AFTER ARUNDEL
Religious Writing in Fifteenth-Century England

Edited by

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CENSORSHIP AND CULTURAL CONTINUITY:
LOVE'S MIRROR, THE PORR CAILIF, AND
RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE BEFORE AND AFTER ARUNDEL

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The author of the Cloud of Unknowing addresses his work to an unnamed student seeking spiritual instruction. Before instruction commences, the author appeals to his personal relationship with the student and begs restraint in further circulation of the lengthy, advanced work:

I charge thee and I beseech thee, with as moche power and verewe as the bonde of charite is sufficient to sufeire, whatsoever thou be that this boke schalt have in possessioun, outher bi propiriety outher by kepynge, by beinge a messenger or elles bi borrowynge, that in as moche as in thee is by wille and avisement, neithre thou rede it, ne write it, ne speke it, ne yit sufre it be red, writyn, or spokyn, of any or to any. But yf it be of soche one or to soche one that hath (bi thi supposing) in a trewe wille and by an hole entente, purposed hym to be a parfit soluble Criste, not only in actyve levynge, but in the sovereyneste poyncte of contemplatif levynge the whiche is possible by grace for to be comen to in this present lif of a parfit soul yeit abiding in this deddy body, and there is that doth that in hym is, and bi thi supposing, hath do longe tym before, for to able hym to contemplatif levynge by the veruynest menes of actyve levynge. For elles it accordeth nothing to hym.1

The breadth and passion of this injunction is striking. Here and in several similar passages, the author sternly enjoins anyone who comes across his book not to read, discuss, or copy it unless both that individual and any others with whom he or she intends to communicate concerning the book’s contents are possessed of true will and holy intent to be perfect followers of Christ to the ‘sovereiniest pointe of contemplatif living’ that is possible for them in this life — ‘[f]or elles it acordeth nothing’ to them. The restriction is fearsomely strenuous, a requirement that potential readers go through the eye of a needle.

The strenuousness of the prohibition reflects the author’s realization of just how difficult it was to control texts in a time of increased lay hunger for what the author had produced — a vigorously written, vigorously considered, vernacular spiritual manual. Because his authoritative position as author/teacher is threatened once the text leaves his hands, the author appeals to the ‘bond of charity’ as an attempt to extend his personal influence over a less personal future. The audience broadens, and the author truly becomes an author, with readers, rather than a teacher, with students.²

Wide readership represents a relinquishment of stable, authoritative interpretation; once passed on, a text, particularly a vernacular text, takes on a new ‘openness’.² It is at least apparently available on equal terms to all comers, its interpretation subject to the vagaries of linguistic and theological context, subject to uncertainty and manners of circulation. The Cloud author perceived that ‘open’ text — text not moored to personal relationship, its interpretation not governed by institutional authority — is subject to decontextualization and distortion, to chaotic and dialogic hermeneutic forces. ‘Having’ a text, whether materially or intellectually, includes the power to use, or abuse, that text. The author lists how the book might come to someone’s hand, ‘be propirte either by keepynge, by bering as messenger or elles bi borowing’. Possible points of uncontrolled contact between readers and these instructional materials proliferate. This list emphasizes the book as a material artefact, susceptible to being circulated, borrowed, bought, inherited, copied, partially copied, mis-copied, but the materiality functions as a surrogate for anxiety about the at least partially distinct matter of the interpretation of whatever version of the text ends up in a given reader’s hands. The tone and exhaustiveness of this

In light of the appeal by the author of the Cloud of Unknowing, the question arises: how do we modern scholars of medieval literature and intellectual history read such passages? We form a reading community but not, of course, a spiritual community. Are we not precisely the sort of readers — as the author colourfully puts it, the ‘fleschely janglers, [...] tithing tellers, roniers and tutiers of rules, and alle maner of pincheurs’ — who the author feared would grab hold of his book and misuse it, pinching off the bits that suit our questionable purposes?⁴

What is more, scholarly ‘misuse’ of devotional works stretches far beyond the Cloud. Devotional writers insist that the reader should not get caught up in their words, because words cannot express the essence of their spiritual insights; indeed, they assert, their words are useless if severed from personal commitment to an active devotional programme. Scholarship mining devotional texts is at best superfluous and at worst, it is misguided, irresponsible, and foolish.

There are clever ways of avoiding the problem by focusing on the ancillary insights that can be derived from such passages, ignoring the core claims of the work while isolating its rhetorical or theological features and allegiances. For instance, the Cloud passages serve rich rhetorical functions, preparing readers to approach the work with a more reverential attitude and placing blame for any perceived shortcomings on the shoulders of an inadequately committed audience. Or, these restrictive passages can be placed within the institutional framework of Carthusian-influenced spiritual instruction, and within the context of the ‘negative theology’ tradition.⁵ Indeed, such readings may seem the only option,

² I intend to discuss this interesting shift of audience from students to readers in the Cloud (among other vernacular theological texts), and the corresponding shifts of pedagogical discourse, in a forthcoming essay on the Cloud.

