I have discussed pertain to the domain of literal sense; the Decameron lacks the allegorical dimension. According to Servius’s commentary on Virgil, simpliciter means literally, but in the exegetical tradition, literal sense includes rhetorical figures and the expressive devices put into practice in the Decameron. Therefore, simpliciter means literally but this does not imply that deciphering a double meaning is an operation belonging to a different level of interpretation. A passage which is relevant to the point may be quoted from Minnis’s valuable Medieval Theory of Authorship:

there are various kinds of literal sense: sometimes, the auctor may speak plainly and directly; sometimes he may employ figurative expressions. All kinds of figurative language, including metaphors, parables and similitudes, involve significative words and are, therefore, part of the literal sense.5

The method of biblical exegesis is at the basis of this doctrine; but it can be extended to the domain of literature. Bergamino’s second-level story, the metaphor of Madonna Oretta, Friar Cipolla’s sermon, all pertain to the domain of literal sense, which admits rhetorical devices and figures.

When Lancelot arrives at the threshold of the grail chamber at Corbenic he finds the door firmly closed against him. In a manner typical of his muscular Christianity, he beats against it, seeking access to the mystery he has so long pursued:

He pushed against it, thinking to open it, but he could not; he tried again and again but nothing he did could gain him entry.2

In response to his clamour he hears strains of ineffable music, ‘so sweet that it seemed no mortal voice could utter it’, in which he fancies that he is able to discern a doxology of praise to the Father of Heaven. Kneeling down and with a swelling heart, this trace of the ineffable provokes in him a prayer of longing and petition:

Most sweet Lord Jesus Christ, if ever I did anything that pleased Thee, then of Thy pity, gracious Lord, spurn me not now, denying me all sight of that which I have been seeking.3

On looking up, he finds the door of the chamber miraculously open and a great light flooding out into the rest of the palace. Lancelot’s ‘joy and his desire to see the source of the light grew so intense that he forgot everything beside’. He is on the point of crossing the threshold when he is forbidden entry by a hidden voice. Obedient, he gazes round the room from the threshold. His vision is resonant with the iconography and symbolism of affective eucharistic imagery:

So he let his gaze run round the room and observed the Holy Vessel standing beneath a cloth of bright red samite upon a silver table. And all around were ministering angels, some swinging silver censers, others

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1 This paper owes much of its approach and many of its ideas to a collaborative study of Julian of Norwich in progress with Sr Martha Reeves (Maggie Ross).


3 Matarasso, p. 261; Pauphilet, p. 254.
holding lighted candles, crosses and other altar furnishings. ... Before the Holy Vessel was an aged man in priestly vestments, engaged to all appearances in the consecration of the Mass. When he came to elevate the host, Lancelot thought he saw, above his outstretched hands, three men, two of whom were placing the youngest in the hands of the priest who raised him aloft as though he were showing him to the people.  

Seeing the priest stagger under the burden, Lancelot is characteristicly moved to assist him, crosses the threshold and breaks the prohibition:

With that he crossed the threshold and made towards the silver table. As he drew near he felt a puff of wind which seemed to him shot through with flame, so hot it was, and as it fanned his features with its scorching breath he thought his face was burned. He stood rooted to the ground like a man paralysed, bereft of sight and hearing, and powerless in every limb. Then he felt himself seized by many hands and carried away. And when they had grabbed him by the arms and legs they pitched him out and left him where he fell.

In this passage Lancelot’s approach to the threshold of the ineffable has the typical ingredients of prayer and praise, but his spiritual maturity is still inadequate to allow him access to the hidden secrets. His prayer stresses his sense of his own deserving, suggesting that his service has earned him access to the mysteries. He tries to storm the bastion of the apophatic, beating on the door that conceals it, and he interprets what he is shown in the referential terms of devotional affectivity. His quasi-pentecostal experience inside the room is parodic of the ecstasy of spiritual insight and mystical vision, but he is unprepared and incapable of bearing the cost of his violation.

Lingering between life and death for 24 days he awakes with a recognition that his eyes had been blinded and sullied by looking on the midden of this world. His seeing is still bodily, his interpretation still fleshy. In the Cloud-author’s terms, he makes a bodily conceit of a ghostly thing. Gesturing towards the ineffable in impeccably Pauline terms, it is clear that the eyes of his soul have not been fully opened:

I have seen... such glories and felicity that my tongue could never reveal their magnitude, nor could my heart conceive it. For this was no earthly but a spiritual vision. And but for my grievous sins and my most evil plight I should have seen still more, had I not lost the sight of my eyes and all power over my body, on account of the infamy that God had seen in me.

Lancelot’s failure lies in his impetuosity and self-reliance. On entering the castle he has been rebuked for carrying his knightly arms to protect himself instead of trusting in the mercy of God. In taking the initiative in crossing the threshold, he has violated the essential mystical decorum that requires God to have the initiative in all revelation.

Lancelot’s bruising encounter with the ineffable contrasts powerfully with that of his son Galahad. As a figure of the unfulfilled spiritual perfection of his father, Galahad’s innocence of the ways of the world, his virginity and chastity and his ability to occupy the Siege Perilous all signify that his route to perfection will be less troubled than his father’s. Unwillingly forced to accept earthly kingship, he recreates the ark of the covenant as a housing for the grail, shielding it from prying and inquisitive eyes. At this new Holy of Holies he performs regular liturgical observances. Returning one dawn to ‘the palace which men termed spiritual’, he sees ‘a noble-looking man in the vestments of a bishop’ celebrating mass using the Grail. Unlike his impetuous father, Galahad waits until he is invited forward to ‘look on that you have so ardently desired to see’. Responding to the divine initiative, he ‘drew near and looked into the Holy Vessel’:

He had but glanced within when a violent trembling seized his mortal flesh at the contemplation of the spiritual mysteries. Then lifting up his hands to heaven, he said: ‘Lord, I worship Thee and give Thee thanks that thou hast

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4 Matarasso, p. 262; Pauphile, p. 255.
5 Matarasso, pp. 262–3; cf. her notes pp. 301–2; Pauphile, p. 256. Lancelot’s punishment is similar to King Mordrain’s earlier in the text (Matarasso, pp. 100–7). Lancelot’s denial has been foretold in a vision to Sir Hector. Lancelot stews to drink from a spring which hides itself from his sight (Matarasso, p. 164; Pauphile, pp. 149–50). The inevitable hermeneutical hermit explains that the spring is ‘the Holy Grail, the grace of the Holy Ghost’, in the presence of which Lancelot’s eyes will lose their sight (Matarasso, pp. 172–3; Pauphile, pp. 158–9).

7 Matarasso, p. 264; Pauphile, p. 258.
8 ‘O man of little faith and most infirm belief, why placest thou greater trust in thine own arm than in thy Maker? Thou art but a sorry wretch to hold that He whom thou didst choose to serve can stand thee in no better stead than shield and sword’ (Matarasso, p. 260; Pauphile, p. 253).
10 Most critics see Galahad as a complex figure of Christ; see Matarasso, Redemption, pp. 33–95.
granted my desire, for now I see what tongue could not relate or heart conceive.\textsuperscript{11}

Galadad’s behaviour is paradigmatic. He obeys his destiny without willfulness or ambition, without assertion or explicit aspiration, but with a focused longing in his heart. He accepts worldly responsibility but sees it as a distraction from his desire for contemplation. Most notably, his contemplation of the mysteries within the grail has none of the anthropomorphic iconography deployed in Lancelot’s encounter. By looking \textit{into} the grail at the non-figural apophatic surface of the water and wine at the point of liturgical transubstantiation (‘the solemn part of the mass’) Galadad’s perception is itself transfigured and transubstantiated. His ineffable experience allows him to pass over the threshold of earthly signification into the glory of the apophatic. His liminality in the experience urges him to pray for release from earthly life:

I pray Thee now that \textit{in this state} Thou suffer me to pass from earthly life to life eternal.

