be fixed it all. Instead, the fixity resides in something beyond the subject. The same was true of the western iconography innovated by Nicholas of Cusa a few generations after Dante. "Up to a certain point," writes Hoff, "the all-seeing gaze of Cusa's icon only makes

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[337] Bissera V. Pentcheva, "The Performative Icon," *The Art Bulletin* 88, no. 4 (2006), 631.

[338] Johannes Hoff, *The Analogical Turn*, 141. For Margaret Wertheim's brief discussion of Cusanus and space, see *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspac,* 129-132. Curiously, Wertheim looks to Cusa's theory that space lacks a true center as a development in the modern scientific approach to empirical space. In contrast, I find that Hoff's exposition of iconographic perspective in Cusa shows Cusa amplifying the importance of the ineffable as an elemental dimension of the human experience of space.

explicit something that characterizes every act of human perception: things have the power to attract my attention and arouse my desire to see because "they are looking at me."[339]

These reflections on iconic perception do not align easily with McRobert's assertion that "[t]he icon is supposed to keep a worshipper this side of heavenly space, bound to earth."[340] To be fair, McRobert sometimes addresses the alleged capacity of the icon to direct attention to that which transcends the sensible. But she also takes pains to qualify those assertions by insisting on the essential materiality of the icon: "Icon painters, as does Davies, do not wish to transgress into abstract Ideal domains."[341] Just what McRobert means by "transgression" in this sentence is unclear. The implication seems to be that any art orienting the viewer toward an immaterial "Ideal" somehow does violence to an implied counter-domain, presumably the zone of materiality that McRobert (and Davies) identify as the site of bodily experience in *Osmose* and *Ephémère*.

Yet an immersant in *Osmose* and *Ephémère* may readily experience the mind moving beyond the sensory details of the strange objects encountered in one's virtual sensorium. Davies herself intimates this potential in her environments. She describes a "capacity for abstraction" as a property of her immersive environments.[342] The possibility for abstraction—an intellectual movement beyond the particulars of sensual immediacy—is both avowed by the author, then, and a readily invoked viewer response. The fuller implications of abstraction for Davies's work will be explored below. For the moment, it is critical to position the possibility of sensual

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[339] Ibid., 109.

[340] McRobert, *Char Davies*, 63.

[341] Ibid., 65.

[342] Davies, "Virtual Space," Introduction, http://www.immersence.com/publications/char/2004-CD-Space.html.

transcendence—that is, thought that moves beyond sensual immediacy—as a viable response to immersive experience in Davies's work.

What does this have to do with icons? The icon is precisely a material object whose materiality is an occasion for transcending, not transgressing, the sensual details in one's phenomenal awareness. One contemplates the icon in order to see what cannot be seen. As Hoff's example shows, the icon lends itself to these perceptual dynamics in virtue of the iconic subject's fixed gaze in place of the fixed gaze of the viewer. To have one's subjective gaze arrested and taken up into the gaze of an *other* becomes the phenomenological mechanism for the experience of abstracting beyond the icon's material particulars. In this sense, icons are fabricated with the intent of leading the viewing gaze toward the very "heavenly space" that McRobert disavows in her reading of iconography. That disavowal seems critically associated with a lack of consideration for how Davies's work may be iconographic in a similar way, inviting the mind toward spaces that transcend the particulars of sense experience.

I share, then, McRobert's estimation that orthodox iconography invites a structure of viewer subjectivity that intimates a range of valid experiential responses to Davies's immersive environments. Unlike McRobert, however, it strikes me that this affinity is important because it suggests how Davies's virtual environments intimate forms of consciousness that gesture toward the unknown, the immaterial, and the trans-rational—the very tropes which the orthodox iconographic tradition would associate with Eternity. The immersant in Davies's art need not necessarily feel bound to a sense of the immanent, empirical details of the environment in which the immersant is surrounded. In fact, the very spatial features that McRobert's helpfully identifies as anti-Cartesian are the very features of Davies's VR worlds that are so profoundly suggestive of a realm beyond the immanently sensual, bodily, and temporal. This is to gesture

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toward an alternative interpretation of VR immersant experience in Davies's work. Much as there can be a variety of valid reader responses to texts bearing strong authorial intentions, so does Davies's work offer itself up as an occasion for the immersant to encounter the very sort of immateriality that McRobert's analysis forecloses through her particular reading of the iconographic tradition.[343]

These reflections set the scene for an alternative iconographic interpretation of *Osmose* and *Ephémère*. It remains to be argued exactly what sort of empirically transcendent experience an immersant might derive from Davies's virtual worlds. To advance one possibility, I turn to questions of the symbolic in Davies's work. Once again, this line of inquiry will invite another comparison between virtual reality with a now familiar theme: dreams.

Dreams and Symbols: A Materialist Approach

Ambiguity is a fundamental property of the objects which the immersant visualizes in *Osmose* and *Ephémère*. McRobert notes that Davies's virtual environments project "landscape[s]" that are both familiar and unfamiliar, populated by "semi-abstract, semi-recognizable forms or elements that are translucent and semi-transparent and coalesce to form multilayered images which appear to be moving and floating toward us as well as *through* us."[344] McRobert's terms "semi-abstract" and "semi-recognizable" suggest the ambiguity surrounding the identity of the digital objects in Davies's work. Abstraction and partial recognizability signal the viewer's efforts to make sense of their new environment. In short, McRobert suggests the

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[343] In the scholarship on Davies's work, my thesis here resonates with Mark Hansen's work. Hansen argues that Davies's virtual environments can be said to confer materiality on fundamentally immaterial things. Within this line of thinking, Hansen construes the subject of Davies's environments as a "body-in-code." Hansen, *Bodies in Code*, 123.

[344] McRobert, *Char Davies*, 5.

manner in which the immersant becomes an interpreter while immersed in *Osmose* and

Ephémère.

The stimulus to interpretation recalls the way in which Dante's dreams and Owein's

visions similarly provoke an encounter with ambiguous images. McRobert intimates the formal

connections linking dreams with Davies's immersive environments when she writes, "It is no

wonder that the language of dreams comes to us in strange, *symbolic images* that reside outside

the realm of logic and reason and trigger such strong emotions."[345] As I observed in the last

chapter, Dante's exposition of his poetic protagonist's oneiric experiences allows the critic to

recognize a construction of the dream-symbol as a stimulant to unsecured, unexpected forms of

interpretation. However, whereas Dante explicitly constructs dreams as a form of disembodied

ecstasy, McRobert reads the dreamlike qualities of Davies's environments as an occurrence

within a deeply embodied, neurological substructure that modern sciences associate with dream

states. The "instinctive part of the brain" is correlated with dreaming;"[346] it is this part of the

brain that, *mutatis mutandis*, must be stimulated in the immersant's brain when viewing *Osmose*

and *Ephémère*.

These scientific concerns lead McRobert to conceive of immersive transcendence as

"biological transcendence," a process whereby "the self is continually in the process of

establishing a new bodily image."[347] In McRobert's view, it is these "*neural representations*"

that finally constitute the self.[348] This leads McRobert to assert that "dreams take place in the

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[345] Ibid., 109, emphasis added.

[346] Ibid., 109.

[347] Ibid., 116.

[348] Ibid., 116, emphasis in original.

hippocampus" which in turn suggests a possible location for transcendent feelings in the brain.[349]

The focus on the brain's origins in generating "transcendent feelings" recalls Kurzweil's broader

reduction of consciousness to the neocortex explored in chapter two.

This approach, however, begs the question: is transcendence really transcendent if the

primary investigative goal is to show the material coordinates of transcendent experience in the

brain? By posing this question, my intention is not to deny the possibility of a partly material

basis for feelings of disembodiment. After all, Dante keeps the material conditions of Dante's

dreaming ecstasy in the reader's full view through the St. Lucy episode. Rather, it is worthwhile

to forestall the moment of asking the scientific question about bodily preconditions in favor of a

more phenomenological approach. The difficulty of a materialist approach to analyzing dreaming

comes to the fore in the effort to ground "transcendence" in material mechanisms:

> In respect to feelings of transcendence, we have concluded that works of art such as
> *Osmose*/*Ephémère* can be used not simply to entertain an immersant's visual brain but to
> open up a new level of self-understanding. In other words, something physiologically
> different happens to immersants in 3D virtual spatiality that evokes in them feelings for
> transcendence. I am suggesting that these unique 'feelings of transcendence' immerse us
> in biological spatiality and open up new ways for us to understand how our
> unconsciousnesses operate in the silent spaces of our limbic brains, where, according to
> Damasio, our emotions give birth to our instinctive feelings.[350]

My departure from the approach summarized here is rooted in the difficult questions arising from

McRobert's subsequent clarification of her argument: "This most important aspect of Davies'

artworks must prioritize the visual brain, since without it there would be no 3D environment."[351]

This statement strikes me as a non sequitur. If something is the functional *sine qua non* of a

given process, this does not imply that the *sine qua non* is then the "most important aspect" of

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[349] Ibid., 117.

[350] Ibid., 118.

[351] Ibid., 119.

the resulting process. To make an analogy, the brain is built from electrons, yet any discussion of neuroscience must take neurons (*not* electrons) as its primary point of reference. As a neuroscientist will readily affirm, neurons—not subatomic particulars—form the most important base element in a discussion of the brain, and this is true even though neurons themselves are composed of still more fundamental elements. Whether or not the brain is comprised of subatomic particulars is not in question; what *is* questionable is the effort to reduce the activity and functions of a brain to descriptions of subatomic particulars. Neurons are simply more complex than the physical properties of their subatomic constituents. The fact is that systems are often greater than the sum of their parts, and efforts to reduce systems to the properties of their elemental components often fail...even in the communities of natural science to which McRobert's line of inquiry seems pitched.[352]

McRobert's approach is redolent of Gilbert the monk's priority for demonstrating the bodily conditions of Owein's journey. Like Gilbert, McRobert works to establish (or at least to assert) a material basis for deriving meaning from the subjective experience of Davies's virtual environments. As valuable as this approach may be, this is not the only way to proceed. A phenomenologist's approach may bracket the question of material substructures, asking instead: What have I seen (heard, etc.)? How has this seeing changed me? And what shifts in consciousness, desire, and understanding attend these changes? In Marie's terms, what are the works of the soul that emerge from this vision regardless of my ability to prove the presence or absence of my body? The mechanistic demonstration of "neurological dynamics" is a worthy and

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[352] My argument here is rooted in a school of scientific and philosophical thought known as Emergence Theory. See especially Warren S. Brown and Nancy Murphy, *Did My Neurons Make Me Do It? Philosophical and Neurobiological Perspectives on Moral Responsibility and Freewill*, (New York: Oxford U Press, 2007), 9, 42-43, 73. See also Margaret Wertheim's parallel emphasis on the emergent properties of cyber phenomena as a rejection of reductive materialism in *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace*, 229.

even exciting venture, but it can distract from the always and already available effort to report and analyze the subject's primary experience.

McRobert's preference for exploring the physiological components of dreaming mirrors her practice of explaining her own immersive experience of Davies's environments in terms of a focus on the material that borders on the reductively materialist: "*Osmose* and *Ephémère* enable immersants to encounter such a conscious instinct for survival through feelings engaging the brain in dialogue between its cognitive and emotional components – in *Osmose* by immersing the brain into worlds of code words and then into soft-edged, spatially ambiguous images of nature."[353] But even supposing that Davies's virtual art does engage the brain in the ways that McRobert describes, do neurological concepts explicitly populate the conscious experience of all immersants in Davies's environments? I remain skeptical that self-conscious reflections on brain chemistry form the content of many immersants' experience. Whatever the case, my challenge to McRobert recalls the same interpretive difficulty that Peter Hawkins identified in the efforts of Dante scholars to decode the pilgrim's purgatorial dreams according to a single, univocal explanation: The oneiric sequences can become a blank slate upon which literary critics can narrate their own biases, preferences, and associations. Hawkins's concern, then, can help the media theorists to resist the myth of a universal subject in Davies's virtual worlds.[354] In other words, *the* immersant may not exist at all since individual immersive experiences will be

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[353] McRobert, *Char Davies*, 111. McRobert does entertain the possibility that immersants in Davies's world may feel "transcendence" as the consequence of "los[ing] touch with" the body. But again, McRobert explains this loss of touch in material terms that may not do justice to the phenomenology of the immersant. "The prefrontal (cognitive) sectors," she writes, "may somehow be temporarily disconnected from the lower brain, and from the body, because the image of 'self' is no longer being generated" (116). Whether this neurological description accurately explains the basis of "transcendent" feelings, the feelings remain. And an immersant's perception of leaving behind the body deserves attention as a report of immediate experience which requires no empirical foundation to substantiate. The goal here is not to ground such claims in "proof," but to consider with care what the claim to disembodiment suggests about the human experience of VR immersion.

[354] Hawkins warns against approaching the *Commedia* merely as "enigma codes to be cracked" (Hawkins, 12).

inflected by the manifold qualities that modulate all individual experience. This is not to suggest

the impossibility of shared experiences of virtual reality environments, but it is worth proceeding

with caution in asserting universal forms of experience that may ultimately be an elaboration of

an individual critic's preferences.

I make no claim to be free of such preferences, but I also hope to make a case that

another narrative of immersion in Davies's environments—a narrative much less focused on

neurology and embodiment—can clarify a substantially different form of immersive self-

experience than the sort elaborated by McRobert. My approach begins with a question

occasioned by McRobert's interpretation: If explicitly neuro-scientific concerns are not

necessarily the conscious object of reflection for the immersant, what aspects of participating in

Osmose and *Ephémère* might typify immersive experience instead? I entertain answers to this

question in ways that foreground the sense of a loss of one's body rather than an intensification

of bodily awareness. Instead of "tripping" on the body's "instincts,"[355] I narrate an experience of

VR immersion that is more analogous to Dante's experience of disembodied dreaming or

Owein's experience of navigating demonic and celestial phenomena.

At the root of my interpretation is a distinctly different account of the symbolic.

McRobert's attempt to associate Davies's environments with dreamscapes pivots on the

supposed manner in which the symbolism of dreams can connect humans to their innate

"spatiality." McRobert roots this spatial awareness in the body, specifically in the causal

properties of the brain and in DNA.[356] These material components, she argues, may explain the

"'divine instincts'" embedded in our genes and neurology. This intellectual commitment to a

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[355] Ibid., 112.

[356] Ibid., 118.

materially reductive approach is clear when McRobert emphasizes that immersants of Davies's worlds may find themselves mapping their desires for certain forms of spiritual transcendence onto Davies's work. Deeply seeded "longings for another world, for an "'unknown God'"[357] may animate the viewer. McRobert immediately qualifies this observation with a normative claim: These "divine instincts" simply have "nothing to do with some abstract version of an 'unknown' God."[358] A cluster of associations emerge: abstraction, the unknown, and God are made to contrast with the body, the material, and the mechanistic causes of feelings associated with the divine.

In order to support her materially focused approach to interpreting Davies's environments, it is striking that McRobert cites passages from Davies's journal like the following excerpt: "All duality, all difference, had vanished. I, myself had expanded to encompass the horizon and the dome of sky above: indeed, I was the landscape and the landscape was me. Self and world, perceiver and perceived had become one and the same."[359] Here, Davies describes her own thought process in the development of osmosis as a concept that would eventually animate her creation of *Osmose*. Descriptions such as these do not necessarily provoke an analysis of the underlying material causes of immersive experiences. On the contrary, Davies's thought process seems to evoke the *unknown*, one of the categories that McRobert resists in her analysis of *Osmose* and *Ephémère*.

The priority for material analysis here goes hand in hand with the critical wariness of disembodiment rehearsed earlier. To ground the immersant—the virtual subject—in a material

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[357] Ibid., 9.

[358] Ibid., 118.

[359] Ibid., 119.

body may well respond to a broader anxiety that looks to maintain clear divisions between material reality and mental illusion, a realm of fact rooted in the empirically quantifiable and a world of illusion which threatens since it cannot be quantified as bodies intrinsically can. For example, in her discussion of Damasio's theories of affect and conceptuality, McRobert asserts that "concepts arise because of the initial effects on the body of penetrating instincts that create emotions, that create feelings that create images. If this is the case, then surely, even though Davies' images straddle the dangerous grounds of illusion, we should be able, nonetheless, to derive concepts from them, and so far these concepts appear to be very positive."[360] I draw attention McRobert's use of the expression "the dangerous ground of illusion." She goes on to strengthen the association between illusion and danger by describing the contents of Davies's VR worlds as "3D unreal images" and "unreal virtual artwork."[361] By construing VR in this way, McRobert appears concerned to stress that *virtuality* is synonymous with *unreality*: To describe Davies's worlds as "virtual" is to denote their opposition to reality.

These explicit priorities lead McRobert to argue that the ethical value disclosed through experiencing Davies's environments is primarily realized in a posterior reflection on the similarity between the non-real objects in the virtual world and the real objects in the non-virtual world. In short, Davies's un-real tree images, for example, signal a true moral temptation to the user, a "dangerous ground of illusion." Oliver Grau shares this perspective, characterizing *Osmose* as "a technical illusion."[362]

It would be neither sound nor possible to argue for a complete collapse of the distinction between illusion and non-illusory forms of experience. Yet in developing interpretations of

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[360] Ibid., 120.

[361] Ibid., 120.

[362] Grau, *Visual Art*, 200.

Davies's worlds, prioritizing the distinction of illusion versus fact may obscure some of the most valuable aspects of experiencing virtual environments. In lieu of this approach, it is possible to focus on the qualitative aspects of *Osmose* and *Ephémère* and the way in which those qualities influence the parameters of the immersant's subjectivity and perception. This critical approach need not bracket the question of illusion entirely any more than we must completely sidestep the question of materiality lurking behind disembodiment. Instead, the question of illusion and truth (or virtuality and reality) can be posed as a secondary question within a broader discussion of the effects of the virtual environments on the immersant.

This alternative methodological approach takes Marie de France's prologue as its point of departure. It was Marie who, as we saw, looked to Gregory the Great for a hermeneutical method that might adequately frame the disembodied voyages of figures like Owein in Purgatory. Marie's resourcing of Gregory led to a form of analysis both chastened and expanded by the limits of disembodiment. Leaving the body deprives the subject of certain knowledge either of their bodily status or the status of what the subject perceives. On the basis of that Gregorian premise, Marie wisely insists that there is still much to learn from tales of disembodiment. One need not, in other words, ignore or set aside such tales simply because their origins and preconditions cannot be proven. Alternatively, one may look to the effects that such tales produce in the re-embodied subject and the publics among whom their story circulates. Marie's program of literary analysis opens up a truly hermeneutical possibility for considering *value* in terms that are not set in advance by the standards of empirical demonstration.

Dreams and Symbols: A Phenomenological Approach

I propose that we may look to Dante's dreams in the *Purgatorio* to inspire a new reading of Davies's virtual images. To unfold this Dantean interpretation, I first note that McRobert's construal of virtual imagery as potential illusion strikes a chord with Dante's own description of visionary epistemology in the *Purgatorio*. In between his first two dreams, Dante experiences *una visïone estatica* (an ecstatic vision, XV. 85-86) in which he witnesses mysterious images derived from Biblical literature and classical antiquity. Dante's use of the term *visïone* obviously links this episode to his second dream, which he likewise describes as his *novella visïon*. Furthermore, when Dante's visionary episode ends, the poet describes Virgil approaching Dante "sì com' om che dal sonno si slega" (like one who shakes himself from sleep, XV. 119). As in the two dreams that Dante has already endured at this point, the pilgrim's ecstasy in *Purgatorio* XV presents him with an immersive sensorium that saturates his phenomenal awareness, and which is discontinuous with the objects that surround his material body. What he sees around him does not correspond to material objects that are locally present to his material sense organs. Once the visionary episode concludes, the poet describes the pilgrim's return to "normal" visionary cognition in one of the most elliptical and delightful passages in the *Commedia*:

> Quando l'anima mia tornò di fori
> a le cose che son fuor di lei vere,
> io riconobbi i miei non falsi errori.
>
> (When my soul made its way back
> to the things that are real outside it,
> I came to know my errors were not false.)
>   (*Purgatorio*, XV. 115-117)

"The literal sense [of the passage] is not difficult," writes Hollander in his commentary. "Dante was not seeing that which was present before his fleshly eyes; from that point of view (the merely physical one) he is delusional, is seeing what does not exist, seeing erroneous phantasms

instead of what his physical eyes would report. But such 'errors' as these are the very heart of truth."[363] Hollander's comment begs the question: In what way are the errors of Dante's vision truthful? What does the poet mean to convey with this apparent paradox?

The commentary tradition supplies a convincing answer in Niccolò Tommaseo's 1837 gloss. As Dante turns away from the objects of his vision, the contrast of the vision with his purgatorial surroundings catalyzes a clearer apprehension of his visionary phenomena. Tommaseo's succinct gloss on this passage telescopes many of his commentative predecessors: "visione era, ma mostrava cose morali intrinsecamente vere" (It was a vision, but it showed [Dante] moral things that are intrinsically true).[364] Like his medieval and Renaissance predecessors, Tommaseo shows a sensibility for discerning multiple forms of truth, not all of them empirical.

The notion of moral truth in *Purgatorio* VX resonates with Cristoforo Landino's fifteenth-century commentary on the word *errori*: "'Error' in latino significa progresso d'andare sanza certo fine" (In Latin, "error" signifies walking forward without a certain end).[365] Landino's etymology signals how the term *error* does not necessarily signify that which is illusory or deceptive. Instead, the term may signal a dynamic process, even a sense of development, which simply lacks a known goal or terminus. With this etymology in mind, Dante the poet would seem to be construing his pilgrim's vision as a vision whose value is felt but which is still indeterminate. On the one hand, extraordinary visionary experience suspends the usual rules of epistemic evaluation: There are no readily consultable "laws" like the law of physics that can

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[363] Robert Hollander, Commentary to *Purgatorio* 15.115-117 by Robert Hollander (2000-2007), as found in the Dartmouth Dante Project, https://Dante.Dartmouth.EDU.

[364] Niccolò Tommaseo, Commentary to *Purgatorio* 15.115-117 by Niccolò Tommaseo (1837 [ed. of 1865]), as found in the Dartmouth Dante Project, https://Dante.Dartmouth.EDU. Translation is my own.

[365] Cristoforo Landino, Commentary to *Purgatorio* 15.115-117 by Cristoforo Landino (1481), as found in the Dartmouth Dante Project, https://Dante.Dartmouth.EDU. Translation is my own.

cleanly make sense of what the ecstatic visionary sees. The objects of such visions are not present to the senses in the way that objects typically appear to bodily sense. For these reasons, Dante characterizes the phenomena of his ecstatic vision as errors. And yet, Dante does not hesitate to boldly claim his *errori* as *non falsi*.

The conclusion, it seems, must be the one reached by Tommaseo: Whatever is true about the ecstatic pilgrim's *errori* must be something that is not described by the representative accuracy of the visionary phenomena. The poet does not hesitate to affirm that the images which Dante sees in his vision do not disclose an immediate fact of empirical reality; the pilgrim does not literally witness the events which he sees as they actually unfolded within objective time-space.[366] Therefore, the visionary content cannot be perceived or poetically reconstructed with the aim of pictographic accuracy. Instead, what makes these images "non-false" is the meaning which they communicate to Dante. Landino's commentary underscores the moral truth which the vision communicates, a kind of interpretive key for the surrounding events in the canto. Much like the dream episodes that synthesize the various themes developed around them, the ecstatic vision conveys truth to the extent that it helps to clarify the salient forms of meaning that the phenomena contribute to Dante's salvific journey of becoming.[367] But the vision of the non-false error additionally seems to constitute another phase in the journey of preparing the pilgrim's phenomenology for his transhumanized experience of the Empyrean. The intensity of the visionary experience prepares the perceptual *conditions* for the kind of form-defying sights that

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[366] In this sense, the ecstatic vision here exemplifies the scholarly occupation with non-physical space that early virtual reality made possible by other means. For instance, in the earliest days of scholarly reflection upon nascent virtual reality technologies, Ken Hillis wrote in 1994 that "VR detaches the view from physical location." Ken Hillis, "The Virtue of Becoming a No-body," (*Ecumene* 1, no. 2 (1994), 178.

[367] For an introduction to Dante's phenomenology of the *non falsi errori* see Teodolinda Barol "Nonfalse Errors and the True Dreams of the Evangelist," in *The Undivine Comedy: Detheologizing Dante* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 143-65.

Dante awaits at the poem's close. As with the dreams, the *visïone estatica* seems just as concerned with developing the preconditions of visionary experience.

Marie de France establishes similar standards for the visionary subject's evaluation of his experience. In chapter one, I noted that "showings" (the transitive objects of *mustrer*) were morally ambiguous. Both demons and God remotely "show" Owein various phenomena; visions both diabolical and divine can be compelling. For instance, the demons show (*mostrerent*, 1326) Owein an aquatic realm of punishment just as Patrick is able to show (*mustrer*, 334) the Irish people where Purgatory is to be found. The trick, as Owein's Cistercian guardians make clear, is to discern the difference between visions worthy of trust and those that are not. *That discernment, however, cannot be primarily be a task of determining which visions have "real" or "non-real" sources.* For the pilgrim in Marie's purgatory, visions simply appear. The pilgrim lacks the resources to discern in advance which proceed from life-giving sources and which do not. Instead, Owein must rely on the aggregate testimony of the hermeneutical community in which he participates. Yes, the monks will warn him of the demons, but such warning does little to dispel the potentially profitable 'showings' and wagers that the demons offer Owein. No amount of clear expectations about the reality, nature, or ontology of what Owein will see can completely prepare him for the unexpected visionary experiences that Purgatory projects. These epistemological conditions suggest that Owein's visions, in some sense, share a kind of generic quality at the level of their appearance.

