Scholarship on The Cloud of Unknowing falls into two main camps, one of which focuses on the Cloud’s contribution to early English prose, while the other examines its theory of spiritual practice.¹ This bifurcation of critical attention manifests a crux in the Cloud itself, namely, how its intricate prose stylistics inform its equally intricate ideation.² As I will show, assessing the Cloud-author’s style in direct relation to his theory of spiritual practice gets at the very core of his project: to design a work that teaches its devotional practice precisely through its aesthetic experience. Indeed, his artful prose style creates for his readership a sensory simulacrum of the experience of spiritual practice itself, so that his work becomes not only a description, but a microcosmic enactment of spiritual work. Examining how the Cloud-author devises and deploys this sensory simulacrum sheds light on two relatively dark corners of his literary philosophy: his stance on the role of sensation in the work of the spirit; and his perspective on the unique suitability of English prose for the representation and rendering of that work.

Time, will, and words: Augustine’s challenge and the Cloud-author’s response

Since the Cloud-author’s technique of spiritual practice is central to my argument, I will begin with a brief review of how it works. As is widely known, the Cloud teaches a practice of prayer and meditation through which a spiritual practitioner can achieve union, or “oneheed,” with God.³ As in many devotional works, love is the primary unitive force the Cloud describes and seeks to cultivate in its readership. This love entails the exertion of will—what the Cloud calls “nakid entente”—toward God.⁴ The Cloud-author figures this “nakid entente” as “a scharpe darte of longing loue,” with which one must repeatedly strike or “smyte” the “cloude of vnknowyng” that separates one
from God (26.11–12). This “smiting” is the central activity of spiritual practice; devout “smiting” enables the spiritual practitioner to penetrate into the cloud, and be absorbed up into it and into “oneheed” with the divine.

The Cloud-author recognizes that the darts of “nakid entente” might prove hard to grasp, both conceptually and in practice, so he offers up a meditative tactic: to “haue betir holde þer-apon,” he explains, his readers should use language as a vehicle for loving will, so that the “nakid entente” is “lappid & foulden in o worde,” namely, the word of prayer (28.8, 11, 10). It naturally follows that readers should fold their will into prayer, but exactly how the word of prayer is rendered a suitable vehicle for their “nakid entente” has a particular significance in the Cloud. The Cloud-author urges his readers not just to pray, but specifically to “take þee bot a litil worde of o silable” during the time of prayer, recommending the monosyllables God and love: “& soche a worde is þis worde GOD or þis worde LOUE” (28.11–14). Readers are urged not just to utter this short word once, but, rather, to repeat it over and over again: “fasten þis worde to þin herte, so þat it neuer go þens for þing that bifalleþ. . . . Wiþ þis worde þou schalt bete on þis cloude & þis derknes abouen þee” (28.11–12, 15–16, 18–19). Prayer, for the Cloud-author, is neither narrative nor syntactic; rather, it is recursive and asyntactic. It is nothing more or less than the steady repetition of a single word that embodies the loving “nakid entente” that its utterer bears toward God. This mode of repetitive, self-identical, short prayer is meant to embody the “sharp darts of longing love” with which the spiritual practitioner must smite and beat the cloud of unknowing: like tiny spear-points of loving will, short words are sent to pierce into the cloud and produce unity with God.

But the connection between monosyllabic prayer and the work of spiritual devotion extends to a far deeper level of the Cloud-author’s theory, having roots in his understanding of the difference and relationship between time and eternity. That understanding, in turn, underpins his theory of how one achieves true union with God. The Cloud-author’s understanding of time and eternity reflects his engagement with earlier theorists, particularly with St. Augustine, who understands time and eternity as fundamentally different dimensions, which structure fundamentally different modes of willing, loving, and using language.

In Augustine’s view, divine eternity is uniform and unchanging, an ever-present and self-similar presence. By contrast with this unchanging divine presence, human experience is fragmentary and changeful, divided into past, present, and future. Moreover, since the past has passed, and the future has not yet arrived, Augustine suggests that only the present moment of time
can be said truly to exist. When he goes on to explore the nature of that “present,” he eventually concludes that the actual present moment is so fleeting that it effectively possesses no duration whatsoever. While God’s eternal present is infinite, spanning all conceivable pasts, presents, and futures, humanity’s temporal present is infinitesimal, compressed on either side by the “past” and “future,” reduced to a span too tiny to be conceived by the mind.

Despite the elusiveness of the temporal present, Augustine does recognize that time can be perceived in some manner, since the mind is able to experience duration. Augustine illustrates how the mind captures an impression of duration by recourse to another structure, more readily perceptible to the senses and thus more intuitively measurable—language:

Longum carmen est, nam tot uersibus contexitur; longi uersus, nam tot pedibus constant; longi pedes, nam tot syllabis tenduntur; longa syllaba est, nam dupla est ad breuem. . . . Deus creator omnium: uersus iste octo syllabarum breuibus et longis alternat syllabis: quattuor itaque breues, prima, tertia, quinta, septima, simplae sunt ad quattuor longas, secundam, quartam, sextam, octauam. hae singulae ad illas singulas duplum habent temporis; pronuntio et renuntio, et ita est, quantum sentitur sensu manifesto. quantum sensus manifestus est, breui syllaba longam metior eamque sentio habere bis tantum. (Confessions 11.26.9, 11.27.26)

[A stanza is long because it consists of so many verses; verses are long because they consist of so many feet; feet are long because they encompass so many syllables; a syllable is long because it is twice as long as a short one. . . . Deus creator omnium: this verse of eight syllables alternates between short and long syllables. Four are short, the first, third, fifth, and seventh; they are single compared to the four long ones, the second, fourth, sixth, and eighth. These long ones are double the time of the short ones. I pronounce this and assert that this is so, as common sense perceives. As common sense makes manifest, I measure a long syllable by a short, and I find that it is twice as long.]

Using the phrase “Deus creator omnium” as a temporal ruler, Augustine demonstrates that different lengths of time can be measured and compared with one another. To make his point, he relies on the sensible sounds and rhythms of language, implicitly recognizing language as the vessel that makes time sensible, and, because sensible, measurable and comprehensible.
This linguistic method of making time sensible and, hence, comprehensible, however, is limited. Since it defines time by comparison to different lengths of speech, this rendering of time is both relative and malleable: “sed neque ita comprehenditur certa mensura temporis, quandoquidem fieri potest, ut ampliore spatio temporis personet uersus brevior, si productius pronuntietur, quam longior, si correptius. ita carmen, ita pes, ita syllaba” [But, thus, no certain measure of time is comprehended, since it is possible that a shorter verse may take up a longer time if pronounced slowly, versus a longer one, quickly. Thus also for a stanza, a foot, a syllable] (Confessions 11.26.16). Thus, the linguistic method of rendering time still does not offer a final definition of what the present moment actually is: “Inde mihi uisum est nihil esse alitud temporis quam distentionem: sed cuius rei, nescio, et mirum, si non ipsius animi” [From this it seems to me that time is nothing other than distension: but of what thing, I do not know, and I wonder, if it is not my mind itself] (11.26.17). Despite his searching, Augustine can find no fundamental unit of time; for this reason, temporal “presence” remains defined only negatively by its fleetingness, its lack of substance.