³ For exploration of the different and occasionally conflicting valences of ‘open’ text in this period, see Ghosh, The Wycliffite Heresy.

⁴ Cloud, ed. by Gallacher, Prologue.

⁵ Carthusians cherished mystical and contemplative experiences of many colours, but they remained vigilant in policing boundaries between active and contemplative, secular and religious.
since the author's restrictions cannot be treated seriously by scholars without risking a paradox: all but the most pious modern readers fall short of the author's requirements, and in any case no scholarly project could be oriented toward using the text as the author commands. If scholars chose to heed the author's terms and use his book as he prescribes, they could not use it at all, qua scholars.

In a sense, scholarship does not violate the spirit of this injunction because scholars do not purport to use these texts for spiritual purposes; perhaps the restrictions apply only to those who seek devotional insight. Scholars may be wasting their time, but their worst harm is to produce more scholarship, which though spiritually worthless will lead few souls to peril. But even this response avoids the core of the author's point, which could be loosely paraphrased: this text will speak properly only to those who take religion very seriously, who seek religious insight, and who are determined to lead a religiously exemplary life. Thus, at a minimum, we must admit that we are in fact violating the Cloud author's 'terms of use' — and I believe we might want to offer reasons for why we do so. We might seek a theory of engagement. The underlying question in these pages is: do medieval English religious texts not seem somehow, and at least somewhat, recognizably religious, thus demanding of us some sort of scholarly consideration — say, even, a theory — of what religion is or how it works?

To answer this question in the affirmative is not to say that we must cordon 'religion' off as a scaled-off, sacrosanct realm of human endeavour or scholarly inquiry. As scholars of the subject have long realized, the concept of 'religion' serves more as useful shorthand for a range of practices and expressions than as an essentialized Other category of human experience. Nor does my suggested approach require commitment to orthodox religion of any sort. (Indeed, works of scholarship offering pious accounts of devotional literature often fail to present a satisfactory theory of engagement, because they are not sufficiently distanced from the presuppositional universe of the works they study.) What is required is not the conviction that the beliefs of those being studied are substantively correct. Rather, the required scholarly commitment is a commitment to understanding; so far as possible, the perspective, the Weltanschauung, of those historical persons to be studied: a commitment to inquiry into how religious texts made sense to those persons who created or read them; along with a conviction that the ways in which they made sense to those individuals, not just rationally but emotionally, culturally, and practically, are worth scholarly attention. This commitment can, of course, be made by scholars of any religious persuasion, or none at all.

More specifically, I propose that the Cloud's restrictions be interpreted as invitations to heightened sensitivity to the nature of the Cloud not just a repository of some interesting literary or historical data but as a record of serious religious commitment — that is, a thoroughgoing emotional, intellectual, and literary involvement — on the part of both writer and (some) readers. Such a perspective would shift many of the emphases in studies of medieval English religious literature. It might deepen our understanding, or at least warn us away from over-simplification, regarding the complex responses to contemporary culture and politics, cross-cutting intellectual and institutional allegiances, and relationships to language, pedagogy, and textual culture that are evidenced in medieval devotional texts.

In the sections that follow I test some of the readings Nicholas Watson uses to support the argument in two of his enormously influential vernacular theology' articles: 'Censorship and Cultural Change in Late-Medieval England: Vernacular Theology, the Oxford Translation Debate, and Arundel's Constitutions of 1409', and 'Conceptions of the Word: The Mother Tongue and the Incarnation of God'.¹ I suggest that Watson's readings of Love's Mirror and the Pure Casket, driven by his literary-historical and political interests, fail to give due consideration to plausible for the true reality (usually politics or economics)¹ (James Simpson, 'Confessing Literature', English Language Notes, 44 (2006), 121–26 (p. 121)). Unfortunately, this seems to me a somewhat premature conclusion, at least if it is intended to include implicit or methodological features of arguments, although Simpson seems right to point to rising uneasiness with the typical reductivism. My agenda is to stir up further unease.

alternative explanations for certain features of the texts, features that might relate to functional aspirations the authors had for their texts based on their views of religious experience and the devotional aims of their readers. Watson’s literary and theological perceptions are notably sharp. That, in this case, his argument takes insufficient account of some crucial aspects of the works in question suggests there may be an underlying problem deserving of wider airing and more detailed consideration.

A Mirror Reflecting Cultural Change?

The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ is an early fifteenth-century adaptation, in Middle English, by the Carthusian leader Nicholas Love, of the popular Latin Meditations vitae Christi. The Mirror, circulated widely in late medieval England, offers a series of gospel narratives rendered suitable for meditation, with instructions for devotional use. After the promulgation of Archbishop Arundel’s Constitutions — a set of decrees which among other things laid out an aggressive programme of ecclesiastical control over vernacular spiritual writings — a memorandum appended to the text noted the Archbishop’s endorsement of it as an orthodox work of spiritual instruction, an unsurprising endorsement given Love’s close connection with Arundel’s ecclesiastical circle, as well as the conservative, and militantly anti-Wycliffite, tenor of the work.