In Dantean terms, one could accurately describe Owein's showings as *errori*, visionary movements forward on the pilgrim's journey without a fixed end. Indeed, this Dantean term is particularly apt to describe Owein's peregrinations among the dead since he is not initially aware of the Earthly Paradise that awaits him as the implicit goal of his journey. Continuing with

Dante's lexicon, Owein's journey is a long series of *errori*. The pilgrim's task is to discern which among them are the *non falsi errori*. His task is to discern the true errors from the false ones.[368] But even this summary betrays Dante's language. After all, the trustworthy phenomena that Dante encounters in the ecstatic vision of *Purgatorio* XV are *not* said to be true, merely "non false." The value and trustworthiness of the visionary phenomena are not determined by objectively determining the vision's correspondence to some other frame of reference like 'Reality.' What makes the vision "non-false" is precisely whether the vision changes Dante in a way that advances his journey toward sanctification. This is the paradigm that Zaleski describes as "the time-honored principle of judging a revelation by moral and spiritual effects."[369]

By separate means, Dante and Marie jointly suggest the value of moral or ethical forms of meaning for determining the veracity of ecstatic visionary experiences. Insofar as this moral account of truth is associated with the "error" of wandering without a determined goal, this association is no less descriptive of Char Davies's *Osmose* and *Ephémère*. To wit, I note that Mark Hansen specifies the "the non-goal-oriented nature of [Davies's virtual] environments."[370] That lack of goal—at least at the *outset* of an extraordinary visionary experience—is a shared feature of the ecstatic environments of Davies, Dante, and Marie de France alike. In chapter four, I directly consider the moral and ethical forms of insight that Davies's work may communicate to the immersant. Before taking up that question more directly, it is crucial to continue pursuing the question of how criticism of Davies's work shapes the possibility for addressing these ethical

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[368] See also David L. Pike's analysis of the Old French infinitive *errer* and its cognates. Pike notes a polyvalent range of meanings in this term which, like the Dantean commentators note, suggests the action of knightly traveling. To ere may suggest the action of the subject's displacement from one place to the next as a function of chivalric questing (Pike, 54).

[369] Carol Zaleski, *Otherworld Journeys: Accounts of Near-Death Experience in Medieval and Modern Times*. (Oxford: Oxford U Press, 1987), 158.

[370] Hansen, *Bodies in Code,* 124.

potentials in the fullest way. Ultimately, the drive to establish a clear distinction between illusion and truth in Davies's work continues to reflect a concurrent priority for a materialist account of the body. That priority manifests similar concerns to those articulated by the partisans of what Bill Brown calls The New Materialization Hypothesis (see chapter 2). By better understanding the association of disembodiment and illusion in criticism of Davies's work, it becomes possible to chart a path more clearly toward a new consideration of the *non falsi errori* populating *Osmose* and *Ephémère*.

Technoromanticism: Brown's New Materialization Hypothesis by Another Name

Michael Heim, author of *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality*, counts himself among the scholars who have devoted critical attention to Char Davies's work. In McRobert's book, the author positions Heim as a "philosopher who is a technoromanticist."[371] To define technoromanticism, McRobert turns to Richard Coyne's account of the term: "The dominant ethos," he writes, "is a new romanticism: a focus on subjectivity, a new metaphysics of proximity, a revival of the early socialist dream of community, a disdain for the constraints imposed by the body."[372] McRobert shares Coyne's estimation that cultures of virtual reality frequently manifest an unhealthy rejection of bodily limitation. Davies's work, by contrast, resists efforts to "lead us to condone ideas of AI 'disembodiedness.'"[373] Heim, in McRobert's view, seems to embrace the body-denying technoromanticism that Davies's work putatively resists.

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[371] McRobert, *Char Davies*, 96.

[372] Ibid., 30.

[373] Ibid., 39.

Part of the basis for McRobert's reading of Heim lies in the Heim's analysis of the mystical experiences of the Spanish Carmelites Juan de la Cruz and Teresa de Avila. In the spiritual writings of these late medieval mystics, contemplation is an erotic act. But here, McRobert's interpretation seems incorrect when she construes Carmelite eroticism as aiming toward an increase of knowledge. In contrast with "*feelings* for God," McRobert argues, John and Teresa's spiritual ecstasies aim at knowledge of God.[374] This reading misses the mark. The spiritual writings of Juan de la Cruz in particular explicitly describe a *trans*-rational erotics in which the contemplative subject comes to an experience of God as that which is *unknown*. Such a spiritual experience completely exceeds the sort of cognitive categories that characterize knowledge in any metaphysical, philosophical, or scientific sense. The austerity of John's trans-rational mysticism comes to the fore in the conclusion of his *Dark Night of the Soul*. John writes of the contemplative soul's journey beyond sense and reason alike: "For faith voids and darkens the understanding as to all its natural intelligence, and herein prepares it for union with divine wisdom."[375] This is no medieval voice praising a rational knowledge of the Infinite. John gives us the opposite: praise for the unknown. To experience divine wisdom, one must surrender the limits of human understanding.

McRobert's reading of the Carmelites matters here because it forms the basis of her construal of Heim as a technoromanticist. Because Heim posits an affinity linking medieval spirituality with virtual reality, McRobert infers that "Heim's notion of cyberspace is eroticism directed toward an intellectual plane."[376] Granted, McRobert qualifies her claims by noting that

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[374] Ibid., 96, emphasis in original.

[375] St. John of the Cross, *Dark Knight of the Soul,* trans. E. Allison Peers (Mineola: Dover, 2003): 102.

[376] McRobert, *Char Davies,* 96.

Heim differs from "his colleagues, who yearn to metamorphose into disembodied AI." Yet Heim's reading, for McRobert, still construes virtual experience as "philosophical" in nature.[377]

The Carmelite mystics are not the only contemplative tradition associated with a putatively dangerous effort to escaping the body. Following Margaret Wertheim, McRobert posits the experience of cyberspace as one that stands in continuity with "dream, hallucination, and mysticism." More directly, "it is a new immaterial space where techno-spiritual dreaming can occur."[378] But very shortly after this passage, McRobert's summary of Wertheim's position—and those of others—takes a turn, criticizing a movement toward a disembodied utopia. Wertheim, we learn, warns of a "problematic [...] Gnostic-Manichean-Platonist dualism."[379] McRobert summarizes this assessment in her own words by describing a trend to construe cyberspace as "a place where dematerialized bodies exist in immortal bodiless minds as patterns of data."[380] Once again, experiences that challenge the subject's explicit connection to their material body are framed as catalysts for a dangerous and slippery slope. And at the slope's base is a wholesale cultural longing to leave behind the human body altogether. In her analysis of cyber theory through the categories of Deleuze's philosophical writings, Ella Brians sounds a similarly prophetic note in her diagnosis of the disembodied turn in virtual technologies and their critics. "While versions of cyber discourse that argue for taking embodiment seriously have emerged," writes Brians, "the fantasy of escaping the flesh persists."[381] The fact of such a fantasy

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[377] Ibid., 98.

[378] Ibid., 94.

[379] Cited in McRobert, *Char Davies*, 94. I explore this dualistic tradition at greater length in my conclusion.

[380] Ibid., 94.

[381] Ella Brians, "The 'Virtual' Body and the Strange Persistence of the Flesh: Deleuze, Cyberspace and the Posthuman," in *Deleuze and the Body*, ed. Guillaume Laura and Hughes (George Square, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 118.

notwithstanding, the ubiquity of Brian's concern among theorists of virtual reality and digital technologies invites the question: Can disembodiment serve *any* positive ends? In the design, experience, and critical discussion of virtual reality, is there any account of transcending the body that does not eventuate in pathology or danger?

I suggest that acknowledging the dangers of disembodiment as a cultural ideal or utopian aim *need not* require an associated refusal to acknowledge the provisional values of disembodied experiences through literary representation and virtual artistry. This hypothesis applies equally to poetic constructions of disembodiment as well as virtual experiences like we find in Davies. The subjective sense of leaving the material body is not necessarily symptomatic of technoromanticism, either as an alleged intention of the artist or as a putative attitude of the immersant leaving the simulated environment. The effort to associate a body-denying "dualism" with disembodiment (that is "technoromanticism") goes hand in hand with McRobert's ambivalent assessment of the symbolic in Davies's work. While she readily identifies the contents of *Osmose* and *Ephémère* as symbolic, McRobert sharply qualifies the value of symbols in terms extremely redolent of Kant's distinction between noumenal and phenomenal worlds:

> Some immersive virtual spaces can be referred to as depicting the virtually real, but the images in Davies' works are hardly meant to be real. They are bound only to the level of symbols, sometimes more literally executed while other times more abstractly. Strictly an artistic rendition of a symbolic nature, they do not, and were never intended to, represent nature-as-it-is.[382]

McRobert seems to presume not merely a distinction but an opposition between symbols and reality. Davies's effort to create a world of symbols is presented here as a kind of warning, as if to remind immersants that the contents of *Osmose* and *Ephémère* are not actually "real." They are *merely* symbolic, which is to say, not real.

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[382] McRobert, *Char Davies*, 19.

I believe this analysis subjects Davies's art objects to a modern interpretive bias: the symbolic is characterized by its *un*-reality. The opposition of symbols to reality further aligns the symbolic with the virtual, placing these concepts on a common plane over and against some putatively more straightforward domain of the real. As a trio of associated tropes, symbols, virtuality, and disembodiment form a common enemy whose righteous foe is the material body, the *real* reality. Davies's VR is rescued from the dangers of virtuality because her use of symbols is ultimately tethered to the real world of bodies: The embodied subject is thereby preserved and the symbolic objects quickly route the mind to their material counterparts in the "real" world.

Louis-Marie Chauvet supplies an alternative reading of the symbolic. One of Chauvet's enduring intellectual contributions is his clearly stated case for the indispensable value of symbols for a human encounter with anything we might call reality. As he writes, "Reality is never present to us except in a mediated way, which is to say, *constructed* out of the symbolic network of the culture which fashions us. This *symbolic order* designates the system of connections between the different elements and levels of a culture."[383] Chauvet goes on to specify the important role that symbols play in "allow[ing] individuals to orient themselves in space, find their place in time, and in general situate themselves in the world in a significant way."[384] The qualification here is vital: symbols mediate human experience by supplying us with the very strategies by which we locate ourselves in time and space.

Drawing heavily upon Levi-Strauss, Parain, and Merleau-Ponty, Chauvet emphasizes the semiotic dimension that always persists in any act of perception: "the stone that violently hits the head provokes an identical *sensation* of pain in the animal and in the human being, but the

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[383] Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, trans. Patrick Madigan, S.J. and Madeleine Beaumont (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1995), 84.

[384] Ibid., 84-85.

perception of the stone is of another order."[385] What sort of order? "What is perceived by humans is not only the physical reality that affects the senses but the "semiological layer" in which the event is embedded by the culture."[386] Hence, language supplies a set of categories that conditions all acts of perception to some degree: "*The perceived object is always-already a constructed object.*"[387] Chauvet need not be read as suggesting that all perception is literally and entirely the projected fabrication of human imagination. His far subtler claim draws focus to the way in which language—as a network of symbols—mediates the most basic experiences of sense experience.

All reality is mediated by symbols: The importance of this simple but far-reaching claim resides in its power to overturn the modern opposition of the symbolic and the real. By restoring symbols to an essential role in discerning "reality," Chauvet flips the script of the partisans of the New Materialization Hypothesis. Layers of mediation do not *necessarily* portend a distancing of the subject from reality at all. On the contrary, mediation—including and especially the mediation of symbols—may increase a subject's intimacy with reality. Chauvet's example of contact lenses illustrates the point with clarity and simplicity. Approaching the objects of sensual and cognitive experience is "similar to contact lenses which cannot be seen by the wearers since they adhere to their eyes but through which all their vision of the real is filtered. Therefore, the real as such is by definition *unreachable*."[388] Much like Bill Brown's research explored in chapter two, Chauvet finds nothing in mediated experience that implies an undesirable distancing between a perceiving subject and the reality of the perceived object world. On the contrary,

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[385] Ibid., 85.

[386] Ibid., 85.

[387] Ibid., 85, emphasis in original.

[388] Ibid., 86.

mediation may sharpen the subject's encounter with a range of objects. Symbols of all sorts play a particularly vital role in mediating human sense perception and intellection.

I have been rehearsing Chauvet's reflections on the symbol as a fundamental form of cognitive mediation. In so doing, I have deliberately avoided a definition of "symbol" in Chauvet's systematic thought. *Le symbole* is a complex and polyvalent concept for Chauvet, one that only begins as a description of the semiotic function that all words necessarily presume in their use by writing and speaking subjects.[389] Chauvet does not, however, stop here, as if "symbol" were just a synonym for "word" or "category." As Chauvet's sustained engagement with Paul Ricoeur's work might suggest, Chauvet's account of *le symbole* includes other functions that recall Ricoeur's symbolic wager that I explored in chapter two. Symbols—whether religion, mythic, or poetic—are recognizable as symbols because they are not primarily vehicles for objective claims; symbols are conveyors of *meaning*. Crucially, 'meaning' is not a synonym for truth. Meaning contrasts with "truth-as-exactitude."[390] As a conveyor of meaning, a symbol invites a degree of cognitive participation from the viewer in order to interpret the value of the symbol. Accuracy is not the value of symbolic interpretation; cooperation between the interpreting subject and symbolic object is the true mark of the symbol.

Chauvet illustrates this cogent thesis in his analysis of the peasant woman's shoes in a famous tableau by Van Gogh. The shoes, writes Chauvet, exemplify the function of a symbol: "the work of art, like all symbolic work, shows what the truth is: not something already given beforehand to which one only has to adjust oneself with exactitude…"[391] This definition of the

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[389] See especially 110-127 for Chauvet's careful exposition of the symbolic in anthropological, historical, and philosophical contexts. Years after its publication, this section still impresses for its multidisciplinary coverage of relevant sources from the Greek origins of *symbolein* to hermeneutical theories of metaphoricity.

[390] Ibid., 117.

[391] Ibid., 117.

symbol amounts to a reappraisal of "truth" following in the work of classical hermeneutes such as Heidegger, Gadamer, and of course, Ricoeur. Instead of offering merely representative concepts or images, the symbol is that which "*touches what is most real* in our world and allows it to come *to* its truth."[392] So defined, a symbol describes a particular form of mediation, one that invites a strong degree of participation from the viewing subject. The symbol invites the subject's ecstatic movement beyond the self and toward the symbol. Unlike the more rudimentary function of the "sign," the symbol brings the interpreter into a more complex and dynamic process in which meaning and value are both discerned and expanded.

Using Chauvet's notions of mediation, I believe it is faulty to oppose a symbolic layer in Char Davies's VR work to some "real" world beyond *Osmose* and *Ephémère*. With Chauvet's work as our guide, I believe that we can affirm McRobert's claim that the objects of Davies's VR worlds are symbolic, but rather than contrasting symbols with "reality," we may consider symbolic VR objects as the stimulants of a unique interpretive process. What if, like the content of Dante's dreams and Owein's pilgrimage, the symbolic content of *Osmose* and *Ephémère* was understood as an invitation to encounter a riddle without a clear answer but with an urgent set of questions? This rhetorical question points to an elemental feature of symbolic signs and objects: The ambiguity of symbols provokes self-reflection. As a description of the objects populating Owein's visions, Dante's dreams, and Davies's virtual worlds, symbols are objects threatening to become signs, things hovering between the intelligible and the unknown, the recognized and the not yet recognized.

Chauvet's account of the symbol explicitly resonates with Char Davies's stated interpretation of her own work. Davies and her software collaborator, John Harrison, have claimed the importance of "ambiguity" for their projects, a result of the practice of "suggesting

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[392] Ibid., 117, emphasis in original.

meaning rather than explicitly illustrating."[393] Object ambiguity—the nearness of virtual objects

to discernable forms—defines the environments of *Osmose* and *Ephémère*. Ambiguous identities

abound here, and the lack of clearly recognizable objects may actually transgress Davies's own

descriptions of *Osmose* and *Ephémère*. To wit, the immersive video log of *Ephémère* establishes

a description of the VR's environment's geography, a kind of roadmap for what the immersant

will soon experience: "Ephémère is structured vertically / into three realms: / landscape, earth,

body. / The body is the substratum beneath the fecund earth and / the bloomings and witherings /

of the land."[394] The author's intentions structure the world that the immersant will soon

encounter.

Yet many features of *Ephémère* arguably resist identification according to the provided

description. To observe this is by no means to contest Davies's right as an author to declare her

own creative designs. Rather, it is to observe the exciting ways in which the ambiguity that

Davies's claims for her work allows her environments to suggest a range of interpretations that

surpass and sidestep the parameters indicated in Davies's description. I suggest that something

essentially Dantean is at work in this text's relation to the objects that it allegedly describes. In

the last chapter, I invoked the work of Marianne Shapiro whose insightful reading of *Purgatorio*

XXV suggested that Statius's description of spiritual apparitions did not seem to satisfactorily

explain how souls appeared to Dante the pilgrim. Shapiro's argument draws attention to the gap

between a character's description of Purgatory's laws, rules, and preconditions on the one hand

and the phenomena that the poet describes on the other. The rules, in other words, do not always

seem to provide the most fitting description of the facts. The phenomena themselves leave

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[393] Davies and Harrison, "*Osmose*, Toward a Broadening…" 25.

[394] Davies, "Osmose." Filmed August 1995. YouTube video, 16:55. Posted June 3, 2014.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=54O4VP3tCoY&t=4s.

something to be desired in Statius's effort to supply a clear account of Dante's environs to the curious pilgrim.

The relation between Statius's claims and Dante's world may reflect a similar link between Davies's description of her own work and *Ephémère* itself. The opening text of the immersive video orients the viewer's understanding of the virtual environment's "realms." At every turn, however, the immersant encounters phenomena that challenge this neat distinction into three distinct zones. The same challenges to identity observable in *Osmose* prevail in *Ephémère*, only with greater intensity: Objects become translucent and pass through the immersive body of the subject; there is a distinct absence of spatial planes that would provide consistent borders, grounds, or horizons; and most distinctively, *Ephémère*—as the environment's title would suggest—contains even less objects whose morphology is clearly delineated by structural detail. The opening phases of the immersive world exemplifies this last point with its murky patchwork of white, black, and grey tones. These colors mingle and blend in defiance of distinction, even as they faintly suggest certainly partially recognizable objects such as trees and water:

Fig. 3: A darkened wood?

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To be clear, none of this implies any kind of deficiency in Davies's sublime artistry. To observe how the ephemeral objects of the eponymous *Ephémère* may exceed the creator's intentions is, in fact, a way of appreciating the success of the virtual environment to manifest the aesthetic ambiguity that Davies compellingly describes in her work.

McRobert has emphasized the strangeness of Davies's object worlds in a fashion that echoes Davies's own reflections on ecological values. For McRobert, as for Davies, the foreignness of the virtual objects occasions a comparison with their counterparts in our everyday lives beyond the use of headsets. A virtual "tree" summons a mental relation to the immersant's memory of a biological tree, or perhaps one may recall one of Davies's virtual tree in the moment of a new sensual encounter with a particular tree. In either of these cases, the difference of Davies's worlds catalyzes a profound ethical appreciation for the precarity of the natural world that is consistently implied but never represented in *Osmose* and *Ephémère*.[395]

These philosophical intentions are noble. Many immersants have likely left their time inhabiting Davies's VR settings with the renewed appreciation for the biosphere that both Davies and McRobert prescribe. Yet immersants may experience a range of alternate responses to the ambiguity of Davies's VR environments. The strangeness characterizing Davies's objects may be the stimulus for a particularly focused form of self-reflexive awareness. Davies has herself has claimed that her work seeks "to heighten ambiguity in order to refocus the participant's attention on their own act of perceiving, or rather of *being*."[396] Whereas Davies emphasizes the capacity of ambiguity to bring about self-reflexive perception, I want to additionally draw out how ambiguous objects in these environments can stimulate a similar but distinctive experience

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[395] See especially McRobert, *Char Davies*, 46-49, 56; Davies, "Virtual Space," 69.

[396] Davies, "Virtual Space," Section: "The virtual environments *Osmose* and *Ephémère*." http://www.immersence.com/publications/char/2004-CD-Space.html.

of symbolic awareness. In the idioms of Ricoeur and Chauvet, it is the ambiguity characterizing symbols that stands to elicit not merely objective understanding but self-reflection. As Ricoeur once wrote of textual interpretation, "[L]a réflexion est l'appropriation de notre effort pour exister et de notre désir d'être, à travers les oeuvres qui témoignent de cet effort et de ce désir" (Reflection is the appropriation of our effort and our desire to exist and our desire to be through those words which testify to this effort and this desire).[397] Ultimately, this is what I aim to emphasize most about *Osmose* and *Ephémère*. As virtual environments, what makes them "virtual" is perhaps not primarily the fact that they consist in lines of computer-generated code. Nor is the category "virtual" only able to describe immateriality in opposition to the quantifiable world of materiality that the immersant encounters once the headset has been removed. Rather, the virtuality in Davies's work resides in the capacity of her impersonal, ambiguous object worlds to provoke forms of introspection that realize what Ricoeur and Chauvet describe as the fundamental psychic process of symbolic interpretation.[398]

We are concerned here with *meaning* in a way that goes beyond self-reflective sensory experience. For Ricoeur, the ambiguous meanings that symbols suggest are always the stimulant to self-reflexive thought.[399] At the most elementary level, a symbol is simply "*toute structure de signification où un sens direct, primaire, littéral, désigne par surcroît un autre sens indirect, secondaire, figuré, qui ne peut être appréhendé qu'à travers le premier*" (any structure of signification in which a direct, primary, literal meaning designates through some excess another

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[397] Ricoeur, *Le conflit*, 39.

[398] My interpretation here also contrasts with Wertheim's reading of the literary Beatrice as a "*virtual*" object in the *Commedia* (62, emphasis in original). In this reading, virtual seems to mean de-historicized: Beatrice is "virtual" to the extent that the character in Dante's narrative is distinct from the historical Florentine figure from which Dante's literary creation is derived. I assign a different value to "virtuality," preferring to use the term to signify a particular form of symbolic experience and awareness.

[399] Ricoeur, *Le conflit*, 30-33.

indirect, secondary, figurative sense that cannot be apprehended except through the initial

sense).[400] Symbols, then, are those subtle signs and objects that elicit two inextricable questions:

"What does this *mean*?" and "How is this object transforming me?" Ricoeur's enduring insight

here is to observe how the subjective encounter with symbols often sends the mind back to the

source of the question itself: the subject. Nevertheless—and the present engagement with

Ricoeur hangs upon this proviso—the result of this hermeneutic self-reflexivity is not a selfish or

narcissistic self-investment. Truly sincere symbolic reflection is to be distinguished from the

narcissism that the Cartesian *Cogito* engenders:

> [I]l faut dire d'abord que le fameux *Cogito* cartésien, qui se saisit directement dans
> l'épreuve du doute, est une vérité aussi vaine qu'elle est invincible [...] exister, pour moi,
> c'est penser ; j'existe en tant que je pense. Mais cette vérité est une vaine vérité, elle est
> comme un premier pas qui ne peut être suivi d'aucun autre, tant que l'*ego* de l'*ego Cogito*
> ne s'est pas ressaisi dans le miroir de ses objets, de ses oeuvres et finalement de ses actes.
>
> First, it must be said that the famous Cartesian *Cogito*, which is directly seized in the test
> of doubt, is a truth as vain as it is invincible [...] to exist, for me, is to think. I exist insofar
> as I think. But this truth is a vain truth. It is like a first step that cannot be followed by
> another, as long as the *ego* of the *Cogito* is not seized anew in the mirror of its objects, of
> its works, and ultimately, of its acts.[401]

Ricoeur's point is specific and incisive: The thinking subject, the likes of which Descartes posits

in his *Cogito*, is no subject at all if she or he does not allow the world of objects to occasion an

introspection that is open to perceiving itself in others. Put in other terms, Ricoeur is cautioning

against a form of self-consciousness that merely looks to the immediacy of its own mental

structures to learn just what the subject is and what it may become. Instead, salutary (rather than

narcissistic) self-reflection comes from introspection in conversation with the objects

encountered both within the mind through intellection and beyond the body through sense

perception. Only by allowing the world of objects to enter into the subject's reflection upon itself

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[400] Ibid., 35, emphasis in original.

[401] Ibid., 41.

can the subject attain a form of self-knowledge that does not amount to an isolating act of psychological navel gazing. In sum, Ricoeur speaks to the importance of an interpretive process that allows the interpreter to encounter herself through the consideration of objects (rather than merely on reflection on the grounds of consciousness in the subject).

In the passage just cited, it is striking that Ricoeur makes his point using the image of a mirror. The particulars of this image have profound resonances in the purgatorial visions of Dante and Marie, calling out to specific instances in the pilgrimages of each knight that bear, in turn, upon the present interpretation of Davies's work. In describing waking life and dreams alike, Dante the poet constantly pictures Dante the pilgrim in the act of seeing. So frequent are the poet's allusions to seeing, sight, vision, and gazing, that the entire *Commedia* could rightly be construed as an epic poem of sight. Eyes are everywhere and the conditions of their functioning occupy the poet's descriptive voice. This is evident in canto XXVII, which recounts the third and final of Dante's somnambulistic visions. Immediately before the onset of this last dream, the pilgrim is said to perceive the image (*imaginando forte*) of those refined in the fires outside the Earthly Paradise. Clearly, Dante sees with physical eyes the material objects of Purgatory. In sleep, he likewise sees, as Virgil attested in his interpretation of what Dante "saw" (*vedistsi*) in the *novella visiön*. Vision is a perceptual category linking sleeping and waking states.

It is in this passage that the poem's drama of vision reaches a particularly intense apogee of self-awareness.[402] Just before the third dream, Dante feels an increased proximity to Beatrice, which Virgil expresses by uttering, "Li occhi suoi già veder parmi" (Even now I can almost see

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[402] Indeed, the data analysis tool Voyant reveals the plural *occhi* is the 9th most frequently employed word in the *Purgatorio*, appearing 85 times. By contrast, *occhi* is only the 35th most frequently deployed word in Dante's *Inferno* where it appears only 49 times. In the *Commedia*, then, Purgatory is a poetic geography in which the lexicon of eyes nearly doubles in frequency. (The trend continues in the *Paradiso* where "occhi" is the tenth most common term with 76 appearances).

her eyes).[403] Virgil's statement describes the expectation of taking the organs of sight as a visual object. More specifically, someone *else's* organs of sight. For as no shortage of poetic and philosophical traditions have demonstrated, it is notoriously to bend vision or thought (allegorical vision) back onto itself. This limitation, however, may admit of a solution, however partial: one can see one's self in the other. Virgil harbors the expectation of seeing Beatrice's eyes, an expectation which imagines the conditions of vision's possibility as the object of vision itself. This hoped-for moment cements the dream episodes' sustained emphasis on intersubjectivity for achieving the purposes of travelling through Purgatory. As Virgil presumes in his comment, the eye cannot know itself without contemplating itself in the other. So it goes for the mind, which the eye consistently signifies throughout the poem.