Having registered the limitations of language to help humanity grasp the nature of temporal presence, Augustine turns to consider God’s eternal presence and how that presence informs the nature of his divine Word. Augustine understands God’s Word as the eternal embodiment of his will, eternal and unchanging. By contrast, as Augustine has just shown, human language is uttered in time and therefore bound to be comprehended in time. Because of this disparity, it is not possible for humanity fully to fathom the true, eternal nature of the Word, nor of the ever-present divine will that the Word embodies. Augustine expresses this impossibility in a rhetorical question that laments the difficulty of understanding God’s eternal presence: “quis tenebit cor hominis, ut stet et uideat, quomodo stans dictet futura et praeterita tempora nec futura nec praeterita aeternitas?” [Who will hold the heart of man, so that it may stand and see, how eternity, standing, is neither future nor past, but may speak in times future and times past?] (11.11.14). This rhetorical question reveals two interrelated challenges to humanity’s comprehension of eternity: first, people are locked into the ever-moving circuit of time and, thus, cannot “hold still” in the present to consider God’s changelessness. The second challenge is to cognition and sensation: because one cannot “see” God’s eternity, one cannot know it; to know God’s eternity, one must be able, in some way, to feel it. Because humans are locked in time, they cannot fully sense the nature of God’s changeless eternity.
Even so, responding to his own rhetorical question precisely as a challenge, Augustine famously tries to “hold the heart of man still” and produce a sense of eternity for his readers by recourse to another linguistic structure: this time, an entire psalm. He points out that, before one recites a psalm, one’s attention holds the entire psalm—the utterance of which lies in the future—in the mind. As the psalm is recited, one continues to hold the words, sounds, and rhythms yet to come into one’s mind, but one now also holds the already-uttered parts in mind, as well as the part one utters in a particular moment of speech. Thus, the psalm becomes a figure for how one can conceive past, present, and future simultaneously (Confessions 11.28). God’s eternally present Word likewise conceives of past, present, and future in one present sweep of consciousness, so Augustine suggests this psalm recitation as a possible model for understanding the eternity of divine presence.

He immediately admits, however, that there is still something about the eternity of the divine Word that the model of the psalm cannot represent: God’s attention is undivided in his simultaneous awareness of all times as present time, whereas man’s consciousness, in reciting the psalm, is divided (Confessions 11.31). Thus, a chasm still gapes between human language and divine, making manifest the more fundamental chasm that separates the human experience of temporality from the divine experience of eternity. As I will show, this chasm lies at the heart of the Cloud of Unknowing, inspiring the Cloud-author’s theory of practice. Indeed, the Cloud-author seeks to bridge this experiential chasm between time and eternity through his theory of monosyllabic prayer, which offers up a second means of “holding still the heart of man” by making God’s eternal presence comprehensible to his readers. The theory makes divine eternity comprehensible by actualizing time as a sensible structure, though it does so in a radically different manner from what Augustine attempts in his illustration of reciting a psalm. In the Cloud of Unknowing, monosyllabic prayer is designed to render time aesthetically sensible in a way that brings readers closer to an understanding of the eternity of God’s Word and will, rather than farther from it.

Atomic according in the Cloud of Unknowing

The Cloud-author begins this process by undercutting the assumption that the present moment of time has no duration and therefore cannot truly be sensed by the mind. As readers of the Cloud of Unknowing will recall, the author understands time as “atomic.” He asserts that atoms are the basic,
indivisible units of time, which however difficult they are to perceive are nevertheless comprehensible to the mind:

\[
\text{athomus, by } \text{þe diffinicion of trewe philisophres in } \text{þe sciens of astronomye, is } \text{þe leest partie of tyme. } \& \text{ it is so ltitl } \text{þat, for } \text{þe ltitlnes of it, it is undepartable [indivisible] } \& \text{ neîþonde [nearly] incomprehensible. (17.17–20)}^{12}
\]

“Nearly incomprehensible” is very different from “entirely incomprehensible,” and it is in that difference that the Cloud-author bases his theory of spiritual practice. Atoms of time, for him, are critically important precisely because they are perceptible to the senses and, hence, comprehensible. This atomic theory of time is the Cloud’s solution to Augustine’s dilemma over how God’s eternity can be made sensible to time-bound humanity.

Once the Cloud-author has defined temporal atoms, he proceeds to map them onto the human will. The atom of time, it turns out, are no different from the movements of the will:

\[
\text{is neiþer lenger ne schorter, bot euen acording to one only steryng } \text{þat is wiþ-inne } \text{þe principal worching miþt of } \text{þi soule, } \text{þe whiche is } \text{þi wille. For euen so many willinges or desiringes— } \& \text{ no mo ne no fewer— mai be } \& \text{ are in one oure in } \text{þi wille, as are athomus in one oure. (18.3–7)}
\]

[(The atom) is neither longer nor shorter (in time), but corresponds exactly to a single impulse within the principal operating power of your soul, which is your will. For as many intentions or desires— no more and no less— may be (experienced) in one hour within your will as atoms in one hour (of time).]

The temporal hour and the contemplative will are created alike in being atomic. Thus, they exist in what the Cloud-author calls “accord.” This concept of accord suggests that there is not just a likeness but specifically a harmonious likeness that exists between time and one’s loving will, something innately positive.\(^{13}\) That “nakid entente” accords with time signifies that there exists a harmony of measurement and meetness between them, what I will call an atomic according.

This atomic according of will with time has immediate and fundamental consequences for the Cloud-author’s theory of spiritual practice. Because the contemplative will is atomic, and because spiritual work, per-
formed by time-bound human beings, necessarily takes place in atomic
time, time provides a scaffold within which spiritual work can and must
take place. For the 

Cloud-author, spiritual practice consists in stretching out
toward God with one’s atomic, loving will, and then matching each unit
of will to an atom of time, “so þat none ȝede forby, bot alle þei schulde
streche into þe souerein desirable & into þe heighest wilnable þing, þe whiche
is God” [so that no atom of time slip by, but all of them should extend into
the supreme desirable and highest thing that can be willed, which is God]
(18.10–12).

This modified characterization of how will is created “according” to
time reveals a central tenet of the Cloud-author’s theory of spiritual practice.
The structure by which the will can be brought into contemplative harmony
is provided in how God has created will and time alike in being atomic.
However, the structural parity of time and will does not mean automatic-
ally that a person necessarily lives in according harmony with God’s inten-
tion. Quite the contrary, human will is something that must be realized and
brought into synchronous fulfillment by constant striving and moment-to-
moment exertion. The “according” of time and will is a harmony in poten-
tial; that potential must be realized by constant exertion.