Reading the Mirror in light of his view that the Constitutions represented a sharp turning point in English religio-literary history, Watson characterizes the

Mirror as a work of cynical, politically driven condescension. It should be understood, he asserts, as Arundel’s ‘means of putting a positive face on the draconian restrictions he was imposing’, in that it ‘offers the uneducated reader more than carelessness: substituting the rational and social concerns it so scrupulously shuns with an offer of a life of affective intensity’. It provides for an emotionally intense but doctrinally ‘safe’ set of carefully worded meditations couched in a set of clear instructions for edifying orthodox use. The Mirror is, Watson says, ‘designed to divert lay readers from doctrinal inquiry and to remind them of their childlike dependence on clerics who think for them’. He has argued that this emphasis is explicable by reference to the Mirror’s place in the post-Arundel decline of vernacular theology, a decline that contrasts with the pre-Constitutions vibrancy of English vernacular theology, exemplified by texts such as Piers Plowman, Julian of Norwich’s Showings, and the Pore Catifes.

This article does not assess Watson’s claims about the Constitutions and the before-and-after eras of English religious writing which he suggests that they respectively curtailed and inaugurated. Rather, I focus on the argument that casts the Pore Catifes as a pre-Arundelian foil to the Arundelian Mirror. Considering the pastoral context and content of these works in addition to their political context opens up more textured awareness of both texts — dimensions of their attitudes toward tradition, audience, religion, and even politics that might go unnoticed.

Adaptation and Responsiveness

Love himself provides compelling explanations of his goals and composition process, explanations that focus on responsive, pastoral motivations more than cynical, politically driven repression. While these explanations need not be taken at face value, they are sufficiently plausible that they cannot be disregarded out of hand. Throughout the Mirror, Love offers reasons for omitting significant stretches of his source text, the Meditations vitae Christi, as well as for rearranging numerous sections and inserting his own comments and exposition. Love self-consciously references his Latin source to bolster the authority of his project but also, in doing so, shows a striking willingness to criticize it explicitly and implicitly.


10 Because I agree with Gilespie that Watson’s ‘Censorship’ article ‘remains the most richly nuanced and powerfully contextualized discussion of vernacular theology in Middle English, and asks many questions that still require answering’, statement almost equally applicable to the second article treated here, I believe that these, more than most, reward continued engagement and scrutiny. See Gilespie, ‘Vernacular Theology’ p. 405, n. 11.

11 Sargents discusses the timing of the Mirror’s composition and release with regards to the Constitutions and Memorandum. See Love, The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ, ed. by Sargents, pp. 36–37, 147–50. For Sargents’s summary of the Mirror’s political and ecclesiastical context, see pp. 23–37; for its anti-Wycliffism, see pp. 54–75.


for its shortcomings. Two particularly colourful passages exemplify Love’s statements of his purposes, and his views on his source-text:

But for also miche as hit were longe worke & patauernete tedole boke to mee redeces & he heres here, if alle he processe of the blessed life of douned shoul be wryten in englishe so fully by medeinaes as it is 3it hideres. Aftuer the processe of he boke before xemed of Bonauntenire in latyne, before he xefere many chapitres & longe processe hat semel litel edifiacon inne, as to he maner of symple folk hat his boke is xpialy written to, shal be latt into it drawe to he passion.15

And hur shortly we passen ouere here miche processe of his gospel & many chapitres of he force boke of Bonauntenire, for he litel edifiacon of hem as it semel nedeful to symple soules, to which his boke is xpialy written in englishe as it haph of be seide here before. And so leuyn his processe in many places we shole onely telle he notabiliites here upon shortly to edifiacon.16

Love portrays himself as tailoring the source-text to make the Mirror more ‘user-friendly’; that is, appropriate for the ‘symple soules’ for whom he writes. He looked, he says, for ways of maximizing impact on his readers, redacting, rearranging, and supplementing his source-text to that end. His stated goals include warning against heresies, expanding the passages most suitable for affective meditation, trimming down the ‘tedole’ bits, and rearranging stories to suit meditative practice. Love’s aspirations for his Mirror, as reflected in his many decisions to accept, reject, or modify his source text, remain open for scholarly exploration; a sensitive reader could discern many layers of motivation pursued in this rhetorically sophisticated and strikingly self-conscious work.17 But there is no reason to discredit Love’s statements of his goals as one significant part of his project.

In fact, this emphasis on practical effect can be discerned in a number of other devotional texts of pastoral theology. The Pore Caiat, for instance, refuses theological categorization in favour of practical purpose when it discuses the classification of sins: ‘summe of hem ben deedle sinne & sum venyal but it is hard to discusse riȝti whiche ben oon & which ben opir’.18 He goes on to note that the risk involved in any sin (i.e., a slide toward damnation) is sufficiently grave that focus on fine categorizations is sheer foolishness: ‘if a man hadde eight peris & he knewe pat summe of hem weren veneynd with deedle poissoun and wist not veneynde which he wolde refuse hem ech oon & ete noon of hem alle’.19 The emphasis here is not on formulative doctrinal instruction but on integration of the commandments with each other and with the lived experience of the believer.20 The motivating factor is a practical desire to affect the audience morally and affectively, not to explicate a theological point or interpret a passage of scripture.