If Davies's virtual designs are considered along the lines of Dantean vision, *Osmose* and *Ephémère* reveal themselves to be like Byzantine icons in more ways than one: Like the icon, Davies's worlds are invitations to a form of asceticism. The term, deriving from Greek, signifies discipline, and asceticism almost always aims at the development of the self toward some higher purpose or goal. For the immersant in Davies's world, there is a discipline in the act of entering a state of consciousness that shares no interpersonal interaction, and in which there is no clearly identifiable terrain of objects to which memory and understanding can be reliably tethered. In contrast to Dante's perception of himself in the other, the immersant in *Osmose* and *Ephémère* experiences symbols with little hint of humanity. For myself, the experience of vicariously journeying through *Osmose* and *Ephémère* forces a self-reflexive frame of mind due to this lack of personal others with whom I may interact. Without other human agents, the mind must turn inward upon itself to locate any trace of personhood. This feature of *Osmose* and *Ephémère* is apposite to Owein's situation in the *Espurgatoire*. In Marie's Purgatory, a process of

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[403] *Purgatorio* XXVII, 54.

dehumanization surrounds Owein the knight. Personhood seems to be breaking down in this place (in contrast to Webb's helpful construal of *Purgatorio* as a domain in which personhood is cultivated.) The absence of fully personal figures with whom Owein may relate compels the knight to seek personhood in his cry to Christ. Of course, no such religious analogue is likely to inspire an immersant journeying within *Osmose* and *Ephémère*. There are no specifically religion images, no demons or monks or visions of the Trinity in its entire illustrious splendor. Yet an immersant in Davies's worlds may yet feel a sense of bewilderment in the face of the never-fully-identifiable environs that elicit interpretation ("Where am I?") even as they never quite manage to disclose full, stable, and known identities.

Hence, the virtual object world that meets the immersant's gaze constantly teases the possibility of recognition without ever yielding up a completely identifiable landscape. These conditions can place the immersive subject in an experience of constantly differing (as in *différance*) the moment of identification. Each object is something that the mind is *almost* ready to categorize: a tree, a cluster of rocks, perhaps a lunar surface. McRobert has joined Davies herself in asserting the importance of these similarities for instilling the value of biological nature in the immersant's mind.[404] Yet I wonder if the constant appearance of objects that are like and unlike ordinary objects stimulates an experience in which virtual objects cannot be relied upon to create a stable domain of meaning. No description of the amorphous light-filled realms in Davies's worlds can calm a nagging desire to identify *where* I am as an immersant. However great the similarity between Davies's virtual objects and those of the non-virtual world,

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[404] In francophone scholarship, Edith-Anne Pageot echoes McRobert's emphasis on the ecological consciousness that Davies's worlds engender, referring specifically to the Guattari-inspired notion of "écosophie." Edith-Anne Pageot, "Art et nouvelles technologies: Pour un recadrage de la subjectivité humaine par rapport à l'idée de paysage," *RACAR, Revue d'art Canadienne | Canadian Art Review* (Vol. 35 (1), ON, Canada: University of Victoria Printing Services (2010), 43.

the differences between them consistently stoke the same "hermeneutical provocation"[405] that I, borrowing Harrison's term, observe in Dante's purgatorial dreams.

There are, then, three critical absences in Davies's virtual worlds: the absence of the subject's body as a represented object, the absence of other people, and the absence of infallible object recognition. One result of this tripartite absence is the immersant's turn toward the subject as the one source of familiarity. When neither the subjective body nor materially grounded objects can ground the subject's sense of reality, what remains are the thoughts, intentions, desires, hopes, and longings of the subject. In this sense, the symbolic objects of Davies's world also illustrate the contrast between symbols and information as Chauvet develops the distinction. In contrast to the ambiguity inherent to symbolic expression and interpretation, the sciences deploy "signs" in order to convey "*information*, estimating the accuracy of the understanding it furnishes."[406] It is in this sense that we have an opportunity to take seriously Davies's notion that her work is a *metaphorical* depiction of nature. Her worlds are symbolic construals of natural objects, not representations on the model of scientific "signs" in Chauvet's taxonomy.

Chauvet's particular contrast of sign and symbol is also noteworthy as a forerunner of Ray Kurzweil's transhumanism rehearsed in chapter two. There, I noted Kurzweil's commitment to information as the fundamental element of human consciousness, an element whose entirely material basis allows Kurzweil to imagine replicating and expanding the capacities of human conscious life. All human perception and knowledge becomes reduced to computation, and the transitive object of this computation is information. Well before Kurzweil's transhumanist intentions had gained popularity, Chauvet's reflections on sacramental presence led Chauvet to contrast the symbolic with the informational. The contrast prompts the question: Will Ray

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[405] Robert Pogue Harrison, *The Body of Beatrice* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 20.

[406] Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 118, emphasis in original.

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Kurzweil's cyborgs eventually experience symbolic contemplation? Can computers *compute* a symbol in the precise sense that Ricoeur and Chauvet understand the symbolic? I remain skeptical. A symbol is not just a kind of sign among others but an object whose ambiguity forces a mysterious interplay of subject and object. This interplay foments deeper changes in the subject's entire perceptual framework (as I discussed in the example of Dante the pilgrim's shifts in visionary capacity in dreams). The aim here is not to entertain thought experiments about the future. Rather, Chauvet's awareness that symbols are not simply indices of *information* presages and resists Kurzweil's eventual understanding of the human as information computers. Symbols, it follows, resist incorporation into Kurzweilian anthropology. Just as humans can imagine cognitive experience beyond their material bodies (e.g. the dreaming Dante), so are symbols a description of the complex nodes of meaning derivation and exchange that escape the materialist reduction of mind to informational computation.

To exercise symbolic consciousness is to transcend one's current conceptualization of the self associated with the mundane material body. This, at any rate, is the discernable logic that arguably connects the experience of the dreaming Dante, visionary Owein, and immersant of Davies's worlds. To feel *as if* one is transcending the world of the body amounts to an awareness that the identity transformation that symbols provoke can become so intense that there is simply no other way to express what is happening. After all, what symbol could be more extreme than disembodiment to communicate a perceived transformation of identity? Disembodiment as identity loss: this is the tautology that animates the journeys of knight and pilgrim. And it is the heuristic by which the purveyor of Davies's virtual reality may constructively reinterpret virtual experience as an immersant within *Osmose* and *Ephémère*. Instead of generating immersive experiences whose primary effect is to reify the materiality of the body, perhaps these worlds

convey a medieval form of visionary experience that invites a surrender of identity so extreme that only disembodiment will suffice to describe it.

This chapter has indicated points at which medieval purgatory poems and Char Davies's virtual reality speak to one another. Marie de France and Dante, I have argued, construe disembodiment and interpretation in terms and images that are strikingly recognizable in the formal elements of immersive experience in *Osmose* and *Ephémère*. These similarities may disclose a tradition of presence, disembodiment, and meaning-making whose features recur across time. To put that wager to the test, I turn in the next and final chapter to the role of light in Davies's work. As a dominant image and principle in Davies's environments, light becomes the cornerstone of her works' most medieval features, and a conceptual portal through which we may finally trace the possibility of a philosophy—at once medieval and postmodern—of disembodiment and presence.

CHAPTER 4

TOWARD A PHENOMENOLOGY OF PRESENCE:
DISEMBODIMENT IN VIRTUAL PURGATORIES

The translucent tree [in Char Davies's *Ephémère*] immersed itself into me, travelling into me, becoming me [...]
Later, I mused: 'Now I know what Martin Buber meant by the I-It experience.'[407]
—Laurie McRobert

Technosophy encourages us to forget about social problems, specifically insofar as collective intelligence seems to require collective amnesia. Technosophy constructs cyberspace as a postmodern version of a medieval paradise, a space of transcendence in which evil and responsibility are left behind in a blissful conjunction with the really real. Cyberspace has genuine transformative possibilities, but technosophy, however diverting, will not realize them.[408]
—Jeffrey Fisher

By invoking Derrida (and other voices) in my reading of Marie de France and Dante, I have suggested that both poets resist what Derrida would call naïve forms of presence while nevertheless representing interactive relations obtaining between visionary subjects and the objects of their visions and dreams. As such, the disembodied visions of Owein and the dreaming Dante escape the Scylla of "grounded" notions of presence ("It was real because I saw it in my body!") and the Charybdis of unintelligibility, a total breakdown of symbolic exchange between subjects ("Meaning is infinitely deferred, so who knows what I'm even experiencing right now! This is all just an illusion!"). Dante's dreams and Owein's visions variously overcome both of these epistemic extremes. Marie de France and Dante depict Purgatory as a zone of extraordinary visionary experience in which self-reflexivity engages and receives support from others while suspending any notion that the individual or community can provide forms of empirical proof that would substantiate the results of purgatorial pilgrimages. Understanding oneself and one's environment in Purgatory is an art, not a science, one that requires the triangulation of subjective and intersubjective modes of knowing and reflecting upon extraordinary experiences.

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[407] McRobert, 23.

[408] Fisher, 125.

On the basis of these readings, the preceding chapters have occasioned the formulation of the following synthetic question: What understanding might emerge by interpreting Davies's immersive environments as (medieval) purgatories? A second and reciprocal question arises: Can medieval purgatorial poems be meaningfully construed as forms of virtual reality? To argue affirmatively involves a sustained consideration of the qualities and effects that typify Davies's virtual artistry, and the possibility for rearticulating extraordinary vision in Dante and Marie in terms of those qualities and effects. This endeavor is plainly anachronistic, but it aims to freshly configure the purgatorial impulse as one that resonates with the postmodern qualities of perceptual ambiguity and identity transformation that characterize *Osmose* and *Ephémère*. The goal, then, of this second question is to recapture something vital about the purposes for which Marie and Dante seem to construct models of visionary subjectivity.

The goal here is ultimately a re-reading of Davies's work through Marie de France and Dante and vice versa. Such a reinterpretation casts Davies's work as a kind of medieval purgatorial journey. But the aim of this reinterpretation is not simply to supply a new critical approach to interpreting a particular VR artist's work, though that is certainly one goal. The further destination is the beginning of an account of visionary presence, an account of what it means to be cognitively present to ordinary objects in view of extraordinary experiences. By approaching Davies's work as a re-instantiation of a medieval pattern, my goal is to offer up this work as an elaboration of that pattern—and, as I will show, even a commendation of that pattern. Here at the conclusion of this project, I will adopt the voice of the philosopher and the critic in order to both describe and ultimately prescribe certain features of cognition that characterizes disembodied visionary experience in the several sources of this research.

To initiate this final movement toward an account of presence, it is salient to turn to the role, function, and quality of a theme that dominates the work of Marie de France, Dante, and Char Davies: light.[409]

<div align="center">*Phenomenologies of Light, Code, and Text*</div>

In Davies's art, light often serves as an environmental transition. In *Osmose*, the equivalent of lens flares (moments when light beams saturate within a frame of vision creating a brilliant flash) can sometimes create a temporary moment of blindness. When the immersant's vision is restored, it is clear that the immersive body has passed into a different environment. Davies herself describes her artistic efforts to fashion the "dissolution of form through light."[410] Consider the following sequence of images taken from the video log of one immersant's experiences in *Osmose*:

Fig. 4: Baroque contrasts of grey, black, and white frame mysterious objects.

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[409] Like McRobert, I agree that Davies's virtual art shows a "preoccupation with light" (125).

[410] Davies, "Virtual Space," Section: "From painting to immersive virtual space."
http://www.immersence.com/publications/char/2004-CD-Space.html

Here, the immersant's perception of a tree-like object is suddenly shifted by the presence of a white light that throws the image into relief in a way redolent of observing a film negative.

Fig. 5: Something resembling a tree emerges against a shifting ground.

Then, a multi-colored texture suggests a horizon or ground beneath and between the tree-like object and the immersant.

Fig. 6: Leaf-like objects coalesce from the immersant's vision.

Suddenly, faint objects that seem like foliage emerge from within the viewer's visual field as if the objects were produced from within the immersant's eyes themselves.

Fig. 7: Leaves appear more distinctly, though their porous boundaries remain.

Within a few more seconds, these faintly lit objects began to appear more distinctly. Their edges are more defined, their hues deepen and differentiate, and their shapes appear more sharply. Is the immersant in a forest? Davies describes this deliberate confusion as an experience of being "paradoxically enveloped by both realms at once."[411] While the question of location is unavoidable for the immersant, the answer is not readily available based on the content of the vision. The multi-directional appearances of leaves, light, and darkness frustrate the subject's efforts to establish a sense of subjective location within a realm of objects:

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[411] Davies, "Virtual Space," Section: "A journey through the virtual realm of *Osmose*." http://www.immersence.com/publications/char/2004-CD-Space.html.

Fig. 8: Foliage and darkness.

As an aesthetic element in Davies's work, light also challenges the body's materiality and dissolves clear distinctions between subject and object. The "dissolution of form through light"[412] about which Davies's writes not only blurs the forms of objects but the qualitative distinctions between subject and object. For instance, moments after the immersant passes into the realm of *Osmose*'s giant foliage, a stream of atomized light begin to flow toward the viewer. These units, which recall the notion of *quanta* even as they resemble certain western images of fairies, ultimately pass toward and through the viewer's body. The immersive body, in other words, is porous to light.

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[412] Ibid., Section "From painting to immersive virtual space." http://www.immersence.com/publications/char/2004-CD-Space.html.

Fig. 9: The arrival of light.

Later, similar light quanta gather themselves into a brilliant stream that flows upward and into the roots of a tree-like object:
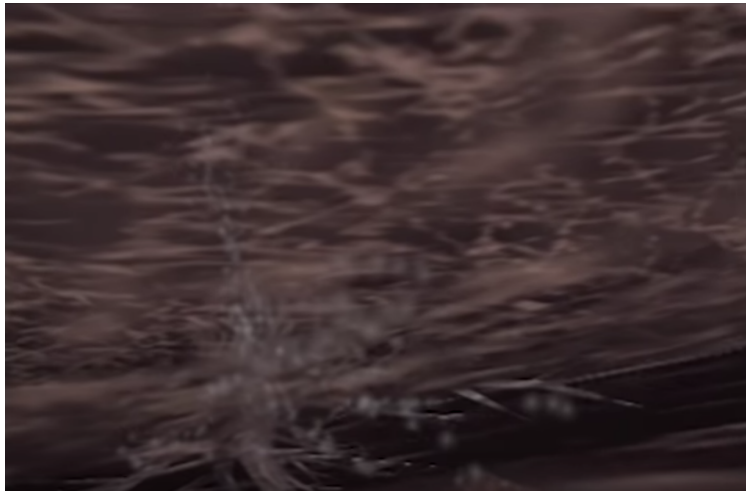

Fig. 10: A spatial plane?

In this screenshot above, one observes that the viewer's perspective is now "underground." Having passed below a faintly glowing lattice of purple-orange light, the immersant perceives the light quanta pulsing toward and into the tree-like object. Light, it would seem, is correlated to the forces of biological life. The same element that can pass through the observing body of the immersant also gravitates toward the tree-like object. The connotation of nourishment is

inescapable, as if the light were a source of nutrition or life just as water supplies for tree roots in the world observed without a virtual reality headset.

Consequently, there emerges a strong visual suggestion of light as a fundamental element comprising the world around the immersant. As the nutrient-like source of the tree-like objects, the light clusters sustain the environment of *Osmose*; as objects that pass through the viewer's "body," light takes on an ethereal quality. The constitutive element of this environment, therefore, is something that transgresses material boundaries. This world is built on something osmotic, as the title of Davies's domain plainly suggests.

If light suggests a fundamental ethereality in *Osmose*, that suggestion is deepened in the subsequent user experience of coding language as a visual object. Immersants in *Osmose* pass through layers of biological-like humus and earth only to find themselves surrounded by the appearance of digital code:

Fig. 10: Flowing sheets of digital code.

Amidst this radically new environment, the immersant eventually sees the green digital code visualizing the phrase, "Breathing_Data" in repeating, vertically stacked text blocks. Much like light, the immersive body passes through the code and vice versa. To be an immersive body is to breathe data, to open one's body up to the fundamental elements of code. Eventually, the visible

text code fades away to reveal a return of the tree-like landscape with now familiar streams of light quanta pulsing throughout the visual field. The sudden shift suggests the affinity between the light quanta and the units of code, both populating the immersant's visual field as streams of elemental units.

Code is a more specific instance of text, which appears elsewhere to the immersant in the form of massive sheets of poetry. In the following still, the text through which the immersant passes describes the very porosity that the virtual body traverses:
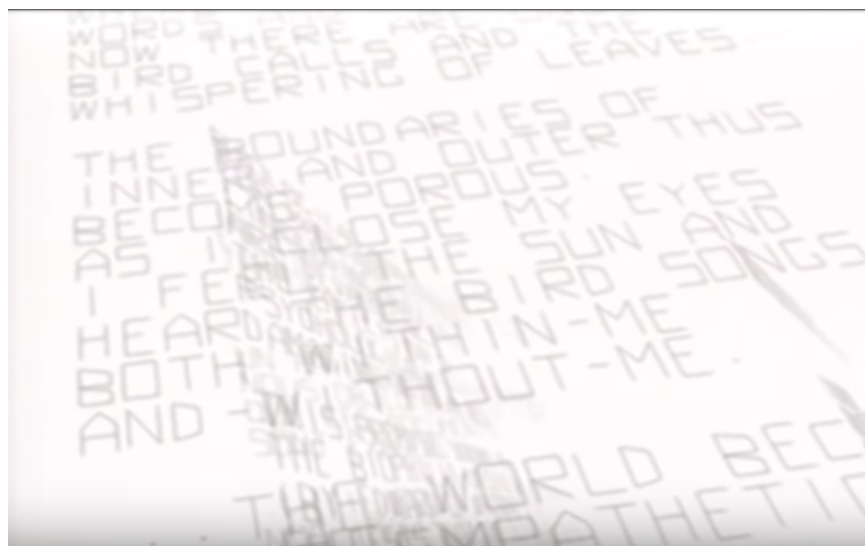
Fig. 11: Towering walls of words.

In this same sequence, text is also a feature of the virtual geography, as we see in the massive T-A-L shapes that rise up like a wall through which the viewer passes. Virtual speech at once occasions an act of reading and the landscape in which the immersant must navigate that reading. At times, the immensity of the visualized letters constitutes an obstacle to the reading which other text so clearly invites. This is worth taking seriously: in *Osmose*, text can form an obstacle to reading even as it forms the means and medium of reading and interpretation.
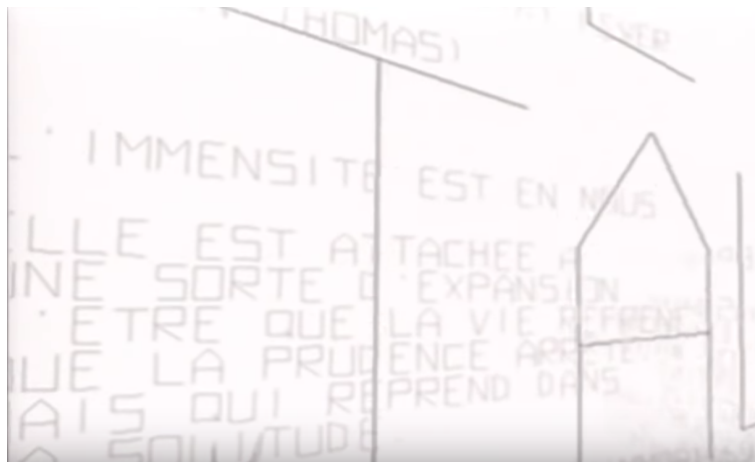
Fig. 12: Words of varying size rise up before the immersant.

Light appears as elemental quanta in *Osmose*, an aesthetic approach which we encounter again in *Ephémère*. In the later, however, light also takes on a more continuous and less discrete form than one observes in *Osmose*. The first objects that one encounters in *Ephémère* seem to consist almost entirely of light. It is as if these objects hover between solid and gaseous states, comprised as they are of brilliant waves of light. Light here does not appear in atomized units but rather as tendrils, walls, waves, and membranes whose variable luminosity creates the impression of different objects.

Fig. 13: Brilliant (angelic?) sources of light

Fig. 14: Grey environs.

In both the grey-scaled wintry landscape and the fiery image above, light is less a source that illuminates objects for a subject so much as that which comprises objects themselves. The presence of anything resembling distinct *things* is made possible almost exclusively through the variable intensity of light: The "river" in is not recognizable as a river based on color or realist detail. Rather, the "river" appears as a gap within a field of white light, an object whose objectivity is made possible by light's absence and presence within a specific domain of virtual space.

Ephémère is consistently characterized by a more somber and even unsettling atmosphere than the sublimity and tranquility of *Osmose*. Gray scale color schemes, the stark absence of color in the itinerary's initial portion, and the staccato of unnerving strings in the soundtrack all establish a mood that enhances the already destabilizing features of the visual environment. The unsettling atmosphere of disorientation climaxes with the immersant's position in a terrain that forces a sense of solitude.
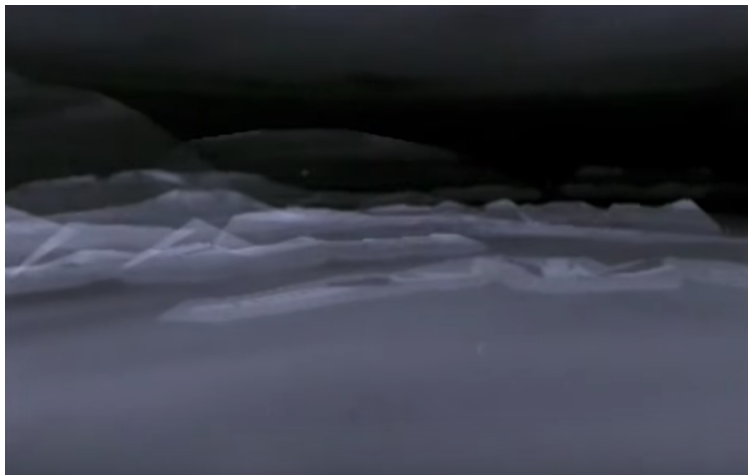
Fig. 15: A celestial environ?[413]

The visual and auditory starkness of this initial terrain finally give way to the warmth and rich color schemes of yet another new environment. This shift brings with it the appearance of more stably delineated objects, no longer the shadowy recesses of light and shadow, though the ambiguity of those earlier images persists:

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[413] All screenshots taken from Immersence, "Ephémère (1998) - Char Davies - 16 min.," 16:21, June 3, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XCWaMll0leI.
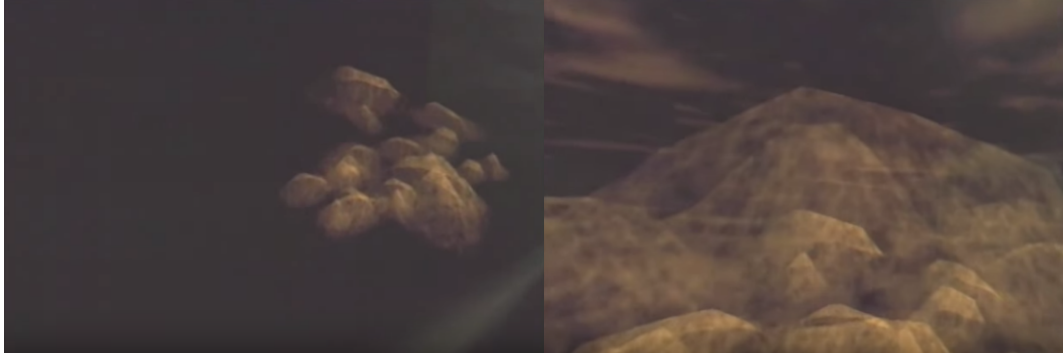
Fig. 16: Objects marked by increasing spatial distinction.

Ephémère's striking imagery shares *Osmose*'s formal penchant for depriving the immersant of identifying their sensorium as a stable center from which spatial relations may be discerned and controlled. Consider the following image captured from one immersant's experience:
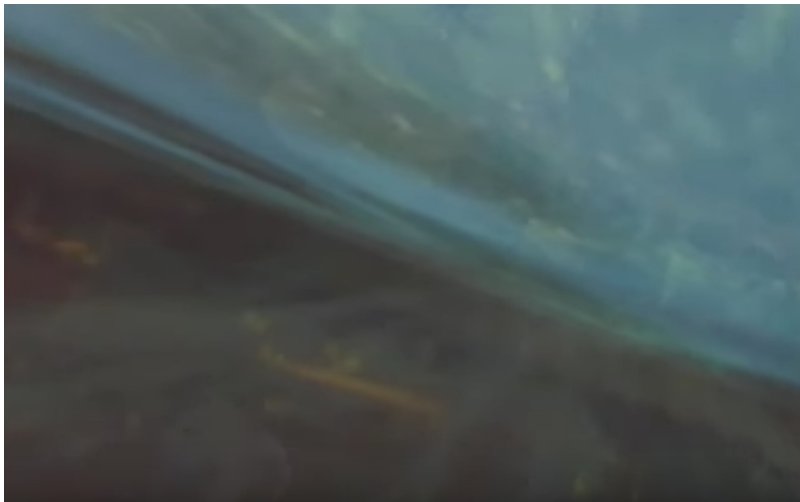
Fig. 17: A massive blue field.

As the immersant floats with great speed through current-like paths of colorful light, an expansive plane of blue emerges from beyond the immersant's vision and extends dramatically into the distance. Because the blue plane is canted at such a pronounced angle, the eye cannot easily interpret the plane as a ground, horizon, or ceiling. For myself, my mind constantly struggles to locate points of stability when observing the shifting environments of *Ephémère*. Yet

this stability is exactly what eludes the immersant at every turn through the scrambling of the immersive body's self-perception in relation to stable virtual objects.

By structuring both virtual environments on the basis of code, light, and text, Davies's worlds are built from fundamentally osmotic and ephemeral elements (as the works' titles explicitly state). To borrow a philosophical idiom, the basic elements comprising Davies's worlds suggest a kind of idealism, a world in which mental or intellectual realities form the basis of visionary experience rather the material particles that the empirical sciences investigate. Language and light pass through the immersive body, an absent body whose immateriality makes possible a new degree of intermingling with the fundamentally mental units of light, code, and text.