Given this theory of spiritual practice, it becomes clear why the

Cloud-author favors monosyllabic prayer, why “o silable . . . is betir þen of
two” (28.12). The shortest unit of audible language that carries meaning,
or, in the Cloud-author’s terminology, can carry “entente,” the syllable, is an
atomic structure. The monosyllabic word, then, is literally the embod-
iment of an atom of present will, a temporal moment of “nakid entente.” If atomic
time is the container into which atomic will must be measured in every pres-
ent moment, the atomic word of prayer is the measuring device. This is why
“euer þe schorter [the word of prayer] is, þe betir it acordeþ wiþ the werk of
þe spirite” (28.12–13). Atomic prayer offers a sensible vehicle for the single
atom of present will-in-time, an aural and rhythmical structure that accords
with the atomic work of the spirit, so that one can feel one’s atomic will align
with atomic time. Through atomic prayer, the Cloud-author does Augustine
one better; he makes the insensibly tiny present sensible to his readers, and
he makes it sensible as the basic tool of spiritual practice.

By devising this now triune system of harmonious likenesses, which
maps words onto will and will onto time, the Cloud-author lays the ground-
work for the most important “according” that his work imagines. He claims
that the reason one should stretch one’s atomic will in every atom of time
toward the “heighest wilnable þing, þe whiche is God” is that “[God] is euen

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mete [measured] to oure soule by mesuring of his Godheed; & oure soule
euen mete unto him bi worþines of oure creacion to his ymage & to his
licnes [likeness]” (18.11–15). Having asserted that the soul can mobilize its
love in tiny units of atomic will, and that atomic prayer is thus the vehicle
most “accorded to” human will-in-time, he now suggests that atomic prayer
makes the atomic will “meet” to God, “measured” to him.16 This should be
a somewhat startling suggestion, in context of the imaginative universe that
the Cloud has created to this point. Since God, apophatically figured in the
cloud of unknowing itself, is whole, unified, unbroken, and eternal, it seems
counterintuitive that atomic prayer, which works precisely by its discrete and
fragmentary synergy with the atomic will, would actualize the soul in its
fullest likeness to God. But this startling suggestion of a measured likeness
between the atomic human will and God’s unbroken eternity is central to
the author’s theory of practice. Underlying it is the author’s belief that the
atom, the infinitesimal present moment of time, is paradoxically the nearest
likeness of eternal presence:

In þis [atom of] tyme it is þat [what] a soule haþ comprehendid,
after þe lesson of Seynte Poule, wiþ alle seyntes—not fully, bot
in maner & in partye [to a certain extent and partly], as it is acor-
dyng vnto þis werk—wichhe is þe lengþe & þe breed , þe heisȝ &
þe depnes of Euerlastyng & Al-lovely, Almiȝty & Alle-witty God.
(75.13–17)

According to the Cloud-author, the atom of time and this “werk” of mono-
syllabic prayer that takes place within that atom of time leads to the com-
prehension of the length, breadth, height, and depth of the everlasting and
all-lovely, almighty and all-knowing God. To understand what he means by
this mystifying statement, I will refer to a related treatment of time’s relation
to eternity, articulated centuries earlier by Boethius.

In the final prose section of the final book of the De consolatione
philosophiae, Lady Philosophy explains that God does not experience any-
thing past or future, but only an ever-present and self-similar presence:
“Aeternitas igitur est, interminabilis vitae tota simul et perfecta possessio”
[Eternity therefore is the whole and perfect possession of unending life].17
For Lady Philosophy, as for Augustine, eternity means the total possession of
all times at once, as an infinite, unbroken presence. She further explains that
human temporality, although modeled on eternity, can never equal divine
eternity.18 Even so, she emphasizes — here marking her difference from
Augustine—that an essential likeness exists between the present moment of time and God’s divine eternity. Indeed, in the tiniest of all present moments, in the fleeting present instant of time, all of human life transpires, and in this instant time most closely resembles the unchanging presence of eternity:

et cum totam pariter uitae suae plenitudinem nequeat possidere, hoc ipso quod aliquo modo numquam esse desinit illud quod implere atque exprimere non potest aliquatenus uidetur aemulari alligans se ad qualemunque praeSentiam hujus exigui uoluscriisque momenti: quae, quoniam manentis illius praeSentiae quamdam gestat imaginem, quibuscunque contigerit, id prasetat, ut esse uideantur. (Consolation, bk. 5, pr. 6)

[And since this temporal state cannot possess its life completely and simultaneously, but it does in the same manner exist forever without ceasing, it therefore seems to try in some degree to rival that which it cannot fulfill or represent, for it binds itself to some sort of present time out of this small and fleeting moment; inasmuch as this temporal present bears a certain appearance of that abiding present, it somehow makes those, to whom it comes, seem to be in truth what they imitate.]

In this passage, Philosophy’s consolation inheres in the notion of presence: she asserts that the exiguous temporal moment is an image of eternity because it, although fleeting, is truly present. Thus, the closest human beings can come to an understanding of the eternity of God is precisely in their experience of the ever-fleeting present moment.

Although the Cloud-author may not have planned it as such, his theory and practice of prayer constitute a Boethian response to an Augustinian problem, with an atomic twist. He realizes that by combining his theory of atomic prayer with the idea that the present moment, albeit tiny and fleeting, offers the best likeness of God’s eternal essence can offer a means of making eternity comprehensible to a time-bound humanity. In the fleeting instant of atomic prayer, spiritual practitioners align their atomic will with atomic time. In so doing, they become fully present, their will perfectly actualized in time for that briefest of moments. Although this atomic accord between will, words, and time is instantaneous and fleeting by its very nature, the Cloud-author devises a method for making the experience of accord among them last longer by insisting that his readers repeat the atomic words upon which they pray. Through the constant repetition of a single word, they
exert a steady stream of self-identical will-in-time. That is, by aligning as many atoms of will with atoms of time as they can, spiritual practitioners create a concatenated simulacrum of eternity, a particulate stream of time and will that, because each particle is as small as can be imagined, approximates the seamless wholeness of eternal presence. Indeed, praying “Love, love, love,” “God, God, God,” is as close to an emulation of God’s eternally present being as a time-bound spiritual practitioner can attain.

At times, the Cloud-author’s insistence on monosyllabic prayer wanders from the focus on God and his eternal love, but such digression sheds brighter light on his theory of spiritual practice. At certain points, the Cloud-author recommends the word sin as an appropriate prayerful monosyllable: “soche as þou mayst haue in þis worde SYNNE” (73.10). This recommendation, though it may appear to be a bizarre choice as a vehicle for one’s loving intention toward God, actually manifests a deeper truth about the Cloud-author’s contemplative practice. As he himself specifies more than once, it does not matter much what words one chooses to pray with, so long as those words are short and repetitious:

& soche a worde is þis worde GOD or þis worde LOUE. Cheese [choose] þee wheþer þou wilt, or anoþer as þe list [please]: whiche þat þee likeþ best of o [one] silable. (28.13–15)²⁹

God and love may be easier to repeat in prayer for most people, but sin is no worse: indeed, if that word pleases more, if it accords better with the will of the contemplative, it is a better word to use. Prayer, for the Cloud-author, is not about the absolute semantic meaning of a prayer word as much as how the aesthetic experience of language can capture intention in atomic time. In repeatedly praying on the word sin, the contemplative creates an experience for himself wherein, crucially, there is no past, nor future, of speech. In repeating God, love, sin, or any other short word, all willing experience becomes the self-same infinitesimal present of atomic will-in-time directed toward God.²⁰ Or, more precisely, directed toward an asymptotic approximation of God’s eternity.