Pastoral goals structure many passages in both the Pore Caiat and the Mirror, passages that from a theological or doctrinal point of view are not entirely consistent or thorough. The passages may not constitute proper ‘vernacular theology’, but surely their stated desire for simplicity and practicality emerges as much from pastoral concern as from explicit or implicit solidarity with an agenda of social control and literary repression. The direct authorial claims and specific characteristics of the Mirror, as with a number of similar texts, support its being crafted in response to a burgeoning, powerful desire for — and market for — pastoral theology, written in English and presented to allow for easy consumption of spiritual teachings. The vibrant literature of devotional guidance that flourishes in late medieval England emerges from this same responsiveness and concern for the nourishment of active lay piety.21

14 Love’s practice therefore contributes to our still-evolving understanding of the vigorous, creative, adaptive project that was ‘translation’ throughout the medieval period.


17 See Love, The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ, ed. by Sargent, pp. 38–54, and the extensive notes provided on the main text.


19 Pore Caiat, ed. by Brady, p. 72.

20 Another comment that is theologically underdeveloped but pastorally on the mark: ‘hus he þar hathe man þat god & breki þe alle þe comundementes of god for þat ben constayed in love to god & man’. Pore Caiat, ed. by Brady, p. 88.

21 Similarly, for instance, the Cloud, which in so many ways differs from the Mirror. Responsiveness underlies the Cloud passages cited at the beginning of this essay, in which the author portrays his work as contingent, circumstantial, occasional — as opposed to universal, systematic, all-purpose. Devotional instruction is, according to the Cloud author’s framework, dependent on the context and the individual. A related common ground is that both the Pore Caiat and the Mirror repeatedly mention that their readers’ good intentions and perseverance are crucial to their success. See, for instance, Mirror, pp. 61, 69, 84; Pore Caiat, p. 1; Kandik Ghosh, ‘Nicholas Love'.
Love and his fellow devotional writers struggle with how to reconcile history and tradition with their present day, how to preserve the continuity of time-tested and authoritative devotional practices and teachings in the face of changing institutional and socio-cultural environments. These self-conscious passages from the Mirror are in a sense Love’s way of considering the historical narrative of which his work forms a part — by situating historical changes in the context of the religious experience of those to whom it was seeking to minister. The author/translator’s job is in a sense to be a careful student of the past, and of the techniques of transmitting knowledge of the past, all with an eye towards making it speak powerfully in the present. It is in light of these practical, pastoral challenges that the impact of legislation such as the Constitutions may begin to be weighed. What may emerge is a sense of cultural continuity — of a surprisingly robust and varied sort — in the face of would-be ruptures. Love’s Mirror appears in this light as a conflicted work, defying any simplistic categorization of it as a tool of the establishment, or as an instrument of resistance. In his Mirror, Love reflects the difficulties of his position in his time: the work is at once obsessively, and self-consciously, polemical; self-consciously both devotionally empowering and theologically limiting; and throughout, because of its self-consciousness, disarmingly genuine in its conflictedness.

Intertextuality, Rumination, and Sufficiency

Preoccupations with history and context arise again in Love’s attitude towards the other texts with which his audience would be familiar. Two examples demonstrate that Love expects his audience to have access to other books:

In þe whiche processe bene manye gode notabilitees touchyng temptacion of man in þis world, of þe whiche sayne Gregory & spere doctours spokem in þe exposition of þis gospel, Duxus est Jesus in desertum, etc. & spesialy Crisostome in imperfecto, þe whiche for þet bene sufficiencetly written, not only in latyn, but also in englyn, we passen ouere at þis tym[e spekeynge ofþermore of þe turnynge theys of oure lord Jesus home to his moder at Nazareth.

in A Companion to Middle English Prose, ed. by Edwards, pp. 53–66 (p. 61). My observations on the tensions in the Mirror are present in one form or another in Ghost’s discussion. Another sensitive treatment of the Mirror is Sarah Beckwith’s, in her Christ’s Body: Identity, Culture, and Society in Late Medieval Writing (London: Routledge, 1993), especially pp. 1–6, 60–66. Her conclusions fall perhaps somewhere between my position and Watson’s, although she offers much additional religious and intellectual depth.

Censorship and Cultural Continuity

[Concerning the Pater Noster:] Bot for al miche as þis matece is spoken of in many oter treetes & bokes bohe in Latyne & in englyn & þis priere sufiiciently expowen, befor we passen ouere more shortly at þis tym[e hereof]?