Unlike his father, who is returned after balancing between life and death, Galadad is allowed to pass over the Jordan into the promised land:

for his soul had already fled his house of flesh and was borne to heaven by angels making jubilation and blessing the name of Our Lord.\textsuperscript{12}

Both Lancelot and Galadad are unable to articulate or describe their experience of the ineffable: rather they reinforce its ineffability in the transfiguration of their languages and their lives. They bear the trace of the ineffable in their longing to achieve union with it. They yearn for it with no prospect of comprehending it and circumscribing it.

Mystical language seeks to deliver us to the threshold of ineffability. Mystical imagery seeks to deliver us to the brink of the apophatic. Together they constitute a repertoire of liminal signifiers which gesture beyond themselves into the realm of unmediated wisdom and the paradise of the Transcendental Signified from which we have been excluded by the fall.\textsuperscript{13} Mystical writing can only ever be about thresholds: the

\textsuperscript{11} Matarasso, pp. 282–3; Pauphilet, pp. 277–8. For discussion, see Matarasso, \textit{Redemption}, pp. 180–204.

\textsuperscript{12} Matarasso, p. 283; Pauphilet, p. 278.


This may partly explain the apparent anti-intellectualism of so much mystical writing, as \textit{clerige} and learning can be seen to usurp the divine prerogative of ineffable self-revelation. \textit{The Book of Privy Counselling}, one of the works of the author of \textit{The Cloud of Unknowing}, persistently teaches the surrender of our discursive consciousness and the abandonment of the intellectual \textit{curiositas} that seeks to entrap God in the world of referentiality and figurality:

Trewly I telle bee \textit{pat} \textit{jif} a soule, \textit{pat} is bus ocupied, had tonge \& langage to sey as it felip, pan alle \textit{pe} clerkes of Cristendome schuld wondere on \textit{pat} wisdam. \textit{je} \& in comparison of it, al here grete clerige schuld seme apeerte foly. \& \textit{perfore} no wondre bof I kan not telle \textit{pe} worpin of \textit{his} werk wip my boystouse beestly tonge. \& God forbede \textit{pat} scholde be so defould in it-self for to be streyned vnder \textit{pe} steringes of a fleschly tonge! Nay, it may not be, \& certes it wil not be, \& God forbede \textit{pat} I schuld coueuyte it!\textsuperscript{15} (BPC 153.12–20)

The ‘goostly werk’ of the \textit{Cloud}-author hinges on a letting go of the intellectual procedures and interpretative strategies of the world and a


\textsuperscript{15} \textit{The Cloud of Unknowing and the Book of Privy Counselling}, ed. P. Hodgson. EETS OS, 218 (1944, revised reprint 1973). Subsequent references to \textit{Cloud} and BPC by page and line number of this edition. Hodgson produced a new edition, with rather few textual changes, but with an expanded and modified introduction and notes, as \textit{The Cloud of Unknowing and Related Treatises}, Analecta Cartusiana, 3 (1982). As Hodgson points out, BPC is here quoting the opening of Aristotle’s \textit{Metaphysics}. My thinking on the \textit{Cloud}-author has been decisively influenced by the work of Dr René Tixier of the University of Toulouse, whose thesis \textit{Mystique et Pédagogie dans Le Cloud of Unknowing} (unpublished Doctorat Nouveau Régime, Université de Nancy, 1985), is a sustained and detailed analysis of the verbal and pedagogic strategies of the \textit{Cloud}. See also his ‘\textit{This lovely blinden werk}: Contemplation in the \textit{Cloud of Unknowing} and related treatises’, in \textit{The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England}, ed. W. Pollard (forthcoming). On \textit{curiositas}, see E. Gilson, \textit{The Mystical Theology of St. Bernard} (London, 1940), Appendix 1.
Interpreting the Ineffable in the Middle English Mystics

16 Cf. E. R. Elder, 'William of St Thierry: Rational and Affective Spirituality' in The Spirituality of Western Christendom, ed. E. R. Elder, Cisterian Studies, 30 (Kalamazoo, 1976), pp. 85–105: 'If reason first bows itself beneath the lintel of faith, if reason stoops beneath him who claimed to be the door, then reason, humbled by faith under the yoke of authority, may enter into the knowledge of God's very truth' (p. 95), paraphrasing Speculum Fidei, 24. The Clenses of Mannes Soule makes a similar point: 'Perfection of resoun in his liif is to be rausched above hym self goostly to se our lord god be an inward and intellectualis knowinge porouz pureit of he soule wipout any ymaginacous or bodily liknes and wip[out] any argumentz of natural reasoun', Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Bodley 923, fols 150v–151r.

17 See Hodgson, Analecta, p. 176 on this anti-intellectual outburst. Rolle is similarly scathing in Incendium Amoris: 'An old woman can be more expert in the love of God... than your theologian with his useless studying. He does it for vanity, to get a reputation, to obtain stipends and official positions. Such a fellow ought to be entitled not "Doctor" but "Fool"!', The Fire of Love, translated by Clifton Wolters (Harmondsworth, 1972), p. 61; cf. p. 46. On Rolle's apparent 'anti-intellectualism', see V. Gillespie, 'Mystic's Foot: Rolle and Affectivity', in The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England, 2, ed. M Glasscoe (Exeter, 1982), pp. 207–9. See also the virtuosic study by N. Watson, Richard Rolle and the Invention of Authority, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature, 13 (Cambridge, 1991), for a profoundly revisionist reading of Rolle's textual strategies. There is evidence for seeing such 'anti-intellectual' postures as rhetorical tropes of diminutio, but the opposition between the schools of love and logic is widespread: Margarete Porete describes the Holy Spirit writing on the precious parchment of the soul: 'here is yhohden ye diune scrole wip moube closed, bat no wit of men may putte in speche', Margarete Porote: The Mirror of Simple Souls, A Middle English Translation, ed. M. Doiron, Archivio Italiano per la Storia della Poesia 5 (1968) 241–382, p. 303. For a sixteenth-century example, see 'Robert Parkyn: Devotional Treatises', ed. A. G. Dickens in Tudor Treatises, Yorkshire Archaeological Society: Record Series, 125 (1959), pp. 61–3. On Parkyn curiosity and the abandonment of exegetical fervour, God's freedom to move in a mysterious way requires the martyrdom of our self-consciousness:

For si in þe fyrst bigynnyn of Holy Chirche in þe tyne of percepcion, dyuere soules & many weren so meruelyously touchyd in sodenye of grace þat sodenly, wipoutyn menes of oþer werkes comyng before, þei kæsten here instrumentes, men of crafes, of here hondes, children here tables in þe scole, & ronnen wip-outyn ransakyng of reson to þe mariirdom wip seinte. (BPC 151.1–6)

This passage alludes to many distinctive features of the encounter with the ineffable. The suddenness of the working of grace, described as a touching; the suspicion and rejection of menes and works; the rejection of the procedures of the schools; the abandonment of reason in favour of desire and love.