By forging a serial likeness of eternal presence, atomic prayer enables practitioners to unite “in goostly onheed & acordyng of wille” with him, because will, through atomic prayer, is made atomically ever-present, and thus made to simulate God’s eternally present Will (Cloud, 88.18). Because of that atomic simulation of eternal presence, practitioners can achieve “in maner & in partye,” to a certain extent, a likeness to or “accord” with
the divine. Thus, the Cloud-author bridges the Augustinian gulf between human existence and divine: through atomic prayer, one’s “nakid entente” becomes unchangingly present, heart held still in sensible meditation on the divine.

**Atomic style and language in the Cloud of Unknowing**

The Cloud-author is not content simply to present his theory of spiritual practice discursively; he also seeks to embody it in his prose style. He intimates as much when he says, “Ye! & it semip impossible to myn understanding þat any soule þat is disposid to þis werk schuld redeem [this book], or speke it, or elles here [hear] it red or spoken, bot ȝif [unless] þat same soule schuld fele for þat tyme a verrey acordaunce to þe effecte of þis werk” (129.22–25). In promising that his reader will feel “an accordance to the effect of this work” of spiritual practice “for that time” that he reads the Cloud, he casts his writing not just as a how-to manual on spiritual practice, but also as a partial performance of that practice. He achieves that performance by stylistically rendering the aesthetic experience of atomic prayer through a carefully designed system of sensible effects in rhythm and sound. In combination, these effects create an atomic prose style.

Atomic style exists in the work, in part, simply through its representation of prayer. By praying “love, love, love,” a practitioner can feel his atomic accord with God’s eternity; by reading “love, love, love,” a practitioner can sense a measure of what he should experience in the work of prayer: the according of intention—this time, a readerly intention, rather than a prayerful intention—with a single, repeated, monosyllable. By reading or speaking the words of the Cloud, one can hear the rhythmically and sonically self-similar monosyllable echo in one’s ears. This echo sensibly embodies atomic time. Thus, as one focuses on each word in the monosyllabic string through the act of reading, one activates one’s will as atomically present; reading through each monosyllable the Cloud-author writes, the reader serially refocuses intention, either on love or on God. In his discursive representations of atomic prayer, then, the author provides a sense of what it is to engage in atomic prayer. In turn, that written simulation of atomic prayer is designed to create a sensible impression of how “atomic accord” between words, will, time, and, ideally, God’s eternal love would feel. By reading or hearing read these monosyllabic prayers, and feeling how they use sound and rhythm to align one’s words with one’s will, and one’s will with time, one will “fele for þat tyme a verrey acordaunce to þe effecte of þis werk” of
spiritual practice (129.24–25). The Cloud-author helps his reader to feel the beginnings of union with God through the act of reading.

Although the examples of atomic prayer are the most conspicuous instances of atomic language in the book, the Cloud-author infuses a feeling of atomic accord more diffusely as well, further to embody the “atomic accord” that constitutes spiritual practice. He does so by two means. The first is his hyper-reliance on monosyllabic words throughout his work.21 This tendency toward monosyllables arises especially when he directly addresses his reader, in imperative exhortations on how to do spiritual work. In the seventh chapter, he says (as noted above), “lift þan up þin herte vnto God wiþ a meek steryng of loue. & mene God [love] þat maad þee, & bouȝt þee” [then lift up your heart to God with a humble prompting of love, and intend love toward God, who made you and bought you] (28.4–6). Later, he urges readers, “Be þou bot þe tre, & lat it be þe wriȝt; be þou bot þe hous, & lat it be þe hosbonde wonyng þer-in” [Be yourself just the tree, and cease from being its carpenter; be yourself just the house, and cease from being the owner dwelling in it] (70.15–17). Again, he urges, “Proue þou, & do betir þif þou betir maist. Do þat in þee is to lat as þou wist not þat þei prees so fast apon þee, bitwix þee & þi God” [Test it, and do better if you can. Do what you can to act as though you do not know that they (thoughts of sin) press hard upon you, between you and your God] (66.14–16).22 These strings of words create an atomic aesthetic in a given passage, sensibly preparing the reader for the actual work of spiritual devotion by deploying concatenated spondaic rhythms.

The second stylistic means by which the Cloud-author embodies spiritual practice in his writing is his much-noted reliance on exclamations, such as “lo!” “ye!” “ne!” and “right nought!” He splices these words into his writing frequently, to convey aurally and rhythmically the atomic feeling of spiritual work through his writing, the “smiting” of darts of intention against the cloud of unknowing itself.23 Their piercing, staccato rhythm engages with readers’ senses, thereby gathering and refocusing their intention squarely on the words they are reading. Through these monosyllabic exclamations, then, the Cloud-author again allows the feeling of atomic language to suffuse his writing, accomplishing a fleeting simulation of the atomic presence that is the goal of devotional work. Through this atomic prose style, the Cloud is designed to produce an aesthetic experience that accords with the actual work of the spirit.

Admittedly, the Cloud-author’s deployment of stylistic devices designed to render “atomic accord” sensible is not equally dense at all points
throughout his work. Instead, monosyllabic strings and exclamations tend to gather in moments of particular expository intensity. As a result, a readers’ aesthetic experience of “atomic accord” is intermittent and irregular. But this intermittency is, as I will show, of the utmost importance to the Cloud-author’s project, structured by his overall attitude toward physical sensation in the work of spiritual devotion.

Famously, the Cloud-author is overtly hostile toward the bodily senses as detriments to the work of spiritual practice. He satirizes the use of the physical senses rather brutally, when he explains how some people, upon hearing that the work of the spirit consists in denying the “outward wits” or outward senses, understand that injunction to mean that they should turn their bodily senses inward without really abandoning them:

& þus þei reuerse hem aȝens þe cours of kynde. . . . & þan as fast þe deuil haþ power for to foyne sum fals liȝt or sounes, swete smelles in þeire noses, wonderful taastes in þeire mowþes, & many queynte hetes and breynynges in þeire bodily brestes or in þeire bowelles, in þeire backes & in þeire reynes, & in þeire pryue membres. (96.21–22, 24–26)

[And thus they turn themselves against the course of nature. . . . And then immediately the devil has the power to fabricate (to their imaginations) some false light or sounds, sweet smells in their noses, wonderful tastes in their mouths, and many secret heats and burnings in their bodily breasts or in their bowels, in their backs and in their loins, and in their private parts.]

