

OXFORD–WARBURG STUDIES

GENERAL EDITORS
CHARLES HOPE AND IAN MACLEAN

THE EXPERIENCE
OF BEAUTY
IN THE
MIDDLE AGES

MARY CARRUTHERS

OXFORD

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General Editors

CHARLES HOPE *and* IAN MACLEAN



Oxford-Warburg Studies comprise works of original research on the intellectual and cultural history of Europe, with particular reference to the transmission and reception of ideas and images originating in the ancient world. The emphasis of the series is on elite rather than popular culture, and the underlying aim is to foster an interdisciplinary approach based on primary sources, which may be visual as well as written, and may extend to materials in a wide range of vernaculars and ancient languages. The authors of the series have addressed in particular the relationship between classical scholarship and the Christian tradition, the influence of modes of transmission on the uptake of ideas, the contributions of great scholars to the learning of their day, and the study of the Italian and Northern manifestations of humanism and their aftermath.

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Preface and Acknowledgements

This book, like most works of scholarship, has been several years in the making. If it reads like a set of essays, that is likely because it began as individual lectures, then became a set of seminars, and finally was thoroughly rewritten and organized into its present form. Two of the lectures (on sweetness and on variety) were subsequently published, as indicated in the Bibliography, but these have been entirely reconceived for this book. I have always preferred the essay form to the monograph, for it seems better to be brief and suggestive than to attempt to be encyclopedic. If these chapters start my readers thinking of other examples, including counter-examples, pertinent texts that I should have discussed but didn't, and more words they wish I had included, they will have served their purpose. It is deliberately a rather short book, *brevitas* being a trope (as I will argue later) that not only invites augmenting, but in so doing provides the motive force of further discussion.

I have profited greatly, intellectually, and personally, from many augmenting conversations during the book's gestation. The material was first shaped in talks and discussions at the Oxford Medieval Society; the Oxford Dante Society; the Medieval History, Church and Culture, Medieval and Renaissance Music, Medieval English, and Medieval Visual Culture graduate seminars in Oxford between 2005 and 2008. In 2009 I offered a series of seminars in All Souls College under the general title of 'The Experience of Beauty in the Middle Ages'; these became the core of the present book. In addition, audiences for versions of particular chapters—presented as talks in Bangor, York, Bristol, Cambridge, St Andrews, Durham, University College London, and Birkbeck College London—were most helpful in developing ideas and providing further questions to explore. I also profited from the informal observations and questions of colleagues during visits to Johns Hopkins University, Yale University, Harvard University, Cornell University, Northwestern University, the University of Tennessee, and of course on my home turf in New York.

My patient friends Helen Cooper, Paul Binski, Ardis Butterfield, David Ganz, and Lesley Abrams read individual chapters that were little more than shreds and patches when they saw them: their thoughtful comments and criticisms have been a crucial aid. In particular, Kathy Eden has been a keen commentator on rhetorical issues. I have learned much from her critical reading especially of the present Chapters 1 and 2, and her admirable ability to distil an argument to its essential core.

I started reflecting on the issues of this book with the generous aid of a fellowship in 2005 from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation. With the help, as well, of a year in fellowship at Balliol College as George Eastman Visiting Professor, I was able to frame certain key questions and settle regularly into the Oxford graduate seminars so critical to that early thinking. New York University throughout has been my firm anchor, both with financial support and with generous leaves after my years as departmental chair and humanities dean. In the autumn of 2010 I was able to spend a term at the Institute for Advanced Study at Durham University, where, in that great fortress-cathedral city, I developed ideas about 'honest taste' with the help of the excellent group of medievalists there. As the book neared completion, I was gifted with a senior research scholarship at Dumbarton Oaks, and worked (though all too briefly) with scholars learned in Byzantine traditions, especially on the matter of 'variety' and perspective.

This is above all an Oxford book, in particular an All Souls book. Following my election to fellowship in 2007, the seminars I gave were a culmination of my time in that uniquely supportive and generous setting. The Fellows, the Wardens (there have been two), and the whole staff have helped my work in myriad ways over the years, integrating me fully into this community of remarkable scholars. In particular, I want to thank Ian Maclean for first thinking that these seminars could become a coherent book and encouraging me to keep at it. The several colleagues on both sides of the ocean who led me to particularly helpful materials are thanked in the notes. Thanks as well to Charles Hope, co-editor with Ian Maclean of the Oxford-Warburg series, to the readers whose comments on the initial proposal I have tried to incorporate, to the editor Sarah Holmes and the production team at Oxford University Press, and to Laura Macy, for her good sense and care in preparing the index. Finally, I would like to honour the memory of two gifted medievalists and good friends, Michael Camille and Eugene Vance; I hope in their different ways each would have liked this book.

During the time I prepared these studies increasing numbers of complete series of edited patristic and medieval Latin texts became available for online searching. These have made possible the kind of lexical studies I have conducted, the primary means of my research, and it could not otherwise have been done. I am in awe of those scholars who produced their massive philological studies without such resources, often completed (if at all) only in old age and through the devotion of many assistants. Though I refer in the notes to the finding apparatus of the printed editions, I do so mainly to assist scholars in finding these citations online. Translations of classical texts, Latin and Greek, are mainly taken from the

Loeb Classical Library series (unless otherwise indicated), readily available to most scholars and soon to become more so when published fully online. Biblical references use the numbering of the Latin Vulgate text. Translations of medieval Latin texts, unless indicated otherwise in the notes, are my own, though I freely consulted others, listed in my Bibliography.

