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LOCATING THE SACRED BODY IN TIME: A STUDY IN
HAGIOGRAPHY AND HISTORICAL IDENTITY

James Cahill
Department of English
McGill University

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ABSTRACT

Hagiography occupies a central place in the history of European culture, and yet despite this centrality, its reception as a significant cultural achievement has at times been undermined by a narrow critical hermeneutic, one that focuses largely on the debilitating flaws of the genre. The goal of this critical practice can be described as at once diagnostic and prescriptive, as scholars attempt rid the canon of specious documents through rigorous textual and contextual analyses. It is my contention, however, that this critical winnowing, rather than rescuing some hagiographic documents from disrepute, is in fact limited by its failure to adequately account for the medieval concern for representation as a re-presencing of the self within language. Understood through the criteria of contemporary biography, saints' lives are easily read as naive caricatures of holiness, archetypes of faith fitted crudely into human form. Instead, the notion of singular identity should be understood as a focal point for hagiography, one that presupposes important theological, and specifically Incarnational, underpinnings. An exploration along these lines will reveal what I believe to be an important function of medieval hagiography; namely, to serve as textual bridges joining the sacred and corporeal realms in coincident moments

of human transcendence and divine immanence.

RESUMÉ

L'hagiographie occupe une place importante dans l'histoire de la culture européene, mais malgré cette position, sa réception comme accomplissement significatif se voit sapée par une étroite herméneutique critique qui se contente principalement de souligner les defauts qui affaiblissent le genre. L'objet de cette pratique critique peut être qualifé d'à la fois diagnostic et normatif, poursuivi par théoriciens qui cherchent à vider le canon de documents spécieux par l'application d'analyses textuelles et contextuelles rigoreuses. Je soutiens, cependant, que ce vannage critique, plutôt que de sauver certains documents hagiographiques du descredit, est en effet borné par son inhabilité à faire place au soucis médiéval de rendre, à travers la representation, une re-présentation du soi dans le langage. Interprétées selon les critères de la biographie contemporaine, les vies des saints sont facilement apercues comme étant de naives caricatures de la sainteté, des archétypes de la foi crûment adaptés à la forme humaine. Cette forme typique devrait cependant être reconnue comme foyer de l'hagiographie, ce qui présuppose d'importants fondements théologiques, et spécifiquement incarnationnels. Une exploration dans ce sens révélera ce que je crois être une fonction importante de l'hagiographie médiévale; à savoir, de

servir de ponts textuels joignant le royaume du sacré et le domaine du

corporel dans les moments coincidents de transcendance humaine et

d'immanence divine.

INTRODUCTION

You ought to listen to me because I'm not just an amateur. I'm an artist-type. If you want to get anywheres in religion, you got to keep it sweet. You got good idears, but what you need is an artist-type to work with you. (Flannery O'Connor, *Wise Blood* 52)

I open my discussion of medieval hagiography with this passage from Flannery O'Connor's novel *Wise Blood* because I believe that it illustrates with admirable brevity and clarity the problems and prejudices that confront any medievalist determined enough to investigate such a difficult (if not utterly bizarre) literary genre. The novel concerns the brief evangelical career of Hazel Motes, a dispossessed Southerner and founder of the Church Without Christ, of which he is the lone member. While prosthelityzing for his cause, he is approached by Hoover Shoats, a self-described preacher, radio star, and all-around "artist-type" who performs under the unlikely pseudonym Onnie Jay Holy. Shoats recognizes in Hazel an able but naive "prophet," an "idear man" lacking polish, and he tries to appropriate Hazel's earnest rhetoric for a more profitable scheme. In contrast to Shoats however, Hazel is a "true

believer," one whose prophetic oratory is a testament not to his chicanery but to his vehement (albeit paradoxical) faith in the "Church Without Christ." His struggle to come to terms with this faith, with the quest for spiritual salvation through a preemptive repudiation of the quest itself, forms the novel's thematic and dramatic core.[1] Not surprisingly then, he repudiates Shoats's "professional" advice and later physically ejects the artist from his car.

From the outset of their encounter, we recognize Shoats's manipulative opportunism in trying to "sweeten" Hazel's radical theology, and yet we can understand Haze as little more than a deluded "visionary" espousing a confused rhetoric that he himself fails to grasp in its contradictory complexities. His status is conferred in a single word: amateur. Shoats is referring here to the style of his performance, but Hazel is more accurately understood as a novice in comprehending the human relationship to divinity, and as a result he is deluded by a untenable philosophy of his own making. Accordingly, his death (an ignominious event that closes the novel and which occurs long after he has renounced his "faith") is far from a martyrdom, that is to say, a

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[1] In the "Author's Note" of her novel's tenth anniversary printing, Flannery O'Connor says of Hazel that his integrity lies in his not being able to renounce Christ, that "ragged figure who moves from tree to tree in the back of his mind," as the genesis, both historical and theological, of religious faith.

profound and purposive sacrifice to a belief that overwhelms and incorporates the self, but rather the final relinquishing of credibility that marks him as nothing so much as a failed saint.

Within the space of Hazel's clash with Shoats, the polarities of naivety and duplicity that tend to define the contemporary understanding of hagiography are sharply revealed; the former's confused diligence invokes the stereotype of the medieval simpleton, whereas the latter embodies the deceitful swindler, whose beliefs centre entirely on personal gain. Clearly, theirs is a dynamic with a lengthy history. In constructing a genealogy of attitudes toward hagiography, pejorative judgements can be traced at least as far back as Gibbon's Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, wherein one of the champions of Enlightenment historiography admonishes medieval hagiographers for adding to the "...invincible band of genuine and primitive martyrs ... myriads of imaginary heroes, who had never existed except in the fancy of crafty or credulous legendaries ..." (210).[2] Moreover, Gibbon claims, the entire history of human sanctity bears witness to an unfortunate process of degeneracy that had its origins in the cult of the saints:

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[2] Thomas Heffernan identifies Gibbon with the genesis of the modern scholarly attitude (58). Peter Brown, in *The Cult of the Saints*, reads back from Gibbon to Hume's *Natural History of Religions.*

> In the long period of twelve hundred years which elapsed between the reign of Constantine and the reformation of Luther the worship of saints and relics corrupted the pure and perfect simplicity of the Christian model (210).

This notion of degeneracy, a notion that I will explore and dispute in my first chapter, tends to define the critical stance long after Gibbon's enunciation of it as the central problem of hagiography. More specifically, the problem is seen in terms of a radical renunciation of empirical historicity in favour of the populist fiction of pious legends and fables. Thus Hippolyte Delehaye commits his influential study of *les legendes hagiographiques* mainly to the "conventional and factitious productions ... without any tangible relation to the facts" (61). In attempting to discover "what really happened," historians of medieval hagiography, following Delehaye, typically problematize both conventional structures and fantastic details as being more committed to rhetorical effect than to historical accuracy, and it is this rhetoric that obscures the evidence of the past, thereby deceiving our knowledge of it in the present.

And yet the sense of historicity employed here as the standard of true historical knowledge is largely a collection of unquestioned

assumptions deployed in the name of a common sensical approach to research problems. This question of the historical provides the impetus for my second chapter, in that it is often the effort to separate history and legend that foregrounds the dilemma of historicity itself. Increasingly, historians and philosophers of history writing in recent decades – William Dray, Louis Mink, Hayden White, et al. – have explored the discontinuity between the actuality of human existence and its organization into narrative form, a form that is then taken to bespeak our knowledge of the past. In addition to foregrounding the relativist nature of historical reports and questioning the representational claims of historical narratives, these writers have begun to rethink the apparently causal relationship between event and description, making narrative configuration concomitant with the very existence (in this case, epistemic) of corresponding events. Louis O. Mink, for example, problematizes the notion of "the past" as an unnarrated object of narration to which historical accounts correspond with varying degrees of success (188). History, on Mink's account, has less to do with descriptive fidelity than narrative presentation, and consequently the epistemological authority usually derived from the ontology of past events must in some way forfeit its primacy to present considerations.

Despite this increasing focus on the challenges and/or difficulties

of historical inquiry, on its seemingly inevitable textuality and the

ontological opaqueness of the reality it aspires to describe, historical

interest in hagiography remains largely unaffected; it continues along in

a methodological course it has inherited from late nineteenth century

historiography, and, more specifically, Bollandist tradition.[3] In contrast,

it is not difficult to imagine incorporating sacred biography into a

relativist or pluralist approach to the philosophy of history in the form

of a cogent (and perhaps extreme) counterargument. Understood by its

own metaphysical lights, the genre supplies a notion of historical

ontology prior to and independent of any ancillary description, and

moreover, it is an instance of what Arthur Danto calls the "substantive

philosophy of history," that is to say, a conception of historical

knowledge that develops its epistemic totality by according equal status

to claims about the past and the future (8). Danto credits Karl Lowith's

The Meaning of History, published in 1949, with proposing a

"theological" approach to history, and yet the relevance of this approach

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[3] Perhaps the most obvious feature of this inheritance is the belief in the possibility
of infusing saintly veneration with a degree of historicist discrimination. David
Knowles has written a brief but illuminating history of the Bollandists, Belgian
Jesuits named for a founding member of the order, and I shall refer later to his
observations in more detail.

to hagiology has eluded its modern practitioners. However, this

indifference to such abstract, theoretical developments is hardly

surprising for such developments must surely seem tangential to the real

work in the field, namely, the separation of fact and fiction. As Lee

Patterson points out, medievalists and the academic institutions that

house them often maintain a mutually agreed upon distance, if not

distaste, and this sense of otherness on the part of academic

medievalism only contributes to the its isolation from current critical

issues and debates ("On the Margin" 91). It is therefore not surprising

that within this context, hagiography has remained the abiding interest

of a relatively small number of exegetes dedicated to aligning documents

into categories of the believable and the unbelievable without justifying

these categories in any rigorous way. Thus it seems likely that when

Donald Attwater, editor of the *Penguin Dictionary of the Saints*, proclaims

"[m]aterials bearing on the lives of the saints have to be studied,

analyzed, and judged in the same objective way ... as the materials

relevant to any other sort of history or biography" (12), he understands

"any other sort of history" as the basis for a sound, stable, and assured

investigative method.

However, even upon bracketing recent questions concerning

history and the historical (for even following the most sensitive consideration of these questions, any statement about hagiography presupposes a commitment to one sort of historicism and an exclusion of others) current trends in hagiology remain fundamentally unsatisfying because they disregard what can only be described as the original historical function of hagiographic documents; namely, to mediate the always difficult relationship between divine reality and human knowledge. The genesis of this function finds its best expression in the first words of John's gospel: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God." John then identifies the eternal and original Word with the historical figure of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. It is this dual presence of Christ, at once prior to history and within it, that constitutes the profound redemptive achievement of the Incarnation; namely, the restoration of humanity's prelapsarian ideality. This restoration, however, does not follow upon the re-invention of human innocence, an act that would signal the end of history, but rather it is a transformation of the discourse of history, one that offers a transcendent referentiality to human language in particularly human terms.

The especially linguistic nature of this historic moment emerges

profoundly in the writing of Augustine, who, according to Eugene

Vance, infuses "[a]ll of [his] endeavours in metaphysics, epistemology,

and exegesis ... with a relentless effort to define the functions and limits

of human language" (20 "St. Augustine: Language as Temporality").

Clearly, the Incarnation offers to language its greatest potential while at

the same time marking its final limit, and this paradox comprises a

crucial focus of Augustinian thought. On the one hand, he expresses

striking linguistic optimism, confident that language, now redeemed,

leads ultimately to its origin in God (Bloch 50, also cf. *On Christian*

Doctrine Book 1 XXXV). On the other hand, however, he experiences

firsthand the failure of language to close with the divine subject, a failure

expressed in the Confessions as the return to "vocal expressions of our

mouth, where the word spoken has beginning and end" (72). The Word,

in contrast, exceeds these temporal limits, and as the principle rather

than consequence of origin, "endureth in Himself without becoming

old, and 'maketh all things new'" (73). Construed in this way, the Word

poses a challenge to historical knowledge conceived as both an

awareness of absence as well as its restitution in language, for the Word,

as the absence of absence, seems to negate language as *a posteriori*

mediation. The Gospels, as the paradigmatic confluence of words and

Word, literally embody this challenge, for they cannot be understood

merely as textual representations that body forth historical knowledge.

They are instead instances of both narrative and narrative excess,

wherein representation as a mode of temporal replacement is

overwhelmed by a divine presence eternally present to itself.

This notion of the Incarnation as a textual problematic is

especially relevant to studies of hagiography in that saints' Lives typically

take their narrative cues from the documentary life of Christ. While it is

commonplace to speak of saints' Lives as deliberate instances of the

imitatio Christi, this evaluation typically neglects the profound historical

implications of the Incarnation. Certainly, any imitative participation in

Christ's identity invokes the atemporal and ahistorical presence of the

Word, and consequently any historical approach to hagiography must

come to terms with the attendant relationships between being, time, and

language. My discussion of these relationships will draw on Augustine's

extensive treatment of language as both redemption and failure, a

solution and a dilemma, a treatment that seems well suited to

hagiography's own twofold temporal configuration. While this

approach clearly positions hagiography within the relations of its own

historical situation, it also resonates with the rhetoric animating

contemporary historiographical theorizing and debate. John F. Toews, in a trenchant review article, traces the patterns in the writing of social or intellectual history as predications of or responses to what he calls the "linguistic turn" in the humanities and social sciences (882). On the one hand, he contends that most historians:

> seem ready to concede that language can no longer be construed as simply a medium ... for the representation or expression of a reality outside itself and are willing to entertain seriously some form of semiological theory in which language is conceived as a self contained system of 'signs' whose meanings are determined by their relations to each other, rather than by their relation to some 'transcendental' or extra-linguistic object or subject (881-82).

The upshot of such a concession would seem to be a radical affirmation of the Derridean notion "il n'y a pas de hors texte" such that any language purporting to be historical can only be understood not in relation to some past person or event, but to some previous language.[4]

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[4] Pushing this conception of language as constituting reality to its radical conclusion would seem to repudiate the entire notion of historical interpretation, for it follows that historical language constitutes rather than explains its subject.

Toews, however, sees this stance as but one component of the linguistic turn, the other being a more recent tendency to:

> adapt ... reaffirm in new ways that, in spite of the relative autonomy of cultural meanings, human subjects still make and remake the worlds of meaning in which they are suspended, and to insist that these worlds are not creations *ex nihilo* but responses to, and shapings of, changing worlds of experience ultimately irreducible to the linguistic forms in which they appear (882).