Although these wrong-headed spiritual workers believe that, in this state of ingrown sensation, “þei haue a restful mynde of þeire God” (97.5–6), they in fact do violence to their souls, and prevent the real work of spiritual union from taking place. The Cloud-author’s critique of the sensorium continues and gains momentum in the next chapter, when he describes spiritual feigners, who sit wide-eyed “as þei were wode, & leȝingly loke as þei sawe þe devil” [as if they were mad, and laughably look as if they had seen the devil] (97.19–20).

Som sette þeire iȝen [eyes] in þeire hedes as [if] þei were sturdy [crazed] scheep betyn in þe heed. . . . Some hangen here [their] hedes on syde, as [if] a worme were in þeire eres [ears]. Som pipyn [squeak shrilly] when þei schuld speke. . . . Som crien & whinen
For the *Cloud*-author, excessive immersion in sense perception is a sign of falseness, an overemphasis on the body, to the detriment of the spirit: such people become like crazed sheep who have been beaten in the head. It seems problematic, then, to assert that he devises a prose style intended to convey sensation to his readers. To explain how the author could be opposed to sensation as a basic spiritual tool yet could use aural and rhythmical effects in atomic English prose to create sensation as an aspect of a readerly spiritual practice, I will look more deeply into what troubles him about sensation in the first place.

The *Cloud*-author’s pervasive hostility toward sense perception originates in his awareness that God, the ultimate source and end of spiritual practice, is not perceptible in physical terms. As a result, the five senses, which engage with what is physically perceptible, are not useful in the work of spiritual devotion:

> For by þin ȝen [eyes] þou maist not conceyue of any þing, bot ȝif [except if] it be by þe lenghe & þe breed [breadth], þe smalnes & þe gretnes, þe roundnes & þe swerenes [squareness], þe fernes [farness] & þe neernes, & þe colour of it. & by þi eren [ears], not bot [nothing except] noise or sum maner of soun [sound]. By þin nose, not bot eiþer stynche or sauour. & by þi taast, not bot eiþer soure or swete, salt or fresche, bittyr or likyng [pleasing]. & by þi feling, not bot ouþer hote or colde, hard or tendre, soft or scharpe. & trewly neiþer haþ God ne goostly þinges none of þees qualities ne quantitees. & þerfore leue [leave aside] þin outward wittes, & worche not wiþ hem, neiþer wiþ-inne ne wiþ-outen.

(124.6–13)

Since God, in his essence, has no bodily traits, one should not seek to experience him through the senses. Physical sensation in spiritual practice is dangerous, then, because it is misleading, leading one away from God, rather than toward him.

In this belief, the *Cloud*-author opposes theories of spiritual practice such as those of Richard Rolle, for whom physical sensation is part and parcel of the work of spiritual devotion. Reflecting his commitment to the physical senses as a tool of spiritual practice, Rolle actively seeks to incite
physical feelings in his readers through his writing style, which tends noticeably toward the poetic.²⁵ Famously, he deploys highly rhythmical, alliterative language whenever he represents prayer or meditation, which he calls “sange” or “affeccion.”²⁶

When will thow com to comforth me, and bryng me owt of care, and gyf me the [yourself], that I may se [see], havand evermore [having you evermore]?  
Thi lufe es ay [love is always] swettest of al that ever war.  
My hert, when sal [shall] it brest [burst] for lufe?  
Than languyst I namare [I will languish no more] . . .  
it drawes me til my day,  
the brand of swete byrnyng, for it haldes [keeps] me ay  
Fra place & fra plaiyng [from home and from being merry],  
til that I get may  
the syght of my swetyng, that wendes [goes] never away.  
(Form of Living, 107.1–10)

With alliterations, isocolonic clauses, isorhythmic clauses, and rhymes, this passage is designed to cultivate a reader’s “affeccion” toward God by relying on its sonic and rhythmical intricacy to incite physical responses in its audience.²⁷ Through praying and reading, readers are meant to feel “sweetness”; their hearts are meant to “burst”; they “languish”; they will feel “sweet burning”; they hope to gain “sight” of their “sweating.” This is the kind of spiritual practice—physical and excessive, fetishizing the body and the physical senses—that the Cloud-author utterly scorns as a detriment to real closeness with God.

Correlatively, Rolle’s insistently and floridly poetic style, designed to elicit a sensual response from its audience, is a strategy that the Cloud-author shuns. Instead, in his atomic prose style, he cultivates an aesthetic reflex only of the particular feelings he wishes to promote in his readership, first, the feeling of atomic accord of time with will, and will with words, and second, the feeling of meetness and likeness between the atomic soul and the eternal God. Atomic prayer and atomic prose, although sensory, are not dangerous, because they allow one to feel a true sense of the divine, rather than a deceptive one.

This kind of prose works through a strategy of ornamentation that differs radically from Rolle’s: it is, in a word, prosaic. The intermittent ornamentation of the Cloud, designed to produce “in maner & in partye” the
feeling of divine likeness, but to do so without immersing a practitioner into inappropriate physicality, exemplifies a great formal strength of prose composition over against verse. As Rolle himself notes, Rolle's highly rhythmical passages are "sanges," hyperstylized interpolations into an otherwise prose epistle. As "sanges," they manifest a level of rhythmical and sonic regularity that readers are meant to experience as poetic. The Cloud-author, by contrast, never breaks into "sange" in his writing. Instead, he remains in the looser and more rhythmically irregular form of prose, which enables him to ornament his writing as much or as little as he likes. Free from the highly regular aesthetic strictures of "song," he can cultivate an "affection" in his readership that is, in his words, an "ordeinde & a mesure affecion," restrained and deliberate, rather than passionate and poetic, hence physical and false (39.17). It is prose form and atomic style, precisely by virtue of their less regular ornamentation, that enable the Cloud-author to provide readers with a sense of spiritual meditation, but without causing them to "streyne" their hearts "ouer-rudely, ne oute of mesure" (87.5–6). In his mandate on atomic prayer and in his echoic realization of it in his intermittent atomic style of prose, the Cloud-author programmatically avoids the pitfalls of sensuality, while he simultaneously creates an aural and rhythmical experience in his writing. Thus, the Cloud bodies forth a formal and stylistic reason why atomic prose might offer a better aesthetic choice than "sange" in representing spiritual work.

The Cloud of Unknowing embodies three important and underexplored realities of late Middle English literary practice and theory. First, as I have just set out, the Cloud cultivates and deploys an innovative practice of Middle English prose ornamentation by which a system of spiritual practice is made aesthetically available to readers. Second, by doing so, the Cloud suggests new ways of thinking about "mystical" or "vernacular theological" prose writings, as deliberately crafted aesthetic objects, designed not only to describe but in some cases to perform the work of the spirit. The Cloud of Unknowing was not simply a book from which to glean an explanation of a spiritual practice; it was a part of that practice, a literary extension of the work of the spirit that promotes union with the divine.