Mary Carruthers

All Souls College

May 2012

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List of Abbreviations

<i>Aen.</i>	Virgil, <i>Aeneid</i>
CCCM	Corpus christianorum, continuatio medievalis
CCSL	Corpus christianorum, series latina
<i>CIMAGL</i>	<i>Cahiers de l'Institut du Moyen Age Grec et Latin</i>
<i>Conf.</i>	Augustinus Aurelius, <i>Confessiones</i>
CSEL	Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum latinorum
<i>De civ. Dei</i>	Augustinus Aurelius, <i>De civitate Dei</i>
<i>De doct. christ.</i>	Augustinus Aurelius, <i>De doctrina christiana</i>
<i>De invent.</i>	Cicero, <i>De inventione</i>
<i>De memoria</i>	Aristotle, <i>De memoria et reminiscentia</i>
<i>De off.</i>	Cicero, <i>De officiis</i>
<i>De orat.</i>	Cicero, <i>De oratore libri iii</i>
<i>De sensu</i>	Aristotle, <i>De sensu et sensato</i>
<i>De trin.</i>	Augustinus Aurelius, <i>De trinitate</i>
<i>DS</i>	M. Viller et al. (eds.), <i>Dictionnaire de spiritualité: ascétique et mystique, doctrine et histoire</i>
<i>Enarr. in Ps.</i>	Augustinus Aurelius, <i>Enarrationes in Psalmis</i>
<i>Etym.</i>	Isidore of Seville, <i>Etymologiarum sive originum libri xx</i>
<i>Inst. orat.</i>	Quintilian, <i>Institutio oratoriae libri xii</i>
<i>JWCI</i>	<i>Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes</i>
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
Lewis & Short	Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short (eds.), <i>A Latin Dictionary</i>
Liddell & Scott	H. A. Liddell, R. Scott, and H. S. Jones (eds.), <i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i> , 9th edn
LLT-A	Library of Latin Texts, Series A (Brepols) [online by subscription]
<i>MED</i>	<i>Middle English Dictionary</i> < http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/ >
<i>Meta.</i>	Ovid, <i>Metamorphoses</i>
MGH	Monumenta germaniae historica (Brepols) [online by subscription]
MRTS	Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies

<i>NE</i>	Aristotle, <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i>
<i>OED</i>	<i>Oxford English Dictionary</i> [online]
<i>OLD</i>	P. G. W. Glare (ed.), <i>Oxford Latin Dictionary</i>
<i>PG</i>	J.-P. Migne et al. (eds.), <i>Patrologia cursus completus, series graeca</i>
<i>PIMS</i>	Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies Press
<i>PL</i>	J.-P. Migne et al. (eds.), <i>Patrologia cursus completus, series latina</i>
<i>PN</i>	Geoffrey of Vinsauf, <i>Poetria nova</i>
<i>RB</i>	<i>Regula Benedicti</i>
<i>Rhet. ad Her.</i>	[Cicero], <i>Rhetorica ad Herennium</i>
<i>Rhet.</i>	Aristotle, <i>De rhetorica</i>
<i>RLM</i>	Carolus Halm, <i>Rhetores latini minores</i>
<i>SBO</i>	Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, <i>Opera omnia</i>
<i>SPCK</i>	Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge
<i>ST</i>	Thomas Aquinas, <i>Summa theologiae</i>
<i>Tusc. Disp.</i>	Cicero, <i>Tusculan Disputations</i>

Introduction: Making Sense

Those masterful images because complete
Grew in pure mind, but out of what began?
A mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street,
Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can,
Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut
Who keeps the till. Now that my ladder's gone
I must lie down where all the ladders start,
In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart.

W. B. Yeats, 'The Circus Animals' Desertion'

SENSATION, NOW AND THEN

In September 1999 an exhibition of works by recent British artists collected by Charles Saatchi opened at the Brooklyn Museum. Called *Sensation*, the show featured such works as Damien Hirst's sliced cow corpses and a dead shark in formaldehyde-filled tanks. In that innocent and optimistic time, the exhibition was intended to shock its audiences into some strong emotional response, as its title proclaimed. It was hardly the first art exhibit claiming to do so; indeed scandal has been a trope for shows of work by new artists for well over a century. Whereas in Britain, where the collection had been exhibited two years earlier, it was the animal corpses that occasioned the most public outrage, in New York the scandal focused on one particular painting, *The Holy Virgin Mary* by Chris Ofili.

The Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights (formerly the Catholic League of Decency) proclaimed its disgust; its president said the catalogue item alone turned his stomach and refused to see the painting itself. Several elected city officials quickly registered their equal outrage at the painting (which few, if any, had actually seen). But no elected official expressed his horror in grander style than the city's mayor, Rudolph Giuliani. He threatened to cancel the museum's general subsidies from the city immediately. Though his actual power to do so was questionable, the grounds for his disgust were clear. All the works were, he

said, 'sick stuff', but the Ofili painting in particular was 'desecrating somebody else's religion . . . you can't do things that desecrate the most personal and deeply held views of people in society. I mean, this is an outrageous thing to do' (Barry and Vogel 1999). The mayor had not actually seen the painting either—perhaps he couldn't bring himself to perform such a disgraceful act—but he had been told about the catalogue description, with its account of using elephant dung and pictures of human genitalia cut from pornographic magazines. These were the two elements deemed by the mayor and the League to be the most 'desecrating' outrages to Catholic belief. The mayor's reaction was quickly channelled into debates over freedom of expression, and the furore rapidly died away in the press, though not in the politics of New York, until, like so much else, it was swept away by events two Septembers later. The judgement on the painting by the art critic for the *New York Times* was that Ofili was just 'tweaking people' like a cheeky lad who was being 'a little too cute' (Kimmelman 1999).