The translator's preface to The Seven Points of True Wisdom, extracted from Suso's Orologium Sapientiae, makes a similar point in the text it takes as its epigraph:

Felip of oure Lorde in goodnesse and sechip him in symplenesse of herte, for he ys foundene of hem þat temptene him not, and he apperip to hem þat hauene feith into hym. 18

The point is reinforced by the work's introductory parable of a devout disciple of wisdom who attended 'diuere scoles' to learn many 'sciences of mannis doctrine and wordelye wisdam'. Being touched by grace, he comes to consider such studies 'veyne trauyle' and prays to be brought to the knowledge and understanding of 'sopefast and souereyne philosophie'. Restlessly passing from school to school, he finds only 'an ymage or a lykenesse' of the wisdom he seeks, until 'þere apperid to his sighte as hit were a wondir gret and large rowndle hows lyke to þe sper of þe fyrmenmate' which is divided in the middle into two mansions, each containing doctors, teachers and disciples. The lower mansion contains students of earthly crafts and sciences 'þe wheche alle hadden as hit were a manere veyle vpon here faces'. These are comforted in their labours by


18 All quotations are taken from Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales MS Porkington 19, the base text for the forthcoming critical edition by Dr Christina von Nolken of the University of Chicago, to whom I am indebted for a copy of her transcription. The prologue occupies pp. 7–13 of this manuscript. For a printed text, see K. Horstmann, Orologium Sapientiae or The Seven Poyntes of Trewse Wisdom out MS. Douce 114', Archiv 10 (1887) 323–89. On the popularity of the Orologium in England, see R. Lovatt, 'Henry Suso and the Medieval Mystical Tradition in England', in The Medieval Mystical Tradition, 2, ed. Glasscoe (1982), pp. 47–62.
a drink which fails to quench their thirst but rather serves to increase it. The disciple’s stomach revolts from this drink, and he goes up to the threshold of the second house and sees an inscription over the door:

Dis is þis scole of sopfaste diuinite, where þe maystresse is Euerlastynge Wisdam, þe doctrine is verite and treube, and þe ende euerlastynge felicite.

He does not hesitate to cross the threshold, hoping to find the fulfilment of his desires. Within he finds three groups of teachers and pupils. The first, seated on the ground by the door, looks back toward things that lie outside the door. The second group ‘profited not feryntlye, but in manere semede as þei stodene stille’. The third group sit close to the master, and:

drinkynge þe watere of helefulle wisdam pat came out of his mowpe, þei were made so drunkyn þat þei forgetene himselfe and alle ober worldely þingis, haunynge here hertis and here eyzen euer vpwarde to þe mayster and ferentlye rausches into his loue and heuenely þingis.

Although the text expounds this vision as describing three manners of studying holy writ, its imagery and vocabulary clearly also align it with progression in the work of contemplation and liberation from the parched pursuit of signification in the language and images of the world.

The Cloud of Unknowing, as so often, encapsulates the problems of mystical language and imagery:

Alle þe reuelacionts pat euer sawe any man here in bodely licnes in þis liif, þei haue goostly bemenynge, & I trowe bot & þei vnto whome þei were schewid, or we for whome þei were schewid, had been so goostly, or coube haue conceuyd þeire bemenynge goostly, þat þan þei had neuer ben schewed bodilly, & þeuerfore late us pike of þe rouȝ bark, & fede us of þe sweete kyrmel. (c.58; 107.11-16)

In gesturing towards the most commonplace medieval image of the process of interpretation, the Cloud engages with the core hermeneutical problem of mystical experience. How do we speak of the ineffable, how do we read the languages of the threshold? Not, it is clear, by rejecting language altogether. We should not feed off the fruit and despise the tree, or drink the wine and throw the cup against a wall (107.20–108.7).


mind, memory and imagination by relating them to and assessing them against the mental archive of words, concepts, images and symbols. New sense data, new images, new concepts are assessed and assigned a place in the taxonomy of knowledge through assimilation into the syntax of the mental language. This taxonomy itself operates by a system of difference and distinction: an analytical and interpretative assessment that articulates itself in terms of quality, quantity, nature of the concept. The discursive consciousness cannot prevent itself from engaging in such processes of assessment and hierarchizing. ‘Curiosity of the witty’ is a kind of intellectual covetousness; a thirst for control and certainty. Such acts of interpretation are a function of our exile from the paradise of unmediated knowledge, an exile symbolized by the primal act of intellectual covetousness towards the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The fall of language is precipitated by the relentless desire to interpret and discriminate. The aspiration to distinguish knowledge into good and evil is the first interpretative act, an act of will and of self-assertion.

But the ineffable nature of God is beyond the hermeneutical grasp of men’s minds. Neither negation nor affirmation can define him:

Per is of hym no settyng ne doyng away; bot when we affermingly set or deniingly do away alle or any of pœ ðinges þat ben not þe, hym we mowe neiwer set ne do awy, ne on any vnderstandable maner afferme him, ne denie him. For þe parfite & þe singuler cause of al most nedelynges be wipoutyn comparison of þe moost hive height abouen alle, bope settyng & doyng away. And his not-vnderstandable ouerpassyng is vn-vnderstandably abouen alle affermyng and denying.33

God resists the taxonomy of analysis: he is ‘wipoutyn comparison’. God simply is: his being, which may be deduced from his energies, tracked from his traces in the book of creation, and articulated by the incarnation of the logos remains beyond the differentiating grasp of the discursive consciousness:

For þer is no name, ne felnyg ne beholdyng more, ne so moche, acordyng vnþo euer-lastynge, þe whiche is God, as þat þe whiche may be had, seen & felt in þe blinde & þe lonely beholding of his worde is. For þif þou sey ‘God’ or ‘Faire Lord’, or ‘Swete’, ‘Mercifull’ or ‘Rigtwise’, ‘Wise’ or ‘Alwitty’, ‘Mëstri’ or ‘Mësthi’, ‘Witte’ or ‘Wisdomse’, ‘Mïste’ or

3 From Deonise hid Diuinite, the Cloud-author’s version of The Mystical Theology of Pseudo-Denys, ed. P. Hodgson, EETS OS, 231 (1955 for 1949), p. 10, 15–23. cf. his comment in A Pistle of Discrescioun of Strings: ‘For to him þat wil be sped of his purpose goystly, it suffiseth to him for a mene, and him nedip no mo þat þe actuele minde of good God only, wiþ a reuerent sering of lastynge loue; so þat mene vnto God gete þe none bot God, 3if þou kepe hole þi sterling of loue’ (Hodgson, EETS, 231, p. 75.8–12).

‘Strengbe’, ‘Loure’ or ‘Charite’, or what oþer soche þing þat þou sey of God: al it is hid & enstord in þis litil worde is. (BPC 143.19–26)

God cannot be spoken, only spoken of and, all too often, special thought about God creates a self-referential and solipsistic looping of abstraction and image-making that talks only to itself.