Finally, the Cloud of Unknowing quietly manifests an idiosyncratic motive for composing in the vernacular. After all, at the foundation of his atomic style lies the author's choice of language: Middle English. Indeed, the Cloud of Unknowing could not have been composed in Latin, because, as an
inflected language, Latin contains a paucity of monosyllabic nouns and verbs. English, by contrast, with its relative wealth of monosyllabic words, is more innately suited to the project of atomic style. If it were composed in Latin, even the Cloud’s representations of atomic prayer would be ruined: “Deus, Deus, Deus” and “amor, amor, amor” can neither represent nor perform the atomic accord between time, intention, and words that “God, God, God” and “love, love, love” are designed precisely to achieve. In short, English is better able to embody the atomic accord between time, words, and will than Latin.31 The Cloud of Unknowing, then, bodies forth a rationale for vernacularity that does not originate in concerns about access.32 Instead, in the Cloud, vernacular prose is first and foremost a stylistic choice, motivated by a deeply held sensitivity to the particular aesthetic possibilities available in Middle English.

Notes

This essay is dedicated to Steven Justice, who, from the outset, supported and encouraged me to think seriously about prose style and literary effect in my engagements with mystical writings in Middle English.


3 *The Cloud of Unknowing*, ed. Hodgson, 32.15. Further citations are to this edition, cited by page and line numbers.


5 In the Cloud-author’s view, true spiritual practice is an immersion into “a darkness” that prevents one from seeing God “clearly by list of vnderstonding in þi reson” (17.2, 17.4–5).

6 Hodgson notes that prayer is the “main theme” of the Cloud. See *Cloud*, lviii.

7 Augustine, *Confessionum libri tredecim*, ed. L. Verhejen, Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina, vol. 27 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1981), bk. 11, chap. 13, par. 16: “Anni tui omnes simul stant, quoniam stant, nec euntes a venientibus excluduntur, quia non transeunt: isti autem nostri omnes erunt, cum omnes non erunt. anni tui unus, et dies tuus non cotidie, sed hodie, quia hodiernus tuus non cedit crastino; neque enim succedit hesterno. hodiernus tuus aeternitas.” [All your years stand together, since they endure, and your past years do not exclude the coming years, because your years do not pass away: however, all these, our years, shall be, when all of them have passed. Your years are but a day, and your day is not daily changing, but always today, because your today does not yield to tomorrow; and thus it does not succeed a yesterday. Your “today” is eternity.] Further citations of the *Confessions* are given by book, chapter, and paragraph numbers; translations of this and other primary sources throughout the article are my own.

8 Augustine, *Confessions* 11.15.41: “Nocturnis enim et diurnis horis omnibus uiginti
quattuor expletur, quorum prima ceteras futuras habet, nouissima praeteritas, aliqua uero interiectum ante se praeteritas, post se futuras. et ipsa una hora fugitiva part.

ucitur: quidquid eius auoluit, praeteritum est, quidquid ei restat, futurum. si quid intellegitur temporis, quod in nullas iam uel minutissimas momentorum partes diuidi possit, id solum est, quod praesens dicatur; quod tamen ita raptum a futuro in praeteritum transulat, ut nullum morula extendat. nam si extenditur, diuidit in praeteritum et futurum: praesens autem nullum habet spatium." [(Day) contains twenty-four hours, of night and of day, of which the first has the rest as futures, and the most recent has the rest as pasts, and truly any thrown in between has those before it as past and those that come after as future. And even one hour itself is done in fleeting fractions: what has flown away is past, what remains, future. If anything can be understood of time, which can in no way now be divided even into the most minute parts of moments, it alone is what the present is; but still, this flies so rapidly from future to past so that it can in no way be extended. For if it is extended, it is then divided into past and future. But the present has no extension whatsoever.]

Augustine, Confessions 11.7.1, 3, 10: “Uocas itaque nos ad intellegendum uerbum, deum apud te deum, quod sempiterne dicitur et eo sempiterne dicuntur omnia. . . . alioquin iam tempus et mutatio, et non uera aeternitas nec uera immortalitas. . . . non ergo quidquam uerbi tui cedit atque succedit, quoniam uere immortale atque aeternum est.” [You call us, then, to understand the Word, the God who is God with you, which is said eternally and by which all things are said eternally. . . . For, otherwise, there would be time and change and not a true eternity, nor a true immortality. . . . therefore there is nothing in your Word that falls away or retreats, since truly it is immortal and eternal.]

This notion is far from unusual in late antiquity and the Middle Ages, when sensation was seen as the first step on a ladder of human cognition culminating in intellectual understanding. For a brilliant treatment of this issue, see Robert Pasnau, Theories of Cognition in the Later Middle Ages (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 126–60.

In this assertion, the Cloud-author situates himself within a significant theological and philosophical movement. Many medieval theologians dispute the figuration of the present moment as too small to comprehend, asserting instead that time is constituted by tiny, indivisible units, called “atoms.” As early as the eighth century in England, Bede in his De temporum ratione defines time based upon an analysis of these tiny constituent parts: “Minimum autem omnium, et quod nulla ratione dividit tempus, atomum Graece, hoc est, indivisible sive inseparable, nominant” [The least time of all and that which in no way can be divided, they call atom in Greek, that is, “indivisible and inseparable”]. Bede, De temporum ratione, chap. 3, in Venerabilis Bedae, opera omnia, 6 vols., ed. J.-P. Migne, Patrologiae cursus completus, series Latina (PL), vols. 90–95 (Paris, 1862), vol. 90, col. 304A. For an overview of atomic theories in the Middle Ages between Bede’s time and the fourteenth century, see Bernhardt Pabst, Atomtheorien des lateinischen Mittelalters (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1994). In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, atomism gained a great deal of intellectual and theological currency, particularly in England and France. This period was indeed characterized by a profound and driving interest in measurement:
the Oxford “calculators” and their counterparts in Paris were obsessed with a drive to measure and account for the physical world according to Aristotelian physics and, in many cases, atomism. For specific analyses of the fourteenth-century English philosophers who were interested in measurement of quantities as atomic, see Edith Sylla, “Medieval Quantifications of Qualities: The Merton School,” *Archive for History of Exact Sciences* 8 (1971): 7–39. For a continuation of this analysis, which extends the exploration of atomic theory into more intangible realms, realms not just physical, but also theological, see especially John Murdoch, “From Social into Intellectual Factors: An Aspect of the Unitary Character of Late Medieval Learning,” in *The Cultural Context of Medieval Learning*, ed. Murdoch and Edith Sylla (Boston: D. Reidel, 1975), 271–348, at 287–89.

12 The *MED* defines *attome* (n.) as “the smallest unit of time during the Middle Ages,” citing, among others, this passage from the *Cloud*.

13 The word *accord*, in this context, signifies “harmony,” a likeness, as between sounds in music, and thus, an “affinity” between two things (see *MED*, s.v. *accord* [n.], 6). The adjectival form *accordable* means “consonant,” “harmonious,” and “fitting” (*MED*, s.v. *accordable* [adj.]).