Hagiography, I will argue, manifests the tendencies outlined by Toews, largely because it is always in position between modes of experience and knowledge, attempting to define a stable locus of identity at once in time and eternal. It seems likely in the first instance that writers of sacred biography would be reluctant to equate their subjects with the language of their inscription, for such a reduction would impair the function of saints as moral exemplars. On a more theoretical level, opposition to such a conflation has its roots in the powerful distinction between the words of hagiography and the Word made flesh. Clearly, saints were themselves not divine, and the early Church Fathers (notably Jerome) went to great lengths to distinguish between the worship (*latria*)

owed to God and the mere veneration (*dulia*) appropriate for the saints

(Wilson 4).[5] Thus while saints could be said to participate in Christ's

divinity through imitation, the language of their lives could not be

elevated to the status of logos; it remained rooted in its referentiality to

the world. Nevertheless, it seems equally true to say that hagiographers

were acutely aware of the abiding presence in sacred language, of its

capacity to efface the existential loss of temporal difference. Surely

Christ's Incarnation offers a powerful model for such an effacement, a

model which privileged textual mediation over the "world of

experience" to which the text supposedly referred. Within the context

of hagiography as historical writing, Christ's full presence in the world

after the empirical fact of his death challenges the subordinate

referential status of historical language, and offers a compelling way of

thinking about being in the text.

Admittedly, my project is an ambitious one, and it is likely that an

exhaustive treatment of the subjects I have mentioned exceeds the

limitations of the present study. Nevertheless, I hope to offer an

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[5] To confuse human language and logos would have been an especially egregious
contradiction of Augustine's dictum concerning use and enjoyment. According to
this doctrine, the use of saints would appear to lead to the enjoyment of God in
Christ. Of course, the realization of this function begs a central question of my
thesis; namely, how to conceive of a stable and theologically sound relationship
between eternal and temporal existence.

alternative to conventional ways of thinking and writing about hagiography, one that places saints' Lives within the context of rational and sophisticated symbolic activity. To this end, my first chapter shall offer a survey of traditional hagiology, focusing on the notion of salvage as it has defined the modern hagiological enterprise. My second chapter will then locate this tradition within the context of contemporary historiography, attempting to draw out its philosophical underpinnings while at the same time illustrating some of the flaws of its basic theoretical assumptions. Following this foray into the philosophy of history, I shall explicate the particular kind of history native to hagiography; namely, Incarnational history. This chapter will draw together the themes of the preceding two by offering a way of understanding saints' Lives that foregrounds the textual principle of divine immanence. The fourth chapter will offer a kind of case study involving the Life of St. Anthony of Egypt. My analysis of this exemplary document shall seek to transform theory into practice, thus demonstrating the operation of hagiography in its appropriate historical and theological milieu.

Having outlined the nature and course of my thesis, the problems it will and the tentative solutions it will propose, I feel responsible as

well to specify its limits. It would be naive to suppose that the writing

and reading of hagiography was motivated purely by theological integrity

and transcendental longings, for indeed the term "hagiography" attaches

itself to a vast corpus of writings dispersed over both an enormous

geography and an extensive temporal frame. Moreover, such a limited

view, one that would conceptualize the "medieval" as a monolithic and

socially static cultural construct, would simply reiterate some of the

misconceptions that I wish to contest. In the words of David Aers, our

knowledge of the Middle Ages as a "... harmonious world unified by one

coherent system of Christian dogma ..." must be "rewritten" in order to

accommodate diverse and often conflicting attitudes and actions within

heterogeneous social groups (221, 227). Thus it is the case that stories of

saints served other and often more secular purposes, about which my

study is largely silent. Lives were used to advance elaborate political

agendas, as for example Aviad Kleinberg demonstrates in his study of

St. Francis (in *Prophets in Their Own Land*), and this politicization of

religious rhetoric, both overt and implicit, has been the subject of

modern critical attention (cf. Elizabeth Petroff's feminist critique of late

medieval female saints' Lives). Within this context of political

advantage, other contemporary scholars have discussed the use of saints'

Lives to establish a monastery's prestige (Olsen), to attract pilgrims and thereby increase Church revenues (Finucane), and maintain harmonious relations between the Church and local aristocracies (Delooz). While this broadly sociological approach has in recent years yielded impressive and informative results, it has also neglected the powerful theological imperatives underwriting hagiography, thus supplying a somewhat distorted picture. Accordingly, my study aims to offer some redress to this situation and as a result I am more interested in the textual strategies employed in depicting divine immanence than in the analyzing the possible social utility of convincing a group of people that one of their number is a saint. I believe that the task before me lies in articulating some middle ground between Hazel and Hoover, between fantasy and fraud, thereby supplying a rational and credible foundation for receiving hagiography on its own terms.

CHAPTER ONE: SALVAGING HAGIOGRAPHY

To give assistance in detecting materials of inferior workmanship is not to deny the

excellence of what remains, and it is to the ultimate advantage of the harvest to point

out the tares that have sometimes become mingled with the wheat to a most

disconcerting extent. (Hippolyte Delehaye, *The Legends of the Saints* x)

Taken on faith, hagiographic narratives stand as records of

particular moments in humanity's past. These records, however, tend to

encourage doubt from even the most sympathetic modern reader, as the

moments they describe seem culled from an imagined past too

fantastical to lay any claim to historical reality. Thus when in The

Legends of the Saints Hippolyte Delehaye speaks of separating the tares

from the wheat, his metaphor refers mainly to the "venerable" fictions

that crowd the canon of holy men and women, thwarting any harvest of

historical facts and figures (vii-x).[6] Indeed, the demands of this harvest

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[6] Delehaye's notion of history is a complicated one, and it is the driving force of his book. At times, he accounts for the rhetorical excesses and historical lapses of medieval hagiography as an unfortunate result of both "mob mentality" and general intellectual deficiencies (16, 17, 40, 49, 60). In contrast, he sometimes celebrates the multitude's pious veneration (x -xi, 230) and goes so far as to relieve hagiography of historical responsibility (2). Nevertheless, it seems safe to say that Delehaye generally afforded "historically accurate" Lives his highest esteem, and his vision has exercised an enormous influence on hagiology in the twentieth century.

have shaped the study of hagiography in the last hundred years, as

interested scholars have attempted to discover a textual voice distinct

from the pious simplicity that seems to characterize much sacred

biography. More often than not, this voice has been one that speaks of

hagiography in a modern context, extracting from even the most

implausible accounts of holiness some elements of historical merit.

This specifically critical approach to the study of hagiography in

the twentieth century has been concerned for the most part with saints

as a historical phenomenon.[7] Consequently, saints' Lives, as a textual

phenomenon, have been interpreted as records of (admittedly

extraordinary) actions and interactions within the world of human

experience, and the scholar has been employed as a kind of curator of

texts, appraising them at their perceived historical worth. Delehaye

enunciates this juridical approach in *The Legends of the Saints*, where he

contends that the only sound principle for classifying hagiographic

documents appeals to "the degree of truth and historic value they

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[7]Alison Elliot Goddard, in her recent book *Roads to Paradise: Reading the Lives of the Early Saints*, states plainly that hagiography is not history (7), and as a consequence of this premise, she directs her study not at what happened but at what ought to have happened (10). This principle seems to solve the problem simply by ignoring it, and in a sense it espouses a position more extreme than Delehaye's scrupulous historicism. Goddard seems to subscribe to a supposedly universal notion of what history is, one which would apply to (and disqualify) late Roman and early medieval hagiographers despite their having subscribed to quite a different notion.

possess" (111). However, the consequences of this evaluation are not as transparent as they initially appear. The classificatory procedure, in determining the historicity of texts, establishes the real as an opposition to the unreal, and then proceeds to extricate genuine information in an effort to reconstruct the earthly lives of the "citizens of heaven." The unreal becomes problematic in the first place (although not, as Delehaye points out, entirely useless; cf. p.45), precisely because the ostensible similarity between spurious and authentic accounts makes a cursory assessment of truth utterly impossible, thus hindering our relationship to the sacred past. Increasingly, the truth is seen as a kernel imbedded within layers of pious rhetoric, and in this setting the representations of historical reality is better understood as a process of textual excavation.

Clare Sponsler discusses this process under the rubric of *salvage*, wherein medievalist scholarship sets out to "recuperate a past threatened with destruction, loss, or abandonment by the modern era" (9). In the case of hagiography, the threat is posed from within the genre itself, from the fictitious "tares" that undermine the historical legitimacy of more credible saints' Lives. Sponsler relates this recuperative strategy to the classic methods of cultural anthropology, and in doing so, she implicates medievalism in a romantic tendency to domesticate foreign

experience. Moreover, she depicts this domestication as part of a general commitment to an uncritical representational realism shared by both traditional medievalists and anthropologists, as they (mistakenly) imagine themselves to be recording things "as they really are, unmediated by conventions of narration and representation, untouched by discourse" (17). And yet despite this negative appraisal, Sponsler recommends to medieval studies an anthropological (or more precisely ethnographical) approach, largely because of the realization within ethnography of its own modes of cultural production, a realization from which it follows that "there can be no perception of the object in and of itself, unfiltered by discourse" (25).

Not surprisingly, hagiologists have mostly resisted Sponsler's advocacy, for to acknowledge the necessary relationship between reality and discourse would be to forego any access to the past "as it really was" (i.e. prior to its encodation in language). Clare Stancliffe, for example, although she acknowledges the influence of culturally conditioned standards of belief on historical representation, still privileges the saint "grounded in reality" (315). She writes in her study of St. Martin that "Sulpicius [Martin's hagiographer] was primarily interested in a historical person" and that despite his laudatory intent, "

he ... was so close to the man and the events he was depicting that he was unable to stray away altogether from what actually happened" (327). Like Delehaye before her, Stancliffe feels obligated to distinguish within sacred narrative between the actual and the ideological, to the extent that these designations are mutually exclusive. Ultimately, this approach seems limited by its over-arching concern for classification, and by the narrow and static categories of "true" and "false" upon which this classification is based. To cite the revisionist thesis of Thomas Heffernan, the hagiology developed by Delehaye et al., in assuming the incontestable validity of its own historical method, fails to countenance alternative modes of true representation, and therefore fails to recognize the whole breadth of sacred existence.

However, saints' Lives, as I shall soon demonstrate, have in recent years been looked at in different ways, ways that have more in common with Sponsler's prescription than Delehaye's. These studies illustrate the richness of hagiographic expression, finding in saints' Lives a variety of theological, political, and sexual confrontations and conciliations. While such new approaches suggest (implicitly) the inadequacy of mere textual collation, it would be both reactionary and wrong to suppose that the massive editorial project of the nineteenth

century was simply misled by rigid historicist pretensions. Rather, its theoretical motivation, attuned as it was to the contemporary standards for historical investigation and production, lead rather naturally to its particular handling of the admittedly unusual documents within its purview. Accordingly, a genealogy of modern hagiologic salvage cannot privilege certain modes of criticism at the expense of other, seemingly outmoded ones, but must instead integrate divergent approaches and explain them in terms of the intellectual circumstances underscoring each.

That some recent studies of hagiography have for the most part dispensed with questions of historical validity can be seen as indicating an evolutionary move away from established techniques of classification and interpretation. These investigations have instead focused on the social dynamics within communities of belief, as these communities reacted to and acted upon hagiographic testimony. Aviad Kleinberg, for example, explains his recent investigation of medieval sanctity as "... a study of sainthood as it was 'practiced' in day-to-day encounters between living individuals considered saints by their contemporaries and other members of their community" (1). Andre Vauchez identifies the purpose of saints' Lives as "... making the servants of God conform to

models corresponding to recognized categories of Christian perfection" (in Le Goff, 313), and proceeds to sketch a series of relationships between recognized saints and the social conventions of medieval sainthood. Similarly, Stephen Wilson, in the introduction to his anthology of scholarly essays, affirms the prevailing notion that hagiographic materials "... can reflect important features of the societies in which they occur ... [including] not only modes of religious perception and feeling but also social relationships and political structures" (1).

Of these three samples, it is Wilson's comment, prefacing as it does a wide range of professional opinion, that best demonstrates both the explicit sociological utility of hagiography and the attendant historicist difficulties that this sociology at once engenders and resolves. Essentially, the "important features" to which he refers concern elements of medieval social praxis, in other words, instances of a community's beliefs, desires, and consequent actions. Thus a sort of historio-cultural anthropology is enjoined, and Wilson himself counts "social anthropologists" among hagiography's modern audience (1). The traditional concerns of historical investigation (or, to be more specific, the concerns of such investigation as it has been conceived in

the last hundred years or so) lose much of their urgency in light of this

sort of approach, for interest lies more in assessing the causes and

consequences of various beliefs than in evaluating the contents of the

beliefs themselves. Kleinberg, for example, although very much a

historical realist, goes along way towards rationalizing hagiographic

convictions; in his discussion of Peter of Dacia he closes the gap

between belief and truth by claiming that Peter's text was "designed for

readers with one set of expectations and is now being read by readers

with a different set" (52). This apparent fudging of the question of

historical truth can be seen as a reaction to the pressures of historicism

that accompany the traditional Bollandist-inspired model. Increasingly,

it has become evident that there are new ways of thinking about the

human past, ways that acknowledge epistemological possibilities other

than a linguistic recapitulation of ontologically discrete events. Paul

Strohm, for example, filters his reading of Chaucer through the evidence

of fourteenth century political and economic documentation, although

he claims that such documents rarely tell us "what happened." Instead,

they "offer testimony on other ... historical matters: on contemporary

perception, ideology, belief, and - above all - on the imaginative

structures within which fourteenth-century participants acted and

assumed their actions would be understood" (4). This emphasis on

reconstructing a historically appropriate context of belief and

expectation constitutes, in part, an attempt to link the past and the

present through a common framework of rationality and to see human

behaviour in general as unified in its pursuit of (or at least in its relation

to) socially defined and sanctioned goals. For Strohm then,

non-fictional fourteenth century texts are not evaluated according to

familiar standards of truth and falsity, but are instead taken as

manifestations of the social world in which Chaucer's literary enterprise

operated, and conversely, as "extra-textual" criteria by which Chaucer's

fictional creations are themselves related to the "outside" world.[8]

Not surprisingly, the meeting of history and anthropology finds

its genesis beyond the narrow boundaries of hagiology, in developments

in the social sciences of the fifties and sixties. As early as 1955, E.