Both the mayor's outrage and the critic's coy dismissal are rationalized responses to the immediate shock and scandal this painting produces in viewers who have any knowledge at all of the conventions, artistic and doctrinal, within which it was produced and which speak through it. For the painting is not about 'a white audience's assumptions about black culture', as the *New York Times* critic also averred. Nor is it de-sacralizing. On the contrary. It is exactly what it says it is: a painting of 'Holy Virgin Mary', Annunciation and Incarnation melded in one moment, as is conventional in western art and sealed in Catholic doctrine. Indeed, the most curious aspect of the whole affair in Brooklyn was how such firm defenders of Catholic decency had failed so completely to recognize the central doctrine of their own faith. Incarnation has never been a comfortable doctrine to comprehend; it is, as St Paul said, both scandalous as an event and a puzzle philosophically (1 Cor. 1:22–23), and Christians have never fully agreed on exactly how it was done. Perhaps though, the League had recognized this doctrine in the painting, but thought (as had the Arians and Monophysites) that its full implication was too 'outrageous' to their faith, the painting showing too grossly the low earthiness of the body into which Divinity chose to descend. We now are more accustomed to a painless Incarnation: a smiling angel, a discreet dove, and a Virgin who looks like she's just won first prize in the world's best beauty contest, all looking to a birth that is all halo and no blood, and certainly doesn't involve any unspeakable lower body parts. (When some years later, another artist tried to exhibit during Eastertide a life-sized Christ in agony made all of milk chocolate, the League's outrage centred on the Crucified's lack of a loincloth, altogether ignoring the sharp satire of a

culture that preferred to cloak the torture of the Passion in sweet chocolate.¹) Whatever Ofili's personal intentions—and by all accounts he is devoutly Roman Catholic—his painting is theologically profound and profoundly orthodox. It also taps into the deepest traditions of medieval European piety and its expression in art.

One wonders what the Catholic League would make of the following:

A cell has two shapes according to the habits of those living in it, not just pitiless for bodily things, but also pleasant for spiritual ones. It is a prison of the body, a paradise of the mind. It is a market where the butcher sells small [literally, pennies' worth] and large amounts of his flesh to God, who comes as a customer. The more of his flesh he sells, the greater grows the sum of money he sets aside. Let them therefore increase their wealth and fill their purse by selling their own blood and flesh, for 'flesh and blood will not possess the kingdom of God' (1 Cor. 15:50).²

This shocking comparison is made in a work on meditative reading and prayer by the 12th-century Benedictine abbot, Peter of Celle. Even its English translator, Hugh Feiss, a monk himself, has judged it 'repulsive'. To think of God as a customer demanding ever more flesh cut by the butcher from his own body is—surely the League would judge—a 'desecration', if ever there was one. Yet the source is impeccably devout, Roman Catholic, and orthodox, composed in Latin by one of the great spiritual masters of the 12th century. The analogy Peter makes is between the work done in the monastic cell and a meat market, meditative reading ('a paradise for the mind') as selling one's own butchered flesh, and God as a buyer (and thus a consumer) of meat. Sometimes, through ascetic discipline, a monk may sell his flesh in parsimonious amounts, sometimes

¹ This time (Easter 2007) the Catholic League was able only to stir up the cardinal archbishop of New York, who—though he had neither seen the figure nor asked for comment from the artist, Cosimo Cavallaro, or the gallery—managed to get its initial exhibition cancelled, though it was later shown in New York without further incident (*New York Times* 2007).

² 'Est quidem biformis cella iuxta cellensium mores, dura sed carnalibus, amoena sed spiritualibus. Carcer est carnis, mentis paradisus. Macellum est ubi carnifex sui corporis nummatus et dimidiatus de carne sua largas emptori Deo uendit et quo plus de carne uendiderit, eo magis pretium acceptum cumulatus reponit. Augeant igitur lucrum et impleant marsupium de sanguine suo et carne uendita quia caro et sanguis regnum Dei non possidebunt' (1946: 238.35–239.4). *Macellum* occurs in the Bible only once (1 Cor. 10:25); by late antiquity it was clearly associated with the slaughter of animals, and then quickly, by extension, with the early martyrs, probably with a nod towards the prophetic text of Isaiah 53:7, 'he is led like a lamb to the slaughter [*sicut ovis ad occisionem ducetur*]'. Isidore of Seville says that *macellum*, which he takes to mean not just a food market but specifically the shambles, is so called because cattle are slaughtered there for subsequent sale ('quod ibi mactentur pecora quae mercantibus venundantur': *Etym.* 15.2.44).

generously, but his flesh is nonetheless torturously consumed, in the name of and by means of a loving spirit—that is, by God.