One of the favourite paradoxes of the medieval schoolmen was the proposition that God is ‘an intelligible sphere whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference nowhere’.24 God is the still centre who circumscribes creation but is not circumscribed by it. Language, therefore, is predicated by him, but not of him. As Derrida puts it

It has always been thought that the center, which is by definition unique, constituted that very thing within a structure which, while governing the structure, escapes structurality... the center is paradoxically, within the structure and outside it.25

God’s ineffability is an absent presence that escapes structurality. The Deus absconditus of Christian tradition inhabits the non-dimensional silence beyond the grasp of men’s structuring consciousness. Yet God is present and absent. The play of absence and presence in his communion with men is a powerful trace of his ineffable essence.26 Because of this, mystical language has as its characteristic tone longing for presence and yearning for liberation from absence. Mystical writers, in seeking to interpret this trace and to transcribe it for their readers aspire to a mode of interpretation that ‘seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes play and the order of the sign, and which lives the necessity of interpretation as an exile’.27

The order of the sign, the referentiality of language, depend upon structurality and difference. The repertoires and codes that condition and


25 J. Derrida, ‘Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences’, in Writing and Difference, translated by A. Bass (London,1978), pp. 278–92, p. 279, where he also notes that ‘the movement of any archaeology, like that of any eschatology, is an accomplishment of this reduction of the structurality of structure, and always attempts to conceive of structure on the basis of full presence which is beyond play’.


interpret our response to phenomena operate, for the most part, within systems of linear causality and temporal sequence. Syntax operates in thought and imagery as well as in language. Images, for example, work within iconographical systems that attribute conventional valencies and excite easily codifiable responses. Even symbols and metaphors develop a decorum of procedure, a rhetorical framework, a circumference of accepted and convenient structure which serves to limit the play of their signification. While offering the possibility of limited escape from simple referentiality, figural and analogical tropes soon fossilize into programmatic and conventional triggers for stock responses. Religious imagery in general, and Passion images in particular, soon acquire, as the Cloud-author notes, approved significations and authorized resonances, creating a self-fuelling chain of low level affective responses.28

Symbolic and verbal languages operate in time even when they seek to bring us to the brink of eternity and the threshold of the apophatic. As Julian learns from her showings, sin and syntax are both products of the fall into time and causality.29 Mystical writing aspires to pass over from referentiality to a promised land without spatial or temporal coordinates:

For tyme, stede, & body, þees þre schuld be forgeten in alle goostly worching. (Cloud c.59; 111.4–5)

God’s being informs structure without being comprehended by it. The initiative lies with him. Only in the incarnation of the Word does the ineffability of God’s being manifest itself in time and structure. The linguistic implications of the incarnation are explored in a remarkable poem by St Ephrem the Syrian that anticipates in many ways the teachings of the Dionysian tradition:

It is our metaphors that he put on – though he did not literally do so; He took them off – without actually doing so: when wearing them, He was at


29 See her discussion in chapter 27, where the pain of sin ‘is somethynge, as to my syte, for a tyme, it purgith and makith us to knowen ourselfe and askyn mercy’. Sin is ‘beovabite’, but all shall be well: ‘And in these same words I saw a mervelous hey privite hid in God, which privity he shall openly make known to us in hevnyn; in which knowyn we shall verily see the cause why he suffrith synne to come; in which syte we shall endlesly ioyen in our lord God’. Julian of Norwich: A Revelation of Love, ed. M. Glasscoe (Exeter, 1976), pp. 28–9. All Julian quotations are taken from this edition of London, British Library MS Sloane 2490 (S1). For a defence of S1’s superiority over the Paris manuscript used as base by Colledge and Walsh, see M. Glasscoe, ‘Visions and Revisions: A Further Look at the Manuscripts of Julian of Norwich’, Studies in Bibliography 42 (1989) 103–20; Gillespie and Ross, ‘Apophatic Image’, elaborates our preference for S1.

the same time stripped of them. He puts one on when it is beneficial, then strips it off in exchange for another; the fact that he strips off and puts on all sorts of metaphors tells us that the metaphor does not apply to His true Being: because that Being is hidden, He has depicted it by means of what is visible.30

God’s metaphors are metaphorical. This double displacement prevents simple codification and interpretative stylization:

He wished to teach us two things: that He became flesh, yet He did not come into being. In his love He made for himself a countenance so that his servants might behold Him; but lest we be harmed by imagining he was really like this, He moved from one likeness to another, to teach us that He has no likeness. And though he did not depart from the form of humanity, yet in his Transfiguration He did depart.

The motive for this play of absence and presence, then, is to lead men to seek transfiguration in imitation of the transfigured Christ: ‘He clothed himself in our language so that He might clothe us in his way of life’.

In a manner characteristic of mystical writing, the playful paradoxes and provisionalites of Ephrem’s language taunt our interpretative expectations of referentiality and figurality. The images flicker and tease to allow our thoughts and responses to gather, focus and penetrate into the mysteries that he seeks to address. But ultimately, as his strategies of effacement suggest, we are no nearer possessing God when we possess his metaphors, unless we are prepared to transfigure our perceptions, strip ourselves of our expectations and focus ourselves into a naked and blind yearning of love that reaches out across the threshold of language.

‘If I touche bot þe hemme of his clooping, I schal be saa’, the words of the woman afflicted with an issue of blood, are used on The Book of Privy Counselling to describe the wounded self-consciousness of the human soul. The remedy is simple: ‘Take good gracyous God as he is, plat & pleyen as a plastre, & legge it to þi seek self as pou arte’ (138.28–9), but it involves the denial of the usual workings of the world of analysis and discursiveness:

It chargeb not now in þee bot þi blynde behoyding of þi nakid beyng be gladdi born up in listines of loue, to be knitted & onid in grace & in spirit to þe precious beyng of God in him-self only as he is, with-outen more. (BPC 139.11–14)

Fantasy and 'corious seching' hinder the 'naked felyng of Ḩi blynde byeng' by drawing attention away from the stillness of contemplation into the realm of analogy, metaphor and difference. By contrast the progressive loss of self-consciousness liberates the soul from the burden of analysis and interpretation. Self-consciousness becomes a barrier between the soul and God:

Pan wol Ḩee þenk it a wel heuy & a ful peynyful birpen of Ḩi-self. . . For pan arte Ḩi-self a croc to Ḩi-self. & Ḩi is trewe worching & wey to oure Lorde, as him-self seip: 'Late hym bere his croc', first in the peynyfulnes of hym-self, & sib 'follow me' into blis or into þe mounte of perfeccion, taasting þe softenes of my loue in godly felyng of my-self.

(BPC 157:13-14;16-20)

The incarnation and the passion are acts in time, but they are also the literal foot of a complex theological metaphor. To be understood properly we must make of them, in the Cloud’s words, a (properly ordered) ‘goostly conseyte of a bodely þing’ (c.65; 117.16) before we can escape from the constricted perspective of sin and time, of syntax and provisionality.31

The metaphoricity of Christ leads us away from time to eternity, from trace to presence, from interpretation to bliss. Christ, the incarnate Word, is the liminal signifier of the ineffable and the apophatic. St Bonaventure likens him to the propitiatory suspended over the ark of the covenant in the Holy of Holies:

He who with full face looks to this propitiatory by looking upon Him suspended on the cross in faith, hope and charity, in devotion, wonder, exultation, appreciation, praise and jubilation, makes a passover . . . that he may pass over the Red Sea by the staff of the cross from Egypt into the desert, where he may taste the hidden manna and with Christ may rest in the tomb as if outwardly dead, yet knowing, as far as possible in our earthly condition, what was said on the cross to the thief cleaving to Christ: ‘Today thou shalt be with me in Paradise’.32

In this passover, Christ is the way and the door. Meditation on the suffering humanity of Christ is an inescapable prerequisite for contemplation of his divinity: one is predicated on the other; they are two halves of a single divine metaphor. As the Stimulus Amoris puts it:

Who-so wenyth to come to contemplacioun of criste and cometh not by his dere ne bi þis wey ne bi þe bitternesse of crist in his manhede, he is but a

31 I am indebted to Denis Renevey for the suggestion that a ‘goostly conseyte of a bodely þing’ may be the Cloud-author’s term for metaphor.
32 The Mind’s Road to God, cap. 7.2, pp. 43–4; Itinerarium Mentis in Deum in S. Bonaventurae Opera Omnia (Quaracchi, 1882–1902), V, 312.