To use the term "elements" here is even misleading, since the essentially immaterial character of these fundamentals (text, light, code) resists classification as matter in the sense that the scientific term "elements" implies. In contrast to Kurzweil's materialist notion of "information, " *Osmose* and *Ephémère* illustrate a world built upon what is manifestly immaterial. Davies's worlds can, then, be helpfully described as illustrations of a certain kind of idealism, a construal of the world that resists the reductive impulses of materialism. In the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy's entry on "Idealism," Guyer and Horstmann propose two definitions of the term. The first is a standard summary of a range of idealist philosophies readily associable with modern thinker such as Berkeley. In this historical sense, idealism is view founded on the notion that "something mental (the mind, spirit, reason, will) is the ultimate foundation of all reality, or even exhaustive of reality." The second definition advances a subtler and more expansive account of idealism as a recognition of the following:

> although the existence of something independent of the mind is conceded, everything that
> we can *know* about this mind-independent "reality" is held to be so permeated by the

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creative, formative, or constructive activities of the mind (of some kind or other) that all claims to knowledge must be considered, in some sense, to be a form of self-knowledge.[414]

This second definition describes a sort of construal of the world that, I argue, frames the user experience of *Osmose* and *Ephémère,* as well as the purgatorial poems of Marie and Dante. As the encyclopedists crucially maintain, the acknowledgement that reality cannot reduce to base elements of quantifiable materiality goes hand in hand with a tacit admission that objective knowledge is always "a form of self-knowledge." The ephemerality of the object-world is "permeated by the creative, formative, or constructive activities of the mind" in such a way that knowledge of objects necessarily implies some degree of self-knowledge in the subject.

This particular account of idealism—which rightly identifies the self-reflexive dimension in *all* knowledge—can be equally identified within the architecture of the purgatory poems studied here. This is one way in which Char Davies's work can be said to recapitulate a medieval vision of purgatory just as the medieval purgatories of Marie and Dante demonstrate the idealist qualities of Davies's virtual reality. The visionary journeys of Owein and Dante posit a terrain whose ephemerality (to use Davies's term) occasions a kind of porosity of subject and object. To read Davies, Dante, and Marie de France in this conjoined way is to affirm for all three artists what Davies has claimed about her own work: "My lifelong artistic project (now stretching over 25 years) has been to re-present the world as I have intuitively sensed it to be—*behind the veil of appearances* — as immaterial, interrelated and dynamic flux."[415] It has been my effort to celebrate Davies's intention for her work. At the same time, I have endeavored to show that one

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[414] Paul Guyer and Rolf-Peter Horstmann, "Idealism", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/idealism/>.

[415] Davies, "Virtual Space," Section: "An alternative sensibility: a spatiality without things." http://www.immersence.com/publications/char/2004-CD-Space.html.

may embrace Davies's appraisal of her artistry as "immaterial" in a way that is truly radical, embracing the possibility of leaving behind one's material embodiment in a way that many of Davies's critics, and sometimes Davies herself, disavow.

My argument for the reciprocity of purgatory and virtual reality—and the visionary experiences that unfold therein—offers a more specific iteration of a larger connection that Margaret Wertheim hypothesizes regarding virtual reality and medieval culture. Within the early twenty-first century fascination with VR, Wertheim discerned a challenge to the "materialist metaphysics" of western modernity.[416] Unlike the reductively materialist pictures of reality that broadly circulate in contemporary cultures, the world of cyberspace is not composed of matter but "the ephymera of bits and bites."[417] The allure of cyberspace, therefore, is often to be found in its potential for offering an escape from the limits of scientific materialism.[418] The "utter failure of modern science to incorporate psyche into its world picture is one of the primary reason [*sic*] so many people are excited about cyberspace."[419] Wertheim does not invoke Char Davies in her argument here, yet her description of virtual reality as an alternative to materialism could have been written as a precise description of potential viewer responses to *Osmose* and *Ephémère*:

> By making a collective space where the self can experiment and play with others, cyberspace creates a parallel world that in a very real sense is a new cosmos of psyche. Tunneling out the physical world, we enter, via the optic fibers of the Internet, a vast psychosocial playground where the self can select from a seeming array of chatrooms, data collections, discussion forums, fantasy games, and virtual "worlds."[420]

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[416] Margaret Wertheim, "The Medieval Return of Cyberspace," in *The Virtual Dimension: Architecture, Representation, and Crash Culture* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998), 48.

[417] Ibid., 48.

[418] Ibid., 48-53.

[419] Ibid., 53.

[420] Ibid., 58.

To identify one cultural antecedent of this "psychological playground," Wertheim casts a glance back in time to Dante. The *Commedia*, Wertheim suggests, forms two poles toward which contemporary fascination with virtual reality may ultimately tend. "As Dante knew full well," she writes, "heaven is reached only by letting go of ego and control. Hell, on the other hand, is always a place we humans make for ourselves."[421] In Wertheim's estimation, whether humans opt for the heavenly or infernal model of virtual reality is a story whose end has not yet been determined.

An Alternative Genealogy of Medieval Virtual Reality:
When Losing Power Is Success

Wertheim's scholarship also raises the question that will occupy the remainder of this chapter: in what terms can we characterize the particular form of symbolic awareness that I have variously traced in Marie de France, Dante, and Char Davies? Whereas chapter three was largely concerned with elaborating a precise account of symbolism through Ricoeur and Chauvet, I now turn to a detailed consideration of the phenomenology of vision that the symbolic encounter variously stimulates in purgatorial and virtual settings alike.

In *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace*, Wertheim positions Dante as the ancestral forerunner of cyberspace. By fashioning a world entirely comprised of visionary "space," Dante anticipates the digital age in which subjects may partially separate their sensorial and cognitive experience from their material bodies.[422] Wertheim sees the visionary pilgrim as a figure who is liberated from material constraint in the same fashion that Internet users experience during online

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[421] Ibid., 58.

[422] "My body remains at rest in my chair" even as I travel within an "electronic space of mind." Wertheim, *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace*, 41.

activity.[423] Like the immersants of virtual terrains or surfers of the Internet, Dantean vision in the

Commedia is a form of vision freed from bodily constraints.[424] But as a critical evaluation of this

experiential paradigm, Wertheim's book seems to toggle between appreciative and skeptical

assessments of Dantean and digital forms of bodily transcendence. On the one hand, Wertheim

explicitly praises Dante for setting a cultural mold that resists a "strictly physicalist view" of the

world.[425] She writes that "the new cyber-dualism is a development to be welcomed"[426] since

digital forms of experience can introduce their subjects to forms of perception that challenge

materially reductive accounts of the human being. To put it plainly, "*Just because something is*

not material does not mean it is unreal."[427] Up to this point in the argument, I share Wertheim's

assessment, which I have endeavored to elaborate similarly in my own terms through my

analysis of Char Davies's work.

Wertheim's view of Dante and VR, however, is at times more conflicted and even

polemical. While she finds both the *Commedia* and its alleged digital offspring to resist reductive

materialism, Wertheim also criticizes the "quasi-religious views of cyberspace" advanced by

figures like Michael Heim which strike Wertheim as "inherently problematic."[428] Her enthusiasm

for Dante chills when she "ultimately want[s] to reject" the very model of the "cyber-soul" that

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[423] "Because cyberspace is not ontologically rooted in […] physical phenomena, it is *not subject to the laws of physics*, and hence it is not bound by the limitations of those laws." (Ibid., 228, emphasis in original.)

[424] See also Jeffrey Fisher's earlier contention that "the postmodern will to virtuality parallels the medieval religious will to transcendence." (122) In Fisher's view, Dante bequeaths to contemporary VR cultures a model of bodily transcendence that aims at the annihilation of memory (122).

[425] Ibid., 40.

[426] Ibid., 247.

[427] Ibid., 231, emphasis in original.

[428] Ibid., 19-20.

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she initially derived from Dante's description of the Empyrean.[429] The reader is left to wonder which interpretation ought to prevail: Is Dante to be praised for raising a perennial challenge to reductive materialism or condemned for presaging digital cultures that denigrate the material body?

On the whole, I believe that Wertheim conflates two cultures that should be distinguished. On the one hand, she identifies a technological culture that positions "cyberspace as heavenly space…"[430] These efforts to frame cyberspace as "heavenly" are dangerous because this framing allegedly amounts to a desire for immortality. She cites Hans Moravec, a name sometimes invoked alongside Ray Kurzweil, whose has claimed that we will "find immortality" through the technologies associated with cyberspace and the Internet.[431] If the *Commedia* is to be praised for the anti-reductive premises of the pilgrim's visionary experience, Dante is to be condemned as the father of a culture that marshals digital technologies to transcend human embodiment altogether. This technocratic investment in immortality is *not*, I will argue, the same impulse that animates the medieval poetics of Dante's *Commedia*. If we contrast Dante's notion of the *trasumanar* with technocratic notions of transhumanism in the recent past and present, it becomes clear that contemporary enthusiasts of technocratic transhumanism are not offering "repackagings of age-old Christian visions in a technological format."[432] If "the fantasy of *omniscience* shimmers over the digital horizon,"[433] this fantasy cannot be reasonably attributed to either Dante or Marie de France.

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[429] Ibid., 41.

[430] Ibid., 20.

[431] Ibid., 21.

[432] Ibid., 21

[433] Ibid., 28, emphasis in original.

In Wertheim's reading of Dante and virtual reality alike, the desire to seek permanent

liberation from bodily limits supposedly goes hand in hand with two associated desires: the

subject's desire to increase in power and a related desire for increase in knowledge.[434] Leaving

the body behind, in this understanding, is a mechanism for pursuing omnipotence and

omniscience. My aim throughout this dissertation has been to disentangle bodily transcendence

from its association with these urges for power and knowledge. I want now to reexamine the role

of knowledge and power in the disembodied experiences of Dante the pilgrim and Owein the

knight. In doing so, I will argue that Dante and Marie de France are mischaracterized as the

originators of a disembodied "cyber-dualism" whose goal is the increase of knowledge and

power. Alternatively, I believe that Dante's dreams and Owein's visions are much more closely

allied with the experience of disembodiment that I observe in Char Davies's distinctive virtual

reality.

To sharpen my argument, I turn to Wertheim's reading of the end of Dante's journey in

Paradiso. For Wertheim, Dante the pilgrim's itinerary is "intrinsically *directed*."[435] The goal is

set out in advance, and there is therefore no surprise involved in Dante's engineered progression

toward God. "Dante did not have a *choice* as to what direction to take: His journey was strictly

linear—toward light, hope, and love."[436] First, it should be noted that Dante's volitional response

to his own sanctification is a clearly necessary feature of his journey in its many phases. The

pilgrim's choice is not irrelevant to the goal of his journey. But more importantly, what exactly is

"linear" about Dante's journey? The very spirality of Purgatory's geography itself already

suggests the strange and destabilizing direction that his journey takes. Granted, Dante the

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[434] Ibid., 28.

[435] Ibid., 186, emphasis in original.

[436] Ibid., 187.

Christian pilgrim is led toward a particular goal within the Empyrean. But I wonder if the conclusion of Dante's journey in Paradise has become unfamiliar through overfamiliarity. Because Dante's journey is a "Christian" journey, it becomes tempting to believe that the poet is merely recapitulating dogma. In this understanding, the end of Dante's journey is compulsory, the poet's inevitable conformity to a doctrinal prescription of medieval religion. But the Empyrean is hardly the fulfillment of some obvious expectation that the pilgrim or the reader has been concretely awaiting from the poem's beginning. The truly bizarre and wonderfully strange sights of the Empyrean amplify the already bizarre and destabilizing phenomenology of the dreams in *Purgatorio*: Surprises await the pilgrim at every turn, and he must truly respond to these strange experiences *as surprises*.

Even if all this is dismissed as the posturing of a poet who engineers his own surprise, we must still take seriously that Dante's journey eventuates in an *eclipse* of his senses and intellect alike, his "vision" in the fullest sense. William Franke emphasizes this trans-rational feature of Dante's vision. As a cognitive experience that utterly transforms the limits of the pilgrim's visionary capacities, Dante's contemplation of God and the faithful within the Empyrean is as much a "non-vision" as it is a vision. It is an experience that implies a "blessed obliviousness."[437] These features of Dante the pilgrim's journey explicitly resist the imputation of "fantasies" of

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[437] William Franke, *Dante and the Sense of Transgression: 'The Trespass of the Sign,'* (Chennai: Bloomsbury, 2013), 48. Franke's analysis of vision and speech, and their interrelations in the Empyrean, deepens my claim here. According to Franke, "Seeing and saying operate to 'neutralize' each other, in Blanchot's sense of the neuter — that is, each modality is broken open by its relation with the other to an outside on which it intrinsically depends." (Ibid., 60). Franke develops this insight by invoking Derrida's notion of the supplement, arguing that "the unsayable is supplemented by vision in a way that makes vision a Derridean 'supplement': rather than grounding saying, the vision on which saying is supposed to rest opens it to the *in*visible and thus to further references that proliferate without being grounded in any visible presence." (Ibid., 60-61). The invitation to consider vision in this way clarifies what Dante's extraordinary visions in the Empyrean do *not* accomplish: specifically, the celestial mysticism that Dante perceives in the poem's final cantos do not give the poem's substance any kind of epistemic guarantee, as if the anterior vision of Heaven "grounded" the poem's subsequent claims (or 'sayings') thereof.

omniscience. Dante's dubious embodiment at the poem's conclusion does not coincide with the some acquisition of complete knowledge. After all, in contemplating the super-sensible ground of all Being (God), what could it possibly mean to say that Dante now "knows" everything? The contemplation of the divine is, as Franke reminds us, as much a "non-vision" as it is a "vision." To contemplate the source of all knowledge is, in a direct way, to surpass knowledge altogether. It is not as if Dante the pilgrim was in possession of a limited amount of facts about reality which were suddenly supplemented by all the remaining facts upon "seeing" God. Rather the pilgrim's vision of God reduces the finite mind to a kind of omni-ignorance rather than omni-science. Yes, Dante's journey lead inexorably toward "light, hope, and love"[438] as Wertheim observes. But these elements are not coextensive with some completed rational knowledge in the pilgrim.[439] Above all, the mystical vision sustained in *Paradiso* XXXIII conveys nothing like the technical rationality that would support the ambitions of cyber-immortality.

Let us dwell on this point for a moment. If the vision of the pilgrim in the Empyrean surpasses knowledge and instills a kind of holy ignorance, does this not trouble our ability to assert that Dante's itinerary was "strictly linear"[440] in the first place? After all, Dante's arrival at the Empyrean is the ultimate surprise: this is not the last stop on a trajectory that Christian dogma has prepared the pilgrim for in advance. The Empyrean is everywhere and nowhere, a fact that Wertheim appreciates in her writing.[441] But this literary fact must be taken to its limits.

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[438] Ibid., 187.

[439] One may readily agree with Mazzotta that Dante's poem "entails and sustains" a "vast scope of knowledge." (136) Yet the sort of knowledge that Dante configures in the poem is not, I would argue, consistent with factitious or scientific knowledge. As Mazzotta clarifies, Dante turns to poetry to find a "global, all-embracing framework in order to represent the rich and contradictory phenomena of existence." (136) Contradiction, as Mazzotta puts it, has a place in Dante's "global" poetic vision. We might contrast this poetic kind of knowledge, for which contradiction is not an enemy, with technical or even philosophical knowledge.

[440] Ibid., 187.

It implies that the journey's destination is utterly unlike other destinations of quests or journeys. God's "presence" is not some final vision in a series of visions. It is beyond all known territories, even as it fulfills medieval cosmological schemata of the universe. In short, even if the Empyrean was an ontological category for the Aristotelian and Ptolemaic sciences of Dante's day, the *experience* of the Empyrean is utterly unexpected. Nothing about it can, by definition, be anticipated as an experience since it exists beyond all horizons of intelligibility. These features of Dante's destination make it very difficult to characterize the Empyrean (or the God who dwells there) as a thing, place, or destination that lies at the end of the pilgrim's road. It is off the road, beyond the maps, and out of both sensible and intellectual sight. Therefore, to arrive "there" is perhaps not to arrive at a pre-engineered "goal...sooner or later."[442] Granted, Wertheim appreciates the utter transcendence of time and space that define Dante's Empyrean, even noting how "The mystery [of the Empyrean] is beyond intellection."[443] My disagreement, then, is not primarily with Wertheim's focused reading of the *Commedia* so much as her subsequent suggestion that Dante's world becomes the origin of the immortalizing pseudo-religion of "cyberspace enthusiasts."[444] Just as Wertheim rightly warns against the dangers of projecting the assumptions of modern materialism onto Dante,[445] so must we avoid a similar danger of prematurely recognizing tropes of omniscience into medieval visionary poetry.

These considerations set the stage for reclaiming Dante from a genealogy that seeks to place him as the progenitor of a technologically romantic desire to overcome bodily materiality

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[441] Ibid., 34-35.

[442] Ibid., 187.

[443] Ibid., 65.

[444] Ibid., 261.

[445] Ibid., 71.

in some complete or final way. By contrast, I wish to position Dante as a figure who presents the importance of the ineffable for human cognition. In *this* sense, Dante's visionary phenomenology—experienced both in dreams and in the Empyrean—prefigure the alternate tradition of virtual reality that I associate with the work of Char Davies. And part of this work amounts to recovering a positive notion of "ineffability," no longer identified as the necessary companion to fantasies of eternal disembodiment, power, and security, but redefined (with greater philosophical and historical plausibility) as nothing more or less than the human desire to experience the unknown.

The same textual features that resist the imputation of omniscience in Dante's journey also work against the interpretation that the pilgrim's journey aims at omnipotence. Let us first take up Wertheim's argument. Her text shows a consistent ethical concern to resist the notion that the virtual world is "*equal* to life",[446] an equality that amounts to a "delusion."[447] The invocation of delusion once again conjures a concern for accuracy and clear distinctions based on the difference beteween a *really* real domain and something derived from it. In Wertheim's case, she fears that participants in varied forms of cyberspace and virtual reality will gradually erode their ability to distinction between "the physical self" and its virtual counterpart.[448]

Wertheim's concern for preserving the priority of the physical body comes from her concomitant sense that the material body is restricted by limits that must be respected for human flourishing. Efforts to playfully remake our subjectivities in virtual environments can disappoint us when we find ourselves unable to reform ourselves beyond the limits that our bodies impose. To be disappointed in this way is to expose a faulty "concept of selfhood [that] is endlessly

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[446] Ibid., 248.

[447] Ibid., 248.

[448] Ibid., 249.

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malleable and under our control."[449] Here we come to the conceptual point upon which Wertheim's construal of virtuality pivots. Her critique is focused on a specific form of *engagement* with virtual reality, a kind of engagement that emphasizes the self as its own artificial object of change. As the passage just cited suggests, virtual environments are places we travel to bring our identities "under our control."[450] With this understanding, Wertheim's particular analysis of virtuality allows for one dominant form of subjective experience: A virtual subject is the subject in pursuit of self-domination. Like a Foucauldian technique of the self, virtual reality is here associated only with the subject's pretense to remake the self on the model of self-control. In this view, virtual reality is a *techne*, a skill or technology whose object is also the subject. Control is the goal; VR is the means.

I share Wertheim's critical unease with any form of VR engagement that would engender a depreciation of the body's finitude. But while this surely describes *one* particular mode of virtual experience, this is just as surely only one mode among others. Before I go on to describe how my reading of Davies's work departs from Wertheim's exposition of virtual subjectivity, we first need to grasp how Wertheim identifies the Middle Ages as the genesis of virtual reality's focus on self-control. In her genealogy of space, Wertheim identifies "*cyber-immortality*" as the quintessence of a cultural "fantasy of abandoning the flesh completely…"[451] The virtual effort to abandon the body, we are told, is the cultural progeny of a medieval Christian eschatological vision.[452] The Heavenly Jerusalem is the symbol par excellence of a wish for cyber-immortality

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[449] Ibid., 249.

[450] Ibid., 249.

[451] Ibid., 259.

[452] Ibid., 258.

understood as the resistance of the "limitations over the body."[453] In this genealogy, contemporary virtual reality is tainted by a desire for complete transcendence of the body, and that appetite for complete transcendence finds its medieval father in Dante.

Furthermore, to interpret Dante's pilgrim as a forerunner of disembodied "cyber-immortality" would seem to miss the critical role that the Resurrection of the Body plays in the architecture of the *Paradiso*. The foundational creed of the western churches, The Apostles Creed, contains language that prescribes the Christian hope for the "carnis resurrectionem," the resurrection *of the body*. The lengthier Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed significantly appears in an abbreviated paraphrase in Dante's *Paradiso*,[454] and the full creedal text likewise affirms the eventual expectation of a "resurrectionem mortuorum," the resurrection of the dead. During the patristic and medieval periods, this hope for a general resurrection of all dead signaled the specific expectation of bodily reanimation, the coming back to life of all human bodies in order to await a general judgment that would prolong the experience of embodied subjectivity into eternity. Embodiment for all time and beyond time: This was the unambiguous vision for human postmortem life espoused in the fundamental beliefs of the medieval western magisterial teaching.

Medieval European Catholicism, broadly speaking, maintained these creedal formulations at the center of ecclesiastical teaching and belief. Inspired by the New Testament conviction that Jesus's resurrected body was an example of what all people would experience, medieval Christian theologies followed the Patristic and Biblical expectation for a world in which the human body would be remade without the corruption inherent to normal fleshly existence. Ironically, as has been well attested by scholars in many fields, the medieval-cum-

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[453] Ibid., 258.

[454] *Paradiso*, XXIV. 130-147.

ancient Christian hope for an embodied postmortem existence was specifically contrasted with other esoteric and religious schools that emphasized an escape from the body as the ultimate path to happiness. In the centuries contemporary with Dante and Marie de France, it was the Cathars, deemed heretics by the church's hierarchy, who espoused forms of ontological dualism that led to a "dissaprov[al] of marriage and meat eating."[455] Rather than positioning eternal disembodiment as the shape of human destiny, medieval Catholicism retained the Biblical hope for a perpetually *embodied* existence. In fact, as Caroline Bynum has aptly shown, medieval discussions of the resurrection of the dead were often characterized by an "extreme literalism and materialism."[456] Rather than promoting practices and beliefs that anticipated an eventually permanent evacuation of the human body, medieval Catholicism often promoted the opposite—a vision for new bodies that would last as bodies forever.

At this point, one might plausibly object that these ecclesiastical doctrines only represented a small section of medieval society. What about medieval popular culture? It is all well and good that priests and bishops may have maintained notions of eternal embodiment, but what about medieval laypersons with their popular cultures expressed in tale, song, and fable? Caroline Bynum's extensive research on the topic is especially pertinent to this question. She writes, ""Medieval people" (as vague a notion, by the way, as "modern people") did not have "a" concept of "the body" any more than we do; nor did they "despise" it…"[457] Bynum discusses a broad range of medieval cultures, concluding that the medieval church's expectation for eternal embodiment was widely believed beyond the boundaries of ecclesial dogma or academic

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[455] Caroline Bynum, "Why All the Fuss about the Body? A Medievalist's Perspective," (*Critical Inquiry* 22, no. 1 (1995), 8.

[456] Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays On Gender and the Human Body In Medieval Religion*, (New York: Zone Books, 2012), 241.

[457] Ibid., 7.

theology: "in the cult of saints and relics, in changes in legal, medical and burial procedures in precisely this period [1100 to 1320], in the kinds of miracle stories that were popular with preachers and audiences."[458] To these cultural changes, I would add the purgatorial poems of Marie de France and Dante. Like the miracle stories to which Bynum alludes, Marie's and Dante's conceptions of Purgatory were composed within a culture saturated with a religious hope for eternal embodiment.

This is why Zaleski's magisterial comparison of medieval and modern near-death experiences brings fresh wisdom to these more current debates circling the status of the body in virtual reality. In her reading of several medieval otherworldly journeys, Zaleski argues—as I have—that one can recognize the medieval journey to other worlds by the essential feature of transience. The journey is never eternal, only temporary. "Transformation," Zaleski observes, "is expressed [in medieval otherworldly visions] by the visionary's return to the body to take up a new way of life."[459] The narrative trajectory of the disembodied visionary comes to reflect the broader belief in ultimate re-embodiment for the dead soul. Just as Owein and Dante recover their bodies, so do the souls of the departed in Dante's Empyrean await a final reunification with their absent bodies. In both contexts, the loss of the body is temporary.

It is puzzling that these facets of medieval theology and narrativity have yet to substantially challenge efforts by media theorists to locate the origins of body-denying virtuality in Dante. Wertheim, for example, shows a stated awareness of the Resurrection of the Body as the deep cultural background against which Dante and other medieval Christians understood their futures.[460] It is "post-Rennaissance propaganda that the medievals held the body in

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[458] Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 254.

[459] Ibid., 75.

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contempt," she writes, adding that "the body was an essential component of human selfhood" in medieval Christian anthropologies.[461] This signals a vital course correction in the reception of medieval cultures within media studies. The need for further refinement, I argue, occurs at how we must understand what the resurrected body both did and did not suggest for medieval expectations of eternal life.

Like John Caputo, Wertheim understands the resurrected body for which medievals hoped as a body that is ultimately "free from the limits of mortal flesh."[462] Yet this is not the only or decisive dimension characteristic of the resurrected flesh for which medieval Christians hoped. Moreover, an exclusive emphasis on the resurrected body's overcoming of material limits threatens to loss of power that arguably accompanies the hoped-for resurrected body. In chapter one, I noted Caputo's analysis of the "spectral" body of the resurrected Jesus. Caputo shares Wertheim's focus on the incorruptibility of the spectral body in Christian traditions.[463] But spectral flesh also characterizes a body that expresses a fundamental (even impossible) change in identity that has happened. I use the passive voice here because the events that spectral bodies, in Caputo's sense, experience are events that happen *to* the subject. We must recall here that Wertheim's analysis of virtual reality (*and* Dante) consistently emphasizes virtual experience as a technique, the expression of a *capacity* that seeks its own augmentation. But this is decidedly not the vision of virtuality that we might derive from Dante the pilgrim's experience across the *Commedia*, particularly in the experiential trajectory from the dream episodes to the Empyrean that I outlined in chapter two. Dante and Owein are (literally) raptured, taken up into experiences

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[460] Ibid., 260-261.

[461] Ibid., 73.

[462] Ibid., 261.

[463] Caputo, *Apophatic Bodies*, 112-115.

of transformation that challenge, rather than increase, the subject's control over themselves and their environments.[464] Like the spectral body of Christ, they are marked by impossible transformations of identity. They are not afforded new capacities for self-control or control of others.