One can of course tame these implications to suit a more modern taste, and dutifully note that monastic discipline encouraged an identification through meditation of the monk with the Crucified, so that the basic metaphor used here is clearly grounded in orthodoxy. The idea that the carnal must be turned to the spiritual is also standard teaching. The doctrine of redemption as fleshly payment for Adam's sin is orthodox as well. Still, the scandal of Peter's conceit remains, not only in the vividness of the butcher shop, but also in the description's emphasis specifically on commercial gain. There is a forcefulness, almost an anger, in Peter's metaphor that is not accounted for by traditional doctrine, conjuring as it does a savagely self-tormented figure, cutting the flesh from his body as he piles up an increasing store of lucre. The image is difficult to reconcile with the promise in the previous sentence, that the cell is a paradise for the mind. Peter's more usual stress, as in the beginning of this work, is on the need for moderation in ascetic discipline.³

Undoubtedly the shock of the carnal/spirit duality in this image is meant to recall the central paradox of incarnation, with its emphasis upon divinity assuming human flesh. Calling the butcher *carnifex*, a word used commonly in the sense of 'torturer' but not in relation to 'one who sells meat', recalls centrally as well the Crucifixion, and in a particularly horrid manner. The English painter Francis Bacon once revealed to an interviewer:

I've always been very moved by pictures about slaughterhouses and meat, and to me they belong very much to the whole thing of the Crucifixion... Of course, we are meat, we are potential carcasses... When you go into a butcher's shop and see how beautiful meat can be... you can think of the whole horror of life—of one thing living off another. (Sylvester 1987: 23, 46–8)

These remarks were judged 'bizarre and disturbing' in a review of a later book on Bacon's work (De Bolla 2004: 20).⁴ They are. But no more so than Peter of Celle's image (which they echo) of the monk butchering his own flesh to sell it piecemeal to God in order to amass the currency of salvation. The scandal in Peter's image is as deliberately bizarre and 'sensational' as it is in Bacon's crucifixion paintings and in Ofili's Annunciation. Yet the critical coolness of a modern eye, that detachment which

³ Peter writes, 'sine modo se affligere tyranni est' (231.9–10), a sentiment far more typical of him.

⁴ It is unlikely that Bacon knew Peter of Celle's work.

the *Sensation* show sought to shatter, is nowhere in Peter of Celle's meditative prayer. His words strongly evoke all five kinds of human sensation: in the sight and smell of the butchered meat, the pain of lacerated flesh, the Deity as carnivore (for God did exact repayment in flesh on the cross), the cries of torture and slaughter.⁵

This figure is placed at the very end of Peter's treatise, its final statement. Just before it, Peter contrasted the monk's solitary enquiry after truth through prayer to the academic enquiry undertaken in cities by crowds of students and masters. He intended his rationally scandalous and sensational image as a vigorous rebuke to that particular intellectual scene. For just as Paul, in Corinthians, addressed groups hostile to and dismissive of the 'irrationality' of Christianity, so in this treatise Peter of Celle analyses the fundamental monastic task of knowing self and God through the craft of *lectio divina*, in response to a hostile new milieu (as he saw it) of Aristotelian-based scholastic argument. The claim he makes for linking up 'affliction' and reading, in other words, is not only a therapeutic but an epistemological one, having to do with the pursuit of truth. For Peter, reading is an act not so much of soul therapy as of rational enquiry and making new knowledge. The visceral energy in Peter's metaphor should be considered a necessary part of this investigative activity.

Peter of Celle was part of an extended circle of French and English officials including Thomas Becket, and was notably a good friend of both John and Richard of Salisbury (John dedicated his *Polycraticus* to Peter). From a noble family of Champagne, he had by 1148 become abbot of the northern French monastery of Montier-la-Celle, home to Robert of Molesmes, the founder of Cîteaux. He corresponded extensively—with Peter the Venerable and Hugh of Cluny, with the Cistercians of Clairvaux, with the Carthusians of Mont-Dieu, with Thomas Becket. In 1162 he became abbot of St Rémi at Reims, and a year later was host to John of Salisbury during his French exile, as he was also to John's brother, Richard. Like so many great 12th-century abbots, he was engaged in the issues of his day, including the intellectual debates. In *De afflictione et lectione*, he clearly joins his voice to that of John of Salisbury in his

⁵ A mural painting from c.1100 in the church of Santa Maria Immacolata at Ceri in Lazio (Italy) depicts a butcher in his shop, with a pig roasting on a spit and sausages hanging over head. The scene is adjacent to the altar where the crucifix would have been, in the lowest range of a set of narrative paintings. I am indebted to Herbert Kessler for calling my attention to this painting; see Kessler 2004: 134 and figure 39. Labels on the figures in the mural point to Terence's *Andria* as their immediate source (a text known chiefly through the grammatical examples from it cited in Priscian's grammar). It is difficult to perceive any connection between this subject and the shambles in Peter of Celle's metaphor except through some common tradition of the Crucifixion as divinely chosen torture and butchery. A general study of the church is Zchomelidse 1996.