14 The *Cloud*-author understands “meaning” and “intention” as interchangeable concepts; he makes this interchangeability plain when he directs his readers to contemplate God’s love: “lift þan up þin herte vnto God wiþ a meek steryng of loue. & mene God [loue] þat maad þee, & bouȝt þee” (28.4–6). (Hodgson’s apparatus and note on this passage [188] indicate that “loue” appeared following “God” in an earlier state of the text.) Here *mene* clearly signifies “intend” or “will.” The semantic equivalence of *mean* with *intend* is standard in late Middle English. See *MED*, s.v. *menen* (v. 1), 1, 2.

15 The *Cloud*-author is not alone in mapping atomic language onto time; Bede also associates atomic time with the measurement of language into single syllables. Indeed, in his view, the grammarian will find it easier to sense atoms than the mathematician, since grammarians are accustomed to feeling their way through syllables: “grammaticis potius quam calculatoribus visibile est: quibus cum versum per verba, verba per pedes, pedes per syllabas, syllabas per tempora dividant, et longae quidem duo tempora, unum brevi tribuant, ultra in quod dividant non habentibus, hoc atomum nuncupari complacuit” [this is more visible to grammar teachers than teachers of arithmetic. And since they divide a verse into words, words into feet, feet into syllables, syllables into quantities, and moreover assign two quantities to a long (syllable) and one to a short (syllable), it is right that, not having anything into which they can further divide, they call this an atom]. Bede, *De temporum ratione*, chap. 3, PL 90:305A. In his *De metrica*, Bede returns to the relationship between time and language, but makes more explicit that both of them are atomic in nature. He refers to syllables, indeed, as “atoms,” the basic units of the verbal measurement of time: “quia omnis syllaba aut brevis est, et tempus recipit unum, quod atomum metrici vocant” [because a syllable is briefest of all, and receives one time, which metricists call an atom]. Bede, “De syllaba,” in *De arte metrica*, chap. 2, in *Venerabilis Bedae, opera omnia*, ed. Migne, *PL* 90:152A. For Bede, as for the *Cloud*-author, time and language are mutually atomic quantities, the former taking sensible form in part through its presence.
in the latter. For Bede, as for the Cloud-author, syllables are the fundamental, atomic units of language-in-time.

16 *OED*, s.v. *mete* (v. 1), 1, 5; *MED*, s.v. *meten* (v. 1), 1, 2.


18 *Consolation*, bk. 5, pr. 6: "Hunc enim vitae immoblis praesentarium statum, infinitus ille temporalium rerum motus imitatur; cumque eum effingere, atque aequare non possit, ex immobilitate deficit in motum, ex simplicitate praesentiae decrescit in infinitam futuri ac praeteriti quantitatem" [Thus this infinite motion of temporal things imitates the ever-present state of unchanging life; since, however, it cannot imitate or equal this, it falls from immutability into change, and falls away from the simplicity of presence into an infinite quantity of future and past].

19 See also *Cloud*, 73.7–11.

20 Robert Myles focuses on the Cloud-author’s preference for short words in the author’s later work, the *Book of Privy Counselling*, as a means by which he creates a feeling of presence in his readers through a meditation on the word *is*. See Robert Myles, “This Litil Worde ‘Is’: The Existential Metaphysics of the Cloud Author,” *Florilegium* 8 (1986): 140–68.


22 Admittedly, there are disyllables in these passages—“betir,” “apon,” “bitwix,” and “steryng.” Although the Cloud-author seeks to embody atomic accord in his atomic style, he does not seek to do so at the expense of meaning or clarity. For that reason, he admits disyllabic words into his monosyllabic chains.


24 Addressing the disparity between the Cloud-author’s style and his expressed attitude toward sensation, Alastair Minnis has suggested that the Cloud permits levels of aesthetic experience in writing that it will not admit in spiritual work. Indeed, as Minnis has elegantly shown, the Cloud-author’s distaste for “imagination” in the work of devotion is not matched by a rejection of imagery in his writing. See Alastair Minnis, “Affection and Imagination in The Cloud of Unknowing and Hilton’s Scale of Perfection,” *Traditio* 39 (1983): 323–66. Although this analysis of imagination and imagery in the Cloud is undoubtedly right—the Cloud-author uses imagery in his writing that he would outright condemn in spiritual practice—there remains more to account for in his attitude toward sense experience in the work of the spirit.

25 The most compelling analysis of how Rolle’s writing style is designed to encapsulate the feeling of spiritual devotion that he describes is Nicholas Watson’s, in which Watson argues that the aesthetic effects of song, which map onto the highest stage of spir-
ritual development, called *canor*, are the organizing principles behind Rolle’s style. See Nicholas Watson, *Richard Rolle and the Invention of Authority* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). In his analysis of the Latin work *Melos Amoris*, Watson argues that there is “a fusion of mystical theory with rhetoric, in which the passionate words to which Love inspires the saint in his praise of the joy of continual *canor* cease merely to represent mystical experience, and instead actually become it” (170). Later he concludes that “as a written representation of an oral activity (praise) the poem continuously comments on what it is doing, indeed, it consists of such comments . . . [and] translates every aspect of Rolle’s spiritual experience of *canor* into a literary construct, in order to provide the reader with a rhetorical version or simulacrum of that experience” (178). For other treatments of Rolle’s stylistic practices, and particularly of his alliteration, see Richard Rolle, *The “Contra amatores mundi” of Richard Rolle of Hampole*, ed. and trans. Paul F. Theiner (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968). Theiner notes in his introduction that alliteration is conspicuous throughout Rolle’s writings, although noting it is nowhere as “dense” as in his Latin *Melos amoris* (32).

26 “And ymang other affeccions & sanges, thou (may in thi) langyng syng this in thi hert til thi lorde Ihesu, (when) thou covaytes hys comyng and thi ganyng” [And among other affections and songs, you may in your longing sing this in your heart to your Lord Jesus, when you desire his coming and going]. Richard Rolle, *Form of Living*, in *The English Writings of Richard Rolle, Hermit of Hampole*, ed. Hope Emily Allen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 107.92–95. For critical treatments of the songfulness of Rolle’s prose, see especially Gabriel Liegey, “Carmen Prosaicum,” *Medieval Studies 19* (1957): 26–28. Liegey has shows that many passages in *Melos* can be made to fit into four-beat alliterative lines, and so suggests thinking about the *Melos* as alternating prose and verse.

27 Rolle states this explicitly after a “sange” or prayer that he recommends in another work, *Ego dormio*. He says to his reader, “If thou wil thynk this ilk [same] day, thou sal fynde swetnes that sal draw thi hert up, that sal gar the fal [make you full] in gretyng, and in grete langyng til Jhesu; and thi thoght sal al be on Jhesu, and so be receyved aboven all erthly thyng, aboven the firmament and the sternes [stars], so that the egh [eye] of thi hert mai loke intil heuen” (*English Writings*, ed. Allen, 69.257–62). The notion that through reading or praying one might “feel a sweetness” that will “draw the heart up” and enable one literally to “look into heaven” with “the eye of the heart” is abhorrent to the *Cloud*-author.