Love frequently alludes to and refers the reader to other devotional works and assumes the reader will keep exploring these different texts, searching out new material and growing in understanding as a result. Some such comments could be considered aside to clerical or educated readers, but this is belied by Love’s emphasis on the availability of discussion in English. Further, even where such comments are absent, Love demonstrably relies on prior knowledge of biblical stories. Narratives are often oblique and compressed, and he assumes that his audience has foundational knowledge even of relatively obscure stories, whether that knowledge was gained from books such as the Wycliffite Bible or from public teaching. Rather than writing so thoroughly as to render such external sources of knowledge obsolete, Love merely draws out a suitable meditation from known narratives. This observation forces reconsideration of Watson’s assertion that:

Love presents his Mirror not only as a means of spiritual and intellectual education but as a bastion against such education. To learn its lesson, the reader must emulate the passivity of the infant, receiving nourishment from a clerical writer who retains full control over what he dispenses and how he dispenses it.

Watson’s perspective draws support from any number of passages in the Mirror, but these passages are in tension with the fact that Love clearly believed — indeed, took for granted — that his audience would have at least some other sources of devotional ‘education’ aside from the Mirror. Maybe, then, the Mirror remains

24 For example, Love, The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ, ed. by Sargent, p. 33.
25 Watson, ‘Conceptions’, p. 95.
some bokes be made to enforme the understonde & to tel how spiritual persons oughte to be governed in al thevyng of they that may knowe what they shal lene & what they shal do [...]. And when ye rede any suche boke, ye oughte to beholde in yourselfe sadly whether ye lye & do as ye rede or no [...]. Other bokes there be that ar made to quyken & to sturre vp the afeccpons of the soule at som that tel of the sorowes & dreeses of deth [...]. to sturre vp the afeccpons of dreed & of sorow for synne. Some tel of the grete benefites of oure lord god [...]. to sturre vpoure afeccion of loue & of hope in to hym. Somme telle of the loyes of heuen, to sturre vp the afeccion of loue to desyre thydeswarde. And some
under the 'full control' of the 'clerical writer' only in terms of technique: Love goes
to great lengths to demonstrate (whether successfully or not) how fervent devotion
can be properly managed, and the possibility of developing this personal practice
is what the *Mirror* holds out to its 'infant' readers. No doubt that Love did not
believe most of his audience would achieve high contemplation, and he warned
against aiming directly for such heights, but he could not have heretically sealed
off the devotional education of his readers. He did not seek to do so.

The ramifications of this intertextuality may be that even the *Mirror*, a most
Arundelian-affiliated text, partakes fully and enthusiastically in the flourishing of
vernacular devotion, albeit along the lines of the reform-oriented conservatism that
emerged most fully after Arundel’s death. Love allows his work to be shaped by the
context within which his audience is likely to encounter it — that is, in dialogue
with other vernacular religious works. His user-driven approach demands a keen
awareness of the immediate situations of actual devotees, as he struggles to make
traditions and existing bodies of pastoral and devotional wisdom speak to that
newly formed, growing audience. He explores the possibilities of safely orthodox
devotional production amidst such pressures, and what emerges from this
experiment is a multi-faceted and internally conflicted artefact.

This internal conflict comes to the fore again in the *Mirror’s* presentation of St
Cecilia, which is Watson’s prime example of how Love offers his readers only static,
limited devotional experience.²⁷ Love writes:

> Among oher vereuce commendynes of he holy virgynne *Cecile* is written hat she bare
> alwye he gospel of cristi hidde in he brest [... ] In he which she set her meditacion & her
> joust nijt & day with a cleene & hole heare. And when she had so fully alle he manere of
> his life ouer he, she began ayayne. And so with a likynge & sweete taste gosly chewyng
> hat manere he gospel of cristi, she set & bare it euer in he priuety of her brest. In he samme
> manere I conseil hat you do. For amang alle gosly exercyses Ieleue hat his is most necessarie
> & most profitable, & hat may bringe to he lysynge of gude liying.²⁸

Watson describes the passage thus: ‘Cecilia lives her days in a repetitive round of
devout meditation on episodes from Christ’s life selected for their affective
impact;’ he observes that ‘her energies are entirely directed within.’²⁹ There is merit
to Watson’s observation concerning the strikingly inward-focused piety that the
*Mirror* encourages, although its Carthusian authorship may furnish as plausible
an explanation for its inward orientation as does recent legislation. In discussing
the Longeatt Sermons as representing one instantiation of non-Arundelian vitality,
Watson claims that ‘[u]nlike the *Mirror* (though like *Pore Catif*, the *Chastising,
Dives and Pauper*, and especially *Julian’s Revelation* [the *Sermons*] presupposes a
reader capable of, and interested in, concentrated study).’³⁰ But the Cecilia passage,
at the very least, does not so clearly deny the possibility of a reader ‘capable of, and
interested in, concentrated study’. True, Cecilia’s study, as described in the *Mirror*,
sounds repetitive, but to dismiss her meditations as the changeless and unending
consumption of devout, childish pabulum would be to ignore the passage’s crucial
and evocative image of meditative rumination — Cecilia’s ‘gosly chewyng’. In this
striking phrase are echoes of a time-honoured meditative practice well known to
Love. Cecilia’s meditative labour, so heartily endorsed by Love, does not differ
greatly from the spiritual ruminating that apparently provoked Julian of Norwich’s
remarkable, long-term reworking of her visions, or the embodied responses to
devotional texts that inspired Margery Kempe.³¹ Devotional continuity is not
stasis. Rather, meditation on familiar images, narratives, and doctrinal mysteries
can form the core of profound religious experience, a continually renewed
awareness of religious truths affectively ‘chewed’ over many years — not simply
swallowed whole.