Evans-Pritchard, whom Marshall Sahlins calls "... long the great and

almost exclusive champion of the historical approach" (xviii), had

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[8] Strohm's blurring of the fiction/non -fiction distinction stands in marked contrast
to D. W. Robertson's more orthodox conception of the relationship between text
and context, one which situates the framework of social reality outside of and
anterior to the fictional text it then enters as a conditioning structure. For
Robertson, the reconstruction of "the intellectual attitudes and the cultural ideals of a
period" necessarily informs our understanding of that period's fictional creations
because this reconstruction posits a stable and tangible reality that an imaginative
construction can in turn affirm or dispute (3).

claimed that "... social anthropology is a kind of historiography" (152).

Speaking more emphatically, Evans-Pritchard labels an absurdity the

notion that "one can understand the functioning of institutions at a

certain point in time without knowing how they came to be what they

are" (147). This critique of the apparently timeless "ethnographic

present" in social anthropology challenges the availability of historically

innocent cultural knowledge, and to a large extent, anthropologists have

responded by investing their explanations of specific social structures

with corresponding accounts of historical conditioning. Thus the Dutch

anthropologist Kirsten Hastrup writes in her introduction to a collection

of recent essays that "[a] truly 'historical' anthropology must include

reference to both space and time, not only because 'history' is the

unfolding of society through time, but also because society is the

institutional form of historical events" (7).

While anthropologists have concerned themselves mainly with

the historicization of their own discipline, more recently it has also been

the case that strains of anthropology have influenced the reading and

writing of history. Marshall Sahlins, for example, encourages historians

to "... explode the concept of history by the anthropological experience

of culture" (72), and indeed historians (for better or for worse) are

discovering the consequences of such an explosion (Spiegel, Toews).

On a somewhat more modest scale, Clare Sponsler's remarks on the growing convergence of medieval studies and anthropological models of interpretation identifies all medievalists as "closet anthropologists" (3). These covert figures, according to Sponsler, are interested in revising the very notions of historical knowledge and evidence, and as a result are "... thinking about and interpreting texts not as isolated moments of aesthetic practice nor as inert documents pointing to historical events, but rather as events, incidents, and activities within a complex dynamic of the production and consumption of culture" (1-2). History thus configured becomes a matter not merely of what people did, but what this doing means, and textual composition and dissemination is properly understood as a central form of culturally meaningful activity. It is true, in one sense, that this reconfiguration leaves the method and practice largely intact, but this is true only if historical texts are seen not as "inert documents" standing in for a temporally absent reality, but rather as comprising in an important way historical reality itself.

Of course, judged by this kind of sort of historio-anthropological standard, traditional studies of saints' Lives more often than not fail to measure up. Documents are commonly read as evidence of some other

reality, more truly "historical" than the legendary depictions of suffering and miraculous triumph that are the putative content of most Lives. Evelyne Patlagean picks up on this tendency in the critical studies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and she places it in the context of an overarching concern for "historical authenticity":

> Scholars felt free to manipulate texts, to pluck concrete information from a hagiographical context, which was itself ignored; the latter was seen, it seems, as a mere stringing together ... of a limited number of legendary themes, among which the authors, who were both stupid and truthful, had inserted certain facts which were the only elements worthy of attention (101).

Patlagean identifies this "positivist method" with two groups: 1) clerics determined to preserve the sanctity of the canon by eliminating the veneration of apocryphal figures, and 2) historians interested in mining hagiographical documents for their "topographical, economic, social, and even historical data" (101). Of course, they are united in their commitment to discovering the truth. Of the former group, Hippolyte Delehaye (who provides the epigraph for the present chapter) stands as perhaps the foremost modern practitioner, and since beginning his

scholarly work at the turn of this century, he has exercised considerable influence on both Church and secular scholars (Olsen 410). The latter group, of which Patlagean fails to provide examples, can claim an origin more or less contemporaneous with Delehaye, and its methods currently enjoy wide use. Antonia Gransden, in her *Historical Writing in England: c. 550 to c. 1307*, typifies this methodology when she claims "... the hagiographer, in fulfilling his duty of recording the dead saint's acts (and so incidentally of establishing no doubt that his body lay in the monastery) was obliged to trace the community's history" (68). By Gransden's account, the details of saintly life are at most of secondary importance to the historian; they are more properly regarded as components of monastic politics. It is instead the features of community history, features which are, by Gransden's own admission, ancillary to the hagiographer's stated aims, that capture the historian's attention and are thus extracted from an unlikely list of miraculous deeds. Similarly, the eminent British medievalist Bertram Colgrave sees the significance in early English hagiography not in its own terms of sacred expression, but rather in the details "... which give much valuable historical information unavailable elsewhere" ("The Earliest Saints' Lives Written in England" 42). Like Gransden, Colgrave finds

hagiography indispensable as a source of documentary evidence, but to realize its evidentiary potential, he must overcome its initially incredible content and recast this content in the context of critical evaluation.

Clearly, Patlagean's assessment of traditional practice ("stupid and truthful") concurs with the traditional attitudes toward hagiography which I outlined in my introduction, attitudes that construe hagiography as either naive or manipulative and dismiss outlandish claims accordingly. She aims to repudiate such attitudes by deploying Levi-Strauss's structuralist methodology in an attempt to discover the full complexity of expression in sacred biography.[9] While her exploration of the "rich ...unconscious level" manifest in early Byzantine hagiography does much to demonstrate the sophistication of representational strategies, it fails to adequately address an important feature of hagiographic writing in general; namely, its non-fictional status. This is not to say that Patlagean is somehow fundamentally wrong in her approach, for indeed her analysis offers cogent examples of the underlying structures of cultural discourse within the Lives she

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[9] It does not follow, of course, that all "anthropological" treatments necessarily adopt a structuralist methodology. Nevertheless, I would contend that the recurring interest in hagiography's cultural circumstances attests to a common understanding of how these circumstances are to be interpreted.

interprets.[10] But it is also true that such a reading largely undermines the possible significance of the historical authenticity scrutinized by Patlagean early in her essay. She seems to side-step the consequences of his dismissal by placing hagiography beyond the ken of the historian's "linear, irreversible time" and within the timeless, transcendent "reversible time of myths," such that descriptions of events (whether mundane or fantastic) are placed in the service of demonstrating saintly power.

Nevertheless, questions of truth and falsity, as these notions are commonly understood, impinge upon the structuralist treatment of hagiography, in large part because the scholars Patlagean would replace take the relationship between words and (pre-linguistic) reality as central to their enterprise. However, I believe that it is characteristic of the structuralist approach that Patlagean endorses to downplay the relationship of accountability that would connect historical narrative to its referents in the phenomenal world. Claude Levi-Strauss, for example, argues in *Structural Anthropology* that history (and the naturally related discipline of ethnography) is never concerned merely with "... the

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[10] Her notion of the "wild" or anti-urban mode of ascetic discourse is especially insightful, especially in that this mode counterbalances the model of civic life derived from the majority of original Latin sources.

exact reconstruction of what happened ... in the society under study."

To posit this reconstructive theory, according to Levi-Strauss, is "... to forget that ... we are dealing with *systems of representation* .... All that the historian ... can do is to enlarge a specific experience to the dimensions of a more general one, which thereby becomes accessible as experience" ("History and Anthropology 16-17, emphasis in the original). On this account, the systems of representation, rather than any original historical (or social) presence, produce the experience of otherness that both historians and ethnographers take as their object of study, and moreover, these systems are themselves taken to constitute the reality of the presence to which they seem to refer.[11] In the case of hagiography, however, a system of representation is precisely what is at issue. Both groups described by Patlagean dispute a theological system that privileges the ubiquity of divine power at the expense of contradictory empirical knowledge. To suppose, as, for example, Gregory the Great does, that language must serve divine truth even if such service violates the rules of language, is to locate the phenomenal constraints on representation in a realm that exceeds the possibility of critical human

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[11] Levi-Strauss elaborates on this moderate anti-realist stance in *The Savage Mind*, where he characterizes history as "... a method with no distinct object corresponding to it" (262). I shall explore the consequences of structuralist anti-realism for the theory and practice of history in my next chapter.

critical human inquiry (Gregory quoted in Heffernan 7). Thus the claim

that St. Polycarp extinguished a blazing fire with blood from his wounds

must be taken to mean what it literally says, because the sanction for

such a statement depends on divine rather than human capability.[12] As a

result of this conception of language, it is theoretically impossible to

judge a historical representation true or false, not simply because the

"facts of the matter" are somehow ontologically inaccessible, but more

importantly because the rules governing their representation are not a

subject of analysis or discussion.

Structuralism (and perhaps to a greater extent post-structuralism),

inasmuch as it relies on Saussurean sign theory, is susceptible to this sort

of philosophical move because of its abiding interest in the

epistemological consequences of language.[13] This claim will receive

fuller treatment in my next chapter, and it is sufficient here to say that

an approach like Patlagean's, while it correctly identifies the

shortcomings of traditional hagiographic criticism, fails to get at the

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[12] My position on interpreting descriptions of miracles relies on a notion of the miraculous inherited from Augustine. In *Miracles and the Medieval Mind,* Benedicta Ward explains that "Augustine held that there was only one true miracle, that of creation.... All supposedly mundane things, then, were both 'natural' and 'miraculous' for all things were filled with the miraculous" (3).

[13] See, for example, Gabrielle Spiegel's "History, Historicism, and the Social Logic of the Text" p. 63.

origins of these shortcomings, and therefore must be supplemented by further explanation. To clarify more fully what I have called the curatorial function of modern hagiology, it seems necessary to fully recognize the general scholarly interest in discovering the phenomenal reality behind hagiographic systems of representation. An important corollary to this interest, however, and one that has had a determining influence on modern practice, is the incredible (one might say aberrant) nature of hagiography's historical claims, in a word, their alterity. Hans Robert Jauss has placed the notion of alterity as a feature of interpretation in the centre of medieval studies, mainly as a result of his influential essay "The Alterity and Modernity of Medieval Literature." Following the hermeneutical program inaugurated by Dilthey and developed by Gadamer, Jauss construes interpretation as a dialogic enterprise, one which elides the temporal gap separating ancient and modern "horizons of expectation" by synthesizing a historically informed mode of reception. Thus a hermeneutic approach militates against a "... naive, modernized preunderstanding" by first acknowledging distinct alterity of a cultural artifact and then using that acknowledgement to initialize the interpretive process. Jauss writes:

"[i]n passing through the surprise of otherness, [the

artifact's] possible meaning for us must be sought: the question of a significance which reaches further historically, which surpasses the original communication situation, must be posed" (182).

Essentially, this is a historically conditioned model which uses its historicism to sanction an interpretation transcending narrow temporal boundaries. However, Jauss admits of the possibility of hermeneutic failure, the result of an insuperable sense of alterity. In this case, "... the first aesthetic judgement of unreadability ... [is] incapable of being overcome .... the text, a document which only retains historical value, drops out of the canon of contemporary aesthetic experience" (183).

It is, I would argue, this status of "unreadability" which accounts for the modern treatment of hagiographic texts, as critics have attempted to remedy the situation in various ways. Of course, Jauss's model, designed as it is to facilitate the experience of "aesthetic" texts, must be modified in a way that recognizes the historical interest at stake. The fact of alterity, however, both posing the problem and shaping a solution remains common to any reading of medieval literature, for its reception is inevitably shaped by critical considerations of the time and place of production. The problem of alterity for modern medievalists is

simply the problem of subsuming the often incredible claims made of

saints into the eminently credible versions of medieval history being

constructed at around the turn of this century. In offering a rudimentary

outline, the problem can be sketched out as follows: 1) because they

comprises a large body of original source material, saints' Lives have

become part of a rational inquiry interested primarily in constructing

true accounts of the past, 2) however, many of the claims made in the

Lives are irrational by the standards of rationality that inform the inquiry

in the first place, 3) accordingly, hagiographic evidence cannot be

inserted, transparently as it were, into modern historical accounts

because the miraculous claims of the former challenge the rational and

empirical assumptions of the latter.[14] This assignation of irrationality, of

making patently unbelievable assertions about saintly achievement, is

perhaps one of the most consistent features of modern hagiology, and

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[14] By irrational I mean that claims are made in earnest about humans that clearly
contradict the boundaries of human possibility, for example, in cephalophore stories.
To posit these claims as literally true despite the fact of this contradiction can be
interpreted as an instance of irrational behaviour, assuming that limits on human
biology have remained more or less constant in the last two millennia. I do not
claim, however, to defend this notion of irrationality because clearly it is undermined
by distinctions between, for example, what is a rational belief in late antique Rome
and what is a rational belief in early twentieth century England. Nevertheless, this
notion does seem relevant in discussing modern interpretations of hagiographic
claims, for scholars have generally failed to make this distinction. For a classic
critique of the use of anachronistic evaluative standards, see Peter Winch's *The Idea of
a Social Science.*

not surprisingly it disqualified hagiography as a valid historical source.

The solution, as I have mentioned, involved something of a salvage

operation, in which the wheat was separated from the tares. But more

importantly, the remaining evidence of irrational composition was not

abandoned as hopelessly irredeemable myth; rather, it was used to justify

the custodial role assumed by modern criticism.

It is by no means a great leap to translate this role of custodian

into the role of parent, and such a translation is especially appropriate in

the context of contemporary scholarship. Medieval hagiographers are

often infantilized, implicitly and explicitly, in this scholarship, and it

follows that their wild compositions can be rescued only by the editorial

efforts of a more mature critical audience. Bertram Colgrave expresses

the attitude succinctly when he writes:

> "[t]he age of Bede was primitive in its outlook; it was
>
> naturally credulous and the nature of evidence was but
>
> vaguely understood .... the pious and the simple-minded
>
> were naturally ready to explain a phenomenon as the direct
>
> imposition of God on their behalf or on the behalf of
>
> those who were especially dear to Him, such as his saints
>
> and martyrs. ("Bede's Miracle Stories" 202).

It is difficult here to draw out the distinction between the pious and the simple-minded, for as a group, Christians seem inclined to countenance the fantastic to the point at which it loses its distinction from the mundane. But Colgrave is hardly alone among historians in portraying the "medieval sensibility" as juvenile. George Gordon Coulton ascribes to the medieval historian "... the child's directness of observation and picturesqueness of expression" but disqualifies him from offering any credible account of causal relations (in Barnes 56). It is this parochial vision, which can neither comprehend reality beyond a narrow historical perspective nor see through a crippling religious bias, that characterizes (and stigmatizes) the medieval historians that Coulton and Colgrave have in mind, and as a result, any claim these historians have made about their past must be authenticated by the appropriate modern specialists before it counts as historical knowledge.