Walter Hilton, who translated the Stimulus Amoris into Middle English, glosses this passage in The Scale of Perfection:

No body can come to the contemplation of the Deity unless he be first reformed by fullness of humility and charity to the likeness of Jesus in his manhood. (Scale 1.91)34

This reformation of the self in meekness and charity is acquired by transfiguring ourselves into the mind of Christ:

For let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who. . . [did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped, but] emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men and in habit found as a man. He humbled himself, becoming obedient unto death, even to the death of the cross. Therefore (for which cause) God hath exalted him, and hath given him a name which is above all names.

(Philippians 2: 5–9)35

The paradox of humility and exaltation which is rooted in the refusal to grasp equality with God leads to the reward of the transfigured name which is above all names. The incarnation, death and exaltation of Christ offers a metaphorical paradigm, an immanent model for the trajectory of mystical experience.

Self-emptying – kenosis – is the model for the humility, meekness and obedience, the loss of self-consciousness, the yielding of the initiative to God that prepares us for transfiguration into ineffable knowing. ‘For it is
God who works in you both to will and to accomplish according to his good will’ (Philippians 2: 13). We must learn to inhabit the paradox of Christ’s dual nature, to sustain and nurture it. We must resist and yield up the natural inclination to resolve it into a linear proposition. His metaphoricity is a signifier of the complex significations that it invites us to pass into. We must engage in a kind of interpretative kinesis, a stilling of the workings of the discursive consciousness in favour of a meek, blind and naked yearning for the unmediated knowing of God. The mystic, refusing to grasp equality with God, longs to be comprehended by God rather than to comprehend Him.

For *The Book of Privy Counselling*, imaginative meditation may help to bring to the threshold, may indeed be the only true way of approach. But unless these means are shed and denied then, like Lancelot and Suso’s scholars, the contemplative will find his way barred or his gaze misdirected:

For many wenep þat þei ben wip-inne þe goostly dore, & ȝit stonden þei þer-oute, & schoen de vont þe tym þat þey sechen meekly þe dore. (*BPC* 158.27-159.2)

Christ’s humanity is the doorway into ‘goostlines’, but entry is under the control and at the initiative of his ‘Godheed’. However, the incarnation opens up a ‘comoun pleyne wey & an open entre to alle þat wolen come’ (159.15). To remain rooted in the manhood means looking back from the threshold into the world ‘in beholding of þe peyne of his manheed’. Suso’s scholars at the threshold lacked ‘trewe taste of dyuinite’ because they were ‘copiaose and habundaunt [in] þe lettrere-science wipoute þe sperite’. They were literal readers ‘blowene and fillid wip pride’. Lancelot’s spiritual failure was because of ‘bobbance and pride of the worlde’.36 *Privy Counselling* warns that such men must remain at the threshold:

> til þe grete rust of his boistous bodelynes be in grete party rubbid awei, his counsell & his conscience to witnes; and namely, euer to þe clep id inne-more be þe priue teching of þe spirit of God, þe whiche techying is þe rediest & þe sekester witnes þat may be had in þis liif of þe clepyng & þe drawyng of a soule inne-more to more special worching of grace. (*BPC* 161.2-7)

To enter into the gate of contemplation, we must die to the world and enter into what Hilton calls the darkness of self-knowing, so that we can say with St Paul ‘the world is slain and crucified to me and I to the world’.


The man who can bring himself first to nothing through grace of humility, and in this way die, he is in the gate, for he is dead to the world and lives to God. St Paul speaks of it like this: . . . You are dead: that is, you that for the love of God forsake all the love of the world are dead to the world; but your life is hidden from worldly men, as Christ lives and is hidden in his divinity from the love and the sight of carnal lovers. (*Scale* 2.27; p.245)

Hilton’s argument by analogy makes it clear how the noughting of the soul at the threshold is predicated on the metaphor of Christ’s transfigured life in God. Eckhart says that God called himself a Word: besides the word man is an adverb: *quasi*.37 As Ephrem says, ‘He clothed Himself in our language so that He might clothe us in His mode of life’.

Mystical writers send despatches from the threshold, artists’ impressions of the apophatic, postcards from the edge. Language falters in the face of the ineffable:

> Fewe ben þi wordes, bot ful of frute & of fiir. A schorete wordes of þi mouþ conteneþ a woreld ful of wisdam, ȝit semeþ it bot foly to hem þat woten in here wittis. (*BPC* 166.24-167.1)

Contemplative prayer struggles to break free of earthly syntax and aspirings to the condition of heavenly song. *The Cloud of Unknowing* recommends short words, ideally of one syllable only. The single, uninfiected, syntactically unhindered word aspires to escape from referentiality and from the chains of signification of earthly discourse. It resists interpretation:

> & ȝif he proffre þee of his grete clergie to expoune þee þat worde & to telle þee þe condicions of þat worde, sey him þat pou wilt hae it al hole, & not broken ne vndon. (c.7; 29.1-4)

’Schort preier peerisþ heuen’.38 Such prayer aspires to its own effacement:

> Prayer is not a preamble, an accessory mode of access. It constitutes an essential moment, it adjusts discursive asceticism, the passage through the


38 *Cloud*, c.7; 75.5. On the popular currency of this aphorism, see J. A. Alford, *Some Unidentified Quotations in Piers Plowman*, *Modern Philology* 72 (1974-5) 390-9, pp. 390-1.
desert of discourse, the apparent referential vacuity which will only avoid empty deliria and prattling, by addressing itself from the start to the other. 39

Contemplative prayer and praise, the jubilation so often described in mystical experience, reach out beyond language. 40 Like the neume at the end of an antiphon it seeks 'pure vocalization, form of an inarticulate song without speech, whose name means breath, which is inspired in us by God and may address only Him'. 41 As Augustine says:

For whom is such a jubilation suitable unless to an ineffable being, and how can we celebrate this ineffable being, since we cannot be silent, or find any thing in our transports which can express them unless unarticulated sounds.

Derrida, in his discussion of Rousseau's Essay on the Origin of Languages, describes the aspiration of such songs as:

A speaking and a singing breath, breath of language which is nonetheless inarticulate... to speak before knowing how to speak, not to be able either to be silent or to speak, this limit of origin is indeed that of pure presence, present enough to be living, to be felt in jouissance but pure enough to have remained unblemished by the work of difference, inarticulate enough for self-delight not to be corrupted by interval, discontinuity, alterity. 42

Such a speech relates to no object and knows no articulation.

Most mystical language seeks to transcribe the approach to and return from the ineffable. Few are audacious enough to go beyond language. Richard Rolle's experience of a transcendental canor provoked him into attempting to capture something of its inarticulate joy.