Parts of the *Mirror* also complicate Watson’s portrayal of the *Pore Catif* as
breaking down the hierarchical barrier between laypersons and clerics assiduously
maintained in Love’s *Mirror*. For instance, Love notes at one point that his
discussion has reached the limit not just of ‘lowde’ reason but of all ‘mannes’
reason.³² Here and in similar passages he fails to maintain a strict separation
between matters fit for clerical audiences and those fit for lay audiences. At times,


³¹ For example Vincent Gillespie, 'Strange Images of Death: The Passion in Later Medieval
English Devotional and Mystical Writing', in *Zeit, Tod und Ewigkeit in der Renaissance Literatur*,
ed. by James Hogg, Analecta Cartusiana, 117 (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik,
Image: The Poetics of Effacement in Julian of Norwich', in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in
More expansively on the practice, see Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*,

that, he acknowledges that wher'ere learned or humble, we are all in it together, limited by our human weaknesses. Watson focuses on part of the prologue to the *Pore Cattif*:

_This trewe suffisith to ech cristien man and womman._

_This trewe compiled of a pore cattif & nedy of gostly help of al cristien peple [...] shal teche simple men & wynnem of gode wil, ye ye wil be yeze him to haue it in mynde & to worche ther afte, wipouten multiplacition of many bokes. And as a child willing to ben a clerk, begynne first atte gronde, bat is his a.b.c., so he, this desiring to spede he betir, begynne atte gronde of heithe, bat is cristien mennes bilet._

To Watson, this passage exemplifies the 'universality to which the [*Pore Cattif*] aspires'; he argues that the 'egalitarian language of the [*Pore Cattif*]'s opening points a different way, towards a readership liberated by the education it provides and responsible for its own reform. Parts of the *Pore Cattif* support this reading, but others support an alternative reading: that this prologue imagines devotional instruction directed only on a 'need to know' basis, with a certain minimum amount of knowledge 'sufficing' for most. The treatise may serve, that is, to provide a bare adequacy to its readership. The author indicates: choose my instructional text, and do not seek 'multiplicacion of many bokes' — a multiplication that here, more than in the *Mirror*, seems frowned upon. This passage serves as an effective promotional message for the *Pore Cattif* as a one-stop shop for every would-be student of devotion, but it hardly reflects the sentiment of an egalitarian, 'power-to-the-people' writer. An underlying image in 'suffisith' is the sufficiency of food, and this lexical undertone is apt: what suffices for a simple diet could provide bare sufficiency to anyone, and in that narrow sense be 'universal', but that is not to say that richer food would not be expected by, and appropriate for, a more refined palate. The *Pore Cattif* prologue could introduce it as a work designed to assuage the spiritual hunger of a curious, non-Latinate audience, while also insinuating that for such readers to seek further knowledge would be exceeding that which 'suffisith'. It may be a discussion-ending gesture, a way of closing off dialogue with no more than an assurance of bare satiety.

**Conclusion: Devotion, ‘Religious Experience’, and History**

In these pages, I have suggested that we can discern significant continuity in the face of cultural change, even in a work as profoundly implicated in the Arundel project as Love’s *Mirror*. This continuity emerges directly from the theory of tradition evident in many devotional works, including the *Mirror*, a conception founded less on authority — ‘this can be trusted’ — than on experience — ‘this has worked and will work for you’. (For similar reasons, the fruits rather than the roots of Wydissifism are often as not the central objects of orthodox criticism of the heresy — it led, so defenders of orthodoxy said, to arrogance and decadence.) Underneath political, ecclesiastical, institutional, and doctrinal pressures is the beating heart of pastoral theology and personal spiritual instruction; and the way practical, pastoral goals work themselves out in the face of constantly evolving pressures deserves more scholarly attention than it has received.