Metalogicon, defending the centrality of the trivium from the attacks of that ‘Cornificius’ who would demean it (John of Salisbury, *Metalogicon*, esp. 1.2–3).⁶ Drawing on the traditional monastic contrast of noise and silence, crowds and desert, Peter writes:

To inquire after oneself in God and God in Himself [*se in Deum et Deum in se quaerere*] is indeed the one great question, but it is not insoluble if the search is unending and zealous. Actually, another inquiry precedes it, to seek oneself in oneself [*se in se quaerere*], which far reaching inquiry uses the disputation of solitude and is opened up through mastery of the flesh [*carnis edomatio*] as ‘a stool for its feet’ (Ps. 109:1), while this first inquiry is not yet fully solved. This inquiry is rarely undertaken by academics in the schools of cities and towns. Since it is hardly ever urged there, it is even more rarely completed. I would not banish their method entirely from our cloisters but they pay less attention to this one question, when they are involved in as many unnecessary as necessary ones and a crowd of people even forcefully urges the facile and chattering disputants to solve questions which have been raised. By contrast, our solitary inquiry goes better in silence and is more perfectly studied in solitude. It is of the heart, not the mouth.⁷

Setting his program of reading in direct opposition to the viva voce lecture of the university, and his method of textual study—*sacra pagina*—directly against the emergent method of academic commentary and debate, Peter makes a very considerable claim in this passage. He speaks in the vocabulary of schools logic, of a *quaestio praelibata* that can be *soluta* or not, and of *solitudinis disputatio*, borrowing the very language of the schools in order to claim the superiority for rational enquiry of the disciplines of *sacra pagina*: silence, meditation, and prayer. The main story of this intellectual struggle in the mid 12th century between the rival claims of university and monastery to be the proper matrix of knowledge is well known.⁸ But it should be stressed that it was a struggle over the nature of inquisitive procedure and not a simple face-off between faith and reason (as it is still

⁶ John’s description of ‘Cornificius’ bears similarities to Peter’s vacuous academics.

⁷ ‘Grandis quidem illa una, sed non insolubilis quaestio, si perpetua et studiosa sit requisitio, se in Deum et Deum in se quaerere; praecedit quidem alia quaestio se in se quaerere, qua longa solitudinis disputatione et carnis edomatione reserata utitur tanquam scabello pedum suorum, nondum plene soluta praelibata quaestio. In urbium et castellorum scholis raro haec inter scholasticos uersatur, rarius finitur, cum vix moneatur. Non remoueo hanc prorsus a nostris claustralibus, sed uni huic minus uacant dum se aliis pluribus tam necessariis quam non necessariis implicant et frequentia quidem hominum fortius incitat forinsecos et uaniloquos disputatores propositas soluere quaestiones, sed soliuaga nostra melius silentio mouetur et solitudine absolutius discitur. Cordis enim est, non oris’ (*De afflictione et lectione*, 238.13–25). My thanks to David Howlett for his most helpful suggestions about the clause ‘qua longa . . . utitur’.

⁸ See for instance Chenu 1968; Constable 1996; Jaeger 2003.

often characterized) or (worse anachronism) some prototype of that between religion and science. At stake at this point in time was not the object of knowledge per se, for Peter makes that clear in the passage I just quoted. Both monastery and university, he says, are engaged in the same quest, of finding one's nature in God and God's own nature. It is rather the method and process of the investigation itself that is of concern. And striking in Peter's analysis is his stress on the biological and carnal roots of the monastic method: *carnis edomatio*, a reading method resting on the taming, training, focusing of the flesh. In contrast, Peter characterizes the new university academy not as too rational, but as woolly minded, only theoretical and insufficiently concerned with the real questions, an ivory tower removed from the shambles of physical life, that 'foul rag and bone shop' of which Yeats speaks. The theologians chatter disputatiously but their hearts are not engaged in their searches.

Engagement through touch with skin is the basic experience of medieval reading. Writing on parchment is even more difficult. As Sarah Kay reminds us in a fine essay on this subject, St Bartholomew, martyred by flaying (having his skin removed while still alive), was the patron saint of parchment makers, tanners, and all who work with skins. '[F]laying is the fundamental preliminary to all the subsequent processes—and potential damage—that parchment undergoes in the course of its preparation' (Kay 2006: 36). In many books the parchment is not at all the paper-like surface of 15th-century luxury productions, but a thicker substance, with folds, holes, and tears, one in which it is easy to see and especially to feel still the remains of the wool follicles. 'Hair-side' and 'skin-side' are two basic features of medieval parchment leaves. Making parchment involved 'processes that, inflicted on a living human body rather than on a dead animal, would be forms of torture . . . the drama of death and redemption, enunciated in the contents of pious texts, is also enfolded in the original skin of the parchment book' (Kay 2006: 36, 64). The analogy with the torture of crucifixion was not lost on medieval writers. Compunction, the wounding of conscience that resulted from various penitential prayers and meditations, and punctuation, the wounding of parchment by the writing stylus, were both from the same root, *punctus*, as puncture. One late medieval English poem imagines Christ speaking from the cross, stretched out like a parchment, the blood running red and black from him like ink, the scourges and thorns which have wounded his skin like the incised marks of a pen (Carruthers 1997).⁹ This is not 'sick stuff'; this is commonplace medieval sense-derived understanding.