Granted, Owein actively seeks out his trials in Purgatory just as Dante sets out to write his *Commedia*: In each poem, a figure decisively elects to submit himself to a journey that promises transformation. Despite this initial gesture of choice and action, both Owein and Dante get more than they bargain for. The experience of Purgatory tests them both through surprises, the unexpected, and above all, an invitation to surrender to the unknown. The ineffability that saturates the end of Dante's journey, as well as his dreams, is associated with a loss rather than a grain of subjective control. This does not come at the cost of domination from some human or divine Other; the loss of the subject's control is not the gain in someone else's power. Dante's dreams and Owein's visions may be fruitfully interpreted as virtual experiences, but not insofar as their journeys intimate some technical mastery over the bodily self.[465]

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[464] Cervigni underscores how the verb denoting the act of the eagle upon Dante (*rapisse*) is the cognate of the Vulgate's *raptum* by which the Latin version of II Corinthians renders Paul's account of the ambiguously embodied "raptured" subject taken into the Third Heaven (106).

[465] In a similar effort to interpret the symbolic as a welcome challenge to stable notions of the subject, Thore Bjørnvig writes of the "*dis*-ontology" that characters may undergo in certain Buddhist ascetical narratives (Thore Bjørnvig, "Metaphors and Asceticism: Asceticism as an Antidote to Symbolic Thinking," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 19, no. 1/2 (2007): 93.) This deconstruction of the self reflects a broader current of human development in evolutionary history: "By force of symbolic representation human beings came to live in a virtual reality: a world virtually represented by means of a higher-order symbolic system of reference." (105-106) Bjørnvig's account of the symbol may still be more semiotic than the symbolic as developed in Ricoeur and Chauvet, yet Bjørnvig's association of symbolism and "virtual reality" indicates the potential for symbols to provoke an entirely new frame of awareness or consciousness, not merely a particularly form of signification. What sort of consciousness? What kind of awareness does the symbol stir up in the interpreter? In his analysis of Christian eremitic asceticism, Bjørnvig provides the most salient answer to these questions that I have encountered: "The eremitic [desert] ascetic suspends the ongoing conversation—the circle of externalization, objectivation and internationalization—through which the self and its cognitive structures are produced and reproduced…" (112) Bjørnvig is describing how mystical practices associated with asceticism come to open up novel understandings of self, world, and other. The practitioners of such contemplative regimes may find a "decompression" (113) of the metaphorical structures by which they have understood the self, world, and others. In contemplation, the ascetic does *not* find fresh structures by which to construe reality; she finds "[a]nti-structure[s]." (115) We might say that a

The medieval doctrine of the Resurrection of the Body cannot be invoked as support for the thesis that medievals such as Dante hoped for extraordinary increases in power through an eventual reunification with their bodies. Unquestionably, Wertheim is correct when she writes that medieval Christians like Dante anticipated the resurrected body as free from certain "limitations of the mortal flesh."[466] But the medieval hope in the resurrected body did not imply the overcoming of physical limitations as a corresponding increase in human power or capacity. We would be wrong to think of medieval Christians such as Dante envisioning their future resurrected bodies as something akin to Marvel superheroes, bodies possessed of incredible strength that extends the potency and agency of the body's subject over itself and its environment. To see this, we need look no further than Dante's Empyrean itself. Granted, the figures there are awaiting the eventual return of their bodies at the Eschaton. But even in their pre-resurrected state that prefigures their fuller glorification to come, the pseudo-bodies of Paradise show no displays of increased power, agency, or capacity. They are busy doing one thing: singing hymnody, offering praise, and gathering as a liturgical assembly.[467] This is hardly the image of bodies seeking to transcend their corporal limits *as an end in itself*. The body here is no medium securing the extension of human power as a Marshal McCluhan might have argued. In the face of the ineffable God who is omnipotent, there is no possible increase in power that humans can hope for that would ever rival the sheer power of the infinite Godhead to which human souls are so intimate in the Empyrean. What would human power mean when contrasted with infinite power? Ultimately, then, the overcoming of bodily limits in the Empyrean is a

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conceptual undoing corresponds to an undoing in the self. By letting go of a stable awareness of who *I am*, I may concomitantly let go of my structured conceptions of what the world *is*.

[466] Wertheim, *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace*, 261.

[467] *Paradiso* XXXI, especially 1-27.

consequence, not the primary goal, of the medieval hope for an immortal body. Moreover, the overcoming of bodily limitation never amounts to the fulfillment of fantasies for omnipotence or omniscience.

The mischaracterization of Dante as the precursor to a body-denying quest for immortality reflects a broader (and more plausible) effort to locate those same features in contemporary virtual artistry. In addition to Wertheim's iteration of this thesis, we find a similar notion in the work of Ella Brians. In her genealogy of virtual reality's early cultural development, Brians observes a social expectation that virtual reality and artificial intelligence technologies might supply their users with "universal access to information."[468] This hope developed alongside a desire for "an alternate embodiment."[469] Brians goes on to detail how cultural hopes for VR began to wane in the 1990's when "VR technologies failed to deliver a fully 'immersive' experience."[470] To narrate the shifting landscape of cultural expectations in this way is revealing: It suggests that such hopes were grounded in the expectation that virtual environments could convincingly persuade the VR subject that the virtual environment could successfully replicate the sensual details of non-virtual experience.

At this point in the argument, both Brians and Wertheim introduce highly similar genealogies of cultures, each arguing that an undesirable negation of the body has characterized western history from ancient times. Wertheim writes, "There is, of course, nothing new about the desire to escape from bodily incarnation. Western culture has carried that seed deep within in it since at least the time of Plato, and in Christianity it has flowered in the Gnostic tradition."[471]

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[468] Brians, 123.

[469] Ibid., 124.

[470] Ibid., 124.

[471] Wertheim, *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace*, 96.

Echoing these terms, Brians has argued, "The mind-body divide that characterizes the 'dualists' is easily traced through Enlightenment rationality, Descartes, and finally, to Plato."[472] The importance of Brians's statement here runs deep. This tripartite cultural story, in which Plato is the father of a substantial dualism that he bequeaths to the Enlightenment through Descartes, seems to occupy a crucial position in the thinking of much reflection on virtual reality.

Brians and Wertheim each offer a variant of what I will call the Plato-Christianity-Descartes genealogy. This triptych construes a monolithic "Christianity" as the inheritor, or at least accomplice, of Platonism's (alleged) antipathy toward the material body. Yet this conflation of distinct cultural attitude breaks down when tested against a nuanced discussion of the Middle Ages. Consider Brians's historical statement when she writes, "*Like Christianity*, this form of posthumanism [which hopes for an escape from the body] promises us that we will only be truly happy and wise once we are free of the flesh."[473] The comparison between a heterogeneous Christianity and posthumanism may be brief, but its implications are urgently important. Barnes's suggestion is that "Christianity," which would presumably include medieval varieties, promotes the idea that happiness is the outcome of permanently escaping the body.

Brians's conflation of Christianity and technological Posthumanism cannot, therefore, stand under the scrutiny of a specific confrontation with the medieval theology of the resurrected body. To invoke again Bynum's research on the medieval body, I would argue that Dante and Marie overturn the "stereotype, common in textbooks, of the Middle Ages as "dualistic"—that is, as despising and fleeing "matter" or "the body," which in this interpretation is often understood to be "female" because "passive," "negative", and "irrational."[474] In view of all this, I argue that

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[472] Brians, 129.

[473] Brians, 130, emphasis added.

the provisional forms of disembodiment studied in this project do not subvert the ultimate

destiny of the human body imagined by Medieval Latin Christianities, nor by the Biblical or

Patristic antecedents thereof. Dante's dreams and Owein's visions constitute exceptions from

embodied norms. Each character returns to a state of embodiment, as Zaleski's project describes.

As I have argued, this return to mundane material embodiment is a closer approximation of

medieval Christian hopes for postmortem life than of any contemporary posthuman fantasy of

permanent disembodiment.[475] Ray Kurzweil and his ilk of contemporary AI pioneers may

actively hope for the obsolescence of the body through the application of digital, virtual, and

artificial tools, but medieval Christians in the Latin west largely rejected such hopes, even

embracing an opposite view that praised the body and projected its literal materiality onto the

eternal destiny of every human individual. But as I argued above, the medieval hope for eternal

embodiment does not disclose a wish for the augmentation of human power and capacity as

imagined by Kurzweil and other transhumanists.

By contrasting my reading of Dante and Marie de France with Margaret Wertheim's

interpretation, I have affirmed the thesis that Dante is a forerunner of virtual reality, though I

have sought to substantially redefine the terms of Dante's prefiguration. Rather than intimating

virtual worlds that satisfy fantasies of increased power and agency, Dante and Marie each

prefigure the more ephemeral virtuality that I have traced in Davies's *Osmose* and *Ephémère*. In

this portion of my argument, I have largely developed my account of medieval virtuality by

contrast with what it is *not*. In the final portion of this chapter, I will develop a constructive

argument for the dominant features of the virtuality that I discern in Dante, Davies, and Marie de

France. To do this, I will invoke a final pair of francophone voices—the medievalist Alain de

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[474] Bynum, "Why All the Fuss About the Body?...", 13.

[475] Zaleski, 75.

Libera and his predecessor, the phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty—in order to concentrate and amplify the thesis that medieval purgatorial disembodiment and Davies's VR offer similar experiences of subjectivity.

Medieval Conversion as Virtual Subjectivity

Dante's dreamer and Marie's visionary each experience forms of disembodiment that renders them virtual subjects. What can this mean? This hypothesis first means that the flight from the material body allows the subject to inhabit a liminal space where psychic transformation is imminently possible (Wertheim's "psychological playground"). This is a feature common to Davies's VR and her medieval antecedents. But medieval philosophers also considered these dynamics of subjectivity through conceptual, rather than artistic, categories. In particular, two giants figure largely in the medieval philosophical imaginary: Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius. In ultimately complimentary ways, these two theologians gave the medieval world of Dante and Marie de France a way to consider the fluidity of the subject on a journey that might be described by Wertheim's notion of the "psychological playground."

In his lectures on the history of subjectivity, Alain de Libera, Chair of the History of Medieval Philosophy at the Collège de France, has adduced the role that each of these medieval theologians played in the scholastic cultures of the High Middle Ages. Augustine in particular bequeathed an account of the subject that, ultimately, is no subject at all. "Augustin," writes De Libera, "pose la question du *je* en devenant lui-même *question de/pour lui-même*. Il ne pose pas « la » question du *je*." [476] (Augustine poses the question of the *I* by becoming [a] *question of/for himself*. He does not pose "the" question of the *I*). In other words, Augustine never develops a

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[476] Alain De Libera, *L'invention du sujet moderne* (Paris: Vrin, 2015), 26. All translations from the French are my own.

speculative definition of *the* subject as a subsisting entity lurking beneath human experience.

Unlike Dionysius, for whom the cosmos is defined by a fixed set of fixed hierarchies, Augustine

acknowledges that the experience of conversion introduces an "irruption"[477] into Dionysius's

static, hierarchical understanding of the human subject amidst a fixed order. "[L]'homme peut

s'élever au-dessus de l'ange, qui est fixé à son rang hiérarchique, parce que l'homme a la

capacité de s'ouvrir au don au-delà de toute réceptivité définie par une position dans la Hiéarchie

céleste […] l'homme est en quelque sorte sans place." [478] (Man can raise himself above the

angel, who is fixed within his hierarchical level, because man has the capacity to open himself up

to the gift beyond all receptivity defined by a position in the celestial Hierarchy). How is it that

human beings lack such a fixed place in the cosmos? What, in Augustine's view, suggests that

such errance is typical of the human condition? It is precisely the human capacity for what De

Libera calls conversion.

In the experience of conversion, the human person is radically reoriented, even

disoriented from a stable sense of existential bearings afforded by the knowledge of a fixed

personal identity. As De Libera puts the matter, "Chose remarquable : la conversion, le retour,

reditus, de l'âme à Dieu, n'est pas le fait d'un sujet." [479] (A remarkable fact: the conversion,

return, *reditus* of the soul to God is not the act of a subject). The consequences of this insight are

electrifying: for the Augustinian mind, there is no "subject" that can be straightforwardly

identified as the consistent basis of the psychological changes that characterize conversion.

Rather, to experience such a profound turning and re-turning is better characterized by a loss of

subjectivity: "Ce n'est pas dans le langage de la subjectivité que s'accomplit, pour les intéressés,

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[477] Ibid., 33.

[478] Ibid., 34.

[479] Ibid., 39.

ceux qui en parlent et ceux qui le vivent, le movement gracieux du *reditus* ou retour en Dieu. C'est celui de la désappropriation, de l'intériorisation, de la déqualification." [480] (It is not within the language of subjectivity that the gracious movement of the *reditus* or return to God is accomplished, not for the interested, those who speak about it and those who live it. It is [the language] of dis-appropriation, interiorization, of de-qualification). In so summarizing Augustine's legacy, De Libera chooses a trio of precise and provocative terms: *désappropriation*, *intériorisation*, and *déqualification*. Each of these terms recalls the various ecstasies of Owein, Dante, and certain sojourners among Davies's environments. In each case, we observe the confluence of interiority and the loss of a stable sense of self effected by challenges to the normal conditions of material embodiment. [481]

We may consider three defining moments in Davies, Dante, and Marie de France that seem to correspond to De Libera's elaboration of the Augustinian self-in-conversion. The porosity of the virtual subject moving among light and code in *Osmose* and *Ephémère*; Owein's ecstatic interiority realized in his cryptic relation to the absent Christ; Dante the pilgrim's spiritual wandering from his body—in each of these instances, the subject is perhaps not a "subject" at all. As De Libera's rehearsal of Augustine shows, the subject who turns radically inward is in a process of change, even fundamental change. And that degree of movement renders the effort to isolate an underlying subject very difficult. The specifically religious dimension of Augustinian conversion is not the most salient feature of the argument here. Rather,

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[480] Ibid., 40.

[481] For a corresponding version of my thesis in sociologies of ritual, see Bruce Kapferer's analysis of "ritual virtualities." (Bruce Kapferer,"Ritual Dynamics and Virtual Practice: Beyond Representation and Meaning." *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Social and Cultural Practice* (48, no. 2 (2004), 47. Kapferer's subsequent emphasis on virtuality as an escape from a referential semiotics resonates deeply with my own project. He writes" "The phantasmagoric space of ritual virtuality may be conceived not only as a space whose dynamic interrupts prior determining processes but also as a space in which participants can reimagine (and redirect and reorient themselves) into the everyday circumstances of life (see, too, Williams and Boyd 1993)." (47)

conversion—while obviously a confessionally Christian phenomenon in Augustine's life and writing—is more generically descriptive of the kind of radical change in any subject whose journey of psychic interiority eventuates in the sort of *déqualification* that De Libera describes.[482]

Pseudo-Dionysius, equally important to medieval theology and philosophy, is positioned as Augustine's opposite in the schema sketched by Professeur De Libera. However, I argue that a crucial detail in Dionysius's *Mystical Theology* hints at the possibility of a more irenic comparison, rather than contrast, of Dionysius and Augustine on the question of subjectivity. The late antique writer who wrote under the name of Dionysius the Areopagite was inestimably important for medieval thought for centuries. Dante was no exception to that influence. The writings of this Pseudo-Dionysius were translated (with enthusiasm if not polish) in the ninth century by Dun Scotus Eriugena. These Latin translations eventually joined others which fomented a broad interest in Pseudo-Dionysius's writings on language and apophaticism, the consideration of what cannot be said. For Dionysius, the God of the Christians is beyond all rational investigation, all conceptual representation, and all verbal utterance. In *On the Divine Names*, Pseudo-Dionysius (PD hereafter) unfolds a carefully argued account of the limits of speech to formulate the divine.

The synthetic cornerstone of PD's many intellectual projects is the very brief text known as *The Mystical Theology*. In just five short chapters, PD telescopes his semiotic account of linguistic limits, his theology of divine transcendence, and a psychology of human intellectual desire for the divine. These tightly argued considerations lead PD to describe the challenge to

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[482] Wertheim summarizes Turkle's argument that postmodern "age of cyberspace" reveals "the unity of the self" to be an "old-fashioned fiction." (247) Postmodern cyberspace replaces the old subject with the model of self as "*multiplicity*." (247) The Augustinian and Dionysius tradition I resource here is less invested in demonstrating the multiplicity of the subject so much as a horizon beyond subjectivity altogether.

individual identity that the human mind confronts in pursuing the mind's highest desire in the divine. "Here," writes PD, "renouncing all that the mind may conceive, wrapped entirely in the intangible and the invisible, he belongs completely to him who is beyond everything. Here, *being neither oneself nor someone else*, one is supremely united to the completely unknown by an inactivity of all knowledge, and knows beyond the mind by knowing nothing."[483] PD's point is neither complex nor difficult to appreciate in its proper speculative context: since God is "supreme Cause of every perceptible thing [which] is not itself perceptible,"[484] it follows that the human mind must leave behind the usual categories, concepts, and words that usually organize the mind's objects of cognition.

But PD adds a psychological insight in the tightly worded passage italicized above: To orient one's mind toward what cannot be thought or said is to relinquish the usual mechanisms of control that conceptuality secures. Such loss produces a corresponding effect on the subject of thought. It is as if the indeterminate character of thought's object here communicates something of itself to a correspondingly indeterminate subject. Apprehending the non-determined, fluid nature of God—who transcends linguistic categories since God has no parts that can be named— can also challenge the perceiving human's sense of self. PD describes an in-between state, once again recalling here Marie de France scholar Myriam White-Le Goff's term *entre-mondes*. Ultimately, PD's insight is this: To approach that which challenges human understanding also challenges the individual's identity in the process. To address what transcends language and

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[483] Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*. Translated by Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem, (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1987), 137.

[484] Ibid.,140. This citation was initially italicized as part of a section heading.

reason is to simultaneously risk any self-identity predicated on the verbal and cognitive

categories of language and reason.[485]

These insights can be helpfully reframed with recourse to the more contemporary analogy

of Schrödinger's Cat. For the eponymous physicist of the twentieth century, the act of observing

a thing fundamentally changes the observed object: There is no way to simultaneously measure a

thing and assign it a fixed identity. The cat of the thought experiment is always hovering in a

state of fundamental indeterminacy, occupying an ambiguous state between life and death...until

the act of observation crystallizes the cat in a discrete condition of alive or dead. Whether

Schrödinger's experiment is accurately representative of fundamental material particles is beside

the point. The image of the cat, engraved into the twentieth century mind, reflects something

fundamental to the Augustinian tradition of the human subject. Like Schrödinger's cat, the

individual—the dreaming Dante and the visionary Owein alike—who undergoes an acute state of

personal transformation cannot be easily identified as a *subject*. Since subjectivity, in its many

forms and conceptions, tends to imply some stable center, basis, or ground of identity, there can

be no easily identifiable subject when the individual is in the midst of becoming toward some

horizon that demands unforeseen changes and responses.

In the spiritually dynamic processes imposed by a visit to Purgatory, Owein and Dante

both share on the subjective plane the indeterminacy typical of Schrödinger's cat on the objective

plane. It is this same indeterminacy that Davies's worlds supply, suggesting that the "virtuality"

of virtual reality is once again *not* a description of something opposed to reality but a context of

flux in which subjects are no longer tethered to fixed conceptions of subjectivity. In Purgatory,

the impossible becomes possible. The errant soul is able to achieve a state of psychological

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[485] Though not glossing the passage in question, Charles A. Stang arrives at a similar summary of Pseudo-Dionysius's apophatic anthropology. For Pseudo-Dionysius, "the self who is united to the unknown God must also become unknown . . ." Stang, *Apophatic Bodies*, 65.

richness characterized by an increase in sanctity, a feat that requires the intervention of fantastical forces such as Dante's otherworld companions and Owein's unseen Christ. In this sense, *Osmose* and *Éphémère* are purgatories of a postmodern sort. The virtual terrains of these strange realms of light introduce the possibility for the virtual subject to dissociate themselves from previously held experiences, conceptions, or images of the subject. Likewise, the subjective fluidity of purgatorial pilgrimage aligns itself with the fluidity and flux that typifies Davies's artistry.

Demons Revisited: Purgation as (Dangerous) Play

Following De Libera, then, I posit the notion of conversion as the sort of change that defies normative notions of underlying subjectivity. This construal of conversion is, in my view, illustrated in a singular way by the curious relationship between Owein and his demonic challengers in the *Espurgatoire* that I observed in chapter one. Regarding Marie's demons, Dépinoy has observed the manner in which purgatorial demons poses an unrelenting challenge to Owein's personal wholeness. "In Purgatory," writes Dépinoy, "the integrity of the human bodies and souls are constantly threatened."[486] In this challenge to Owein's integrity as a person, Dépinoy discerns a dehumanizing effect that the knight shares with the tortures of those souls whom he contemplates. What makes Purgatory a dangerous space, then, is the "switch from being subjects to being objects"[487] that Owein and Purgatory's dead must variously endure. Dépinoy's interpretation presumes, not without reason, that the threat to personal integrity works against the salutary purposes of purgation. What if, by contrast, the threat to personal integrity that Dépinoy describes was implicated in the work of Owein's purgation as a pilgrim? A threat

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[486] Dépinoy, 358.

[487] Ibid., 359.

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that was deconstructive rather than destructive? At the literal sense of the text, the demonic threat

to Owein manifests an obvious "cruauté froide et préméditée,"[488] as in this early instance of

Owein's repeated cry to Jesus: "Li chevaliers, en sa dolur, / appelat le nun Nostre Seigneur. / Si

enemi qui od lui sunt /s'esforcerent k'el feu parfunt / le peüssent entre els tenir / e sun cors arder

e bruïr." (v. 893-898) No sooner is Owein nearly burned among the terrible flames that surround

him when he implements the sage advice given to him by the Cistercian guardians of Purgatory's

gate: "Quant cel grant tourment senti, / a Jhesu Crist criat merci. Icil nuns l'ad bien defendu / del

premier torment ou il fu." (v. 899-902) These moments in which Owein seems on the verge of a

deep destruction to his very self (a self that is already in the disjointed situation of

disembodiment) are moments occasioned by the activity of Purgatory's demons. Not just any

forces but *antagonistic* forces conspire to threaten Owein's integrity as a subject.

Yet here we may consider that it is precisely these narrative moments when the demonic

threat reaches a fever pitch that Owein calls out to Christ as his deliverer. From a narrative

perspective, the demonic threat to Owein's personal integrity actually supplies the centrifugal

force that urges Owein to rally his memory and will toward the salutary gesture that will save

him.[489] Without the state of intense confusion in which the self is challenged to the limits of its

identity, Owein would not have the occasion to cry out to the absent Christ. The knight's

vocative address to his God as deliverer becomes a kind of bare and utterly focused spiritual act:

there is no room left for anything else. Past and present, time and space all fade away into a

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[488] Miriam White, "L'expression de la subjectivité dans *L'Espurgatoire seint Patriz* de Marie de France," *Medievalia* 26 no. 1, (2005), 214.

[489] My thesis here asymptotically touches McCullough's reading when she writes that Owein's "call to the Suffering Body [of Christ] cannot be made without being unmade in the same gesture." (57) McCullough's observation here is strictly semantic: The moments of forgetfulness or pause within Owein's cries constitute the "unmaking" of Owein's speech. In my view, this insight can be fruitfully extended to the level of Owein's entire subject, which is likewise "unmade" through the deconstructive activity of Owein's demonic guides.

single moment in which Owein must intend the reception of a deliverance that he himself cannot supply.

From a particular vantage of theological history, this state of affairs is actually unsurprising: The demons form a cast of characters in Christian imagination that ultimately serve the salvific will of the God against whom they rebel. Since the God of medieval Christianity (as of the Patristic era more broadly) is all-powerful, the agency of demons is always subservient to the greater, omnibenevolent will of God revealed in *Jhesu*. Even if demons think they can act independently, their efforts at autonomy are ultimately thwarted since nothing within God's creation can ultimately supervene upon his cosmic intentions. This is not to absurdly suggest that medieval theologians or poets style demonic activity as the direct agents of the Christian God. Far from it. Rather, the notion is that diabolical agency and demonic action could not ultimately overwhelm the all-powerful will of the Triune God. As such, demons were often seen as the unwitting accomplices of divine providence, serving the redemptive ends of the Christian God's purposes for human life even as the immediate grotesqueries of demonic action were utterly abhorrent to this same God.[490]

A limit case is visible in medieval literary accounts that even depicted demons whose behavior could be "penitent, helpful, kind, and respectful of God."[491] The demons of the

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[490] Scholastic theologians also developed accounts of the limits of demonic power, contrasting the agency of demons with God's infinitely greater power to create *ex nihilo*. For a summary of this tradition among Alexander of Hales, Bonaventure, and Aquinas, see Travis Dumsday, "Natural Evil, Evolution, and Scholastic Accounts of the Limits of Demonic Power," (*Pro Ecclesia*, 2015), 79. As Dumsday aptly shows, Bonaventure in particular theorized demonic activity as something which could merely deceive human intelligence through the manipulation of existing forms. (80) Demons could not, upon his account, create novel substances, forms, or things. Their ability to deceive was entirely parasitic upon the ontologically prior forms of divine creation. (80)

[491] Coree Alisa Newman, "God's Other Angels: The Role of Helpful and Penitent Demons in Medieval Literature." Brown University, 2008): 4. Newman points to the Anglo-Norman adaptation of the *Navigatio sancti brendani* as evidence of fallen angels who even seem to have corroborated with Satan against their will. These demons are depicted as white birds in the Brendan story, which as Newman notes, visually represents the moral complexity of these demons, since the white bird was often associated with God's Holy Spirit in medieval art and literature. See 53-54.

Espurgatoire are obviously not of this kind. Nevertheless, Coree Alisa Newman's analysis of the good demon provides a crucial boundary case that demonstrates one extreme way in which demons were imagined to ultimately serve God's purposes within a medieval Christian imaginary. Moreover, Newman rightly points to Gregory the Great, whose *Dialogues* form a crucial inspiration to the *Espurgatoire*, as a medieval spiritual authority for whom God allowed rebellious angels the freedom of will that ultimately transformed them into demons.[492] It is God's benevolent respect of personal will, in this view, which allows for demons to persist in the world. This divine allowance suggests the firm limitation constricting demonic power, since demons exist only because of the mysterious affordances of their divine creator who allows them the capacity to resist his will.[493]

If we keep these theological and literary traditions in mind, then the demonic pressure upon Owein's personal integrity constitutes a crucial and even necessary phase in a single narrative process whose conclusion is the self's assertion as a cry for help. That cry is, again, crucially absent of historical, personal, and psychological context. The sheer singularity and pathos of the moment suggests a kind of voluntary purity that gushes forth from the challenge to Owein's self that the demons pose.

Owein's loss and recovery of self in the act of crying to Christ may dramatize what the psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott called play. As Winnicott defined it, play is a creative "search for the self."[494] Based in decades of empirical research, Winnicott came to believe that the commonplace notion of play is not exclusively a phenomenon observable among children.