In light of this paternal attitude, it should not be surprising that modern scholarship transforms medieval sacred narrative into the site of its own critical agency. Eleanor Duckett is typical in placing on the one hand "simple stories and legends" and on the other "the modern expert in hagiology who hunts in the haystack of legend for the slender needle of historical truth" (11). That Duckett locates this expert "on the other

side" of the material s/he studies suggests a realm of historical truth wholly separated from hagiographic claims. Indeed, it could be argued that the authors of "simple stories and legends" were innocent of the investigative rigour that is supposed to constitute modern historical practice, and therefore they should not be faulted for placing their faith in what we now know to be myths and fables. According to Harry Elmer Barnes, the advent of Christianity made "[c]redulity, especially with respect to the supernatural ... a major intellectual, as well as spiritual, virtue," and consequently history became a theological rather than a factual concern (41).

However, this emphasis on the pristine formal innocence afforded by a context of naive simplicity must be balanced by an understanding of hagiography as a degenerate genre. The *New Catholic Encyclopedia*'s entry concerning hagiography describes the lists of martyrs' names drawn up in "primitive times" for the purpose of commemoration (894), and this sense of original purity has defined the course of its generic evolution. In his *Guide to the Sources of Medieval History*, R. C. Van Caenegem alerts medievalists to hagiography's "law of development", according to which "... the hard core of the *vita*, which was fairly factual and composed by contemporaries and even

eye-witnesses, grew into a net of ornament and legend, where quality

was lost as size increased" (53). Historians determined to use such

potentially unreliable information could take comfort in Van

Caenegem's assurance that, with the proper critical measures in place,

hagiography could be an amenable historical source.

The irony of simplicity now recommending itself as a positive

feature is best expressed in the complete approbation Delehaye grants to

suitably primitive documents:

> Those simple narratives of the heroic age which one would
>
> say were written with a pen dipped in the blood of martyrs,
>
> those unaffected stories, fragrant with religion and
>
> goodness, in which eye-witnesses relate the heroism of
>
> dedicated maidens and ascetics, these call for our
>
> unreserved respect and admiration (xii).

Clearly, the respect and admiration Delehaye endorses is engendered by

the incontestable link between event and narrative, and the privilege he

affords eye-witness testimony not only prefigures Van Caenegem's

comments, but echoes the famous historical method proffered by

Isidore of Seville as well (for Isidore see Beryl Smalley's *Historians in the*

Middle Ages). The synecdoche effected by the "bloody" writing of

genuine documents summarizes Delehaye's attitude in supposing these documents to be presently discernible parts of a larger past reality. The accumulated conventions of hagiography, however, seriously undermine the efforts to represent this reality. Delehaye argues that subjective reports of events are inherently distorted, and this distortion is amplified by the passing of time (14-16). More important than the temporal separation of reality and representation, however, is the deliberate smothering of reality by thematic embellishment and invention, what Delehaye calls the "heavy veil of rhetoric" (xi). In his chapter explaining the development of hagiographic legends, Delehaye attributes this characteristic deformation of reality to the woefully underdeveloped critical faculties of the "popular imagination":

> "[t]he intellectual capacity of the multitude reveals itself on all sides as exceedingly limited .... The best point of comparison by which we can ascertain its level is the intelligence of a child" (16-17). As a consequence of this "childlike" grasp of reality, historical descriptions inevitably eschew specific detail and coherent causality in favour of a reduction to themes and stereotypes, in Delehaye's words, "the personification of an abstraction" (23).

While, as I have already shown, it is precisely the task of hagiologic criticism, as is has traditionally been conceived, to pierce this shroud of convention and repetition and uncover the foundation of historical reality that lies beneath, there is another way of reading this enthusiasm for the simple truth. Given the ostensible alterity of hagiography in general, the attempt to know the truth presents a methodological option that minimizes the strangeness of miracles and the like by foregrounding the continuity of human experience that lies at the heart of numerous saints' Lives. On the surface, this interpretive project seems to agree with the hermeneutic principles outlined by Jauss, for hagiography is thus integrated into our knowledge of the past. It would be more accurate to say, however, that the problem of alterity is solved simply by eliminating the rhetoric of sacred representation from discussions of historical validity. As a result, hagiography speaks to contemporary historicism on the latter's own terms, bereft of any unassimilable expressiveness.[15] The privileging of original documents

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[15] This last claim should be clarified by a specific qualification. Of course, "radical" elements in saints' Lives are not actually eliminated from documents, for to do so would violate basic principles of textual integrity. Instead, these elements are removed from serious historical consideration, and are often relegated to the domain of anthropological interest - e.g. taken as evidence of what passed for history in medieval communities. This removal essentially bifurcates hagiography along historicist lines, and, on Delehaye's model establishes a hierarchy of hagiographic legitimacy, one that has only recently come into question.

sets up the interpretive paradigm, such that accounts exceeding or

confounding the requisite sincerity are targeted for the clarification of

critical exegesis. Of course, this exegesis is itself designed to remedy the

extravagant claims of ingenuous hagiographers; essentially it aims to

restore narrative simplicity to accounts by authors themselves too simple

to properly grasp and render a true appearance of reality.

What emerges from the integration of hagiography and historical

criticism is a concept of truth that is largely a matter of compliance with

current notions of historical mimesis ("current" here being used rather

loosely). The paradox suggested by the duality I have detected in the

notion of simplicity, wherein it connotes both negative and positive

properties, is easily resolved by close attention to detail. The simplicity

of content in early vitae is offered as a reductive model in dealing with

the problem of naively produced excesses in style; the early vitae

prefigure the "kernels" of truth enmeshed in later, more elaborate Lives.

Moreover, the functioning of simplicity within traditional hagiologic

practice conforms to a general paternalistic attitude characterizing the

reception of all hagiographic testimony. On the one hand, the puerile

confusion of fact and fantasy within an apparently historical account

necessitates the intervention of a more discerning examination in order

to disentangle the miscegenation. On the other hand, accounts childlike in their honesty present themselves already within the purview of parental control, and can therefore perform a sort of double function, at once elaborating on our knowledge of the past and confirming this very knowledge as an authentic (because authenticated) mode of historical understanding. However, the demand for this compliance implies both the legitimacy and the stability of how this mimesis is conceived. Hayden White articulates the problem (and it should be noted that this "problem" generally escapes the consideration of hagiologists) when he writes in *Metahistory*:

> ... the whole discussion of the nature of "realism" in literature flounders in the failure to assess critically what a genuinely "historical" conception of "reality" consists of. The usual tactic is to set the "historical" over against the "mythical," as if the former were genuinely *empirical* and the latter were nothing but *conceptual*, and then to locate the realm of the "fictive" between the two poles. (3n., emphasis in the original).

Certainly, this characterization describes the taxonimizing principle of conventional hagiology, a principle that privileges the original over the

merely thematic and recognizes the inherent honesty of plain reports. But as White points out, the extinction of style (or stylization) is by no means a corollary for truth, and in fact a proper reading of a historical text often requires an interpretation of its implicit or explicit stylistic codes.

It would seem then that hagiology, in its encounter with contemporary historiography, has reached something of an impasse. While it is accurate to say that anthropological openings into hagiographic texts offer a suggestive alternative to the reductiveness of the traditional approach, it may be the case that this alternative simply downplays traditional aspirations of isolating the actual from the imaginative, perhaps because the ideal purity of this isolation radically limits what can legitimately be said about saint's Lives.

Still, typically historical concerns are not likely to disappear. For example, Aviad Kleinberg, although willing to admit an interest in the more "fantastic" elements of hagiography, nevertheless maintains that "categories of 'real/fabricated' or 'authentic/inauthentic' are indispensable for historical analysis" (62). I would argue that this attitude has more to do with methodological continuity than anachronism, for hagiologists are only typical of most historians in

trying to determine the substance of the past. That positivist historical inquiry in the twentieth century would confront and overwhelm the alterity of medieval hagiography was perhaps inevitable in the context of the Church's waning control over the form and content of sanctioned knowledge. Patlagean specifically identifies nineteenth century positivism as the impetus for salvage operations (101), and in one sense, this belief system, with its attendant standards of careful investigation and empirical legitimacy, succeeded in displacing mere faith as hagiography's epistemological locus. But questions about the very nature of historical knowledge (as opposed to questions of content within a particular frame of knowing) have effectively usurped the certainty of these convictions, and as a result what we know about hagiography is not entirely clear. It is to this climate of ambivalence and inquiry that I turn in the next chapter.

CHAPTER TWO: HISTORICIZING HAGIOLOGY

Henceforth, it was necessary to begin thinking that there was no center, that the center

could not be thought in the form of a present-being, that the center had no natural site

.... This was the moment when language invaded the universal problematic, the

moment when, in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse ....

(Jacques Derrida, from "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the

Human Sciences" 280)

It's impossible to legislate the way people are going to relate to the past because, above

all, the past is a place of fantasy. It doesn't exist anymore. (Hayden White, from

an interview with Ewa Domanska.

In my last chapter, I made a number of claims about the

historiographic assumptions of hagiology as it has developed in the

twentieth century. Specifically, these claims centred on notions of

narrative veracity in representing historical reality, such that

hagiographic experts have been able to establish an evaluative context in

which to discriminate between true and falsified (or perhaps fancified)

reports of sanctity. Moreover, my description of this context has

adumbrated its paternalistic disposition, a disposition which has defined

the limits of hagiographic expression within the rather narrow

boundaries of what is credible and what is not. While I marshalled

demonstrative evidence in support of these contentions, it is still

necessary to locate my characterization within a broader framework of

historical understanding. Clearly, the attitudes and practices that

construct modern hagiographic knowledge are deeply implicated in and

informed by concurrent notions of what history is and how it comes to

be known. This is not to say that hagiology has placed itself at the heart

of contemporary discussions concerning the philosophy of history; on

the contrary, it seems clear that the profession has been far more

interested in concrete results rather than any abstract theorizing that

would preface and qualify them. It is, however, precisely this relative

indifference to the philosophical underpinnings of its methodology that

compels an exposition of hagiology's implicit historicist principles so as

to comprehend and evaluate these principles in the milieu of a larger

debate. To this end, I shall trace a genealogy of sorts, one that not only

identifies hagiology within the tradition of historical realism, but also

portrays it as one particular response to fundamental questions of time,

presence, and representation.

The discussion of historical writing in the twentieth century is, to the say the least, abundant and complex.[16] It continues a philosophical interest that dates back at least to Aristotle's *Poetics*, and in many ways it is engaged by a self-reflexive examination of the temporal situatedness of its own tradition. Questions of expression and articulation figure prominently in this engagement, as historical accounts are often said (metaphorically speaking) to give voice to the past. Consequently the role of historical language can be seen as a central feature of the discussion, and more specifically, a debate over referentiality emerges in the disputed notion of how language reconstitutes (or constitutes) the past.[17] It should not be surprising that hagiologists by and large have adopted a relatively conservative position given that they understand their task as one of conserving past reality. Nevertheless, recent critiques of the relationship between language and reality, notably those

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[16] For a brief yet illuminating account of developments in twentieth century historiography, see Louis Mink's "Philosophy and Theory of History" in *International Handbook of Historical Studies: Contemporary Research and Theory* ed. Georg G. Iggers and Harold T. Parker.

[17] This is not to say that they are the only issues. Maurice Mandelbaum, for one, rejects the pre-eminence of narrative, especially as it supposes a creative act on the part of the historian. He maintains instead that historical writing is directed primarily by research which is, on his view, a pre-narrative act (414). Nevertheless, knowledge of a human past, much like knowledge of an individual's past, offers itself as a story or series of stories, and narrative structure seems to be an ubiquitous, if not a necessary, feature.

offered by structuralist and post-structuralist theorists, have challenged

the referential link that conflates historical writing and original

experience. In its place they foreground writing itself as the singular

condition of historical experience, arguing that because history is

inescapably immersed in discourse, the reality of the past is entirely

discourse dependent.

Inasmuch as the modern treatment of saints' Lives can be traced

to an origin in the recent work of the Belgian Bollandists and their

eminent leader P. Hippolyte Delehaye, the methodological assumptions

of hagiology can be traced back to the positivism of the mid nineteenth

century.[18] Admittedly, positivism is a loaded term, and the frequency of

its use has tended to undermine the precision of its meaning. For my

purposes (and in conjunction with some of the assertions I made in the

last chapter), historical positivism derives its force from the notion that

the human past is a domain of scientific rather than theological inquiry,

and that this inquiry must therefore surrender any tendentious

preconceptions to the stringent demands of the scientific method.

Positivist thinking, understood as a particular intellectual "movement"

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[18] I speak here of "recent work" because the Bollandist project stretches back to the middle of the seventeenth century and the inaugural efforts of Papebroch (Knowles 24).

rather than a transhistorical methodology, emerges most deliberately in the scientistic sociology of Auguste Comte and, more generally, in the intellectual environment of France in the middle of the nineteenth century (cf. *Dictionary of the History of Ideas* 532-33). It is, however, important to distinguish the relatively modest textual investigations of the Bollandist school from the broad systematizing endeavours of scholars like Comte, Taine, and Buckle (Iggers "Introduction: The Transformation of Historical Studies in Historical Perspective" 4), for although each group is properly understood as committed to the notion of history as an empirical science, hagiologists eschewed abstract schema in favour of more tangible products of inquiry.

Nevertheless, the Bollandists, and hagiologists in general, are properly identified with the desire, characteristic of late nineteenth century intellectual milieu, to displace superstition and ossified religious dogma with genuine facts about the human condition derived from sound research. History, as it was increasingly systematized and entrenched in European and North American university culture, was a prominent enterprise in this milieu, and Herbert Butterfield goes so far as to accord it the intellectual presidency of the century (492). Of course, history's ascendancy owes much to its incipient credibility as an

academic discipline, and increasingly it was seen as a "genetic social science ... concerned with reconstructing ... the past thought and activities of humanity" (Barnes 3). In 1906, the eminent British historian J. B. Bury (himself the author of a monumental study of St. Patrick) declared that "History is a science, no less and no more" (22), and his magisterial pronouncement, part of a speech before an international audience of historians, epitomises the assured attitude of scholars determined to catalogue and taxonimize humanity's past.

The fundamental premise of this sort of pragmatic historicism is that the past can be known empirically rather than metaphysically, can be reconstituted not temporally but epistemologically as a contemporary experience of extant remains. From these remains, and through inductive reasoning, we can then construct an account or series of accounts that represent the past through a function of their referentiality. What makes one account superior to another, according to this understanding, is simply the relative degree of correspondence between account and actuality; that is to say, how well the account accounts for the truth of the event(s) it describes. In this way, the ontology of events, their having happened in one way and not another, is not a function of their accountability; rather, accounts are contingent

upon the events to which they refer.