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33 As quoted by Watson, ‘Censorship’, p. 849. Watson takes this prologue from Downside Abbey, MS 26542, fol. 94, which formed the basis of the *Pore Cattif* transcription in The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280–1520, ed. by Jocelyn Wogan-Browne and others (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), pp. 239–41; as well as in Watson, ‘Conceptions of the Word’, p. 107. As far as I can tell, the first sentence should not be relied on as authorial. Although the Downside manuscript may have been unknown to her, Brady, in her introduction to her dissertation, characterizes this line sentence as the way ‘a scribe who copies his book advertises it’, and cites the language as appearing in only two other manuscripts out of the more than forty that she knew of: Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS fonds anglais 41 and Glasgow, Hunterian Museum, MS 520. She notes ‘somewhat similar’ language in British Library, MS Harley 953 (p. lxxiii). Whether the language is original or not, Watson treats the passage in general as apoly representing the *Pore Cattif’s* pastoral approach, and I do not disagree, although I draw different conclusions, in particular as regards the question of how we might read ‘sufficiency’ in light of the broader instructional stance taken in the text.

34 Watson, ‘Conceptions of the Word’, p. 108. He here writes that the *Pore Cattif* sees itself as democratizing the spiritual life by reminding everyone, lay or cleric, that only a certain set of religious truths [...] matter and that these truths are common to all. Along the same lines, Watson briefly revisits the *Pore Cattif* in ‘Cultural Changes’, p. 134.

35 See MED entry on this word (esp. 1a and 1b as ‘suffisith’). Complicating matters is that a ‘sufficiency’ of food, of course, is never permanently satisfying: more is required, all too soon.

36 Against this view, one could point to the structure of the tracts of the *Pore Cattif*, noting its varied and at times rather ‘mystical’ components as evidence that it achieves more closely to a ‘progressive devotion’ model than to a rudimentary didactic one. This argument strikes me as potentially compelling, as does Watson’s overall thesis, which certainly survives this essay.

37 This is the way in which forms of the word ‘suffice’ are used in the inscriptions I have found in Love’s *Mirror* and in the Cloud author’s *Book of Priye Counselling*. See Love, *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, ed. by Sargent, pp. 22, 55, 63; *The Book of Priye Counselling*, in *The Cloud of Unknowing and Related Treatises on Contemplative Prayer*, ed. by Phyllis Hudgson, Analecta Cartusiana, 3 (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Salzburg, 1982), p. 79.
This proposed focus explains my insistent use of the term 'devotional' to describe vernacular theological texts. The term 'devotional' is not used with a view to ousting other classifications, but because without a real interest in the devotional aspects of texts we risk missing much of their historical meaning. Devotion looks to the function of religion — it is a currency of psychological intensity.38 Doctrines matter, but that they actually affect an individual's religious experience is the sine qua non of devotion. A vernacular theology emphasis may fail to capture this crucial aspect of these texts (although it brings others to the fore).

As I have shown in the Mirror, we can observe specific ways in which Nicholas Love self-consciously helps his audience along, and what he helps them to is an encounter with religious feeling via gospel narratives and meditations. From this perspective, the Mirror's success depends almost wholly on the listener's or reader's ability to break down historical barriers and experience the events of the gospels and especially the passion, with immediacy, with passionate intensity. The responsiveness of the Mirror and of similar texts to the actual needs and position of its listeners deserves special attention because a dominant characteristic of late medieval English devotion is a Church struggling to make room for precisely the same categories of affective response, of 'religious experience', for which our modern histories have not found a place.39 My thesis is not that before and after Arundel there is a continuity of religious practice or belief. Instead, I argue for a continuity of engagement with certain fundamental questions, questions particularly

pressing in the decades following hard upon the rise of Wycliffism, which was both an embarrassment to the English church and an undoubted harbinger of change, left to the historical players (and not just Arundel, dead by 1414) to work out.

The Mirror presents one example of a general problem in the study of religious writing, which is precisely that it makes religious demands on its readers, striving to make its impact a living one in its time. The pervasiveness of normative, moral, or emotional demands (demands that I here call 'religious', but that stretch beyond that categorization) in historical texts, forms one of the main difficulties for scholars who seek to understand reform and social change, to write or understand history, especially literary history. Simply put, the political, formal, and conceptual dimensions of texts provide firmer (or at least easier) ground for analysis. But when we omit considerations of more subjective matters, we tell history wrongly, and we tell the wrong history. Here, for instance, we misunderstand Nicholas Love unless we see how he takes account of his audience's experience, tailors his text to it, and strategically pursues his goals in light of it — goals that are demonstrably not just social control. Were we to talk about medieval religious experience explicitly, we might find ourselves considering, doubting, and revising our assumptions about medieval religious experience, and in doing so contribute to a dialogue about comparative dynamics of religious experience, a dialogue hitherto largely dominated by theorists of religion, in religion faculties, seminaries, and departments of psychology and sociology.40

The potential pitfalls of my proposed approach are manifold. Scholars may be tempted to anachronism, to essentializing, to narrow piety. But laying out a history

38 Watson objects to the term by noting 'the aura of otherworldliness that often surrounds terms like "devotional",' or indeed "spiritualism,"' ('Censorship', p. 824, n. 6). Still, there are costs to forsking such terms, their "otherworldliness" notwithstanding. For further terminological and classificatory exposition, see Nicholas Watson, The Middle English Mystics, pp. 539–65. As used here, in line with most medieval usage, 'devotion' means religious observance animated by emotional attachment or fervour, in contradistinction to ceremonial, ritualistic, or pro forma performance of ritual. To be sure, Watson has disavowed, in his previous reflections on the 'Censorship' article, an overly reductive 'alignment' between politics and religion, noting: 'However closely politics and religion are aligned — and 'Censorship and Cultural Change' is all about that alignment — the study of religion as religion at some junctures inevitably moves [...] critics away from the political and towards the difficult, because novel, terrain of the affective and the transcendent' ('Cultural Changes', p. 134).