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[492] Ibid., 27.

[493] Ibid., 53-54.

[494] D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, (New York: Routledge, 1971): 71.

Adults need play. This is because play describes the dynamic processes by which a self emerges. Playing, according to Winnicott, "is itself a therapy."[495] Play is not just the structure of make believe to which children are especially predisposed. It is a form of experience that introduces the subject into the dynamic and troubled boundary between subjective and objective forms of awareness. Or as Winnicott put it, play always unfolds "on the theoretical line between the subjective and that which is objectively perceived."[496] Exactly what is most playful about play is the suspension of otherwise typical modes of distinguishing subjective and objective forms of knowledge and experience.

Such a mode of experience is evidenced by Owein's recurring experience of near self-dissolution in Purgatory's various stages just before he calls upon the name of Jesus to secure his deliverance. For play, as the analyst wrote, "is always liable to become frightening."[497] It is a form of experience that is "inherently exciting and precarious."[498] Such excitement and precarity are both on clear display in Owein's recurring drama of near dissolution and sudden deliverance. As a visitor to Purgatory, the knight-pilgrim is engaged in play of the most serious and sober variety: he submits to the cycles of visionary experience that challenge and change his sense of self. But the excitement, in Winnicott's idiom, does not negate the precariousness. There is danger in purgatorial play, but it is danger worth the risk.[499]

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[495] Ibid., 67.

[496] Ibid., 68

[497] Ibid., 67.

[498] Ibid., 70.

[499] Dan Merkur argues that Winnicott shared Freud's insistence that so-called religious experiences were forms of illusion. Unlike Freud, however, Winnicott saw such illusions as a necessary form of psychological development that should therefore be embraced to a point. This assessment left much to be desired, since Winnicott failed to clearly derive the criteria between religious experience that is "illusory and respectable" and that which is "illusory and mad." (215) See Dan Merkur, "Interpreting Numinous Experiences." *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Social and Cultural Practice* 50, no. 2 (2006), 204-23. And as James W. Jones also maintains, Winnicott should

These risks echo Carol Zaleski's observation of the intensification of self that occurs in twentieth-century accounts and studies of near-death experiences as well as medieval visionary journeys to other worlds. "Both medieval and modern vision stories suggest that the soul must be stripped of nonessential attributes; in order to experience reality directly, it becomes an undiscriminated organ of knowledge and affection. The distinctions between sensation, emotion, and cognition melt away, and only the minimal traits required to make a person are retained."[500] With these precise categories in mind, I note that the demonic pressure upon Owein's psychic integrity illustrates exactly the sort of stripping away of the subject that Zaleski describes in broader terms. The terrible play that Owein sustains in his journey reveals the ultimate impotence of the demons to thwart the sanctifying purposes that brought Owein to Purgatory in the first place. Instead, the demons supply the very stripping away of "non-essential attributes" that Zaleski observes among medieval visionaries.

Conversion, then, is a serious form of play, and the specifically ethical stakes of Dante's and Owein's journeys implicate each of them in a dangerous act of serious play. This construal of the disembodied portion of their respective journeys also leads inexorably back to the fundamental importance of the symbolic in Purgatory. In chapter one, we saw that Chauvet's meditation on Eucharistic presence led him to the startling hypothesis that presence is fundamentally a presence of absence. Rather than amounting to a heap of jargon, Chauvet's idea is a vital response to Derrida's critique of presence as a naïve epistemological foundation. Chauvet, as we observed, was hunting big game—the elaboration of presence without *présence*.

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be considered among a group of psychoanalysts who resisted the reductive tendencies that often characterize Freud's view of phenomenology and religion. See especially James W. Jones, "A Nonreductive Psychoanalysis.," in *Religion and Psychology in Transition: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Theology*, (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1996), 131-50.

[500] Zaleski, *Otherworldly Journeys*, 120.

In the course of developing this notion, Chauvet asserts the indispensible role that symbolic mediation plays in the human experience of determining objects as present. Yet all this is actually prolegomena to an even broader anthropology of the subject that Chauvet fashions out of this post-Derridean account of presence. The result is an account of the human person as a being who is always in a state of growth and change toward novel horizons. "Finally," he writes,

> the subject exists only in a permanent becoming, in a *never-finished* process where it has to learn, at its own expense, to be bereaved of its umbilical attachment to the Same, to renounce to win back its lost paradise, its own origin, and the ultimate foundation which would explain its existence.[501]

In Chauvet's account, the rejection of foundations completes a necessary step in a process of becoming. His Derridean influences are clear here. In order to engage the unbounded experience of human becoming toward novel horizons, one must surrender a particular will to power.

It can hardly be a coincidence that Chauvet's formulation of the fundamentally dynamic subject arises from within his broader project of understanding presence and its relation to symbolic modes of understanding. As a Eucharistic theologian, he shares Jean-Yves Lacoste's burden of addressing a distinctly Catholic question: how is an immaterial God *present* in the material elements of the Eucharist? And where does the status of "symbol" reside among these poles of materiality and immateriality? These obviously theological questions give way to insights about presence and absence that, as I argued earlier, transcend the confessional religious context that catalyzed their initial formulation. The insight for the present is to seize the deep conceptual connection between the question of presence and symbolism on the one hand and the question of the subject as becoming on the other.

Just how these three themes coalesce for Chauvet becomes clear later in the passage just cited. He writes,

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[501] Chauvet, 99.

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> To consent to this presence of the absence is to consent to *never being able to leave mediation behind* – mediation of the symbolic order that always-already precedes human beings and allows them to become human because they start from a world already humanized before them and passed on to them as a universe of meaning.[502]

At this node in Chauvet's meditation on presence and the symbolic, a stunning homology emerges that deepens the link between his analysis and that of the many virtual reality theorists consulted my third chapter. As we have just seen, the acceptance of presence-as-absence amounts to a person's consent to the fundamentally mediated character of all human experience.

Further, the acceptance that cognition always implies some distance is tantamount to a stunning loss of control by the subject. In other words, to embrace the mediated character of the human condition is to give up on two illusions simultaneously: the myth of domination and control and the myth of immediacy. In Chauvet's own words, "each one of us is consumed by such a strong wish for omnipotence and domination over things that it is as if we were possessed by an irresistible need to believe in this fantasy [of overcoming the mediated order of symbols and encountering Reality] and thus to believe in ourselves."[503] The somewhat universalizing tone of the argument here may invite scrutiny, but the details of Chauvet's language are highly instructive. He narrates a strong connection between the individual's belief in a stable subjective "self" and a correspondingly intense belief in the possibility of control through dominance of others. In this configuration, the fantasies of omniscience and omnipotence are associated with a strong rejection of mediation. Conversely, by embracing the mediated character of human experience—both ordinary and extraordinary varieties of visionary experience—one simultaneously resists the well to control.

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[502] Ibid., 98, emphasis in original.

[503] Ibid., 98.

Parallels can be instructive. They can reveal unexpected aspects of the objects under comparison. In this case, the reciprocal construal of purgatory as virtual reality and VR as purgative returns us to the initial theme that occasioned this project: the visionary body and its apparent absence. The fluidity of the subject-in-conversion is precisely what is expressed—albeit in different modalities of style and genre—within the experience of leaving the normal, material body in Owein's visionary journey, Dante's dreaming, and the virtual experiences of *Osmose* and *Ephémère*. In order to recapitulate the significance of disembodiment for Purgatory and VR alike, we shall consider the account of the body in the work of the philosopher whose work has arguably formed the most consistent basis of theoretical engagement with Char Davies's work: Merleau-Ponty.

Merleau-Ponty: Seeing Things in a Virtual Body

In chapter two, I recalled how Cervigni noted that light acts as the catalyst for Dante's dream states. The "*lume* which moves the seer's imagination"[504] leads the mind into dreams, characterized by an ecstatic movement of the dreaming psyche. Light is also the constitutive catalyst for Owein's passage from the material world of Purgatory's gate into the spiritual space of Purgatory proper: "cum il plus va, plus est oscur; / tute pert humaine veüe. Autre clarté lui est venue [...] (Since the further along he went, the darker it become, / He lost his earthly vision, / But another light came to him)." (v. 677-678) Light, then, plays a decisive role in generating the abnormal visionary experiences of Marie and Dante.

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[504] Cervigni,, 27.

I do not aim here to enter into the enormous terrain of studies on light, optics, and vision that saturate Dante studies alone.[505] By signaling the role of light in novel forms of visionary experience, I want instead to invoke the voice of Merleau-Ponty, that twentieth-century luminary whose small volume, *L'Oeil et l'Esprit*, supplies a crucial point of historical reflection on the nature of light. In it, Merleau-Ponty describes light as that which destabilizes the perceiving subject. I submit that the terms with which he describes this subjective instability also describe the role of light as the medium of visionary revelation in Marie and Dante. In the following passage, Merleau-Ponty elaborates an account of vision and the body:

> L'espace n'est plus celui dont parle la *Dioptrique*, réseau de relation entre objets, tel que verrait un tiers témoin de ma vision, ou un géomètre qui la reconstruit et la survole, c'est un espace compté à partir de moi comme point ou degré zéro de la spatialité.[506]

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of vision takes the subject as the beginning or originator of space. This approach resonates deeply with Lacoste's notion—rehearsed in chapter one—of Eucharistic extratemporality, which formulates the possibility of subject-object relations beyond the limits of spatial proximity. And yet Merleau-Ponty's account of subjectivity and vision would seem ill at ease with the phenomenology of Marie's prologue, or Dante's *Purgatorio*. Those texts often emphasize the other-ness of divine light as that which makes possible travel through otherworldly spaces. The affinity between Merleau-Ponty, Marie, and Dante, however, becomes discernable in the next lines, in which the phenomenologist considers the role of light in generating spatiality within the subject:

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[505] For an excellent challenge to the entire notion of a univocal or monolithic "light metaphysics" tradition in Dante, see Simon A. Gilson, *Medieval Optics and Theories of Light in the Works of Dante*, (New York: The Edwin Miller Press, 2000).

[506] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *L'Oeil et l'Esprit* (Paris: folio, 2007), 59.

> Je ne le [the perceived object] vois pas selon son enveloppe extérieure, je le vis du dedans, j'y suis englobé. Après tout, le monde est autour de moi, non devant moi. La lumière est retrouvée comme action à distance, et non plus réduite à l'action de contact . . .[507]

Several aspects of this passage supply a perspective that can help to enrich a reading of subjectivity and medieval visionary experience. First, Merleau-Ponty suggests that light that communicates distance rather than contact. Spatiality englobes the subject in a way that confuses, rather than clarifies, the subject's own sense of position relative to the objects of its phenomenal field of awareness. As Merleau-Ponty writes, to reconsider seeing in this way means to confront the fact that one *lives from within* a phenomenon rather than simply observing something as an object from without.

In *L'Oeil et l'Esprit*, Merleau-Ponty considers light and vision in the context of painting. I believe that his phenomenology of light, however, can clarify the role of *supernatural* light in Gregory's *Dialogues,* Marie's *Espurgatoire*, and Dante's *Purgatorio*. In each of these cases, the medieval poet has employed light as an image to initiate forms of ecstatic experience that lead to profound introspection. This is a paradox. The deeper the subject is drawn from the self, the more that subject seems to penetrate to its own depths. As Franke has noted, this paradox (also associated with Bataille and Blanchot) reveals the manner in which "'inner experience' [...] opens to an outside."[508] After the Middle Ages, we see that pre- and post-modern discourses of light may jointly suggest a mode of experience that troubles the distinction between the subject and object, the inner and the outer. At this level, Marie's disembodied subject achieves a

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[507] Ibid., 59. Giomi (306) analyzes this same passage, but in such a way that affirms an emphasis on bodily corporality. My aim in this section is to trouble the sense that a return to the matieral body is the necessary and only eventuation of embracing Merleau-Ponty's theories of corporality in studying Davies's work.

[508] William Franke, *Dante and the Sense of Transgression: 'The Trespass of the Sign.'* (Chennai: Bloomsbury, 2013). Franke's entire chapter (138-144) signals an indispensable point of inspiration for my approach here.

common identity with the ambiguously embodied subject of Dante's dreaming subject.[509] Seen

through the heuristic of Merleau-Ponty, the two poets of Purgatory reveal themselves to enact

models of extra-ordinary bodily vision that brings the subject more deeply inward even as it is

taken ever further from itself.

My engagement with *L'Oeil et l'Esprit* is partly occasioned by a trend in media studies

that looks to Merleau-Ponty as a source of conceptual inspiration for reflection on embodiment

within virtual and digital domains.[510] For example, in his essay "Embodying Virtual Reality:

Touch and Self-Movement in the Work of Char Davies," Mark Hansen frames his

phenomenology of the VR subject around an analysis of Char Davies's *Osmose* in conversation

with Merleau-Ponty's corpus. Hansen argues that Davies achieved a form of virtual reality that

configures embodied experience quite differently from other virtual reality games, simulations,

and programs. According to Hansen, Davies's project models a perceiving subject that "literally

teaches us how to orient ourselves without needing to see ourselves (or to let the gaze of the

other see us) as a point in space."[511] Whereas much virtual reality research, artwork and games

have presumed an "ocularcentrism" that privileges a dominant visual sense, Hansen argues that

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[509] Auerbach's account of "contemplative ecstasy" stakes out a different but instructive interpretation of Dante as the dreaming visionary. See Erich Auerbach, "Figurative Texts Illustrating Certain Passages of Dante's Commedia," *Speculum* 21, no. 4 (1946): 475.

[510] For an account of Merleau-Ponty's influence on scholarly reflections on virtuality and the digital, see Andrea Giomi, "Virtual Embodiment: An Understanding of the Influences of Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Technology on Perforamnce and Digitial Media," *Mirrors and Other Technologies* 22, (2022): 297-315. Giomi's overview of the field aims to clarify how Merleau-Ponty's thinking has become "a fundamental reference in the conceptualizationof technologically based art practices." (308)

[511] Mark Hansen, 112. Hansen helpfully contrasts his account of space and embodiment in virtual reality from what he rightly takes to be the stereotypical view of these themes: "Conjure up your own mental image of virtual reality. What does it present if not some version of this visually-optimized, sanitized space? Having by now been streamed and re-streamed through all available cultural channels (movies being, perhaps, the most effective), this standard picture has become so ubiquitous that most of us would not even think to question it."

this configuration is not an inevitable feature of virtual experience.[512] In contrast to such

ocularcetric VR experiences, the sort of virtual subjectivity that Hansen studies offers "a

dissolution of the discrete boundaries characteristic of the body as a visually-dominating agent,

opening an experience of the indifferentiation between bodily interiority and spatial

exteriority."[513] Note how closely this description of Davies's VR resembles Tambling's account

of Dante's *Purgatorio* as the sustained "breakdown of inner and outer worlds."[514] The similarity

in these scholarly descriptions suggests the continuity of disembodiment as a catalyst for

transformed subjectivity in purgatorial and virtual landscapes.

If Dante and Marie grapple with the dilemmas of the body within visionary experience,

this is because each poet values the positive role that decentering one's subjectivity plays in the

development of the medieval, Christian self. Compunction (Marie) and Beatitude (Dante)

variously frame the ends of salvation, and disembodied visionary experience aims at supplying

its subject with novel perspectives that serve the subject's journey toward these medieval goals.

While Hansen's work obviously does not share these religious and historical contexts, his

hypotheses on Davies's virtual body assumes a similarly ethical commitment. In his analysis of a

particular VR art object, Hansen hopes to describe and then *prescribe* a mode of subjectivity that

forbids the sort of Cartesian mastery over one's environment that his article's first epigram

describes.[515] Like the body of Merleau-Ponty, Hansen's VR subject will learn to relinquish the

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[512] Ibid.

[513] Ibid., see also McRobert who notes a passage in Davies's journals in which she claims *Osmose* (1995), her first virtual environment, is occupied with engaging the distinction of "inner/outer." (16)
[514] Tambling, 114.

[515] Hansen cites Richard Coyne's thesis that "VR [virtual reality] is a literal enactment of Cartesian ontology, cocooning a person as an isolated subject within a field of sensations and claiming that everything is there, presented to the subject." Hansen, 107. Coyne summarizes an approach here that sees virtuality as a domain defined by presence whereas I have invoked deconstructive and apophatic approaches to develop the opposite thesis with respect to Davies's VR in particular. *Osmose* and *Ephémère* do not provide immediate experience, or at least, they

belief that one's body stands in a predictable, impersonal relation to space and the other bodies that populate it.

Through the help of computer-generated simulations, the body may experience a sense of displacement that underscores its always already continuous character with the environment that stimulates it. This notion leads me to reconsider the geography of Purgatory, the dream within a vision, and the disembodied voyage as a medieval antecedent of Davies's virtual reality. This hypothesis in no way intends the term "virtual" as a diminutive, as if to suggest "less real" than some other, putatively stable order of reality. On the contrary, one legacy of the medieval poets studied here is the sustained credence with which they pursue and receive novel forms of visionary perspective without demanding accounts of their possibility. In my view, Merleau-Ponty—both in my own reading and Hansen's—can supply a phenomenological idiom that helps contemporary thought to better grasp this medieval openness, an openness that invites an ecstasy of interiority, and the concomitant dethroning of the body's sure position as an assurance of the subject's autonomy. This conclusion suggests the qualitative affinity linking medieval disembodied visions and virtual reality, but specifically on the Merleau-Ponty-inspired model of VR that Hansen articulates on the basis of Davies's work. According to his account, to call reality "virtual" may signal a recovery of a rare form of experience in which the body experiences a deep truth about itself: it is not the autonomous center of a world that stands apart from objective reality. In this particular account then, *virtual* signifies an account of presence that one may recognize in Marie de France and Dante Alighieri. Rather than the account of presence supplied through the spatial proximity of material subjects, the virtual medieval body of

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need not be interpreted in this way. We can instead choose to see Ricoeur's symbols populating these worlds, objects that are neither present nor absent to paraphrase Derrida.

dreams and visions supplies a subject whose radical openness to various 'others' follows from the body's displacement through a variety of mechanisms.

A caveat: At first blush, Merleau-Ponty would seem to be a strange theorist to summon to elaborate these ideas. Was not Merleau-Ponty the champion of a distinctly corporal phenomenology? The scholarly appeal of Merleau-Ponty's thought, as Maharaj notes, is frequently found in the French thinker's elaboration of material embodiment as the basis of all conscious experience.[516] Maharaj's claim derives support from Andrea Giomi, whose recent article has catalogued a range of theorists inspired by Merleau-Ponty's "theory of embodiment" and its ability to advance "the discourse about digital media".[517] Even Davies's herself takes a similar stand in her own writing. At one point, she meditates on the same passage from *L'Oeil et l'Esprit* cited above concerning Merleau-Ponty's configuration of space as beginning with the subject; with her focus on that text, Davies claims that one purpose of her virtual work "is to *relinquish distance*, *relinquish the frontal gaze*, giving up one's stance as a disinterested so-called objective observer surveying a world separate from one's self, and instead, to inhabit it, as a corporeal subject, as a lived body, from the *inside*."[518] Clearly the value of Merleau-Ponty's thinking for discussing material embodiment in VR is beyond dispute.

Yet this is not the only way to approach the French philosopher's thinking on the body and virtuality. At certain points in his corpus, Merleau-Ponty leaves traces of an account of the body that challenges any effort to characterize him as a reductive materialist. In *Le Visible et*

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[516] Claudia Maneka Maharaj, "Embodiment and the Boundaries Between Us in Virtual Reality A critical analysis of inclusivity in social virtual reality environments," Malmö University (2017): 7.
[517] Goria, 297.

[518] Davies, "Rethinking VR," Section: Redefining Immsersive Virtual Space. http://www.immersence.com/publications/char/2003-CD-VSSM.html.

l'Invisible, Merleau-Ponty construes the body as the "metteur en scène"[519] of perception. The term most readily defines a director of theatrical plays, suggesting that the body's role in sense perception is akin to a Kantian ground, a precondition of perception's possibility. And yet near that very passage just cited, Merleau-Ponty also nuances this emphasis on corporality. "Sans doute," he writes, "ce n'est pas tout à fait mon corps qui perçoit : je sais seulement qu'il peut m'empêcher de percevoir, que je ne peux pas percevoir sans sa permission."[520] (Undoubtedly, it is not entirely my body that perceives: I know only that it can keep me from perceiving, that I cannot perceive without its permission). The shift in emphasis is subtle but crucial. The body has become a kind of limit or condition that characterizes perception, something which is deeply constitutive of sense perception but whose causal properties are beyond the purvey of Merleau-Ponty's description. The body achieves a mysterious complicity in perception, but this does not keep Merleau-Ponty from asserting the body's insufficiency to account for perception. There can be no simple evocation of "the body" as the self-evidently exhaustive cause of perception, only a recognition of the body's incalculable role in molding the contours of perceptual experience.

As these passages suggest, there is something incomplete in reading "the body" in Merleau-Ponty through the lens of reductively materialistic accounts as espoused by figures like Kurzweil. For the phenomenologist, the body is not an objective mass of matter: Certainly, the body may be defined materially in other contexts (such as occurs in the quantitative sciences), but the body is not uniquely definable in terms of materiality. How then to think of the body if not as something exclusively material? In common sense and science alike, western thought is so habituated to the association of *body* and *matter* that it is difficult to introduce non-material approaches to thinking the body. Merleau-Ponty's alternative, sustained throughout *Le visible et*

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[519] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), 25. Translation are my own.

[520] Ibid., 24.

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l'invisible, seems to point us toward thinking the body as the necessary *limits* that always shape and constrain perception itself. This is to offer a profound observation of what the body *does* rather than what it is made of. To experience life in a body is to experience the constant condition of limitation and, potentially, various efforts to overcome those constraints.

One of the many conceptual benefits of Merleau-Ponty's approach is to liberate the thinker (and the literary critic) from the reductivism that so often characterizes contemporary discussions of materiality across academic disciplines. Consider this stunning passage: "Certes," writes Merleau-Ponty, "nous avons refoulé le magique dans la subjectivité, mais rien ne nous garantit que le rapport entre les hommes ne comporte pas inévitablement des composantes magiques et oniriques."[521] (To be sure, we have repressed the magic in subjectivity, but nothing guarantees for us that the relationship between men does not necessarily consist in some magical and oneiric components). For Merleau-Ponty, magic and dreams ("composantes magiques et oniriques") go hand in hand. Both suggest perceptual movements beyond what is known, staked out, or certain. In fact, Merleau-Ponty's effort to restore the possibility of the dreamy and the magical in subjectivity echoes Caputo's notion of the impossible body discussed in the first chapter. Owein's body resists the concept of the possible precisely insofar as his visionary body breaks the rules of bodily materialism. In this sense, the knight's body is impossible, a subject characterized by its transgression of what bodily subjects are supposed to be able to do. And Heather Webb has already noted how Dante's pilgrim invests himself in a journey of overcoming the body's typical possibilities: "the language of the body" in the *Purgatorio* "enacts unions and communions that the earthly body cannot experience."[522] The key, in my view, is to grasp that Dante's dreams radically intensify Webb's reading of transcending bodily limits. To become a

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[521] Ibid., 43.

[522] Heather Webb, *Dante's Persons: An Ethics of the Transhuman* (Oxford: Oxford U Press, 2016), 127.

pilgrim to the body in sleep amounts to a more fundamental break with the "earthly body" that echoes Owein's bodily displacement and the experience of the subject wandering within *Osmose* and *Ephémère*. It is in this sense that I gently depart from Davies's claim that "for us, as incarnate beings, this centre is the body."[523] The body may be felt as the center of many human experiences, including the subjective response to a particular immersant in *Osmose* and *Ephémère*. This is not, as I have consistently sought to illustrate, the only valid response. In chapter one, I introduced Derrida's notion the center of thought and experience is often located beyond the self or subject. This fundamentally ecstatic view of all experience positions the center somewhere beyond the scope of what is present, near-to-hand, and within my control. Indeed, Davies's writing consistently positions her own work as a rejoinder to the tradition of virtual artistry that seeks an increase in power. My claim here and throughout has been to show how an immersive experience of *disembodiment* can directly serve Davies's investment in helping immersants to "explore the [virtual] spaces and "let go.""[524]

To be disembodied, as observed in the subjects of Dante, Marie de France, and Char Davies, is to continually shed presently held conceptions of one's identity. Much like a reptile that molts its exterior continuously, so do purgatorial and virtual subjects alike undergo experiences whose qualities force a process of self-overcoming toward new experiences of what it means to be a subject. Alain de Libera, following from traditions dear to Dante and Marie in

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[523] Davies, "*Osmose*: Notes on Being in Immersive Virtual Space (1995)," Section: "As Body."
http://www.immersence.com/publications/char/1998-CD-Digital_Creativity.html.

[524] Throughout her writing, Davies directly constrasts her work with a trend toward power-seeking artistry and games. For instance, "Commercial computer games approach interactivity as a means of empowering the human subject through violence and aggression (Cornwall 1993). These conventional approaches to digital media reflect our culture's Cartesian world-view, with its tendency to reduce the world and its myriad of inhabitants to "standing-reserve" for human consumption (Heidegger 1977)." Ibid., Section: In Context.

differing degrees, described how this continual self-overcoming amounts to an evasion of what could be stably identified as a subject. As a more proximate historical interlocutor, Merleau-Ponty, with his account of light and perceptual instability, narrates the body's ephemerality through his own lexicon. These medieval and postmodern voices jointly suggest the perennial value of bodily displacement as an experience that describes the fluidity of the human subject in moments of profound psychological change.

Merleau-Ponty doubles down on the body's tenuousness through his focus on the profoundly enmeshed association of the sensing body with the bodies of sense perception. Véronique M. Fóti has summarized this feature of Merleau-Ponty's project as the "intercorporeity" of visionary and visible bodies.[525] The body of the visionary is always and already a continuous participant in a surrounding field of bodies. This description of "intercorporeity" elucidates something formally present throughout *Osmose* and *Ephémère*. As my close reading of those landscapes made clear, the visionary body is never easily distinguished from the ethereal bodies that surround and even pass through the virtual subject's body. Echoing Davies, Hansen has similarly argued that Merleau-Ponty's notion of *flesh* describes the virtual body's "interpenetration with the environment"[526] in Davies's virtual worlds. But my specific goal here is to throw into relief how that very interpenetration—which Merleau-Ponty helps us to describe—is itself already something that challenges a prereflective sense of embodiment in the first place. Again, if one is so emeshed with one's (virtual) environment that the difference between subject and object becomes tenuous, then the very notion of "body" becomes delightfully subverted and even superfluous.