Of course, any genealogy of nineteenth century historicism should not underestimate the influence of the German historian Leopold von Ranke in establishing the recognition and legitimacy of the scientific attitude.[19] Ranke, in valorizing disinterested archival research, forged a logical connection between past actuality and documentary evidence, one that figures history as the inductively reasoned reconstruction of a single reality (Tillinghast 20-21). It was Ranke's confidence in the factual certainty afforded by original documents that legitimized his goal of representing the past *wie es eiglentlich gewesen* ("exactly as it happened" quoted in *Leopold von Ranke and the Shaping of the Historical Discipline* xiv), and can also be held to account for his rejection of positivism's efforts to reduce historical phenomena to instances of broad socio-cultural laws (White, *Metahistory* 164). This rejection of positivistic generalizations, however, does not count as a refutation of history's scientific aspirations, but rather focuses the attention of these

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[19] It is likewise important, however, not to overestimate his influence. Georg Iggers sees Ranke as one of the definitive figures in the mature development of a critical method itself inaugurated by an earlier generation of historians, philologists, classicists, and Bible-scholars. Furthermore, according to Iggers, this critical method was "easily exported and adapted by historians in other countries" such that it "became the common property of honest historical scholars everywhere" (*The German Conception of History: The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present* 3-4).

aspirations on historical events themselves. For Ranke, and for the historic sensibility in which he was situated, an accurate depiction of these events was the purpose of historical writing, and this purpose could be served only by a careful and exhaustive interpretation of documentary evidence.

In this way, the Bollandists were of a piece with contemporary developments in historiography. David Knowles, in his history of monastic scholarship, describes Charles De Smedt, the de facto leader of the Belgian order as belonging to "the scientific and critical world of the nineteenth century" (23). Under De Smedt's guidance, a number of editorial practices were adopted in order to meet the requirements of modern criticism: "[t]exts were to be presented ... after a complete assembly and classification of manuscripts, and with a full apparatus criticus that would satisfy the philologist as well as the higher critic" (24). This emphasis on methodological rigour, on satisfying specific technical criteria established outside of the domain of strictly historical research, illustrates the scientific intent of hagiologic inquiry as it developed in the intellectual climate of nineteenth century Europe, and this intent is perhaps nowhere more carefully elucidated than in Hippolyte Delehaye's precise and prescriptive *The Legends of the Saints*.

Delehaye offers his treatise as a brief yet detailed lesson in the scientific

handling of saints' Lives (ix), thereby conferring upon his subject matter

a certain ontological stability. Stated plainly, the past is simply there,

transmitted by truthful documents to the discerning scholar. As with

any science, the conclusions reached by the scientific hagiologist are

supported by a reliable methodology. Ultimately, it is documentary

evidence that constrains historical knowledge as, specifically

hagiographic claims are often confirmed or disconfirmed by comparison

to related and roughly contemporaneous sources. The resonance with

the Rankean inclination for archival research, with its benefit of palpable

knowledge, is obvious. The introduction to the Bollandist *Biblioteca*

hagiographica latina, for example, explains that "[i]t is not infrequent for

more trustworthy or older evidence to be found in a chronicle, in annals

or some similar work, in a poem, an epitaph or an inscription" (in

Delehaye, xvi).

Configured in this way, the hagiographic past emerges through a

complex and interrelated web of documentation, and takes on the shape

of what Thomas Heffernan, in his revisionist study of hagiology and

hagiography, calls a "vast frozen planet littered with time's unchanging

debris" (40). The objectual nature of this sort of historical study not

surprisingly can account for Delehaye's conception of hagiology as an

objective science, one that is empirical and impartial precisely because it

studies only the objects produced by religious communities.[20] Dominick

LaCapra finds in this emphasis on "hard" facts the basis for what he

designates the documentary model of history, a model wherein:

> [t]he historical imagination is limited to plausibly filling
>
> gaps in the record, and 'throwing new light' on phenomena
>
> requires the discovery of hitherto unknown information ....
>
> all sources tend to be treated in narrowly documentary
>
> terms, that is, in terms of factual or referential propositions
>
> that may derived from them to provide information about
>
> specific times and places (18).

In this passage, LaCapra captures much of what defines the historical

treatment of saints' Lives, especially in the notion of strict factual or

referential evaluation. Hagiographic documents framed by this critical

context are read not as deliberate instances of textual veneration but as

inadvertent and inevitable temporal mediation. In view of the pragmatic

and level-headed attitude that characterizes the hagiologist's

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[20] Paul Zumthor speculates that the appeal of the Middle Ages to medievalists lies in its perceived stability and knowability, features that allow medievalists to say with confidence "It happened like that" (10).

self-appointed task, the parties of this mediation are not the faithful and

their celestial deity, but rather the scholar and his/her real human past.

This unswerving devotion to conservative historical realism, I would

argue, characterizes the bulk of mainstream writing on saints' Lives in

this century, and the case of St. Patrick provides a fairly typical if, at

times, a somewhat belligerent example.[21] Recent scholarly investigations

have attempted to disentangle the various elements of Patrician history

and legend, intending thereby to establish an incontestable historical

account. The ensuing debates have focused mainly on the chronology

and consequences of Patrick's mission in Ireland, and in some cases, the

very connection of the name "Patrick" with its traditional historical

referent has been called into question. John Morris describes the

revisionist scholarship as "unusual and bizarre" (in Hood 15), but his

perfunctory dismissal only illustrates a sense of the frayed temperament

and strained tolerance that plagues Patrician studies. The "traditional"

account (J. B. Bury, Ludwig Bieler, Ryan, Shaw, Grosjean), placing

Patrick in Ireland from 432 to his death in 461, has been challenged by

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[21] I have chosen the discussions of St. Patrick as an example of hagiologists at work
in large part because the Irish saint is much discussed. I would, however, qualify the
exemplary nature of these discussions with the acknowledgment that Patrick's
prominence in a fiercely Catholic country has at times imbued them with a rather
atypical fervour and rancour. Nevertheless, the participants in Patrician scholarship
agree unanimously that their debates will be settled only by the most stringent

time frames such as 462 - 493 (O'Rahilly) and 456 - 493 (Carney), and as

a result the historical primacy of Patrick's baptismal mission is no longer

a certainty. Indeed, the account of Patrick's very existence is

enormously complicated by Thomas O'Rahilly's notion of the "two

Patricks." While claiming ancient origins for his theory (8-14), O'Rahilly

essentially inaugurates the contemporary controversy by exposing a

(supposedly) erroneous confluence of two persons into one saint.

Palladius, the initial ambassador from Rome, arrived in Ireland in 431

and died in 461 - Patrick succeeded Palladius and died in (about) 492 (8

and passim).[22] O'Rahilly makes his claim on the basis of an ancient

record listing Patrick's death in 491 or 492. As a result, O'Rahilly

contends that much of the achievement accorded to "Patrick" truly

belongs to Palladius; that both men were called Patricius explains the

confusion (9-10), yet also begins the dispute (in this century, at least).For

traditionalists such as Bury and Bieler, the "two Patrick" theories offer

little interest. More passionate commentators, Frs. Ryan and Shaw for

example, take O'Rahilly to task for his "naivety" and "weak arguments"

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adherence to the historical facts of the matter.

[22] Mario Esposito, taking his cue from O'Rahilly, claims that the second Patrick (presumably the Patrick of popular veneration) actually preceded Palladius by about forty years, and remained only a minor priest because of because of a quarrel with his superiors (in Binchy 30). For a more complete account of multiple Patrick theories, see D. A. Binchy's exhaustive *Patrick and His Biographers, Ancient and Modern*

(in Binchy 15, 28). Shaw argues for the precedence of sacred observation over revisionist speculation when he claims that "the right to celebrate is at stake" (in Binchy 7). D. A. Binchy, himself a "secular" historian, faults the Jesuits for eschewing a "dispassionate and objective treatment" of the issue, answering their appeals to doctrinal authority with indictments of prejudiced reasoning (17). The resulting stalemate serves only to illustrate what is typically an intuitive gap between epistemologies of faith and reason. In his critique of Ryan and Shaw, Binchy inevitably accords the empirical approach a transparent methodology, such that only a disinterested investigation of the facts (as opposed to a justification of a priori conclusions) generates a narrative re-presentation of past events. The prevailing standards of scientific hagiology bear out Binchy's argument, for at issue in the debate, Fr. Shaw's admonition aside, are questions of evidence and inference, questions that seek answers in the records that are supposed to trace the reality of Patrick's life.

The centre of the Patrician debate is staked out by an overarching concern for authentic and or authoritative manuscript evidence, and this concern illustrates the technique hagiologic historicism. The ability to establish an accurate picture of the past is generally understood to be a

consequence of eliminating any spurious or fanciful evidence from consideration and then allowing the past to speak for itself. Delehaye recommends that accounts of sainthood undergo an exacting interrogation, for hagiographers themselves are not to be trusted (55-56). In the case of Patrick, disputes arise out of the treatment of his two hagiographers, Muirchu and Tirachan. John Morris sees Muirchu as a "sober biographer" and uses his account to support an orthodox rendering of Patrick's life. In contrast, O'Rahilly's revisionist thesis derives its force from his use of alternative sources, sources that purportedly expose the traditional canon as historically fraudulent.

Both the volubility and the critical orientation of the Patrician debate ably demonstrate Lawrence Stone's contention that professionalized history in the early part of this century was for the most part "myopic and inward-turned," the result of an inordinate interest in increasingly minute historical details (11). The quarrel over Ireland's patron saint is characterized by nothing so much as its petty bickering, wherein participants routinely depict their opponents as confused if not genuinely obtuse. Moreover, this instance of hagiologic controversy corresponds to Stone's disparaging depiction of the conventional early twentieth century historicist methodology, wherein "all that was needed

to establish Truth was to cleave faithfully to the facts gleaned from the archives" (6). This notion, so clearly at the heart of so much modern hagiology, has nevertheless been subject to a number of penetrating critiques of late, to the extent that a "just the facts" historicism seems philosophically untenable. Hayden White, certainly one of the most trenchant recent commentators, places the discussion in its full ontological context when he contends that the past simply does not exist. Of course, this idea might seem merely tautological; to be past is in an important way not to be at all. Traditional historians might then respond to White that they have never presumed to somehow truly reclaim their subject, . They work instead with the surviving evidence of the past, constructing historical narratives that fill out this evidentiary structure with reasonable hypotheses, hypotheses which are themselves limited by the evidence that engenders them.[23] Yet it is precisely this narrative aspect that problematizes our stories about the past. Louis O. Mink describes the primary assumption underwriting the narrativizing of

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[23] Nancy Partner regards historical evidence as "a major trope, a figure of speech and thought which organizes and extends the visible present world to induce the invisible past into intelligible form" (105). The particular trope she has in mind is metonymy, and indeed evidence exists as evidence only inasmuch as it contributes to a metonymic relationship between past and present. Accordingly, any empirical method of constructing the past must acknowledge its tropological use of evidence, wherein evidence does not speak the past so much as it engenders the vocabulary and grammar of any present discourse directed towards the past.

history as a manifestation of the notion of "Universal History," wherein "historical actuality itself [is taken to have] narrative form, which the historian does not invent but discovers, or attempts to discover" (188). While Mink credits Vico's *Scienza nuova* with the modern articulation of Universal History, its characteristic concepts of research and discovery conform to the scientistic presumptions of nineteenth and early twentieth century historiography. Lionel Gossman has said of this historiography that its primary interest lay not in questions of historical writing but in questions of historical knowledge, and indeed the main thrust of this retrenching can be seen as an attempt to sever the traditional connections between literature (i.e. poetics) and history (7). Thus the American historian John Martin Vincent, writing in the early part of this century, offers some fairly orthodox advice when he warns his fellow practitioners away from literary design, declaring instead that "[t]he scientific imagination will find itself fully occupied in supplying the missing facts which logically must have occurred, rather in the invention of things which will best fill out an artistic plot or a moving description" (305).

Hayden White locates the beginning of the desire for history as pure denotation in the mid-nineteenth century concern for a plain

narrative style, one through which the past could be seen. He calls this

attack on rhetoric merely an unacknowledged rhetorical choice that

served to "obscure the problem of linguistic encodation which, up till

then, rhetorical theory had kept alive to the consciousness of historians

and their readers alike" (*Theories of History* 6). More specifically, this

attack sidesteps the apparently ineluctable gap between immediate

presence and linguistic representation by supposing that the move from

rhetorical flourish to scientific precision effectively places the historian

in the presence of the past. And yet the dilemma remains, if only

because the inevitable demands of style always betray the otherness of

writing, its distinct ontology of reference within the realm of experience.

Mink reminds us that "narrative form in history, as in fiction, is an

artifice, the product of an individual imagination" (199), but this

imagination often seems intent on disguising the contingent nature of its

own productions. The intuitive conviction that historical narration is a

perfectible endeavour, if only a properly disinterested tone is adopted,

seems predicated on the even stronger conviction that things in the past

have happened in one way and in no others. Indeed, this is perhaps the

foundational assumption of thought directed towards the past, and the

notion of epistemological certainty derives much of its strength from the

belief that time unfolds along a single (and therefore singularly knowable) line. But the supposition of a perfectible rhetoric presupposes the condition of referential fidelity, one that guarantees a meaningful connection between writing about the past and its putative extralinguistic subject. It is precisely this connection that has of late been cast into doubt.