In my prayer I was reaching out to heaven with heartfelt longing when I became aware, in a way I cannot explain, of a symphony of song, and in myself I sensed a corresponding harmony at once wholly delectable and heavenly, which persisted in my mind. Then and there my thinking itself turned into melodious song, and my meditation became a poem, and my very prayers and psalms took up the same sound. The effect of this inner sweetness was that I began to sing what previously I had spoken; only I sang inwardly, and that for my Creator. But it was not suspected by those who saw me. 43

As he explains in his vernacular epistles, this song in inarticulate. It does not involve 'bodily crying with the mouth'. 44 It is impossible to describe, though he is confident (more confident than some of his commentators) that it comes from heaven. It transcends earthly language: 'who-so hath hit, hymthynke al þe songe and þe mynstrelcge of erte nat bot sorowe and woo þerto. In soureyni rest shal þay be pat mow get hit' (Form, 582–4). Canor transcends all human utterance: 'How might I than writ hit' (Ego Dormio, 57–8), he asks, posing a question he struggled to answer throughout his writing career. Walter Hilton, who created a careful and cautious taxonomy of the experience of heightened language in his Of Angel's Song, agrees that true canor is ineffable: 'It may be feled and persayued in a saule, but it may noght be schweved'. 45 Most experiences of song, he argues, are merely heightened affective responses pouring out in the language of longing, by analogy with the songs of love longed for in the psalms and the Song of Songs.

But Rolle felt his experience to have been different in kind, not just different in degree from the heightened discourses of earthly song. In Melos Amoris he is led to attempt to recreate something of the effect of his transfigured song by virtuosic rhetorical experiment:

Amor utique audacem efficit animum, quem arripit ab imis dum eterne Auctoris incidendum amicam inflammat et suscipit in sublimitatem supra sophaem seculum ut non senciat nisi sanctitatem. Utget igitur amoris habundancia ut audeam aperiire eloquium ad informacionem aliorum, ostendens altitudinem amancium ardentissime iusticiamque jubilantium icundae in Iesu ac charitatem canencium in conformitate celecica, necnon et claritatem conscienciarum capacium increati caloris et delectationis indeficientis. 46

39 Derrida, 'How to Avoid Speaking', p. 41.
40 Cf. Cassian's comment: '[This prayer] is not concerned with any consideration of an image, nor characterized by any sound nor set of words. It comes forth from a fiery mental intention through an ineflable rapture of the heart (excessus cordis) by means of an inexplicable burst of the spirit. Freed from all sensations and visible concerns, the mind pours itself out to God with unspeakable groans and sighs (Romans 8: 26)', Conationes 10.11, cited McGinn, Foundations, p. 224.
42 P. 249.
43 Fire of Love, cap. 15, p. 93. On the centrality of this experience to Rolle's mystical identity, see Watson, Invention, pp. 69–72, 113–41. On canor see Watson, pp. 171–91; Gillespie, 'Mystic's Foot', pp. 207–18.
44 All references to Rolle's vernacular writings are to Richard Rolle: Prose and Verse, ed. S. J. Ogilvie-Thomson, EETS OS 293 (1988), this quote Form of Living, 575. (References are in the form of title and line number.)
'The charity of those who chant in conformity with the celestial' leads him to dare to unveil eloquence for the edification of others. As Nicholas Watson has pointed out, the *Melos Amoris* is a highly self-referential text that is both about *canor* and aspires to be *canor*. It offers 'a rhetorical version or simulacrum of that experience'. But even the *Melos Amoris*, as an exercise in quasi- *canor*, recognises that in flattening it into human language it is reducing and traducing the experience:

Now a spirit sighing from the paternal piety swept over me and suddenly submerged me, so that I separated myself in solitude from secular solace. Then he changed my mind most miraculously from misery to melody, yet in such a way that I fear to declare the gift and to multiply magnificence lest loquacity lessen me.

Deinde mentem tam mirifice mutavit a merore in melos, quod metuo monstrare munus et multiplicare magnificenciam, ne multiloquium me minuerit.48

The hyperbolic alliterative structure and the rhythmic pulse create a kind of rhetorical paradox of movement and stasis, the timeless mellifluousness of the sweeping alliteration and the temporal tug of the rhymthical prose:

What is the nature of pleasure in such a situation? Nothing external to oneself and one's own proper existence, so long as this state lasts, one suffices to oneself, like God.49

The *Melos* chafes at the limits of language, offering prospects of numetic bliss. Inevitably, the experiment fails. Difference in kind is provisionally transcribed as difference in degree.

In Rolle's works, the *Melos Amoris* stands at the head of a hierarchical repertoire of songs and lyrics that offers a linguistic ladder towards the ineffable. The rhapsoic prose of some passages of the epistles clearly signal a heightened order of signifying, while the imbedded and independent lyrics consistently draw attention to themselves as songs from the threshold. They combine prayer and praise in a euphoric and ecstatic reproduction of that longing and desire that signals the trace of the ineffable. In *The Form of Living*, for example, he offers a lyric which 'pou may in pi longynge syngye. . . in byn herte to thy lord Ihesu, when pou coueteste his comyngynge and thy goyngynge' (*Form* 596–7). These songs of love longing are not meant to be *canor*, or even reproductions of it. They are instruments of affective focusing, like the songs of love described by Hilton, who may indeed have confused Rolle's claims to ineffable *canor* with these exercises in affective manipulation. Rolle's lyrics are steadfastly rooted in time and place, provisionally installed at the threshold of the ineffable through their focus on Christ:

My songe is in sigynghe, whil I dwel in pis waye;
My lif is in langynghe, bat byndeth me nyght and daye. . .

I sit and syng of loue-langynghe, bat in my brete is bryde;
Ihesu, my kynge and my ioyynge, why ne ware I til pe ledde?

In patrolling the liminal spaces of ineffability, they articulate for Rolle's readers the hope of transfiguration into *canor*:

Thy songe and þi swetynghe he wil be at þe laste.50

Rolle's vernacular lyrics define the space within which contact with the ineffable takes place, but they steadfastly and fastidiously deny themselves access to it, nor do they pretend to mimic *canor*. They embody and enact prayer and praise, love and longing, desire and delight, absence and expectation.

Liminality is marked by anxiety and uncertainty as much as by joy and bliss. The continuum between discursive and apophatic consciousness means that the experience of absence and presence is universal in mystical experience. The loss of old modes of perception, the abandonment of old devotional exercises, the gradual effacement of the means used in the process of affective nourishing in preparation for oning with God: these absences are not fully or consistently filled by a secure sense of the presence of God. Such tribulations, for the Cloud-author, are part of the training in humility and obedience: 'for he wil haue þee maad as pleying to his wille goostly as a roon gloue to þin honde bodely' (*BPC* 168.8–9). The loss of old certainties and comfortable practices is part of the rite of passage: 'For now arte þou in þe goostely see, to my lynces, schipping ouer fro bodelines into goostlines' (*BPC* 167.14–16).