⁹ See also Camille, who observes, rightly, that 'every turn of the page [was] an act . . . resonant with sensations, from the feel of the flesh and hair side of the parchment on one's

The essays in this book all begin from the premise that medieval aesthetic experience is bound into human sensation and that human knowledge is sense-derived, the agents of which are all corporeal. Human knowing results from flux and movements, from corporeal ‘affects’ as Aristotle calls them, feelings and emotions as well as recollections and rationally derived judgements. My subject is not the theology of Beauty, which is largely a neoplatonist and mathematical creation. Boethius’s treatise on music, the basic text of the schools curriculum throughout the Middle Ages, deals primarily with music that cannot be heard by human ears and is not made by human instruments (especially not made with artefacts like lutes); its prerequisite, as Boethius says, is his text on arithmetic. Theology speaks of God, and of His creation in so far as it reflects God. The magisterial work of Edgar De Bruyne (1998 [1946]), based on a host of well-selected, representative quotations from medieval theologians, from Boethius and Augustine to Scotus Eriugena to Aquinas and Bonaventure, deals with this divine, theological Beauty. As one traces his citations to their original contexts, one is soon aware that their overwhelming subject is divinity—the Trinity in itself and as expressed in its natural creation. Rare is the comment about human artefacts and the responses of humans to the artefacts they make.¹⁰ Reading De Bruyne’s work and that of his disciple, Umberto Eco, one might well wonder if medieval people had any notion of aesthetic experience or judgement at all, or whether they could conceive of Beauty only in terms of Divinity (to use the old name for theology) and a pastorally motivated moral teaching derived solely from it and answerable to it alone.

Many scholars have in fact assumed just this. The result is a criticism of medieval arts that has become over-theologized and over-moralized to the point where every flourish, every joke, every colour and ornament is said to conceal a lesson for the improvement of the viewer or listener. Since these putative lessons are often banal and repetitive, or obscure to the point of incoherence, it is no wonder that many in the modern audience who take great pleasure in medieval arts refuse to read criticism by

fingertips to the lubricious labial mouthing of the words with one’s throat and tongue’ (1997: 41). Monastic writers emphasize the sensations of ‘eating’ their books, in rumination and reading aloud, as well as touching the parchment leaves; indeed for all the importance of hearing and seeing in the experiences of reading, touch and taste are equally emphasized (see Carruthers 1998).

¹⁰ Jeffrey Hamburger has recently commented that theology and aesthetic response ‘belong to other realms of discourse’ (in Hamburger and Bouché 2005: 11). The observation has been made many times, for example by Michael Baxandall (1971); see also Wimsatt 1965: 51–71. But one must be careful as well not to introduce a falsely rigid ‘ring-fence’ between the two discourses. A persuasive model of how not to do so in the context of religious architecture is Hiscock 2009; and see also Murray 1996.

medievalists or are put off by its religiosity. If a modern reader finds something amusing in a medieval work composed before Chaucer it must be either unintentional or 'covering over' some sober doctrine in need of extraction.

But at the very least we should recognize the distinction made by Thomas Aquinas (and much earlier) between 'good art' as a moral judgement and 'good art' as an aesthetic one. In his discussions of the virtue of prudence, Thomas, following Aristotle and Cicero, and indeed rhetorical teaching more generally, distinguishes just this point. Art is nothing else but knowing 'the proper way to go about making a particular work'. And yet the good of such things depends, not on human appetitive faculty being affected in this or that way morally, but on the goodness of the artisanry. 'For a craftsman, as such, is commendable, not for the will with which he does a work, but for the quality of the work' (*ST* I-II, Q.57, a.3 resp.). Defining an art as 'ratio recta aliquorum operum faciendorum', he then distinguishes 'proper crafting' (*recta ratio factibilium*) from moral action (*recta ratio agibilium*), distinguishing 'to make' (*facere*) from 'to do' (*agere*), and quotes from Aristotle's *Metaphysics* 16, to the effect that craftsmen work ('fashion') external materials, whereas actions such as virtues occur (*agere*) within the human agent itself (*ST* I-II, Q.57, a.4, resp. and Q.57, a.5 ad 3).¹¹ A similar distinction lies within Aristotle's statement that the *ethos*, or 'character', of a speaker while orating lies within the speech, not whatever moral character he may otherwise possess. It is indeed possible for even the best of men to give an ineffectual speech—one ancient example was Socrates' failure to persuade the Athenian authorities of his innocence (*De orat.* 1.231–3).¹² The reverse debate question 'Can a bad man give a good speech?' is apparent in Augustine's insistence in *De doctrina christiana* book 4 (his own version of the ideal orator) that the best oratory is not a speech, an artefact, but a good life, and in Quintilian's much cited definition of an ideal orator as *vir bonus dicendi peritus* (a good man speaking well). Inherent in all these versions of the same idea is the crucial distinction, well understood in the Middle Ages, between virtuous living and successful art. One should also take note, as William Wimsatt (1965) reminded a generation of American critics, that Thomas Aquinas had specifically addressed the question of whether human writings could signify predictively for different historical times in the manner of the Bible—and replied that they could not. 'In no

¹¹ Aquinas makes a similar point in *ST* II-II, Q.47, a.4, ad 2.