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[525] Véronique M. Fóti, "Bound Transcendence and the Invisible: On Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Painting," (*Symplokē* 4, no. 1/2 1996), 8.

[526] Hansen, 130.

A final contrast will help to clarify my argument here. Like Hansen, Giomi finds Merleau-Ponty a willing partner to help describe how Davies's virtual environments become indistinct from the immersant. "From this point of view," writes Giomi, "the immersant doesn't clearly perceive the boundaries dividing his/her phenomenal body from the surrounding audiovisual environment where he/her [*sic*] is immersed."[527] As is clear by now, I share this interpretation of Davies's work. What I do not share, however, is the sense that a heightened awareness of the body's materiality necessarily follows from the environmental confusion that Hansen and Giomi articulate. On the one hand, it cannot be denied that immersant may feel acutely aware of physiological sensations during VR experiences. However, when those sensations are framed as a unity with surrounding virtual bodies, then the fundamental concept of "body" seems now to have lost its clarity and potency in the oceanic oneness that Merleau-Ponty's philosophy has helped so many media theorists to describe in Davies's work (and that of other virtual artists).

In contrast to Giomi's reading of corporality in Merleau-Ponty, Hansen considers the radical erasure of bodily difference from its environment that results from taking intercorporeity seriously:

> Ultimately, this understanding of the dynamic coupling of body and space undermines the function of the body schema as such, in the sense that it can no longer function to demarcate the body from the environment. Put another way, insofar as the body schema is generative of space as well as the body, it characterizes their systemic correlation, rather than one or the other of them.[528]

Hansen sees the emeshed character of body scheme and bodily environment as a challenge to the distinction between the two. My goal here is to pitch this insight toward the terrain of medieval purgatories. To wit, the notion of intercorporeity can clarify the bodily status of the visionary

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[527] Giomi, 306.

[528] Hansen, 135.

Owein and the dreaming Dante. In these contexts, Marian and Dantean traditions of *dis*-embodiment accomplish the same end that hyper *em*-bodiment achieves for Hansen and Merleau-Ponty. As I have endeavored to show, the element common to all three discourses—the medieval poems, phenomenologies of non-local presence, and virtual reality—is the destabilization of the bodily subject from a position of autonomy, control, and certainty. To achieve the Earthly Paradise that awaits them, Owein and Dante must undergo radical forms of play (Winnicott) that refine their perceptual limits. The purgatories of Marie de France and Dante demonstrate such redefinitions *in extremis* by troubling the materiality of that most fundamental component of the human person: the body.

By approaching *Osmose* and *Ephémère* as postmodern purgatories, I do not mean to draw out any plain equivalence between the sanctification that animates medieval purgatorial disembodiment and the viewer responses that Davies's immersants might experience. The effect that is potentially common to Davies's work and her medieval predecessors is the reconfiguration that symbols exert on visionary experience. This is to refer to a variety of possible experiences that may converge upon the immersant in *Osmose* and *Ephémère*: The forced abandonment of rationality, the corresponding surrender of naive *présence*, the sometimes painful experience of inwardly focused attention, and the peculiar effects produced by semi-recognizable objects—all these features have discernable precedents in the *Espurgatoire* and *Purgatorio*.

Indeed, it is significant to my argument that Mark Hansen contrasts the role of power in the majority of virtual reality cultures and Davies's artistry. The immersant lacks "the use of a joystick or other manipulable navigational tool"[529] in *Osmose* and *Ephémère*. The absence of

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[529] Ibid., 110.

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these traditional features of virtual environments distinguishes Davies's work. Immersants lack access to the formal features of the medium that might secure increases of power, capacity, and control. Instead, immersants in Davies's worlds experience challenges to their typical mechanisms of agential control associated with the body's predictable relation to objects in space.[530] As my own close viewing of *Osmose* and *Ephémère* have made clear, Davies's virtuality overwhelms the virtual sensorium of the immersant, much as the *foco* of *Purgatorio* IX and *Paradiso* XXXIII challenge the pilgrim's sense of power.

De Libera's exposition of medieval apophatic anthropologies and Merleau-Ponty's account of the body may jointly return us to the theme of this chapter: the reconfiguration of disembodiment in Marie, Dante, and Char Davies as an alternative tradition of virtuality to the sort posited by Wertheim and Brians. In these journeys, decreases in power and knowledge contribute to the subjective transformations that these medieval and postmodern journeys make possible. In such a tradition, "the self who is united to the unknown God must also become unknown…"[531] No trace of a God is implied in *Osmose* and *Ephémère*. But what, after all, is God for the purgatorial poems in question? God is what is unknown, that which lies beyond the horizon of Owein's Earthly Paradise and that which challenges all intelligibility in the pilgrim's mind. In describing Davies's worlds, one might readily secularize Stang's statement thusly: The self who is united to the unknown must also become unknown. If we describe the divine in these contexts as the truly ineffable, then we might, in turn, find the trace of the divine in Davies's virtuality after all. The symbolic encounters offered throughout her worlds offer her immersants the possibility of new experiences of the self, neither through the augmentation of power associated with other virtual reality creations nor the increase in capacity that animates

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[530] Ibid., 110-111.

[531] Stang, *Apophatic Bodies*, 65.

Kurzweil's transhumanism. The symbol's ambiguity challenges power, agency, and knowledge, and in so doing, *Osmose* and *Ephémère* recover Purgatory's model of flourishing through ignorance.

CONCLUSION

NEW BODIES: PURGATORIAL AND VIRTUAL

Visionary Experiences: The Extraordinary Revealing the Ordinary

To travel with Owein and Dante through Purgatory is to consider the body as a heuristic

category to express the limits of human identity and the possibility for overcoming those limits.

The comparisons with Davis's virtual reality elaborated in chapters three and four have aimed to

sharpen this thesis through an unlikely contrast with an aesthetic culture more familiar to the

early twenty-first century. In traversing Purgatory and virtual landscapes in tandem, the student

of medieval poetry may come to perceive Purgatory as something more than an imaginative

landscape of moral perfection, though it is certainly that. For Marie de France and Dante,

Purgatory is the site of radical transformation. Such transformation is configured as a loss of the

subject which the poet expresses as the temporary absence of a material body. Seen in this light,

disembodiment is less a literal claim than it is a compelling heuristic to express self-

transformation as a loss of identity.

In Davies's computer generated art, we encounter a reality that is virtual. However, to

contrast virtual with "real" fails to reflect the facts of Davies's work. *Osmose* and *Ephémère* are

rightly designated as "virtual" to the extent that these worlds press the subject to realize the

always already symbolic character of *ordinary* visionary experience. Accordingly, the

extraordinary reveals the ordinary; what is virtual about Davies's art is no less virtual about the

world we inhabit in our daily lives. By encountering objects of sense, cognition, and imagination

that require constant interpretation, *Osmose* and *Ephémère* heighten the fundamental structures

of mundane cognition. In this sense, Davies's environments carry on the mantle of Marie de

France's and Dante's purgatories, just as Purgatory is itself a virtual space. In each case, the

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subject must contend with the difficulties of interpreting the unknown as a constitutive

dimension of the self's process of becoming. And in the course of such contention, the

interpreting subject must surrender increasingly inadequate and outdated notions of the

interpreting subject. Hence, the virtual "spaces" of purgatorial visions and visionary dreams set

the stage for a form of self-transformation that finds expression in the language of

disembodiment. To lose the body is the medieval purgatorial poet's idiom to construe a more

fundamental loss of self.

Ironically, this symmetry of subjective identity and body does not elide the body with

the subject. Or at the least, it does not suggest that the body exhaustively accounts for the self.

Marie invokes Gregory and Augustine to speak of 'soul' just as Dante describes *la mente*

traversing the boundary of the body. Of course, much has and remains to be said about more

precise accounts of soul and mind that may inform these categories in the *Espurgatoire* and the

Purgatorio. And yet disembodiment in both poems never fixes itself to an exhaustive

metaphysics of body and soul. In any case, the greater literary and phenomenological *function* of

disembodiment in both poems is the construal of identity continuously surrendered. Neither

Dante nor Owein ever lose their body with permanence. But the perception of bodily loss,

absence, or transcendence endures as a poetic strategy for signaling the fundamentally ecstatic

experience of leaving behind a stable sense of what it means to be a subject.

Extraordinary visionary experiences, whether those of purgatorial poets or postmodern

digital artists, can reveal to us the starkly mysterious character of ordinary visionary experience.

By heightening the sensual and intellectual ambiguities that typify more mundane cognitive

experiences, these strange visions exaggerate features of common experience, mundane life, and

the normal. But the exaggeration aims at a demonstration of the continuity, rather than the

opposition, of the normal from the paranormal, the extraordinary and the ordinary. Merleau-Ponty's description of the body in *Le Visible et l'Invisible* gave us language to articulate the effect of these extraordinary visionary experiences upon their visionaries. Additionally, virtual reality theorist Michael Heim recovers Freke's concept of "lucid living"[532] to suggest that the properties of dreams that seem to distinguish them from waking life are, upon inspection, also indemic to waking experiences. Freke draws upon Christian Gnostic texts and Buddhist traditions to develop the notion of lucid living as a state of simultaneous awareness of one's individuality and "transpersonal" non-dual experience.[533] The dissolution of sleeping and waking here is not posited as a lazy category mistake. Freke's point, mediated by Heim, amounts to a rediscovery of waking life as an experience that can be enriched by the extraordinary forms of consciousness that the dream engenders.

In medieval studies, we have the opportunity to look back to Dante as an architect of dreams in a way that illustrates Freke's notion of lucid living. As Mazzotta has remarked of Dante the visionary, "The poets dream, but, as they dream, they always keep their eyes open."[534] Marie's Owein embodies lucid living no less than Dante the dreaming pilgrim. As the subject of an extraordinary vision, Owein returns to the land of the (embodied) living with a fresh perspective of self and other that carries forward the kinds of awareness that his strange vision imparted in Purgatory. As in virtual reality, so in Purgatory: The extraordinary reveals (and enriches) the ordinary. I wish to return briefly to Zaleski's study that I have invoked throughout this project. Zaleski is keen to show "a fundamental kinship between otherworld visions and the

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[532] Michael Heim, *Virtual Realism* (Oxford U Press, 1998): 271.

[533] Ibid., 272.

[534] Giuseppe Mazzotta, *Dante's Vision and the Circle of Knowledge,* (Princeton: Princeton U Press, 1993), 139.

more common forms of imaginative experience."[535] The demonstration of such continuity amounts to a rejection of a "reductionism" that has laid claim to many scientific modes of analyzing near-death experiences. It is my sense that just sense a "fundamental kinship" obtains between Owein's vision and his mundane chivalric life, between Dante's dreams and his waking experience, and between the VR user's experiences with and without the optical headset. But my aim has not been simply to recapitulate Zaleski's thesis in new categories with a novel set of postmodern sources. By invoking the Derridean tradition of critiquing *présence* in each phase of this comparative project, I have sought to show that the very "fundamental kinship" that Zaleski and I each perceive in our medieval and contemporary sources is actually explained as an embrace of Derrida's appeal to epistemic groundlessness. To overcome reductionism in a reading of medieval and contemporary visionary experiences alike, we require the Derridean innovation that stresses the reciprocal character of language and experience. Experiences and the words that signify them are bound in a fruitful, rather than deadlocked, circuit of reciprocal reference.

As I discussed in chapters one and two, Derrida's thesis on supplementarity generates a set of theoretical categories in which the literary critic may frame Zaleski's "fundamental kinship." For it is not simply the case that medieval visions of other worlds show common features with mundane cognitive experiences. In the example of the dreaming Dante, the peculiar texture of oneiric vision forces Dante to confront the same kinds of specifically interpretive challenges that typify his waking vision. And as Cervigni's research is keen to show, the poet's

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[535] Zaleski, 205. Surveying the similarities between liturgical procession in Owein's Purgatory and the customs of the time in which the text was composed, Miriam White-Le Goff similarly suggests that the priestly procession displayed in the Earthly Paradise "constitue une analogie entre ce monde et l'autre monde." (23) As I make clear in what follows, my own thesis distinguishes itself from White-Le Goff's by focusing on the analogies between interpretive experiences within and outside Purgatory. This approach shares Mariam White-Le Goff's and Zaleski's approach of elaborating the "analogie" of this world and Purgatory, but I want to shed critical light on what this analogy implies for interpretive experience within and beyond the otherworldly geographies that both Owein and Dante inhabit.

stacking of these visionary realms implies a further layer of affinity and difference between the pilgrim's life on Earth and his time spent in Purgatory.[536] The intensification of visionary experience in dreaming implies the symmetrical and prior capitulation of the pilgrim's experience at the *Commedia*'s outset. Dreams, then, become a clue to the interpret Dante's Russian dollhouse backward, to realize that life, in some sense, is already a vision that is interrupted by dreams.

I find this order of cognitive realms to reflect the same dynamics at play in Owein's journey. There is no corresponding capitulation of the strange, no moment in which the bizarre nature of the vision gives way to a still more subtle and extraordinary modality of experience. Yet the continuity between Owein's journey through Purgatory and his mundane life reveals a similar confluence of familiarity and unfamiliarity, known and unknown. By suggesting that these artifacts collectively reveal something ordinary in the construction of the extraordinary, I mean that both poet and visual artist are invested in a strategy of hyperbole. Dante, Davies, and Marie de France each amplify certain features of ordinary, mundane, or commonplace experience in such a way that makes the ordinary appear strange, different, and thereby, new. One illustration of this relationship comes from Hannah Arendt's reflections on cognition in her Gifford Lectures on "Thinking" within *The Life of the Mind*. She observes the invisibility of the thinking subject's body during experiences of thought: "*While thinking I am not where I actually am*; I am surrounded not by sense-objects but by images that are invisible to everyone else."[537] This description of thinking, that simple task of deliberating different notions, concepts, or ideas, may recall Derrida's notion of the displaced center as a feature of all thought. At the very least, Arendt's phenomenology of thinking aligns precisely with Dante the poet's construction of the

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[536] Cervigni, "Dante's Poetry of Dreams," 24-30.

[537] Arendt, 85. emphasis added.

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non falsi errori as a cognitive event. I observed how the pilgrim's rapturous vision in *Purgatorio* XV reflected the dream episodes' structural feature of presenting objects of consciousness that were invisible to Dante's companions. The bizarre images comprising the non-false errors are uniquely visible to the visionary's imagination. With respect to the three dream episodes, this was most apparent in the case of Virgil, who holds the distinction of appearing both as a dream-object in Dante's sleeping mind as well as a sense-object in Dante's waking and embodied visionary journey. Yet the Virgil that appears in Dante's waking life shows no knowledge of what the dream-Virgil perceived within Dante's second dream. This defining boundary of the inner and outer is no less characteristic of any commonplace act of cognition. Arendt recalls our attention to the fundamental invisibility of all thinking to those who are not the individual subjects of a given thought process. In this way, Dante's particular representation of dreaming life reflects Arendt's broader insight about the most mundane feature of conscious experience.

The parallel runs further. Arendt's description of thinking implies the simultaneous displacement of the thinking subject's body as well as the associated invisibility of the thinker's intellectual objects.[538] In the simplest terms, I am often unaware of just *where* my body is located during experiences of thinking, and other observers similarly cannot directly experience what I am experiencing in my mind. The "sense-objects" of thought are invisible to others just as my body is invisible to me when I think. This invisibility contains the origins of metaphorical thinking itself (and as we will see, what Arendt means by metaphor intersects what I have called

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[538] It is hardly surprising that Arendt's phenomenology of thinking should bear such strong resemblances to the dynamics of extraordinary vision in medieval poets. In her Gifford Lectures, Arendt developed a detailed reflection on different accounts of conscious experience in Antiquity and the Middle Ages with a particular interest in Duns Scotus and Thomas Aquinas. Both of these thinkers are, of course, extremely important to Dante and his *Commedia*. Arendt's sense that medieval cultures continue to nourish modern thought also reflects my own project's sustained conviction that theological discourses, both medieval and postmodern, stand to contribute insights to current theoretical debates outside confessional religious communities. Arendt was no Christian, yet she found medieval Christian thought to be a rich source of philosophical inspiration. In this sense, her work is paradigmatic for my own.

the symbolic.) Arendt's deft synthesis of philosophical history (with her particular affinities for

Plato, medieval scholastics and Kant) reminds us that metaphorical language always presumes

some anterior apprehension of similarity between things. While semioticians and linguists may

justifiably puzzle over the *how* of metaphorical language, the philosopher marvels over the

metaphor's origins. When I say that X is (like) Y, I am using metaphorical language to express

some prior insight or perception of affinity between two things. All metaphors disclose "an

intuitive perception of similarity in dissimilars," writes Arendt in a citation from Aristotle.[539]

Metaphors then use dissimilar words to express subtle similarities. "The metaphor, bridging the

abyss between inward and invisible mental activities and the world of appearances, was certainly

the greatest gift language could bestow on thinking and hence on philosophy, but the metaphor

itself is poetic rather than philosophical in origin."[540] By summarizing metaphorical language in

these terms, Arendt is not merely showing the indebtedness of philosophical reasoning to

poetical language. She is revealing the capacity of metaphor to express "outwardly" what the

thinker does when he or she is invisible both to self and world.

Arendt's account of the metaphor's relation to sense-objects bears a striking

resemblance to the visionary objects encountered in Dante's dream, Davies's virtuality, and

Owein's quest. In each case, the visionary subject observes objects that bear striking

resemblances to sense-objects that are potentially observable in waking, mundane life. This

remains the strong implication of the appearance topos that I explored in chapter two in which

Dante's dream-visions disclose objects that the dreamer *seems* to see or which *appeared* to him

like something recognizable. The poet's craft is sufficient to convey what the pilgrim saw, but

only through the application of language that is intrinsically metaphorical. This, at any rate, is the

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[539] Arendt, 103.

[540] Ibid., 105.

inevitable conclusion when one observes Dante's task through the lens of Arendt's careful exposition of metaphor. Metaphors try to articulate similarities between objects that are not obvious but nonetheless perceived. While dreaming, Dante sees things that are similar to what he knows and can recall: the identifiable figures of Biblical literature, animals like eagles, and friends like Virgil. But he also encounters things he cannot identify, such as the *femmina balba*. The Italian lexica that Dante marshals to convey such dream visions reflect the play of sameness and difference as the fundamental law of the dream. To recount a dream in poetical language is to express a set of affinities between what was perceived in sleep with what was perceived in waking life. Metaphors expose such affinities, however much language must be strained to accomplish this expression.[541] An analogy results: dream objects are to waking sense-objects what metaphorical language is to insights of object similarity. More simply put, Dante's construction of dreams manifests the fundamental conditions of metaphorical language itself. By describing dream images with words, phrases, and tropes derived from waking life, the poetic expression of dreams embodies the nature of all metaphorical language. If life is like dreaming in Dante's *Purgatorio*, this is because dreams must be interpreted on the model of waking life.

Arendt's philosophy of metaphor allows the critic to deepen this appreciation for the *Purgatorio* by seeing in the poetry of dreams a reflection of language itself: An inherently metaphorical task of describing the perception of similarity where it is initially hard to see. Dream poetry, in fact, becomes a metaphor for the metaphorical basis of cognition itself: The ability to signify the hidden connections between dreaming and waking life reflects the mundane human habit of pursuing metaphorical connections between the many objects of common sense experience.

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[541] For a more direct study of this strain, see William Franke's construal of Dante's poetics of transgression in *Dante and the Transgression of the Sign* in which Franke takes up this question in a systematic way.

The same holds true for Owein. For the French knight, the drama of metaphoricity and disembodied experience is characterized by the interconnectedness of experience and writing (see chapter one). As Owein is thrown beyond the limits of his typical embodiment, his experience becomes implicated in a complex chain of signification. First, the words of prior pilgrimages generate the preconceptual basis of the pilgrim's immediate experience. Then, even such writing is revealed to be limited in its capacity to prepare Owein entirely for what he will encounter. The knight's eventual testimony is put into writing, and the play of language continues. What this cycle does is quite similar to what dreaming accomplishes in the *Purgatorio*. Owein's entire narrative arch recapitulates something that is arguably inherent to human cognition. Life may not be likened to a dream in Owein's world, but life is certainly like a vision. To borrow Dante's locution, Owein's experience of becoming a "pilgrim to the flesh" focuses our readerly attention on the strains that extraordinary visionary experience place on interpretive capacity. Ultimately, the goal of both pilgrim and knight is to experience this strain as a trial that inaugurates a new form of awareness, a new way of seeing, a novel sense of subjectivity that has been hallowed out by the shedding of notional paradigms of both self and world.

Presence Revisited: What We See, Not What We Know

The comparison between Purgatory and virtual reality was initially occasioned by the theme of presence as a clarifying concept that described the relation between visionary subjects and objects. These poems and poetic landscapes offer a range of representations that configure presence as phenomena that resist authentication through the channels of empirical science. The illusive objects populating Owein's terrifying and ultimately salutary visions; the sights which

the dreaming Dante perceives in the liminal spaces of oneiric experience; the form-defying images that make up the texture of *Osmose* and *Ephémère*—all these objects appear to various subjects. As we have seen, Marie does not hesitate to explicitly invoke the category of *presence* to describe one instance of these non-bodily forms of appearance and perception. Herein lies the crucial insight: presence, in the various illustrations studied throughout this project, describes the perception of meaningful appearances.

The value of this perceptual account of presence can be seized through a final interdisciplinary comparison with virtual reality scholarship. Throughout this project, I have observed a trend among scholars of virtual reality to interpret presence as a subjective experience of inhabiting a virtual world as if it were a convincingly naturalistic sense environment. Heli Puhakka speaks of "the impression of being present" in virtual reality environments.[542] Caroline Austine strikes a similar chord in her rehearsal of VR artists Bruno Martelli and Ruth Gibson, who use motion capture technology to heighten the realism of movement simulated within virtual spaces. By using motion capture suits that harvest data from the performer's movements, the subsequent representation of motion in the virtual environment closes the gap between artificial representation and direct experience. Martelli and Gibson claim that this motion capture approach assures that "the data is authentic – no pretending, fakeness or acting."[543] Puhakka and Austine, then, each think of presence as the persuasive effect of empirically accurate representation. To "be there", or to be present to an environment, is achieved through the

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[542] Heli Puhakka, "From Analogue to Digital: Drawing the human form by examining creative practices, techniques and experiences of practitioners within immersive technology." (Masters Thesis, Queensland University of Technology. 2019), 316.

[543] Caroline Austin, "Perpetual Modes of Absence ≡ Presence," (Creative Industries Faculty Queensland University of Technology. MFA Dissertation. 2016), 45.

excellence of artificial representation. The virtual subject is present to an environment to the extent that the environment hides its artifice.

Tyler Andrew Blackman's study dedicated to presence in virtual reality extends Puhakka's and Austine's account of the same subject. Blackman grounds his own research in a now familiar notion derived from Herrera et al. who state that "presence is the "subjective feeling of being inside" a digital world [...]."[544] With this widely shared account as his point of departure, Blackman poses perhaps the most precise formulation of the question at the heart of virtual reality scholarship on presence:

> How can immersion as technical affordances be objectively measurable and independent of human experience when bodies are thoroughly part of VR's design, production, and subsequent use? Can immersion exist or be measurable without having a body to experience it? Is a VR system even immersive without an embodied subject?[545]

The concision of this question represents the apogee of the line of VR research into presence that has accompanied this project's several phases. If immersive experiences often implicate feelings of disembodiment, how to substantiate presence as a subjective sense of existing in a virtual environment when the body clearly keeps existing? Tellingly, in nearly every instance in which Blackman invokes the term presence, he embeds the term within a recurring triptych: 'immersion, presence, or "being there."'[546] This semantic habit draws attention to the association of presence with the possibility of illusion and the consequent need to verify the subject's status within a virtual (or more ordinary) environment. Blackman's habit of placing the term *being there* in quotation marks rightly suggests the epistemic thrust that drives much of the reflection on presence in VR. Is the immersive suggest *really* "there" when he or she travels to virtual

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[544] Tyler Andrew Blackman, "Digital Worlds: Performativity and Immersion in VR Videogames," (University of the Fraser Valley, 2016), 8.

[545] Ibid., 36-37.

[546] Ibid., 61.

environments? For many scholars, the answer depends on the bodily materiality of the virtual subject.

Caroline Austin has summarized Char Davies's reflections on her own artistry in similar terms. "The ambiguity of [Davies's] practice," she writes, "challenges the traditional viewpoint of virtual reality, in which bodily presence is suspended and our embeddedness in the world is denied."[547] I readily affirm the assessment of Davies's idiosyncrasy within alternative VR cultures. I think, however, we can champion this aspect of Davies's work without insisting on interpreting immersive experience within the terms of embodiment. The sensibilities of Marie and Dante allow us to trace an alternate path through *Osmose* and *Ephémère*. Instead of reading Davies's virtual landscapes exclusively as an invitation to a self-consciously material subjectivity, it is possible to frame one's immersive experience as one of temporary disembodiment. This approach, taking purgatorial poets as the guide, recasts the possibilities for answering Blackman's question: "Can immersion exist or be measurable without having a body to experience it?"[548] Yes, immersion (specifically disembodied immersion) is quite possible without the corroboration of material measurement or quantification. In chapter four, Merleau-Ponty's categories of fleshly embodiment made it clear that such a possibility is immanently available even to a radical materialist. After all, to assert that the human body exists in an unbroken texture of bodies is to challenge the distinction between subject and object, my body and the world's bodies. Within such a line of thought, material embodiment, when taken to its logical extreme, becomes convertible with disembodiment. If the subject exists in a world whose materiality is completely coextensive with the subject's own materiality, is this not a kind of unending experience of being outside the body? According to common sense, the body is

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[547] Austin, 22.

[548] Blackman, 8.

typically taken to form the limits of the subject. The materiality of the body is what delimits a

clear "I" from a world of "you" and "it." To trouble this distinction, as a radicalized materialism

does, actually has the unintended consequence of clearing the stage for a discourse of

disembodiment all over again. This is a welcome state of affairs, since it makes possible a return

to a more phenomenological appreciation of disembodiment that considers what leaving the body

can *mean* rather than fixating upon whether it is literally possible.[549]

     The kind of presence, then, that characterizes the relation between virtual subject and

virtual environment in Davies's work may be constructively construed as *purgatorial presence*.