47 Invention, p. 178.
48 Arnould, pp. 3–4; Watson, Invention, pp. 183–4.
The threshold can be a lonely and stormy place, as Julian of Norwich discovers in her seventh showing, when she experiences the ebb and flow of God’s presence more than twenty times. When securely beholding God, she is ‘fulfillid of the everlastin gestines migtily susteinid withoute any peynful drede’ (c.15; p.17), and she says with St Paul ‘Nothing shall depart me fro the charite of Criste’. When this is withdrawn she is ‘turnyd’ away from the sight of God and ‘left to my selfe in hevynes and werines of my life and irkenes of myselfe’. Her return to self-consciousness must be borne like a cross, and in the stormy sea of her passover she cries out with St Peter ‘Lord, save me, I perish’. Yet she learns that ‘peyne is passand’, a function of time:

And therefore it is not Godds will that we folow the felynge of peyne in sorow and mornyng for hem, but sodenly passing over and holden us in endless likyng. (c.15; p.18)

Although briefly turned back from the threshold into the world of pain, she places this temporal and temporary suffering into the enclosing and transfiguring eternal perspective of her loving God. Increasingly confident in the love that underpins her showings, she is prepared to suffer the play of absence and presence as part of the game of love.51

The sense of God’s absence leaves the contemplative ‘al cold and drie, swetnesse haue we noon ne saouure in deuocioun’.52 In return for their labours in earthly sciences, Suso’s scholars were rewarded with a drink which, far from assuaging their thirst, enhanced it ‘generyng a maner of dryness’. They receive only partial relief because they ‘hadden as hit were a manere veyle vpon here faces’. Dryness is a feature of mystical experience and of mystical writing, figuring a thirst for release from time and language into unmediated presence. Julian confronts this in her eighth showing of the Passion, which steadfastly refuses to blossom into the kinds of ghostly sight and understanding that she has enjoyed in her previous showings.

In the previous chapters, she has begun to develop a subtle and sophisticated technique for communicating to her audience the multidimensional discourses of her visions. In particular, she has evolved effective strategies for showing, in her role as mean or intermediary, how the pains of the passion are wrapped in a timeless and enfolding garment of love.53 Sin, suffering and the passion of Christ are all fettered in time, but she experiences and communicates how her showings constantly change perspective, liberating her from the causality of time, the blindness of man’s limited perspective and the linearity of his reason into the freedom and clarity of the divine perspective. Her text seeks to escape the structurality of linear narrative to enjoy the sense of ineffable freedom that is God:

And after, or God shewd ony wordes, he sufferd me to beholden in him a conable tyme, and all that I had sene, and all inntellecte that was therein as the simplicite of the soule migte take it. Than he, withoute voice and openyng of lippis, formys in my soule thes wordes: Herewith is the fend overcome'. These words sayd our lord menening his blissid passion as he shewed aforne. (c.13; p.15)

The boundaries between time and eternity, between language and the ineffable are skillfully blured here. The ‘conable tymé’ is simultaneously the linear time in which the showing happens, the timeless beholding that she experiences within it and the convenient or necessary time at which the passion took place; the fullness of time in which God sent his only beloved son to save the world. All that she has seen and understood is also grounded in this divine ‘conable tymé’ in which all meanings meet and are comprehended. God’s words to her eschew physical means: He means (or speaks) without means (or intermediary) and his meaning (intention and signification) is resonant for the meaning of all the showings of the passion.54 Christ as the figural passover offers metaphorical releve from the perspective of sin and time.


53 This discussion of Julian continues and develops aspects of Gillespie and Ross, ‘The Apophatic Image’.

54 Julian’s lexical exploration of the word mene, as a noun, adjective and verb, is one of the most dazzling illustrations of her verbal dexterity in creating semantic clusters or ‘word-knots’. The nominal senses of mene include: sexual intercourse; fellowship; a companion; a course of action, method or way; an intermediary or negotiator; an agent or instrument; an intermediate state; something uniting extremes; mediation or help; argument, reason or discussion. Adjectivally it can mean ‘partaking of the qualities or characteristics of two extremes’. As a verb it has the senses of: to intend to convey something; to signify; to say or express something; to remember something; to advise, admonish or urge somebody to do something. It can also have the sense of: to
The eighth showing, however, denies her access to such fullness of unmediated showing. Instead she is subjected to a virtuosic and relentless piling up of physical torment that seems endlessly fettered in time and affords her no wider perspective or release. Poised in awful timelessness, yet afflicted with time passing with surreal slowness, she sees Christ on the verge of death, on the threshold of passing over. Yet he lingers in torment, racked with thirst, and in long paratactic accumulations of agony we share his suffering and come to thirst for release:

This blissid body dreyd alone long tymem, with wrinkeynge of the naylys and weyte of the bodye; for I understode that for tenderness of the swete hands and of the swete fete, be the gretnes, hardhede and grevoshed of the naylis, the wounds wexid wider and the body saggid for weyte be long tymem hanging, and peircing and wrangenyng of the hede and byndynge of the crowne, al bakyn with drye blode, with the swete heire clyngand, and the drye flesh, to the thornys, and the thornys to the flesh deyand; and in the begynnynge while the flesh was fresh and bledand, the continuant sytyng of the thornys made the wounds wyde. (c. 17; p.19)

Time hangs in the air in incessant present participles as we and Christ dry out like a cloth hung in the wind. Dryness informs the showing, reverberating and resonating in the hollowness of the grief and sorrow it generates in her and in us. The text hangs on the edge of time, poised on the abyss of the death of God:

This longe pynyng semyd to me as if he had bene seven night ded, deyand, at the point of out pasureng away, sufferand the last peny. . .the swete body was so discolyrd, so drye, so elongyn, so dedely and so petteves as he had be seven night dede, continuynd deyand.

(c.16; pp.18–19)

There is nothing metaphorical about this Christ. She receives no spiritual meaning or ghostly sight to liberate her from physical suffering. She is brought to share the bodily thirst of Christ in her sense of abandonment at the foot of the cross. The interpretative virtuosity of her earlier showings is stunned by the sheer brutality of what she is shown. The cold wind of affective horror dries out the richness of her response. She seeks to recapture the ‘beholdyne’ of her apophatic joy by focusing on the crown of thorns, but finds the ‘marvelling’ of her discursive consciousness invisibly coupled to it:

complain; to cry out for help; to pity, sympathize with or condole with somebody. A further adjectival set of senses coheres around notions of lowness, inferiority and smallness which resonates with Julian’s sense of humble self-emptying. (MED, sv mene, n.; menen, v.) Julian’s exploitation of the polysemousness of this word means that it becomes the meeting place for many of her key ideas, perceptions, responses and expressions.

This continuad a while and sone it began to chongyn, and I beheld and merveled how it migt ben. (c.17; p.19)

If she hopes for release from this all too present absence into the absent presence of the apophatic, she is cruelly denied. The images loop around each other in concentric circles of suffering:

And than I saw it was for it began to dreyen and stynte a party of the weyte and sette aboute the garland. And thus it enyronyd al aboute, as it were garland upon garland. The garland of thornys was dyed with the blode, and the tother garland and the hede, al was on colour, as clobery blode whan it is drey.

Her relentlessly literal exegesis discerns four kinds of dying: bloodless; pain following after; hanging in the air as a cloth hung to dry; and ‘that the bodily kind askyd licour and ther was no maner of comfort mynystid to hym in al his wo and disese’. Almost imperceptibly, Christ’s bodily dryness becomes an image of her own thirst for some licour from this showing. Like Christ on the cross, Julian feels abandoned: Lord save me I perish. Her compassion with the thirst of Christ, her sense of desolation leads her to repent of her earlier request to have ‘more trew minde in the passion of Christe’ (c.2; p.2). Just as she shadows Mary in the annunciation in her conceiving of her showings and in her labour pains to understand and articulate them, now she shadows the compassionate Mary at the foot of the cross in the darkness of Golgotha by the sword of sorrow that pierces her:

Here felt I soothfastly that I loyvd Criste so mech above myselfe that there was no payne that might be suffrid leke to the sorow that I had to se him in payne. (c.17; p.20)

The glib metaphoricity of dying to the world, bearing the cross of self-consciousness and acquiring the mind of Christ is transfigured in the crucible of her radical sense of sharing in Christ’s kenosis of love:

Her saw I a gret onyng betwix Criste and us, to myn understondyng; for whan he was in payne, we were in payne. . .Thus was our lord Iesu nawted for us, and we stond al in this maner nowtid with him; and shal done til we come to his blisse. (c.18; pp.20,21)

Christ is the way and he is the door. This humbling episode, and her obedient but grief-stricken response to it, added to her sense of her own partial responsibility for it, take her to the threshold of affective tolerance. She challenges the facile and superficial affectivity of most meditative engagement with the passion, taking us to the limits of language, deep within the metaphor of spiritual thirst.