¹² Cf. *Inst. orat.* 11.1.9–10. But Socrates had a reputation as a superior master of eloquence especially of irony—Cicero also says that by not speaking he demonstrated a speaking style appropriate to the villainy of the occasion: cf. *De orat.* 3.60.

science, invented by human industry, properly speaking, can be found any but the literal sense; but only in that Scripture whose author is the holy spirit, the human being the instrument.¹³

The modern tendency to over-moralize the medieval arts is not just the product of some egregious misunderstanding, however, because much of what remains of what might be called art criticism in medieval sources is in fact either theological writing (of the sort mined so well by De Bruyne) or is contained in sermons and similar materials composed as moral counsel. It is in fact rare to find instances in medieval writing which recount what we would recognize as wholly aesthetic responses to and judgements of human-made artefacts and artists. So, a statue of the Virgin moves an onlooker to tears or to dancing, but then turns out to be the Virgin herself, who converts or confirms her audience in their faith—at which point the tale has become something other than an account only of human aesthetic response to a wholly human artefact.¹⁴ We should not be surprised that pastoral materials stress virtuous life and the moral effects (good and bad) of artefacts. Nor should we be surprised that questions about aesthetic value appear to become more complicated in non-pastoral contexts, such as courts and great households (lay and clerical), where the inventive playfulness inherent in all the rhetorically modelled arts is better understood and protected.¹⁵

J. B. Allen (1982) insisted that medieval poetry was always and wholly ethical—his search in medieval moral philosophy for ‘the literary’ turned up only an ethical category. This is unsurprising, given what his archive contained. Allen went on to argue that all narratives offered exemplary stories for readers to digest, judge, discard, or emulate—ethical behaviour was to be modelled directly on such exempla. In the words of a recent study, ‘the lines between ethics and poetry in the medieval period are indistinct at best’ (Rosenfeld 2011: 4). Whatever pleasure literature offered was thus like the sugar coating on a pill—something to catch attention, entertain, make the medicine go down. According to this analysis, style is primarily the covering on some separate and separable content, *verba* on the one hand, *res* on the other. And indeed, as we will see in Chapter 6, style is spoken of as a kind of cladding, *venustas*, for

¹³ ‘Unde in nulla scientia, humana industria inventa, proprie loquendo, potest inveniri nisi literalis sensus; sed solum in ista Scriptura, cuius spiritus sanctus est auctor, homo vero instrumentum’ (*Quaestiones quodlibetales*, quodlibet 7, Q.6, a.3).

¹⁴ Ziolkowski (2010) analyses the complications of the *Jongleur de Notre Dame* story, which involves one such statue and an action of persuasive silence.

¹⁵ The rhetorical aspect of medieval verbal, visual, and musical arts is the subject of the essays in Carruthers 2010b; see esp. 1–13.

compositional elegance is made through surface colours, whether of rhetoric, flavours, sounds, or paint.

Even Erich Auerbach did not entirely escape this Gibbonian mindset, which pitted Greek delight against Judaeo-Christian ethical sobriety. Of the Homeric poems Auerbach wrote:

Delight in physical existence is everything to them, and their highest aim is to make that delight perceptible to us . . . It is all very different in the Biblical stories. Their aim is not to bewitch the senses, and if nevertheless they produce lively sensory effects, it is only because the moral, religious, and psychological phenomena which are their sole concern are made concrete in the sensible matter of life. (1953: 10–11)

But this characterization does not bear scrutiny. Much in the Bible that delights the senses is not 'solely' aimed at doctrinal content (the sensory riches of the Song of Songs were justified through allegorical commentary after the fact; and some of its language was just plain delightful, as Augustine makes quite clear). Much in Homer seriously explores moral, religious, and psychological phenomena (fatherhood, jealousy, anger, and the dreadful costs of ill-advised war).

It is surely wrong to model all medieval literature (and indeed most other sorts of medieval artefact) on sermons. The characteristic styles of poetry are not those of homily. To cite a basic difference, well recognized in rhetoric teaching and in exegesis, a homily wants 'plain' style, the open, clear, conversational speech which can tell the truths of faith to all souls as though their lives depended on it—which of course they did. To speak obscurely on such occasions is not only discourteous; it is a kind of soul murder. Sermon style, as Augustine said, should mostly use either plain or middle style, only infrequently employing a grand style, and only when a preacher, for good reason, feels the need to frighten or awe his congregants towards their salvation. Strange words, intricate metaphors, ironies, all the figures of obscure language found in poetry, including the poetry of the Bible, need in sermons to be translated into plain terms. Preachers who use 'difficult' verbal tropes without such explanation are showing off, guilty of pride and vainglory; those who use obscure syntax and odd words may well be only ignorant and incompetent.

Just because surviving medieval explanations most often moralize the aesthetic, we cannot conclude that medieval people were incapable of understanding some of their experiences aesthetically, that is, as experiences distinctively occasioned by works of human art. Equally, they were capable of creating a work of art in order to evoke and shape distinctively aesthetic experiences, not solely to teach moral and theological 'lessons'. One should not just conflate the question 'Did medieval people recognize

experiences distinctive to art?’ with the quite separate question ‘How did they explain and justify such experiences?’ A group can explain thunder with reference to the angry actions of a thunder god, but their unscientific explanation does not mean that they could not therefore perceive actual thunder.