The idea that language fails to refer to anything outside of itself is perhaps the most extreme consequence of the so-called "linguistic turn" that has influenced the direction of inquiry in many areas of the humanities.[24] Certainly, it is difficult to adequately describe or characterize the linguistic turn, in part because of self-reflexive doubts concerning the descriptive efficacy of language itself. When Jacques Derrida writes of language's "invasion," he signals the breakdown of a fundamental ontological boundary, one that would maintain a discernible distinction between an object and its description. The loss of the concept of centre as a natural site (i.e. preceding both

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[24] As is often the case with intellectual movements or moments, it is difficult to ascertain the "beginning" of the so -called linguistic turn. Nevertheless, a brief account of its development in the twentieth century appears in Martin Jay's "Should Intellectual History Take a Linguistic Turn? Reflections on the Habermas - Gadamer Debate" in *Modern European Intellectual History: Reappraisals and New Perspectives* ed. Dominick LaCapra and Steven L. Kaplan. Also, Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* recounts the traditional conception of language's descriptive or reporting function for the purpose of undermining its legitimacy.

consciousness and articulation) essentially collapses being and language into an undifferentiated state of discourse, and, more importantly for this discussion, imperils the status of history as a kind of knowledge mediated by but ultimately prior to language.[25]

Of course, this critique of what can be called historical being antedates Derrida's attention to issues such as logocentrism and representation. Martin Jay traces its development within the Anglo-American, French, and German philosophical traditions, detecting among them substantial differences yet seeing in all of them the rejection of language operating as a neutral and transparent medium of historical reportage (87-90). According to Jay, the Anglo-American orientation, defined by such figures as Wittgenstein, Ryle, and Austin, construes language as a "complex human activity," one which joins speakers and hearers (or writers and readers) in an intersubjective dialogue characterized by intention and interpretation (87-88). It would seem then that the shape of the resulting historical consciousness emerges in part in the explications of historians' linguistic actions, such that the textualization of human events is in fact part of larger

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[25] Josue V. Harari depicts Derridean deconstruction as, in part, a radical critique of representation, wherein the natural relationship between language and being is ruptured, thereby repudiating linguistic recapitulation of original presence (29 -30).

epistemological exchange between past and present modes of representation. Similarly, the hermeneutic approach fashioned by Dilthey, Gadamer, Jauss, et al. turns on the notion of intersubjectivity, of an interpretive capability occasioned by what Gadamer calls the fusion of horizons. Gadamer's enormous influence on the hermeneutic project, however, has foregrounded the implications of history's mediation through a historically situated textuality, one that itself shapes any conception of the past and moreover withholds from that conception any claim to the original meaning of cultural phenomena (Jay 97).[26]

On Jay's account of the linguistic turn in the formulation of history, it would seem that one of the legacies of both ordinary language philosophy in England and North America and hermeneutics in Germany has been the preservation of some notion of a past reality made accessible (to varying degrees) through language. In addition, this turn has had the effect of tempering what now appears as the overweening confidence of figures like Bury and Ranke, for historians

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[26] Unfortunately, the brevity of my sketch of the linguistic turn along national lines supposes both an insularity and a homogeneity that do not apply to the orientations under discussion. Jay's elucidation of the dispute between Gadamer and Jurgen Habermas over the appropriate direction of intellectual history illustrates but one instance of an atmosphere charged with contention and debate.

no longer see themselves as recuperating the past in the full presence of its original actuality. The American philosopher Arthur Danto typifies this de-mystification of the historical enterprise while at the same time asserting its more modest (and likely more attainable) goals when he characterizes historical reference as "simply reference in a certain temporal direction relative to the referring expression itself" (315). For Danto, sentences purporting to be historically accurate are no different from other sentences purporting to be accurate about contemporary (or even atemporal) states of affairs in their susceptibility to correspondence and verification, and therefore historians are simply individuals interested in constructing true stories about past events (25). Thus it is true that this theoretical configuration of history demonstrates an apparent affinity with the Rankean aim to tell the story of the past as it really happened, in other words, to get the story right. Morton White, in his carefully reasoned *The Foundations of Historical Knowledge*, claims that the contemporary philosopher of history "is more interested in analyzing historical thought and language" than in "seeking to chart the development of epochs, cultures, and civilizations" (2). He then tries to resolve the fundamental methodological dispute between positivists and idealists by absorbing the two positions into a more comprehensive

outlook: "Each group exaggerated a genuine aspect of historical investigation, for the simple truth is that history reports facts, employs general knowledge, and depends to some extent on value judgements consciously or unconsciously made" (3-4).

However, at around the same time that White articulated his moderate realist principles (1965), Roland Barthes, in rejecting the theory of reference favoured by Danto and White, put forth the notion that:

> the 'fact' [in history] can only exist linguistically, as a term in discourse, yet we behave as if it were a simple reproduction of something on another plane of existence altogether, some extra-structural 'reality.' Historical discourse is presumably the only kind which aims at a referent 'outside' itself that in fact can never be reached (153).

According to Geoff Bennington and Robert Young, Barthes's analysis points out the "sleight of hand" of historical writing, whereby "... the referent, is projected into a realm supposedly beyond signification, from which position it can be thought to precede and determine the discourse that posits it as referent" (3). Of course, to accept Barthes's argument is

to abandon the epistemological relationship (and the ontological

distinction) between historical discourse and historical reality, for

following the surrender of "some extra-structural reality," discourse is all

that remains. Additionally, the principle of historical truth or accuracy

loses its force if referential/representational language is severed from a

corresponding pre-discursive field of events, a field whose temporal

precedence would seem to authorize the factual restrictions it imposes

on historical reports. Inevitably, history according to this model of

linguistic arrangement relinquishes its privileged status as truth about the

past, truth that affords its audience a genuine relationship with an absent

object of reference; instead, historical beliefs come to be wholly about

language rather than any reality at once lying behind this language

(sanctioning its subordinate referential presence) and materializing

within it as a consequence of a literal transformation or translation.

This ostensible loss of history as the verbal or textual

representation of a vanished past is itself a notion not lost on

contemporary historians.[27] Gabrielle Spiegel identifies the "dissolution

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[27] This is not to say, however, that historians have en masse abandoned the profession of history as it is commonly understood. As Mary R. Anderson points out, a significant gap usually separates "the creative edge of thought in the historical profession and its incorporation into the classroom [or, I would add, the archives]" (567). In fact, practicing historians like Spiegel and Partner are not concerned primarily with *post mortem* evaluations but rather with articulating a new

of the materiality of the sign, its ruptured relation to extralinguistic

reality" with "the dissolution of history" because language can account

for no presence other than its own (63). Nancy Partner would seem to

agree, acknowledging the "silent shared conspiracy of all historians ... to

talk about the past as though it were really 'there,'" and contending, in a

passage clearly reminiscent of Barthes, that the "whole of historical

discourse is calculated to induce a sense of referential reality in a

conceptual field with no external reference at all" (97). Moreover,

Barthes cannot be dismissed as an aberrant French intellectual, one

whose speculations have exercised an inordinate and bizarre influence

on recent historiography; rather, he should be understood as but one

figure among many situated in what Hayden White calls "[r]ecent

theories of discourse [that dissolve] the distinction between [the]

realistic and [the] fictional ..." (*The Content of the Form* x). More

specifically, Barthes's comments demonstrate structuralism's

supervening interest in the organization of accounts of phenomena

rather than phenomena themselves. It follows from this interest that

historical narratives, far from being a transparent medium of reference,

emerge as the very subject under investigation, and language, as a

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understanding of historical writing in the wake of structuralist and post -structuralist
criticism.

deliberately structured system of signs, is seen essentially as a

self-contained field of semiotic relations. Documents or "source

materials," be they manuscript versions of a Life, eyewitness reports

from the trial of a martyr, or records of a canonization procedure, are

no longer taken as indicative of some prior non-verbal reality. Instead,

historical texts themselves, constituting the only legible manifestation of

a presence no longer present, become heir to the genuinely historical

interest.

While it is true that Barthes and others make a compelling

argument in undermining more traditional conceptions of history, my

purpose here is not to adjudicate the disputes between various strains of

twentieth century historiography, but rather to point out that these

disputes have had little if any bearing on the concomitant practice of

hagiology. A consistently conservative intellectual posture seems to

have ensured hagiology's immunity from any methodological

self-reflexivity, such that the instructions Delehaye gives in the fourth

chapter of *The Legends of the Saints* - "The Classification of

Hagiographical Texts" - have become something of a methodological

canon for scholars. C. H. Lawrence, in his study of St. Edmund of

Abingdon, illustrates this orthodoxy when he laments the absence of a

critical examination of the documents, both administrative and

hagiographical, that communicate the details of Edmund's life. He

prefaces his own attempt at such an examination with the claim that

"the working out of the hagiographical tradition is an essential

preliminary to placing Edmund in his proper place in the history of the

thirteenth century" (2).[28] Clearly, Lawrence's desire to place Edmund in

history implies the historical past as a tangible locus or context of causes

and effects, a coherent and complex system of relations obtaining

between the events of history themselves (as opposed to between their

descriptions). The documents related to Edmund, and relating him to

us, are a part of this system, and, properly handled, they allow for an

enhanced view of a distinct part of the known past.

But the shift of focus from phenomena to structure (or to text,

understood as a self-contained symbolic structure) signalled within

recent literary theory supposes as its corollary a radical discontinuity

between experience and its representation in language, one that

designates language as primarily constitutive rather than descriptive

(Harari 22). Of course, this designation strikes a fatal blow to the

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[28] For the influence of Delehaye, see *The Legends of the Saints*, 89-92. Delehaye's prioritized schema for the classification of documents enables Lawrence to disentangle the strands of history and legend that comprise Edmund's documentary existence.

documentary approach of Delehaye, Lawrence, et al., for it refutes the

metonymic authority of evidence as the extant part of a lapsed whole, a

part from which the whole can be reconstructed. Historians in general

(and hagiologists in particular, as my canvassing of the Patrician

controversy illustrates) suppose they are in some way reconstructing the

actual past, yet it seems difficult to maintain that the past admits of any

intrinsic design that can then be re-constructed by even the most

meticulous investigation. Historical narrative, and this point has been

made repeatedly by both Hayden White and Louis Mink, is therefore

not describing so much as inscribing something; namely, order.[29] The

"leap of faith" which, according to Partner, bridges the distance

separating "present text and past reality" (106) is imperilled by serious

philosophical doubts about the necessary connections between writing

and reality.

However, these doubts are hardly unique to recent literary and

historiographic theory. The contemporary philosopher Paul Ricoeur,

trying to specify the nature of the elusive debt the historian owes the

past, observes that it is precisely the past that is always absent from

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[29] For Mink, this order is cognitive, whereas for White it has a stronger aesthetic or tropological connotation.

historical discourse (2). On the face of it, this observation seems rather

facile, but in fact it constitutes the essence of a profound and venerable

inquiry into the nature of time, one that has occupied a central place in

Christian philosophy for over a millennia. Augustine can arguably be

credited with inaugurating (or at least precisely articulating) the

archetypically Christian conception of time, one which takes its

epistemological cue from the temporal distance separating the knower

and the known. Surely one the most profound and searching

discussions of the nature of time occurs in the eleventh book of the

Confessions, wherein Augustine introduces his meditation through a

series of questions: "Lord, since eternity is Thine, art Thou ignorant of

what I say to Thee? or dost Thou see in time, what passeth in time ...?"

These questions, which certainly do not anticipate an answer, are

offered not as mere rhetorical flourish, but in acknowledgement of the

dilemma that confronts humanity in relating to a deity whose being

constitutes an eternal presence. As Augustine puts it:

> Thou precedest all things past, by the sublimity of an
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> ever-present eternity; and surpassest all future because they
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> are future, and when they come, they shall be past; but
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> Thou art the Same, and Thy years fail not. Thy years

neither come nor go; whereas ours both come and go, that they all may come (70).

Whether or not God "see[s] in time what passeth in time," it is clear to Augustine that divine knowledge is in no way contingent on the fact of this vision. As Eugene Vance has observed, the mind of God according to Augustine's conception "knows the totality of time as pure presence to itself" (23).

If, on the one hand this unique ubiquity constitutes God's utter removal from the problem of historical knowledge, it serves on the other to accentuate humanity's necessarily limited access to the past. For Augustine, humans seem at once confined to an infinite present and hemmed in on both sides by past and future, such that the present moment is forever suspended between poles of anticipation and loss. It would seem in this situation that knowledge about the past is forever poised on the edge of an epistemic abyss, always receding further into the nebulous terrain of temporal displacement. But this dilemma arises only if the human self is seen as a radically limited agent within time, overcome by its inexorable (and seemingly unknowable / and therefore barely knowable) passage from present to past / unable to overcome the inevitable loss of presence. Augustine foregoes this limitation by shifting

from temporality as exterior and objective to consciousness as interior

and subjective in defining the nature of time, thereby asserting the

prerogative of an indivisible present:

Nor is it properly said 'there be three times, past, present, and to come':

yet perchance it might be properly said, 'there be three times; a present

of things past, a present of things present, and a present of things

future.' for these three do exist in some sort, in the soul, but

otherwhere do I not see them; present of things past, memory; present

of things present, sight; present of things future, expectation (72) .

Following this formulation, the self is not rooted in time, bound by its

passage and loss, but rather time is figured as an extension of the self, of

consciousness translating temporality into the language of the soul.

Here the self experiences time as it distends itself in the direction of the

past or the future, engendering what Vance calls "moments of presence

in the mind and of the mind to itself" (20-21) and therefore instantiating

these moments as intramental equivalents of the reality one presently

"sees."[30] In effect, the mind seeks to comprehend within itself the

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[30] Although Augustine speaks of time both past and future, it is only the former that
interests me here. Therefore I shall skirt the very difficult question of how future
moments are known and how this knowledge compares to our knowing the past. It
would seem that a fundamental ontic distinction separates memory and expectation,
and Augustine himself says that the future cannot be known as a reality in itself.
Once again the difference between divine and human knowledge emerges, for as the

consequences of the displacement it perceives as it "moves" through time by represencing itself through memory.

This understanding of time and its manifestations offers profound implications for the reading of saints' Lives as historical texts, inasmuch as these Lives participate in an imitation of Christ. As Augustine proclaims, the Son of God is not merely the consequence of a historical moment, deposited into time by a human act of generation, but rather He exists co-eternally with the Father beyond the beginning and end of time (231). But the Son became flesh, became at some point in time Jesus the son of Mary, and therefore he committed himself to a temporally limited existence within human history. It is this profound duality of being in and out of time, at once eternal and historical, that constitutes the paradox of the Incarnation, and hagiography, as a form of veneration and representation, constitutes a sustained response to the challenge of this paradox. The life of Christ, or more specifically the lives of Christ communicated by the Gospels, enact(s) a kind of "terministic bridge" (to borrow Kenneth Burke's expression) whereby transcendence of the realm immediately visible is achieved by being

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doctrine of predestination points out, the entirety of time, which we can experience only diachronically, exists simultaneously in the mind of God.

viewed in terms of a realm beyond it.[31] The "terms" of the gospel texts are therefore not "dead letters" indicative of some reality now past; instead, they are themselves the site of this transcendence, fusing presence and representation in a relationship that offers the actuality of divine vision over the paltry emulation that is memory and expectation. Ultimately, Christ unites two modes of comprehending time, heretofore radically distinct, in the double nature of the Word made flesh, and moreover, he offers a model of transcendence that infuses the human (and therefore historical) experience of time with the total presence of divinity. Hagiography, as an equally textual phenomena, imitates the life of Christ in precisely this duality, marking the irruptions of eternity within the mundane realm of mortality and loss. On this specifically Incarnational model, saints' Lives can be read as coming to terms with history in a particularly transcendental fashion, positioning themselves through writing within a space that marks itself against the difference of temporality.