28 Latinate manuals on prose stylistics, which the *Cloud*-author may well have drawn upon in composing his vernacular work, often associate poetry with falseness, and prose with truth. Thomas of Capua, a prominent dictaminist, observes that prose, because unconstrained to fit a particular meter, leaves its author freer to express himself: “Prosaicum dicitur a proson grece, quod latine significant longum, quia in prosa licet alicui longius et latius aut quantumlibet castigatius evagari” [Prose is said to come from the Greek *proson*, which means in Latin “long,” because in prose you may wander off farther and wider or, as much as you please, be more restrained]. Thomas von Capua, *Die Ars dictandi des Thomas von Capua*, ed. Emmy Heller (Heidelberg: Carl Winters Universitätsbuchhandlung, 1929), 14. Another dictaminist, Bernard of
Silvester, goes farther, outright condemning meter as a debasement of meaning: “Prosaicum dictamen est litteralis edicio, a lege metrice differens, longa congruaque continuatione procedens. . . . Prosa, ut ait Beda in Arte Metrica, est longa oratio a lege metri soluta, quia extra metricam non debet quantitatem mutilari” [Prose publishing of a letter is a type of writing, different from metrical rules, proceeding in a long and congruous continuity. . . . Prose, as Bede says in The Art of Meter, is continuous speech unbound by metrical rule, because it should not be mutilated by metrical quantity]. Bernard of Silvester, “Il Dictamen di Bernardo Silvestre,” ed. Mirella Brini Savorinelli, in Rivista Critica della Storia Filosofia, Testi e Documenti 20 (1965): 182–230, at 202. For Bernard, as, I believe, for the Cloud-author, the difference between metrical and prosaic writing has become an ethic: since prose is not “mutilated” by meter, it becomes a privileged form for creating sensible effects, but without debasing its own meaning in that process.

29 The association between the formal regularity of meter and falseness, to which I have suggested the Cloud-author is sensitive, is not uniquely his, even among vernacular writers. Studying historiographies of thirteenth-century France, Gabrielle M. Spiegel finds that vernacular historiographers become increasingly suspicious of the power of meter to bear truth, saying, “No one is able to recite a chanson de geste without lying, there where the verse determines that the words be ordered and cut to fit the rhyme” [Nus hom ne puet chàncon de geste dire que il ne menta la ou li vers define aus mos drecier et a tailler la rime]. Gabrielle M. Spiegel, “Forging the Past: The Language of Historical Truth in the Middle Ages,” History Teacher 17 (1984): 267–88, at 272. In Spiegel’s own words in Romancing the Past: The Rise of Vernacular Prose Historiography in Thirteenth-Century France (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), “Finding the poet’s search for rhyme and measure to be incompatible with the historian’s pursuit of truth and need for exactitude of narration, laymen increasingly sought to satisfy their curiosity about the past in new ways” (2). Those “new ways” are prose chronicles.

30 Although he notes that criticism on the Cloud has suggested “tentatively and on tenuous ground” that the motive behind vernacularity is that the Cloud-author intends it for a female audience, Charles Lock assesses the level of erudition that suffuses the work to be inconsistent with its having been written in English for reasons of promoting access. He suggests instead that the Cloud-author chooses English in order to mine it for its linguistic and etymological particularities. See Charles Lock, “The Cloud of Unknowing: Apophatic Discourse and Vernacular Anxieties,” in Text and Voice: The Rhetoric of Authority in the Middle Ages, ed. Marianne Borch (Odense: University of Southern Denmark Press, 2004), 207–33.

31 Interestingly, the history of the dissemination of the work registers the centrality of English. The Cloud is translated into Latin during the fifteenth century. In this Latin translation, the passage on monosyllabic prayer in chapter 7 becomes, “Ut ergo verbum istud non ignores, tale sit quale est hoc: DEUS siue AMOR, aut eis consimile, que Anglice loquendo vna sillaba exprimi possunt, de quibus id assumas quod melius tibi placet.” See The Latin versions of “The Cloud of Unknowing,” Volume I: Nubes ignorandi, MS. Bodley 856, ed. John P. H. Clark (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Salzburg, 1984), 37, lines 4–7. Evidently, readers
are intended to use English in the actual work of their prayer, even though they may be reading the description of that prayer in Latin. This evident intent that spiritual practice take place in Latin is, actually, a point on which the Cloud-author and Richard Rolle differ. Rolle’s alliterative aesthetics obtain in his Latinate writings and the prayers they contain as much as they do in his Middle English writings. Famously, as Watson, Theiner, and Liegey have all shown, Rolle’s Latinate alliterative style occurs throughout his Latin treatises, as well as in his Middle English devotional writings. Perhaps the most interesting instance of Rolle’s incantatory style, indeed, occurs in Orationes ad honorem nominis Ihesu. This work is alliterative throughout, though Rolle starts with relatively little alliteration, and gradually works himself up into an alliterative lather, so that by the end, he is in full Rollean alliterative ecstasy: “O dulcis Domine, qui diligis devotos, quantum tibi teneor qui te ipsum tradidisti, ut me tuearis a tantis tormentis et servum susciperes, dimiso dolore, ad dulcissimum dilligendum! O pie Ihesu, quam penaliter percuciebaris! Pectus meum pietas tue passionis penetret, et sagittet me sanguis quem sudasti. Memoria misericordie tue in mentis mee medullas migret, et funditur ferar a febribus funeris vulnerum tuorum virtute. . . . O Trinitas, sine termino tene me in tranquillitate, et non tradas temptatori thronum tuum. . . . A Conditor, te concupivi, non discedam a dulcidine quam dedisti; sed diligam eos qui me despexerint, ac derisores cum detractoribus non divulgem ad dampnum, nec non et amem eos qui me arguerint, et ostenderint odio ut abhominarer.” Richard Rolle, “Emendatio vitae” and “Orationes ad honorem nominis Ihesu,” ed. Nicholas Watson (Toronto: Pontifical Institute for Mediaeval Studies for the Centre for Medieval Studies, University of Toronto, 1995), 83. Apparently, for Rolle, unlike the Cloud-author, the aesthetic embodiment of spiritual practice—what Watson elegantly calls “canor”—in language can take place as easily in Latin as it can in English.

32 By and large, the turn toward vernacularity is justly seen as a manifestation of a wish to promote access to spiritual works. For recent analyses of how vernacularity facilitates shared public understanding of Christianity, see the following essays from The Vulgar Tongue: Medieval and Postmedieval Vernacularity, ed. Fiona Somerset and Nicholas Watson (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003): Meg Worley, “Using the Ormulum to Redefine Vernacularity,” 19–30; Claire M. Waters, Talking the Talk: Access to the Vernacular in Medieval Preaching,” 31–42; Harvey Hames, “The Language of Conversion: Ramon Llull’s Art as a Vernacular,” 43–56; and Sara S. Poor, “Mechthild von Magdeburg: Gender and the ‘Unlearned Tongue,’” 57–80.