Let me hasten to say that I do not think the ethical/theological justifications given in medieval accounts of aesthetic experiences are of the same sort as the thunder god’s wrath, something that can readily be discarded when a better explanation comes along. Certainly they were not thought so in medieval cultures. They did not think of their pastoral explanations as rational overlays detachable from the underlying human experience. Rather, the pastoral (and indeed theological) reasons grow up and out from the human experience.¹⁶ Medieval accounts of aesthetic experiences are usually modelled in terms of ‘grades’, steps mounting upwards (or downwards). But the idea of stages is fundamental to them: one step builds on the previous until one reaches the top, and (excepting miracles or Pauline *raptus*) there is no skipping steps, nor, when one reaches a higher step, do all the others become impotent and irrelevant.¹⁷ And one should always begin, as an artisan must, at the beginning, even (perhaps

¹⁶ Interpretation of all the arts has been dogged continually by the charge of being *ex post facto* analysis, justification rather than motive. Indeed rhetorical analysis, by giving as much (or more) agency to the artefact and the perceiver as to the composer, resolves this problem. To say that Panofskian iconographical criticism went too far in attributing symbolism to requirements that were solely ‘practical’ or technical in their goals is to beat a certainly dead, but also largely illusory, horse, and more destructively, to introduce unwarranted analytical rigidity. Often, symbol is absorbed in practice. An example is the medieval masons’ technique of quadrature, using a square as the basic unit to lay out the plan of a particular building. This scheme was most famously applied in religious architecture. But the square cubit (in two and three dimensions) is also the unit of measurement for all the buildings whose dimensions are given in the Bible, which identifies God as the planner of most of them. So to find such divine geometry in medieval ecclesiastical architecture is not surprising, nor would it have required an arts education to appreciate.

¹⁷ Bonaventure expresses this old idea excellently: ‘Iuxta igitur sex gradus *ascensionis* in Deum, sex sunt gradus *potentiarum* animae per quos ascendimus ab imis ad summa, ab exterioribus ad intima, a temporalibus conscendimus ad aeterna, scilicet *sensus, imaginatio, ratio, intellectus, intelligentia et apex mentis* seu synderesis scintilla. Hos gradus in nobis habemus plantatos per naturam, deformatos per culpam, reformatos per gratiam; purgandos per iustitiam, exercendos per scientiam, perficiendos per sapientiam’ (As there are six steps of ascent to God, so there are six abilities of the soul by which we ascend from the bottom to the top, from things outside to those inside, by temporalities we climb to eternity, that is the senses, imagination, reasoning, comprehension, intellection and the mind’s peak, the spark of moral understanding. These steps we have planted in us by nature, deformed by guilt, reformed by grace; cleansed by justice, strengthened by knowledge, perfected by wisdom’) (*Itinerarium mentis in Deo*, cap. 1, 6). Bonaventure’s governing metaphor, as the title indicates, combines *gradus* (found as well in the first chapter of *RB*) with *itinerarium*, journey. According to this scheme, the essays in my book could be said to focus on *sensus*, *imaginatio*, and *ratio*.

especially) when one is expert. The model of building, one course at a time, each resting upon the last, is basic in medieval aesthetic. So too is the model of journey, itinerary, and path, *via*, *iter*, and *ductus*, moving actively through a work among its internal paths to its goal. For all their 'open' form, medieval works are not formless; they have within them evident itineraries and courses. The pilgrims may not get to Canterbury but it is the aim and scope of their journey (though there can be many side trips).

This book focuses on the very first stage of understanding, as it were, that of 'making sense' of physical sensations derived from human encounters with their own crafted artefacts. I hope in these essays to winnow from the discourses of morals and theology some elements that can be identified as wholly aesthetic. In the grand scheme of things, this may seem a reverse sort of winnowing, keeping the chaff instead of the grains, but I hope to persuade my readers to examine that chaff carefully, perhaps to take pleasure in it and even value it for its own distinctive sake.

My method in all these essays is an old-fashioned one, that of historical philology and lexical examination using the evidence in texts selected over a long range, since words gather nuance and even extend their meanings in ways we now perceive best in retrospect from this kind of evidence. This is in fact the method of Edgar De Bruyne himself, though I learned it first and best from the essays of Erich Auerbach. My first question in these studies is this: In the Middle Ages, was a distinctive lexicon used to describe such experiences, an identifiably aesthetic vocabulary not simply transcribed from ethical and theological discourses?¹⁸

'A CONFIDENT CONSENT TO BELIEVE'

Basic to medieval aesthetic understanding is rhetoric, the *techne* or art (in Aristotle's term) that 'finds in each occasion the available means of

¹⁸ This lexicon is not distinctive in the sense of comprising a set of words belonging to aesthetic descriptions only. Rather all the words I consider are 'ordinary' words; they are often used in non-aesthetic contexts too, including moral and theological ones sometimes quite far removed from normal human experiences. I have found Peter Kivy's characterization to be useful: aesthetic descriptions of experiences, he writes, 'do not lead anywhere else . . . To describe something in aesthetic terms is . . . to savor it at the same time: to run it over your tongue and lick your lips; to "investigate" its pleasurable possibilities . . . Nonaesthetic descriptions invite further steps, conclusions, further trains of arguments, actions . . . And the fact that aesthetic descriptions are "terminal," that they lead nowhere, distinguishes them sharply from moral descriptions, which often are preludes to action' (1975: 210–11). For an argument that aesthetic terms (which he calls 'taste terms') are a special kind of (non-condition-governed) words, see Sibley 1959. The debate ultimately derives from Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, and his insistence that aesthetic experience is 'disinterested'.