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[31] The phrase "terministic bridge" comes from Burke's "I, Eye, Aye - Concerning Emerson's Early Essay on 'Nature,' and the Machinery of Transcendence." In The *Rhetoric of Religion*, Burke expands on this notion: "'Words' in the first sense have a wholly naturalistic, empirical reference. But they may be used anagogically, to designate a further dimension, the 'supernatural.' Whether or not there is a realm of the supernatural, there are words for it" (7). For Burke, language mediates the relationship between natural and supernatural realms, but it also facilitates their mutual assimilation through the reciprocity of referring terms.

CHAPTER THREE: INCARNATION AND IMITATION

*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have
beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father* (John 1:14)

*It is clear that it is better to talk about the life of the Fathers than the lives, because,
though there may be some difference in their merits and virtues, yet the life of one body
nourished them all in the world.* (Gregory the Great, quoted in Jones, 62)

The idea of the *imitatio Christi* is perhaps the greatest single

commonplace in both the writing of and about saints' Lives, to the

extent that it has been used with equal facility to explain the

accomplishments and the shortcomings of the genre. Gregory the Great

conveys the significance of this imitative function as it relates to

nomenclature, for it seems conceptually (if not practically) conceivable

that the entire company of saints live but one life, the life of Christ. It is

this notion of unity that prompts Alexandra Hennessey Olsen to write

"[t]he life of every saint is a reflection of that of Christ and must

accordingly follow a predetermined pattern" (411). The variety of

pattern and design that then ensues from this determination is often

thought to constitute hagiography's literary merit (Olsen 415).

However, the seemingly endless repetition that follows upon imitation has inspired a multitude of critics as well. James Whitby Earl, sounding a note that appears repeatedly in hagiologic work, declares "[o]nce you've read one saint's Life, you've read them all" (11).[32]

It would, however, be precipitous to endorse one of these views over the other on the assumption that either adequately captures the significance of imitation in sacred biography. Hagiography functions not in spite of repetition nor is repetition to be rationalized as some kind of primitive aesthetic genius; it is instead a fundamental theological motive and as such informs the writing of saints' Lives at a basic level of textual praxis. The anonymous author of the Life of St. Gregory demonstrates the simple necessity of this motive when he accounts for the occurrence of some rather familiar miracles in his vita:

> [a]nd neither should anyone be offended if any of these
>
> deeds were actually done by some other of the saints, since
>
> the holy apostle, through the mystery of one body with its
>
> members the saints, by comparing it with the living body

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[32] I should note that Earl mitigates the dismissive tone of his assertion later in his study, when he develops an intriguing and nuanced reading of hagiographic representation as it relates to thematic repetition in iconographic painting (60 -64).

has so brought them into union that we should attribute to each member the works of the other in turn (in Jones 118).

To even the most obtuse modern sensibility, this admonition must surely sound astonishing, for it repudiates concepts of individual responsibility and factual reporting that are taken to be indispensable to true historical accounts. Nevertheless the rationale is clear: the body of Christ extends itself as a supervening identity, encompassing the human membership of the saints and effacing any requisite particulars that would distinguish the deeds of one saint from those of another. In addition to explaining an admittedly unusual element in the rhetoric of sanctity, this passage exemplifies a theory of time and event that characterizes hagiography's unique representational intentions; namely, the joining of heaven and earth and the union of history and eternity. Of course, it is only the Incarnation of the Word, the historical becoming of an eternal presence, that could animate and endorse this intent, and it is my contention that any adequate understanding of hagiography, especially from a historicist perspective, must incorporate the profound influence of the Word made flesh as a model for the writing of sanctity.[33]

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[33] While it is my belief that this influence has been central in determining the evolution of hagiography since its origin, it nevertheless does not comprise a general

Hagiography is then, I shall argue, a product of the referential

fidelity made possible by the fact, at once historical and theological, of

the Incarnation. The imitative nature of saints' Lives is not, for

example, merely an anthropological feature of a collective (and, as

Delehaye would point out, overwhelmingly naive) effort to articulate the

power of Christian sacrifice, nor is it simply typical of a religious

movement attempting to establish or reinforce its spiritual (and political)

ascendancy within the realm of human concerns. While I would hardly

maintain that these explanations are irrelevant to any discussion of

hagiography, I would contend that their preoccupation with the social

dynamics of sacred biography often has the effect of obscuring or

neglecting the relationship between imitation and Incarnation.

Admittedly, this theme has on occasion attracted astute scholarly

attention. Thomas Heffernan, for example, explores the relationship

between the imitation of Christ and martyrdom and declares forthrightly

that the "doctrine of the imitatio Christi and the literary types it gave

birth to form the foundation for the development of sacred biography"

(217). He connects this foundational character to what is in retrospect

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theory of hagiography, one that admits few if any exceptions. Such a theory is difficult to conceive simply because of the complexity and diversity of the symbolic activity involved.

the extraordinary literal-mindedness of the early Christian communities,

whose members believed that to imitate Jesus was to imitate "on earth,

in their flesh and blood, the God of Abraham and Moses" (216). And

while the "history" of hagiography has more often been evaluated in

isolation from its Christological context, legitimized primarily in its

function as a repository of facts and evidence, the constancy of this

imitative motif compels a thoughtful and detailed consideration.[34]

Instances of imitation are perhaps the most obvious features, prior to

any careful investigation, in the Lives of well known saints. Cyprian,

tied to a stake and about to be engulfed by fire, is stabbed in the side by

an executioner and the blood that flows forth extinguishes the flames.

Aelred of Riveaulx, lying on his deathbed, reiterates Christ's final words

on the cross (Matt. 23:46) before passing on. Francis is visited with the

stigmata two years before his death (the stigmata, in these cases

invisible, is also associated with Catherine of Siena and Teresa of Avila).

Stephen, who is, according to the "Acts of the Apostles," the first

martyr, forgives his executioners even as they stone him and then

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[34] The eventual proliferation of saints, both "official" and "unofficial," coupled with their innumerable instances of healing and other intercessions might seem to diminish the exceptional lives and deaths of earlier holy men and women. Thus the notion of imitation is often seen (wrongly, I think) as undermining the singular and miraculous nature of the Incarnation itself. It is in this context that Delehaye stigmatizes the ubiquitous use of Christological content in hagiography.

commends his spirit to God. In each case, a detail (or series of details) explicitly recalls the life of Christ, but in so doing seems to contradict the sense of individuality and distinction that we normally associate with realistic representation.

In his deliberate acquiescence to the consequences of his faith, Stephen is arguably the first bona fide Christian saint, for it is this act of renunciation that serves to define the genre of hagiography for roughly the next thousand years. It is in the scene of his of martyrdom that we find the commitment to Christ's model most powerfully expressed, and as David Loades observes, "[f]or a person to sacrifice his or her own life for the faith is to practice the imitatio Christi in a very special sense" (xv). But more importantly, Stephen, as he appears in Acts, appears as an identity entirely displaced by, or perhaps infused with, the identity of Christ. The lengthy monologue he delivers before the council of Jewish elders, far from offering any personal insight or sentiment, serves only to rehearse the Biblical history of prophecy that has culminated in the advent of Jesus and the New Kingdom. Moreover, his death resonates literally with the sentiments recorded in Matthew, and it is this literary invocation, the matching up of one text with its prototypical source, that communicates Stephen's death as a reiteration of a paradigmatic (or, in

terms of Christian salvation, the paradigmatic) act. Heffernan construes

the dynamic of martyrdom in its larger political context such that the

single martyr, in his or her complete defiance of civil proscription,

promotes the eschatological theology of the entire Church (220).

Clearly, Christian martyrs figured themselves into a community of faith

engendered by Christ's triumphant resurrection and consequently

attempts at intervention or deterrence by civil authorities, no matter

how severe, fostered rather than disrupted this imaginative integration.

In effect, the Church could not but succeed, for the death of every

martyr served only to amplify the principle of eternal life established by

Christ.

Despite the political and theological significance of individual

sacrifice in the early Christian Church, the fact of martyrdom and its

concomitant imitation of Christ must be understood as subordinate to

the Church's essentially collective organization of its spiritual

community. Accepting death was by no means an expression of

personal allegiance to the cause or of bravura, but was on the contrary a

complete surrender of self-determination in favour of Christ's

transcendent persona. In the "Martyrdom of Carpus and Palypus," part

of the *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, this principle is demonstrated when

Carpus, asked his name by the proconsul, responds "My first and most distinctive name is that of Christian; but if you want my name in the world, it is Carpus" (in Musurillo 25). Here Carpus establishes a dichotomy between communities of faith and disbelief, and while "the world" is apparently excised from Christian eschatology, his response more accurately signals the transfiguration of the world effected by the Incarnation. The life of the resurrection enters into what is, generically speaking, a courtroom drama, transforming the immediately discernible milieu of persecution into one of triumph through redemption. Carpus, no longer a subject of civil law, expresses the beneficence of divine grace, grace that has descended into the world through Christ and now elevates him beyond his captors. Indeed, this sense of removal is most acutely demonstrated when Carpus, nailed to a stake and about to be set alight, laughs and provokes the following scene:

> The bystanders asked: What are you laughing at?
>
> And the blessed one said: I saw the glory of the Lord and I was happy. Besides, I am rid of you and have no share in your sins (27).

The vindictive final comment aside, this exchange is important because the vision of God is represented in the past tense, not as an anticipation

but as an accomplished fact, comparable to the pressing reality of physical extinction and, on Carpus's view, victorious over its appearance. This instance of spiritual transcendence suggests the operation of Burke's "terministic bridge," as Carpus inverts the occasion of his imminent demise with language that defeats the supposed finality of his executioner's intent. Similarly, in an effort to foreground the pre-eminence of imitative performance, Christian martyrdom transgressed the conventional boundaries of civil society in the late antique world. The traditional designations of family and community were challenged by the idea and practice of a community of faith engendered by Christ, and thus Papylus, a martyr executed along with Carpus, confounds the Roman magistrate's attempt to appeal to his familial (and therefore civic) responsibility:

> The proconsul said: Do you have any children?
>
> Papylus said: Yes, many, by God's grace.
>
> But one of the crowd shouted out: He means he has children in virtue of the faith which the Christians repose in him (in Musurillo 27).

This transformation of patrimony should be understood as more than a convenient spiritual metaphor, for Papylus, in his assumption of

persecution and death, acts as a reiteration of the divine patrimony which Jesus, as the Son apparent in the world, supplies the original link.[35]

On the one hand then, the notion of imitation can be seen rather simply in the context of hagiography's effort towards forging a narrative and thematic connection with the life of Christ, as this life testifies to the redemptive presence of the Word. At the same time, however, this connection implicates hagiography in the larger and more complex debate over Incarnational theology, for its imitation is not only an endorsement of the Incarnation but more importantly a deliberate invocation of Incarnational doctrine. Indeed, the representational force of sacred biography depends entirely on the astonishing ontological claims issued on behalf of the Word made flesh.

In describing the Incarnation as "probably the most extraordinary identity claim ever propounded by large numbers of serious people concerned with the truth," the philosopher Thomas V. Morris underscores its theological significance and primacy within the Catholic

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[35] Peter Brown expands on this familial metaphor when he notes that the graves of early Christian martyrs quickly became sites of community celebration and worship. This communal sensibility, in effect a "family" celebration of the reality of eternal life, stood in marked contrast to the attitude and behaviour of the Christians' pagan contemporaries. For the latter, according to Brown, cemeteries were definitely outside of the sphere of both family and community, and were most often regarded

church (*The Logic of God Incarnate* 14). Morris's own recent and highly

original efforts to legitimize the doctrine of the Incarnation within the

fields of theology and analytic philosophy attests to its continuing

importance as well as to the dilemma it presents even to the modern

Christian community. Morris correctly parses this dilemma as one of

compatibility, wherein two seemingly contradictory modes of being

collide:

> The claim is that a properly divine person, God the Son ...
>
> has taken on a human nature for us and our human
>
> salvation. Before the Incarnation, this person existed from
>
> all eternity as fully divine. Then, in the days of Herod the
>
> king, he took upon himself a fully human form of
>
> existence, yet never therein ceasing to be that which he
>
> eternally was" ("The Metaphysics of God Incarnate" 112).

It is this concept of divinity and humanity comprising the nature of a

single being, with each constituent existing co-equally and neither

existing at any time to the diminishment of the other, that poses the

central ontological problem, if not impossibility, for orthodox faith.

This orthodoxy emerges, at least in its formal terms, in the decree issued

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(when they were regarded at all) with distaste (*The Cult of the Saints* 14).

in 451 by the council of Chalcedon, and the decree is explicit in

declaring the ineluctable fact of Christ's simultaneously human and

divine personhood:

> Wherefore, following the holy Fathers, we all with one
>
> voice confess our Lord Jesus Christ one and the same Son,
>
> the same perfect in Godhead, the same perfect in
>
> manhood, truly God and truly man, the same consisting of
>
> a reasonable soul and body, of one substance with the
>
> Father as touching the Godhead, the same of one
>
> substance with us touching the manhood ... one and the
>
> same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, to be
>
> acknowledged in two natures, without confusion, without
>
> separation; the distinction of natures being in no way
>
> abolished because of the union, but rather the
>
> characteristic of each nature being preserved, and
>
> concurring with one Person and one subsistence ...." (in
>
> Stevenson 337).

As R. V. Sellers has pointed out, this definitive Christological

statement places special emphasis on Christ's indivisibility, the oneness

of his being despite the presence of two distinct natures (212).

Nevertheless, the strain of paradox is inescapable, a fact that is borne

out by the numerous controversies and heresies – Docetism,

Nestorianism, Arianism, for example – that characterized

pre-Chalcedonian debate and which continued to challenge the council's

doctrine long after its formulation. Stated simply, this doctrine conflates

at the most fundamental level of being a psychological and spiritual

dualism with a monistic unity of natures that would seem to be its

antithesis. The ontological difficulties that follow upon this conflation

have garnered much attention of late, and while efforts to demonstrate

the impossibility or incoherence of the Incarnation have proliferated, it

is also the case that these efforts often illustrate the doctrine's function

in relation to redeemed language. Traditionally, challenges to

Chalcedonian orthodoxy, in trying to resolve the paradox of the

Incarnation, have targeted one of the two natures that purportedly

comprise God incarnate, and as result the "other" nature has been

privileged as essential or at least more truly characteristic. Thus, to cite

just two examples, Docetism claimed that Jesus was fully divine and

only seemed or appeared to be human (the name comes from the Greek

verb "to seem") while various strains of Adoptionism argued that he

was in fact a human who was "adopted" (after his baptism by John or

after his resurrection) into a special and revelatory relationship with God (Erickson 44-49). For my purposes, however, I shall draw on the recent revisionist thesis offered recently by John Hick, for in its innovative approach it discloses a number of important features about the Incarnation and, more importantly, about the status of language that aspires to refer to God.