39 There are exceptions, including those considered in Watson's moving 'Desire for the Past', Studies in the Age of Chaucer, 21 (1999), 59–97, some of whose goals I hope I have here advance. Watson cites exemplary, wide-ranging, and contentious works by Caroline Walker Bynum, Louise Fadenburg, Carolyn Dinshaw, Barbara Newman, and David Aers. Despite these and other brilliant and varied contributions, many open questions remain.

40 'Religious experience' itself is a term of art from the scholarly discourse in religion. It has developed as a way of framing discussions of individual and corporate religious practices. It relates to the more theoretically orientated 'phenomenology of religion'. It recognizes the otherness of the object of study while acknowledging (and theorizing) revealing commonalities or continuities between the object and the researcher. While such an approach has influenced many medievalists, a 'religious experience' approach has had limited impact on the study of historical religions. Still, the tensions it was formulated to express — if not resolve — are applicable. For basic discussion and bibliography, see Douglas Allen, 'Phenomenology of Religion', in Encyclopedia of Religion, ed. by Lindsay Jones (New York: Macmillan, 2005); and the remarkable contribution of a leading scholar of religion, Ann Taves, Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building-Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009). Another way of analyzing the literature is as 'psychological', and the strength of the analogy between the practical goals of the authors of devotional texts and the similar emphasis of modern clinical psychology, which focuses on manipulating, 'curing' the self, or giving it the tools (especially self-knowledge) to 'cure' itself. So, for instance, Masha Raskolnikov, 'Confessional Literature, Vernacular Psychology, and the History of the Self in Middle English', Literature Compass, 2 (2005), 1–20.
based only on reassuringly straightforward and factual (as contrasted with interpretive or speculative) bases is no more intellectually honest, or accurate, than risking one that cannot be so confidently laid out. Furthermore, everyone writing on religious topics has a 'theory' of religion whether they admit it or not — of what counts as religion, and how it works. In these early articles, Watson may give too much credit to Arundelian gestures of control, and paints a picture of an orthodoxy narrower than it may have been. I want to take seriously the notion that the Church's jealousy for authority reflects not the perversiveness but the fragility of its control over the religious life of English persons. This situation resulted in more strategically sophisticated, and perhaps more respectful, approaches to the experience of lay believers than has been recognized.

In any case, different underlying views of religion and authority such as these merit explicit discussion; during which discussion, history of a sort remains the scholarly focus, a history requiring attentiveness to the affective dimensions of medieval devotion, to the actual social and cultural arrangements which permitted and facilitated devotion, as well as to how devotion worked or did not work under those circumstances, based on whatever evidence we can find. This shift of approach might provide one way forward, in filling out our story of devotion before, during, and after Arundel.

VOICE AFTER ARUNDEL

David Lawton

In 1413, of all years, Margery Kempe went to see Julian of Norwich in her anchorage at Norwich. According to The Book of Margery Kempe, Margery told Julian about:

the grace that God put in his solw of companycyon, contriceyyn, sweynesse and devocyyn, compassyon wyth holy meditacyyon, and by contemplacyyon, and ful many holy spechys and dalyawns that owerc Lord spak to his sowe, and many wonderfull revelacyyon whoshe schewyd to the anctres to wetyyn of ther wet any deceyte in hym, for the anctres was expert in sweych thyngys and god cowstel cowed ge tranny.¹

This sentence is an extraordinary microcosm, raising questions of penance, vision, voice, authority, and contemplation as well as order, sexuality, and gender under the seemingly innocuous heading of 'holy spechys and dalyawns'. Margery Kempe's strong association of voice and vision underscores her awareness that the conversation 'comunyng' she has with Christ is spiritual: the most important voices you hear are the ones other people do not. Revelations are images appearing in the soul, not before the eyes; sacred voice and vision are therefore equally communications to the soul. Julian talks, it would seem at some length, of how to distinguish true from false spiritual communication: the rule is charity. She proceeds to encourage Margery in her course, whatever the world may think, and the two women — affirmed as soul-mates — go on to recapture the sweetness of sacred conversation in their own. While neither is in doubt that speech here is a metaphor, like Augustine they see it as a wholly indispensable and theologically necessary one; and the book's references to holy conversation encourage us to keep

¹ The Book of Margery Kempe, ed. by Lynn Staley, TEAMS Middle English Texts (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute, 1996), Book 1, chap.18, accessed online at: <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/kemp1frm.htm>.