Marie de France, following Gregory the Great, does not hesitate to affirm the possibility of

presence inhering between subjects and objects despite the absence of typically normal markers

of embodied relations. Christ comes into Patrick's presence in dreams just as Dante sees non-

false errors; of course, these sights are sufficiently intelligible to their visionary in order to incite

recognition. Patrick can identify Christ; Dante can partly discern certain figures (though not all)

in his dreams. In these instances, it is not Derridean *présence* that operates because there is no

effort in either purgatorial poem to ground the substance of these visions—both dreaming and

waking—in some form of certainty that could be secured by an appeal to the "measurable"

criteria that Blackman celebrates.[550] Presence can be recast as the description of the compelling

appearance of the vision itself, the manner in which the vision pushes the perceiving subject to

surrender the self through the instigation of symbolic encounters. The materiality of the

visionary's body becomes a post hoc question. Concurrently, the claim to presence is needlessly

tethered to the demand for material subjectivity. A radical kind of freedom results from the

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[549] In place of a radical materialism on the one hand and overly ethereal concepts of spirit or spirituality, Bill Brown signals the coming of a "new materialism" in media studies. Without denying the fact of material structures in human cognition, a new materialism makes space for us to "reengage[e] phenomena." (59)

[550] Ibid., 36-37.

uncoupling of these elements. The demands of a forensic empiricism give way to the phenomenologist's openness to a different form of presence, one which describes the interpretive ecstasy (going forth) of a subject who experiences objects that catalyze transformations of identity.

Purgatorial presence is the context in which phenomena compel the transformation of a subject's identity. I have invoked this category to interpret the subject's relation to the virtual environments of Davies's worlds. Through this gesture, I hope to open an interpretive channel in which Davies's virtuality can be considered apart from discourses about materiality and its relation to questions of physical presence. It is undeniable that particular experiences of virtual participation within *Osmose* and *Ephémère* will vary widely; some subjects will interpret their experiences in categories of embodiment. The validity of such an experience should go without saying. But the self-justifying character of visionary experience makes possible a multiplicity of interpretive construals. My effort has been to present one such construal by attending to the similarities that are thrown into relief when Davies's virtual reality is compared to the visionary voyages of medieval purgatorial poems. The hopeful result of this operation is to show that Davies's virtual artistry fulfills Jacques Le Goff's expectation that "it will be a long while before it can be truly said of Purgatory that its time is past."[551]

Davies's osmotic and ephemeral environs position the virtual subject as a stranger surrounded by objects whose familiar and unfamiliar elements interrupt the viewer's preexisting and stable senses of identity. This destabilizing effect emerges from the formal features of the non-linear space that characterize Davies's dreamlike creations. Yet the destabilization may go further, prompting the subject's acknowledgement of a world that is uncanny, both like and unlike the world that preceded and succeeds the virtual experience. There are no demons in

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[551] Jacques Le Goff, 360.

Osmose. Neither are there penitent souls in *Ephémère*, but there are fantastical visionary objects whose status as non-false errors (*non falsi errori*) is always closely related to the subject's potential experience of disembodiment. To feel out of one's body is the subjective corollary of encountering the unfamiliar world that demands interpretation. In other words, the perspectival shift occasioned by a virtual body is the precondition for the encounter with a strange object-world demanding interpretation. Dante the pilgrim and Owein the Knight find their embodiment challenged through a mysterious association with images whose identity is only partially perceived and understood. The form of these visionary journeys sets one valid mold in which a virtual subject may describe the immediate experience of Davies's art. Purgatory's time is not past, as Le Goff expected. Rather, Purgatory finds one unlikely point of contemporary survival in the structures of virtual experience in *Osmose* and *Ephémère*.

Is Disembodiment Dangerous? Feminist Considerations, Novel Horizons

In the third chapter, my argument interacted in detail with Laurie McRobert's book-length study of Davies's virtual reality. McRobert's work is notable here for its negative association of disembodiment, deconstruction, and the female body: "No doubt the deconstructionist movement, and its preoccupation with an absent, abstract (feminine) body, has also inadvertently played a role in her [Davies's] artistic endeavors."[552] Her speculation raises a critical concern that amplifies a broader feminist question: Is it possible that any positive construal of disembodiment is intrinsically violent toward women?[553] In theological studies,

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[552] McRobert, 90.

[553] Carol Rupprecht critiques the violence "inscribed on the female body" (45) that she perceives in the dream episodes. While I will not be approaching this important concern directly, my consideration of disembodiment is occasioned by scholars like Rupprecht who have valuably raised both broad and focused questions related to Dante and the female body. Carol Schreier Rupprecht, "Transformations of the Female Body in Dante's "Purgatorio," *QUADRANT: THE JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY JUNGIAN THOUGHT*. 25 no. 2 (1992), 45.

Chris Bosel and Catherine Keller warn of the "toxic consequences of spiritual disembodiment" that has emerged in theological thinking.[554] The same concern has been raised in scholarship focused on virtual reality. Ella Brians recalls the feminist concern for the "effacement of bodies" that VR seemed to make possible.[555] In heeding these warnings, we may ask: Is there something necessarily at cross-purposes with female liberation in an anthropology that emphasizes even temporary departures from the material body? This is a more focused concern than the broader issue of disembodiment sketched in the previous section.

Clearly any effort to interact with these questions must begin with the frank and unequivocal acknowledgement that literary poets have all too often threatened the female body through various forms of literary erasure. The question is whether disembodiment in the purgatorial poems here falls prey to this patriarchal impulse. Within the world of the poems, it is primarily the male purgatorial subject that experiences disembodiment. But this still leaves open the broader question of whether disembodiment is hopelessly mired within a male project of denying the female body.

Posing this question is a risk. The question must be asked in an open-ended way that invites the possibility of a challenging answer. It is my conviction that in so answering the difficult but indispensible questions raised by feminist voices, it is simultaneously possible to draw together this dissertation's central theses concerning disembodiment and presence. In fact, the question of the potential dangers posed to the female body recapitulates the broader concerns with the loss of material embodiment echoed both in medieval studies and scholarship focused on virtual reality. In this final section, then, I aim to address the feminist caveat that turns out to

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[554] Bosel and Keller, 3.

[555] Ella Brians, 125.

hold the potential for a synthetic reappraisal of disembodiment in both purgatorial and virtual terrains.

Ecstasy and Identity: Considerations from Feminist Theology

One could formulate a variety of helpful points of departure from which to consider the possible threat, or absence thereof, that purgatorial disembodiment may pose to women. At several junctures, this project has incorporated the work of more contemporary theologians working within the categories and symbols of medieval poetry, philosophy, and theology. For this reason, it seems fitting to turn one final time to contemporary theologies in order to query the status of the body in feminist theological discourse. In Christian traditions alone, such a vast array of scholarship is too diverse in its many streams to summarize here.[556] Among these enriching and heterogeneous scholarly discourses, I will single out the work of Sarah Coakley. With the distinction of having delivered the Gifford Lectures (along with such celebrated figures as Hannah Arendt and Judith Butler), Coakley's worked shows remarkably creative, synthetic engagement with scientific, theological, and philosophical discourses on gender, sexuality, and the body.

Coakley's scholarly work is indirectly crucial for my own feminist concern since Coakley also formulates a psychological ideal that derives in no small part from male sources, from patristic intellectuals such as Gregory of Nyssa to medieval scholastic theologians. As a committed feminist, Coakley is alert to the potentially problematic implications of her own research in this way. In her work *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'*, Coakley carefully formulates the transition to her argument's conclusions as an uncertain wager that must

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[556] Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'*, (Cambridge: Cambridge U Press, 2013), 61-65. In these pages, Coakley gives a detailed bibliography of different theological receptions of scholarship on gender and sexuality, from the natural sciences to sociology to literary criticism.

ask, and not prematurely assume, whether "the *feminist* contemplative" is able to adopt the particular variety of apophatically-oriented psychology that Coakley has spent the majority of her book describing. Likewise, at the close of my own project, I find myself confronted with a variant of Coakley's wager. To borrow Coakley's own words, can a *feminist* visionary embrace the dynamics of disembodiment that I have sketched up to this point in my argument?

In *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, Coakley grounds her multidisciplinary account of sex and self in an appraisal of patristic and medieval symbols of the body. This complex project looks to Christian accounts of the Trinity as the basis for a fascinating reconstrual of human psychology and its potentials. At the heart of Coakley's project, she finds an intrinsic connection between two elements; first, ancient and medieval Christian traditions of apophatic contemplation, the practices of orienting the mind's attention toward a gradual shedding of images and concepts alike; secondly, a tradition shared by both Neo-Platonist and Christian intellectuals that acknowledges the way in which ecstatic forms of contemplation challenge normative notions of gender.[557] She finds that the apophatic practices (the contemplative movement toward what cannot be said) deriving from Pseudo-Dionysius have often fomented a psychological context in which the female body is allowed to transcend a forced identification with a strict gender binary.[558] Hence, "*The apophatic turn has the capacity [...] to undermine gender stereotypes…*"[559] But how? As Coakley reminds us, the Trinity imagines God as a source of both self-reflexive and other-focused relations, imagined as gifted exchanges between self and other. Coakley discerns a note of anarchy in these traditional Christian images. Specifically, for

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[557] Coakley recapitulates her main arguments from a wide variety of disciplinary arguments across her tome. See in particular her section entitled "Augustine on Gender, Prayer, and Trinitarianism" (288-296) and "The Primacy of Divine Desire" (311-322). In this later section, Coakley develops her particular occupation with Pseudo-Dionysius and ecstatic prayer.

[558] Ibid., 342.

[559] Ibid., 243, emphasis in original.

the human psyche striving toward such an image of the divine, the Trinity comes to inspire a model of human relations increasingly characterized by a *lack* of stable individual identity. In the place of a normative notion of the individual, the human subject conformed to the Trinity's triadic relations begins to model the destabilizing Trinitarian model of self and other as delightfully confused.[560]

As in my own forth chapter, Coakley is invested in the way that Pseudo-Dionysius's corpus supplied medieval (and potentially more current) thinking with a conception of a subject whose movement toward the unknown manifested liberative possibilities for the subject. In Coakley's work, this interest in the medieval inheritance of Dionysian anthropology takes a markedly feminist direction. To put her own feminist wager to the test, Coakley effectively formulates a kind of intellectual experiment: Does the Dionysian emphasis on ecstatic self-transcendence resonate with any aspect of contemporary feminist discourse? Coakley finds that it does, casting her focus on the prominent French feminist Luce Irigaray, who placed concentrated emphasis on the importance of transcending the self as a crucial form of ecstasy inherent to selfhood, friendship, and community. But Coakley goes further than simply citing Irigaray as a contemporary feminist illustration of an ancient or medieval argument. Rather, Coakley boldly suggests a profound continuity between Irigaray's feminist vision of ecstasy in human relations and the fundamentally ecstatic psychology of antique and medieval Christian accounts of the

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[560] It is fascinating to consider that Coakley's project is both a fulfillment and negation of Luce Irigaray's particular call for women to invent their own distinctive theologies that can establish contemplative horizons for women to pursue in their process of *devenir*. In "Femmes Divines," Irigaray is deeply wary of any possibility that the Christian God can supply women with such an index of becoming: "Sommes-nous capables, ce Dieu, de l'imaginer femme?" Luce Irigaray, "Femmes divines." in *Sexes et parantés* (Paris: Éditions de minuit, 1987), 75. Ultimately, Irigaray answers in the negative: "La trinité feminine nous manque." (Ibid., 76) Yet Coakley, while sharing Irigaray's broader conception of imagining divine sources of inspiration for female flourishing, finds promise in the Trinity. Though it is often (if not exclusively) gendered male in Christian traditions, the Trinity is traditionally imagined as a curious conflagration of subjectivity and objectivity, that which loves itself in loving the Other. Despite the traditionally male gender assigned the "persons" of the Trinity, Coakley finds in their interrelations the forces that would destabilize gender binaries altogether.

subject. Irigaray emphasizes the intense ecstasy that incorporates both self and other into ineffable and unexpected configurations. In a stirring phrase that captures the ecstasy of love, friendship, and altruism, Irigiray writes, "we are at least three". In the experience of deep human connections, both partners exceed their atomized sense of individuality or uniqueness.[561] This transcendence of individuality is destabilizing, for in loving well, the boundaries between self and other become challenged along with concomitant notions of an autonomous self or subject.[562] Upon Coakley's reading, this state of affairs is strikingly consistent with the Dionysian account of ecstasy as that which troubles, rather than secures, a stable notion of human identity.

There are two aspects of Coakley's thinking here that I want to append to my own wager. First, Coakley's appraisal of Irigaray shows a concrete instance in which the medieval emphasis on ecstasy as going beyond the self has found a home in at least one corner of contemporary feminism. This shows the possibility for at least one rapprochement linking medieval psychologies of ecstasy with feminist concerns for the safety and dignity of the human body. Further, Coakley's detailed exposition of this link between Dionysius and Irigaray also shows how the intensely destabilizing effects of ecstatic love are *not* intrinsically opposed to the goals of feminist liberation. On the contrary, Coakley calls attention to the positive and constructive role that such destabilizing ecstasy plays in Irigaray's overall schema of gendered

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[561] Cited in Coakley, 317, deemphasized.

[562] Ibid., 317-318. "If we take inspiration here from Irigaray's insight about the implicitly 'trinitarian' nature of human erotic ecstasy, then we may perhaps glimpse how human ecstatic loves (*at their best*) might ultimately relate to divine ecstatic love: not by any direct emulation of the trinitarian nature, but by the 'interruption' by the Spirit of any merely 'egological' duality inherent in their relationship, such that the human lovers are themselves aware of a necessary 'third' between them – both uniting them and protecting their integrity in their new ecstasy of exchange." (318)

life.[563] In short, Coakley follows Irigaray in upholding the value of certain cognitive experiences that challenge stable notions of identity.[564]

To be clear, neither Coakley nor Irigaray are specifically invoking experiences of disembodiment, yet Coakley's positive construal of destabilized identity carries the same qualitative effects that I have sought to describe in Dante's peregrinations beyond his body in sleep as well as Owein's adoption of an impossible body in Marie's Purgatory. The abnormality of ecstatic experience catalyzes the transformation of identity. Following this line of thinking, I suggest that the disembodiment of Marie's and Dante's purgatorial subjects is precisely described by Irigaray's notion of destabilizing ecstasy. Going beyond the self (and perhaps soaring beyond the human?) seems not to be an intrinsic enemy to liberative feminist psychologies.

None of these arguments should obscure the fact that the visionary bodies of Marie and Dante are gendered male. An entire volume could be dedicated to the question of how and if a female medieval visionary body could adopt the same kinds of identity transformations that I have traced in these poems. My humbler goal has been to clarify that the sort of heuristic disembodiment that I have studied is not an intrinsic threat to the female body. By looking to the medieval expectations of the general Resurrection of the Dead, I have hoped to show how Marie's visions and Dante's dreams do not project an erasure of the human body nor do they

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[563] Coakley does not cite Irigaray's "Femmes divines", but that text may be readily invoked as further evidence of Irigaray's specific investment in the Middle Ages as a source of intellectual inspiration for her work: "Notre temps d'appareillage technique assez sophistique ne va-t-il pas chercher ses images et secrets dans le Moyen Age, entre autres sources?" (70).

[564] Alicia Spencer-Hall finds that contemporary experiences of digitally-mediated religious worship have disclosed liberative effects for women who are able to resist patriarchal forms of clericalism in communions dominated by male leadership (Spencer-Hall, 225-6, 230). In Spencer-Hall's view, this positive consequence of virtual religious experience finds an echo in the feminine spirituality of medieval saints like Juliana of Mont-Cornillon: "Medieval visions, as with online worship, enable the holy woman to develop a deeper understanding of her own faith and the magnificence of God." (231)

presuppose a permanent denial of the physical body. By looking to contemporary theological and philosophical feminisms, I have underscored the enduring value that ecstasy continues to play in certain quarters of contemporary feminist thought. I believe that these forms of ecstasy are qualitatively aligned with the psychological revolutions that heuristic disembodiment makes possible in the *Espurgatoire* and the *Purgatorio*. This signals a possible common cause between a feminist account of ecstatic identity and the symbolic awareness for which purgatorial disembodiment is the mechanism. It may be that we see such a possibility at work already. Eleanor Kaufman, for instance, has reappropriated non-bodily experience as a discourse that might serve, rather than oppose, the ends of liberative feminism. There "are perhaps some things," writes Kaufman, "that a mind in disjunction from its body can still do."[565] How Dante and Marie de France might actively serve feminist causes in our time will surely be an exciting prospect to consider throughout the humanities.

For the moment, however, it seems reasonable to conclude that heuristic disembodiment forms no obvious challenge to the integrity and safety of the female body. As I have stressed throughout this study, the major component of such disembodiment that has interested me is the trope of leaving the body as an expression of extremem identity transformations linked to intense encounters with the ineffable. To be sure, both extraordinary visionaries (Owein, Dante) are clearly inflected by the male gender of their stories' subjects. Yet these inflections mask a deeper possibility for a model of subjectivity that is not just theoretically available to women but which may perhaps more radically challenge a binary account of gender in the first place. To leave the body behind in dreams or in visions is, perhaps, neither an essentially male or female capacity, but is instead a radically destabilizing construal of passing

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[565] Eleanor Kaufman, "Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Mind," in *Deleuze and Feminist Theory*, eds. Ian Buchanan and Claire Colebrook, 128-43 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 128.

beyond the mundane strictures of gendered embodiment. In the spirit of Coakley's account of ecstatic subjectivity, I argue that what Marie, Dante, and Davies accomplish is to implicitly set the stage for a construal of cognitive experience that is unbound from any particular construal of gender dynamics.

Here, I recall the media theorist Bill Brown's rejoinder to the so-called New Materialization Hypothesis that I discussed in my treatment of Dante's three dreams. Brown summarized how many theorists take a suspicious view of technological media that seem to distance subjects from their embodied surroundings. According to their view, mediation is itself a kind of original sin, a fall from a primal unity that humans shared with the embodied world in some imagined state of cognition or ancestral past. Yet Brown instructively shows the non sequitur at the heart of this logic: There is nothing about mediated experience that compromises an aboriginal unity. In the spirit of Brown's argument, I also suggest that temporary disembodiment poses no obvious moral threat neither as a poetic device nor as a heuristic description of virtual experience in the worlds of Char Davies. Being lifted from the body (by dreams and other means) signals a form of virtual experience that never negates the broader material world in which such extraordinary experiences occur. The temporary character of purgatorial disembodiment is what, in my view, safeguards such a trope from any tacit violence.

In fact, as I have argued in different modes throughout the last two chapters, temporary disembodiment secures the possibility of uncovering, forging, and receiving unexpected forms of identity. The transformation of identity in these different terms holds real promise for a liberative ethics. In addition to the examples associated with Coakley and Irigaray, I invoke Franke's construal of ethics embedded in his study of Dante's *Paradiso*. For Dante, as for Levinas, the "essence of ethics," writes Franke, "is a radical transcendence of oneself in relation to an Other

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who is other than all one can say."[566] Ethics is often presented as a discourse of moral deliberation. It may therefore seem strange to consider ethics as self-transcendence. However, Franke aims to show how Dante's *Paradiso* illustrates the poetic subject confronting the fullest possibility for giving oneself to others in the experience of being transformed by the unknown. To experience the unsettling reality of otherness, particularly the Divine Other who is purely other, Dante's protagonist is opened toward new possibilities of relating to other persons.[567]

Franke grounds these assertions in his reading of the *Paradiso*, yet in my view, these same dynamics obtain by other means in the dream episodes of the *Purgatorio*. They apply also to Marie de France's knight on his own journey. For in Dante's dreams as in Owein's visions, the self's radical transformation (which I have identified as a form of virtuality) aims at an increase in the sort of openness that Franke describes. The openness results from a radical embrace of ambiguity, both at the level of the subject's sense of self-identity and with respect to the subject's identification of the world around them.

I have argued that the symbol, precisely defined, is the common catalyst that incites these transformations in the purgatorial/virtual subject. Through this project's sustained comparisons of "purgatorial consciousness" (Marie de France, Dante) and "virtual consciousness" (Char Davies), I suggest we find an overlapping region of symbolic consciousness or awareness. This new awareness corresponds to a fresh mode of approaching bodily transcendence. Ultimately, we can most fruitfully approach the temporary loss of body in all these contexts as a heuristic (non-literal) construal of the destabilizing effects of symbolic consciousness. Dante, Davies, and Marie de France each construct the conditions for what John

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[566] William Franke, "The Ethical Vision of Dante's Paradiso in Light of Levinas." *Comparative Literature* 59, no. 3 (2007): 210.

[567] See especially 224.

Caputo has called "a more fragile and undecidable sense of transcendence."[568] Like Owein and

Dante, immersants traversing Davies's worlds cannot guarantee how the experience will change

them. Only one thing is certain: the subject's present identity must be risked along with the

subject's present understanding of self and other (physical, human, and divine). But for pilgrims

in purgatory and immersants in Davies's virtual environs, *transcendence never implies a*

devaluation of what is being transcended. To "transcend the body" never implies a concomitant

denigration of bodily substance, a hypothesis that finds substantial support from Caroline

Bynum's research on the deep importance of bodily resurrection for the medieval cultures that

Dante and Marie de France inhabited. It is therefore my hope that this research will make

possible a fresh perspective from which to reconsider bodily absence in virtual experience, both

medieval and postmodern. Perhaps we may begin to speak the unexpected values that temporary

disembodiment can disclose for worthwhile adventures into the ineffable.

Disembodiment in Our Time: Specters of the Middle Ages from Journalism to Fiction

In the twenty-first century, the question of disembodiment continues to assert itself

beyond academic medieval studies and cultures of virtual reality. In journalism, literature, and

neuroscience, disembodiment continues to fascinate as an interpretation of extraordinary

experience. We are baffled and bewitched, intrigued and confused in the face of such reports.

And yet despite the scientific prescriptions that might eliminate disembodiment from the modern

imagination, descriptions persist of living subjects leaving their body.

Furthermore, the exact approaches to evaluating accounts of disembodiment sketched out

in this dissertation likewise continue to haunt our world. In February 2020, the philosopher John

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[568] Edith Wyschogrod and John D. Caputo, "Postmodernism and the Desire for God: An E-Mail Exchange," *Cross Currents* (48, no. 3 (1998), 296.

Martin Fisher penned an op-ed for the New York Times entitled, "Are 'Near Death Experiences' Real?"[569] Near Death Experiences, or N.E.D.'s, may involve "an "out of body" experience in which one seems to be floating above one's physical form and can see it and its surroundings." According to Fisher, such experiences "are real in the sense of "authentic" — they really occur. No one should deny this; to do so is to disrespect a vast majority of those who sincerely report them." However, Fisher calls for a pivotal distinction between the authenticity of personal experience and the literal reality that we can infer from reports of such experience. "Are N.D.E.s," asks Fisher,

> [if] interpreted literally, accurate depictions of an external reality? This is an importantly different question. It is crucial not to slide from "real" in the first sense to "real" in the second, but this is precisely what many of the supernaturalists do. N.D.E.s really occur. But we cannot infer from this that they accurately depict guidance by deceased loved ones to a nonphysical realm.[570]

Fisher's skeptical interpretation of disembodied experience echoes the implicit materialism that animates Gilbert the monk in the *Espurgatoire*. Like Gilbert, Owein's monastic companion, Fisher emphasizes the importance of empirical demonstration to authenticate the claims that issue from disembodied experience. While such experiences can be "authentic," that authenticity does not imply the existence of the world that the disembodied subject allegedly experiences. This approach to evaluating disembodiment familiarly pits authenticity against reality, driving a firm wedge between a kind of Kantian noumenal world beyond the veil of experience and the more immediate world that experience communicates. This may be a welcome distinction in many scientifically minded discussions, but the authentic/real binary already begins to privilege "reality" as something which must be established in order to fully explore the "authentic." This

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[569] John Martin Fisher, "Are Near Death Experiences Real?" NY Times, February 13, 2020.

[570] Ibid.

state of affairs leaves little room for a primary exploration of authentic experience, to use Fisher's term, which need not await the vindicating pronouncements of "reality."

A contemporary approach more redolent of Marie's (and Dante's) phenomenology of the body can be found in the concluding pages of the most widely circulated non-religious literature in the world during the first decades of the twenty-first century: the Harry Potter franchise. In the seventh and final installment of J.K. Rowling's inestimably popular fantasy novels, the protagonist—the eponymous Harry—succumbs in battle to the dark wizard Voldemort. When he regains consciousness, Harry finds himself in a liminal space inhabited by his likewise deceased mentor, the benevolent wizard Albus Dumbledore. The great wizard informs Harry that he must return to life to vanquish his evil rival. But before the vision recedes, Harry poses a pivotal question to his beloved mentor, much as Dante frequently poses questions to Virgil: "Is this real? Or has this been happening inside my head?"[571] Dumbledore's reply overcomes the false dichotomy that Harry's question presumes. "Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?"[572] The wizard affirms young Harry's sense that the boy's extraordinary visionary experience is not one whose reality can be authenticated beyond the immediacy of the experience. Naturally, Harry will be unable to prove that his vision existed independently of his subjective perceptive experience. This, however, need not pose a difficulty to embracing the practical wisdom that the vision's content imparts to its subject.

It is this precisely this approach to evaluating extraordinary experiences that I have sought to describe in the purgatorial-cum-virtual subjects of Marie de France, Dante, and Char Davies. The fact that this collective approach to virtuality, presence, and the body is

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[571] J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows,* (Scholastic: 2007), 723.

[572] Ibid., 723.

recapitulated in the most popular literature of our time only attests to the enduring relevance of the sort of disembodiment that purgatorial poets construct. In contrast to the demands of the empirical sciences, the tradition established in Marie de France's visions and Dante's dreams privileges the hermeneutic priority for seeking the transformative effects that disembodied experience makes possible for the virtual subject. In these literary and digital contexts, symbols incite a new form of awareness, a symbolic consciousness that invites the virtual subject to risk becoming what it cannot foresee even as it must risk finding meaning whose accuracy and stability is never guaranteed. This, at least, is the shape of subjective transformation that Owein and Dante sustain: Like immersants travelling through *Osmose* and *Ephémère*, they must constantly allow symbols to reform their expectations for who they will be. Conversely, like the pilgrims of French and Italian purgatories, immersants in Davies's virtual realities may experience an opportunity to incline their awareness toward an ineffability that at once challenges their sure sense of who they are and what the world is. The subject in conversion is the subject who embraces the instability catalyzed by the unknown, and to find oneself in a state of such conversion is what poetic renderings of purgatory make possible through a temporary— but utterly transformative—flight from the mundane, material body.

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