When, much later, she returns to the thirst of Christ to explore its spiritual meanings, the difference is dramatic. Her showings have moved
away from the details of the passion into the apophatic wound in the side of Christ. Increasingly her showings deal with words rather than images. Christ speaks to her in cryptic, performative utterances which Julian glosses and expounds:

And with this our gode lord seyd ful blissfully ‘Lo how that I loveth the’, as if he had seid: ‘My derling, behold and se thy lord, thy God, that is thy maker and thynd endless ioy. Se what likyon and bliss I have in thy salvation, and for my love enjoy now with me’. (c.24; p.26)

Her glosses on Christ’s words are confident because she believes herself to be at one in Christ’s meaning. She places herself at the meeting place of the ineffable and the discursive: ‘as if he had seid’. She tentatively transcribes into language – ‘as it may be seid, that is to mene’ – her own glosses or understandings of these liminal sayings:

This is the understondyng simply as I can sey of this blissed word: ‘Lo how I loveth the’.

Julian is increasingly loquacious on behalf of the ineffable, interpreting Christ’s cryptic utterances at length and in detail, ‘as be the menyng of these sweete wordes, as if he seyd’ (c.25; p.27).

Christ’s invitation to Julian to see Mary (‘Wilt the se hir?’ (c.25; p.27)) receives lengthy exposition as ‘the most likyng word that he might have gome me’. The likyon word is the word that likens Mary to Christ. Through her roles of obedient recipient, suffering mother and crowned Queen of Heaven, Mary offers a paradigm for all Christian lives. The word becomes flesh and dwells with her; she is transfigured and likened to Christ by the actions of her life and her bliss after death. Similarly, Julian’s text suggests, we must conceive, give birth, suffer and die with and for the word, as Julian shows herself doing. She ‘likens’ herself to Mary and to Christ, becoming, like Mary, the bearer of the word for the benefit of mankind. Lifyng words offer bliss and joy because they offer the route to oneing with Christ.

It is no surprise, therefore, that Julian engages with the keystone text of the ineffable tradition, God’s words to Moses: ‘I am that I am’ (Exodus 3: 14), which in their refusal of referentiality and denial of the tyranny of grammar and syntax enact the ineradicable ineffability of the apophatic heart of God. She sees Christ ‘more gloryfied, as to my syte, than I saw him beforne’, and in this state of transfiguration, she hears him repeatedly proclaim his ineffable essence and energies:

I it am, I it am; I it am that is hyest; I it am that thou lovist; I it am that thou lykyst; I it am that thou servist; I it am that thou longyst; I it am that thou desyrist; I it am that thou menyst; I it am that is al; I it am that holy church prechyth and teachyth the; I it am that shewed me here to thee. (c.26; p.28)

In response to the ineffable, she effaces her own role as mene or intermediary, yielding the hermeneutical initiative to God:

The nombre of the words passyth my witte and al my understondying and al my mights, and it arn the hyest, as to my syte; for therein is comprehendid - I cannot tellyn.\(^{55}\)

Turning away from language and interpretation to face into the presence, she reports that

the ioy I saw in the shewyn of them passyth al that herte may willen and soule may desire; and therefore the words be not declaryd here but every man after the grace that God geveth him in understondying and loygyn receive hem in our lords menyng.

The reward for yielding up the hermeneutical initiative is the passover into transcendent joy.

Similarly, when, much earlier, she says of her ghostly sight that ‘I cannot ne may not shew it as hopinly ne as fully as I wolde’ (c.9; p.11), she is both affirming the limits of language and deferring to the initiative of the Almighty:

But I truste in our lord God almiughtie that he shal of his godenes, and for yowr love, make yow to take it more gostly and more swetely than I can or may telle it.\(^{56}\)

In chapter 31, ‘the good lord answerid to al the question and doubts that I myte makyn, sayeung ful comfortably:

I may makyn althing wele; I can make althing wele and I wil make althyng wele and I shall make althyng wele; and thou shal se thysself that al maner of thyng shal be wele. (p.31)

Julian understands these five utterances to refer to the persons of the trinity, their unity and the inevitable oneing of mankind into the trinity. Exploiting the tenses and moods of the verbs, she explores the immanent workings of God in time and eternity. God ‘wil be onclosid in rest and pece’ in these five ‘words’ and by this means the ghostly thirst of Christ will have an end. God’s intention is to occupy the

\(^{55}\) For similar strategies of effacement in the Cloud-author, see Tixier’s discussions in ‘Good gomesumli plye’ and ‘This louely blinde werk’.\(^{56}\) Cf. the similar gesture in the Cloud, c.26, 62. 17-21: ‘pan schalt jour fele pin affeccion enlaumid wip be fiire of his loue, fer more ben I kan telle bee, or may, or wile, at his tyme. For of pat werke pat falli on God dar I not take apen me to speke wip my blabyng fleshely tongue; and, shortly to say, al-bof I durst, I wolde rot’. Hilton in Scale 2.40 (p. 280) voice similar doubts, but ventures on a description ‘because I think Love asks and Love commands’.
The bodily thirst of Christ was in time and torment. The ghostly thirst is eternal and generates a reciprocal thirst and longing in us. The bodily thirst generated 'in time of passion' was for escape from literal torment into metaphor. The ghostly thirst generated by the mystical text is for escape from metaphor into the paradise of the transcendental signified.

Julian ends her work with the comment that 'this booke is begunne be Gods gift and his grace, but it is not yet performid, as to my syte' (c.86; p.102). The lesson of love showed in her book is grounded finally in the prayer of kenotic surrender in her very first showing:

God, of thy goodnesse, give me thyselfe; for thou art enow to me and I may nothing asken that is less that may be full worshippe to thee. And if I ask that is lesse, ever we waneth, but only in thee I have all. And these words are ful lovesome to the soul and full nere touchen the will of God and his goodnesse; for his goodnesse comprehenth all his creatures and all his blissid works, and overpasseth without end, for he is the endlesshed. (c.5; p.6)

The words touch the will of God in that they both approximate to it in a performative utterance of intellectual kenosis and they gropingly gesture towards it. The words and images that God has given to us as means of approaching him are all functions of his goodnesse but cannot comprehend it: 'the goodness of God is the highest prayer and it comith downe to the lowest party of our nede' (c.6; p.7).


58 See the similar sentiment in Cloud c.73; 129.4-12; the orthodox glossator of The Mirror of Simple Souls comments: 'Lo, ye pat studien pis booke, pus ye moste wipynne yoursylf yglace ychere derke wordis, and if ye may not come soone to ke vnkindonge perof, offrip it mikelie up to God, and bi custom of ofte redynge beron ye schulen come perlo' (Doiron, pp. 313-4).

59 The Seven Points of True Wisdom, pp. 9-10.