Hick is one of the most famous (or perhaps infamous) contemporary theologians contesting the doctrinal and historical validity of the Incarnation, but in fact his position calls more for a serious reorientation than an outright repudiation. While he mentions Spinoza's "squared circle" objection, he does so firstly in order to demonstrate the failure of all previous attempts to describe the Incarnation and secondly to shift the emphasis of conventional theological interpretation from literal to metaphorical discourse. Hick cites the usual incongruities, such as infinite/finite, omniscient/ignorant, creator/created, and then concludes that "in the case of the divine incarnation the initial idea has proved to be devoid of literal meaning and accordingly identified as metaphor, functioning in a way that is continuous with its non-religious uses" (104). His purpose in this move is, ostensibly, to retrieve the Incarnation's spiritual potency and normative efficacy from the

disrepute of logical contradiction, thereby restoring its capacity to speak

to humans about the presence of divinity in their daily lives.

Accordingly, we are to understand Jesus not as a vexatious metaphysical

conundrum, but rather as "a man living in a startling degree of

awareness of God and of response to God's presence" (106).[36] The

metaphor of the Incarnation, on Hick's view, (re)introduces the

historical and religious figure of Jesus into the social and ethical sphere

of human society precisely by eschewing terminological quarrels and

logical maneuverings and focusing instead on the fact of God's genuine

(i.e. non-contradictory) involvement in human life (9). Not surprisingly,

Hick's proposal has come under sharp criticism, and defenders of

orthodoxy have challenged the validity of his distinction between

metaphorical and literal utterances. Brian Hebblethwaite, for one, takes

issue with the use of metaphor because it seems to limit the possibility

of God's existence and power, and accordingly he asks "[w]ho are we to

say that the essence of God is such as to rule out the possibility of his

making himself present in the human world while in no way ceasing to

be the God he ever is?" (3). To his credit, Hick appears to be amenable

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[36] Hick is especially concerned with establishing a positive relationship between the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation and the beliefs of other world religions. Construing the Incarnation in metaphorical terms serves this purpose well for metaphor is an eminently translatable trope.

to the charge that what he is really talking about is a failure of a description of ontology rather the failure of the ontology itself. He acknowledges the inevitable relativism, indeed the very humanness of human talk about God, and he anticipates his critics somewhat when he writes that "it is, within certain limits, up to us to decide what is to count as Jesus being God ... and what is to count as his being man ..." (4). But Hick sees this preoccupation with categorizing the concepts of "God" and "human" as vitiating the power of the Incarnation, compromising its ability to function in a global and pluralistic religious community. In his preface to *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*, Hick contends that Christology on his terms enables Christianity to conceive of itself as "one among a number of different human responses to the ultimate transcendent reality that we call God ..." (ix). Ultimately, the use of metaphor allows for a great degree of flexibility in negotiating a relationship with other human responses to God, for metaphor, unlike doctrine, is a trope that is open to human participation in the interpretation of its meaning.

It is certainly not my purpose here to arbitrate the dispute between orthodox and revisionist Christologies, for the debate encompasses an enormous breadth of scholarship and argument, and

moreover, Hick's central thesis draws on definitions of literal and metaphorical speech that are themselves highly contentious.[37] I would instead point out that a metaphorical conception of the Incarnation is in an important way tautological simply because all discourse directed towards God and the nature of divine reality is metaphorical and approximate. Thus while Kenneth Burke claims that our words about God in no way guarantee his existence, conversely it is also true that God's existence does not necessarily entail our ability to speak about him. Of course, the problem of referring to God, of naming that which exceeds the conventional act of naming itself, is both central and ancient within the Christian tradition. The purpose of

language, loosely construed, would seem to involve some sort of meaningful connection between the world and our thoughts about the world; language, from a functionalist point of view, connects our thoughts to an extramental environment. But it is in the nature of God to be prior to the world itself, removed from time and being in a way

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[37] For the controversy over the Incarnation see *The Myth of God Incarnate* edited by John Hick and *Incarnation and Myth: The Debate Continued* edited by Michael Goulder. For differing positions on metaphoric and literal speech, especially where the differences can be read within a implicitly theological context, see the lengthy debate conducted between John Searle and Jacques Derrida in *Glyph* 1, *Limited Inc. abc*, and *New Literary History*. See also Susan Handelman's perspective on the Derridean treatment of sacred language in her essay "Jacques Derrida and the Heretic Hermeneutic."

that thwarts any mental connection via linguistic mediation.

Pseudo-Dionysius, a philosopher concerned almost exclusively with

confronting this problem of aporia, remarks in *The Divine Names* that

theologians celebrate God "as nameless and [what amounts to the same

thing] in accordance with all names" (114) because God cannot be

singled out as a being among other beings in the world. As a result,

reference cannot act literally (i.e. saying what actually is) but must

instead resort to a tropological substitution that can be neither resolved

nor translated.[38] Gerald Bruns makes a similar point when he says that

language (and more specifically, language operating through allegory)

can describe only a curtain of appearance which separates and conceals

the incomprehensible reality of God. While the curtain's radiance bears

witness to the brilliance of this reality, it at the same time acts as a

substitute, offering an effect in the absence of the original cause. But

this substitution is for Bruns a necessary feature of our human

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[38] John D. Jones, in his introduction to *The Divine Names and Mystical Theology*, suggests that negative theology effectively bypasses the standard route of assertive or declarative language because any recourse to difference and sameness (that is to say, the relationships predicated by language between the self and the world) are disallowed by the negation of difference and sameness: Since one must abandon all sameness and difference to achieve a mystical unity with the divinity, one does not experience the divine transcendence as the wholly other; rather, one is united to the non-other and the non-same (24). From this formulation it follows th at the "mystical unity with the divinity" is ecstatic and visionary rather than rational and empirical in nature (cf. *The Divine Names* 107).

cognition, and ultimately "[l]anguage exists to protect us from what is unnamed" for what is unnamed is the "annihilating vision" of a pure plenitude of presence beyond the mediating role of language (5). Thus we say that God is "good," "truth," "saviour," "justice," and "sanctification" while at the same time realizing that he is none of these simply because he is not comprehended by any notion of is.

The Incarnation, the moment of the Word made flesh, therefore enters into this dilemma of metaphoricity in order to redeem language and establish a correspondence between human speech and divine reality; it is, in effect, a solution to the problem of describing or referring to divine reality. Brian Hebblethwaite goes so far as to discern an ostensive relationship between Jesus's earthly existence and his simultaneous (and eternal) presence in the Trinity, arguing that "[i]f Jesus is God in person, then our knowledge of God has an intelligible personal human focus. In Jesus' character and acts we see the character and acts of God himself in terms we can readily understand" (23). Admittedly, this sort of account could be read as an equivocation, an attempt to skirt the difficult metaphysical claims of Chalcedon by foregrounding the exemplary power of Jesus's humanity, but nevertheless it also underscores the powerful link between the Gospels

and the new possibility of reference that they occasion. Susan

Handelman, in an essay that demonstrates, in part, the differences

separating Jewish and Christian theories of sacred language, claims that

"Jesus becomes the true predicate of all statements, the singular and

ultimate reference ..." (106). More specifically, the advent of the logos

in the world in human form of Jesus empowers human language as a

means of speaking directly about God because the enfleshment of the

Word works in two directions at once, as a locus of reference that unites

speech about Christ (issued from one direction) with the divinity in

which he partakes (issued from the other).[39] Stephen G. Nichols

explicates this fundamental double move as the paradigmatic instance of

theosis, wherein the Incarnation, a condescension of the spirit into flesh,

both inspires and facilitates the corresponding response of human

ascension (understood here as a specifically linguistic ascension).[40]

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[39] The doctrine of the *logos*, as it first appears in John's Gospel, has been the subject of much debate in recent years, primarily because its direct association with the historical figure of Jesus and the religious community he inspired now seems tenuous at best. My point, however, rests not on the fact that Jesus himself claimed to be the Word made flesh, but rather on the fact that this status was ascribed to him within a few decades after his death, and thus became deeply embedded in Christological thinking. For the origin of *logos* theology, see James Dunn's *Christology in the Making* 12-64.

[40] Marcia Colish, speaking of Augustine, makes a similar point in *The Mirror of Language*. "... God creates the world and man through his Word, and he takes on humanity in the Word made flesh so that human words may take on divinity, thereby bringing man and the world back to God" (26).

Nichols cites Eriugena, who declared that "[t]he Word descended into man so that, through it, man could raise himself to God" (*Romanesque Signs* 10), and understood in this redemptive capacity, the Incarnation becomes less a fixed doctrine and more a site of transition between modes of human self-understanding; Christ's presence in the world allows Christians to understand their own presence as infused with an endowment of divinity.

The consequences for language following this endowment are immediate and profound. Augustine, despite episodes of equivocation (some of which I have already discussed) discerns in the Incarnation a powerful opportunity for the referential stability of human language because all meaningful expressions are at once directed towards God and guaranteed to be true by God's acquiescence to linguistic representation through the embodiment of the Son. According to Marcia Colish, the redemption of language meant that "human modes of thought and expression, although still limited by the human condition, could now take on the tasks assigned to them by God" (3). The practical consequences of the Word taking on human flesh (i.e. those consequences not directly or necessarily related to theological speculation and debate) are best seen in Augustine's at times

overwhelming linguistic optimism and assuredness, attitudes which Lee

Patterson characterizes as a "preemptive hermeneutic" by which "the

Christian reader comes to the text (Scripture) already possessed of its

message (the double law of charity), and his task is to understand not its

meaning but its way of signifying that meaning" (*Negotiating the Past* 151).

This hermeneutic strategy emerges in *On Christian Doctrine*, where

Augustine states plainly that proper interpretation is a matter of arriving

at the destination regardless of the directions offered by any human map

or compass:

> But anyone who understands in the Scriptures something
>
> other than that intended by them is deceived, although
>
> they do not lie. However, as I began to explain, if he is
>
> deceived in an interpretation which builds up to charity ...
>
> he is deceived in the same way that as a man who leaves a
>
> road by mistake and passes through a field to the same
>
> place toward which the road itself leads (Bk. 1, XXXVI).[41]

It is therefore possible to detect in Augustinian sign theory the

operation of an exceedingly narrow interpretive scope coupled with an

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[41] Notice the implication of divine agency in interpreting what the Scriptures "intended." Similarly, Augustine earlier sanctions an interpretive divergence from the manifest authorial intent in the overriding interest of building the double law of charity.

extraordinarily varied interpretive technique, both of which work in

concert to ensure that language corresponds to the expressive intent of

divinity within in the corporeal world. The challenge for such a

hermeneutic strategy, simply stated, lies in perceiving within a large and

heterogeneous world a constant and singular meaning, and the fact of

the Incarnation empowers this strategy by drawing language unfailingly

to the all-encompassing presence of God. Rosalie Colie, in her classic

study of paradox, assigns to the logos precisely this metalinguistic (and

therefore in an important sense, anti-linguistic) role, contending that the

theologically inclined "come to terms with the experience of deity by

identifying it with ... the word for all words obviating the necessity of

other words" (97). Of course, this univocality means that knowledge for

Augustine, as an experience of the Truth, is more important than the

words it may inhabit at any given time, for while words may in fact be

"choice and precious vessels," this esteem (as it is accorded in the first

book of the Confessions) presumes on the one hand the purity of sacred

content and disallows the intoxicating style of empty rhetoric on the

other. R. Howard Bloch notes that early medieval grammar, following

the Augustinian lead, featured "a privileging of the object of reference

over its mode" (49), and in this inclination the grammarians

demonstrated the Augustinian focus on content, an emphasis that would

eliminate the vicissitudes of interpretation in favour of a single

exegetical perspective. Moreover, this emphasis tended to reinforce the

unique achievement and abiding function of the Incarnation, namely,

that "all language is about God and leads to God" (Bloch 50).

It would seem, however, that the effort to explicate (and perhaps

exonerate) hagiography in terms of its connection to Incarnational

theology is in fact an alternate version of the critical posture that has

conditioned its reception in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a

posture that involves the curatorial hermeneutic discussed in the first

chapter. Ostensibly, its deference to the claims of faith eliminates

hagiography from the ken of historical writing because its

epistemological motive is entirely affirmative rather than investigative;

simply stated, saints' Lives seek only to reiterate prevailing attitudes

about Christ's presence in the world. This motive should not be

surprising operating as it does in a culture that, according to Stephen G.

Nichols, governed the act of representation "by a principle of

tautological perception that [sought] to corroborate and convey known

views" ("The New Medievalism" 5). Aviad Kleinberg, echoing the

intellectual initiative of modern hagiology, asks "[w]hy do [the Lives of

the saints] contain so much that we ... find hard to believe" (40) and

perhaps the most fundamental answer he offers turns on the

supposition that medieval Lives were "... designed for readers with one

set of expectations and is now read by readers with another set" (52).

This statement demonstrates Kleinberg's effort to locate his study of the

social dynamics of medieval sainthood outside of the traditional

boundaries hagiologic interpretation, and often he seeks to exculpate the

narrative excesses of hagiography by ascribing to sacred biographers a

culturally specific intentionalism that would undermine much modern

criticism as ahistoricist.[42] Nevertheless, this sense of difference, far

from liberating hagiography, constitutes an explicit recognition of

alterity, and reasserts the necessity of a compensatory hermeneutic.

Ultimately, we are denied a mode of reading hagiography that allows for

both its contemporary relevance and its historical situatedness largely

because it seems impossible to acknowledge it as a kind of writing that is

concerned primarily with figuring human existence within time. The

"different set" of expectations that would characterize writers and

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[42] Kleinberg is by no means a wholly sympathetic reader of saints Lives, and at times his evaluation recalls the faint superiority of critics like Delehaye and Eleanor Duckett: "[t]he saints about whom the most incredible stories were told usually existed in that unwitnessed past where people dressed, talked, and behaved in a different way" (53).

readers alike undermines any connection to a modern sense of the
historical. Kleinberg himself allows for the seemingly insuperable
distance separating fact and narrative when he critiques the frequent
conflation of imaginative and realistic expression in hagiographic
narratives:

> We do not know whether or not an event occurred
> in the real world or in the imagined world of the
> author. We do not even know whether an author
> describes an event more or less faithfully, or
> modifies it to make it consonant with his ideal.
> What we do know is that the two are not
> interchangeable: literary inventions are not real
> people, nor are descriptions of real people mere
> reflections of authorial perceptions (67).

Kleinberg's sentiments here should be read as axiomatic of hagiology in
particular and, more importantly, of historical realism in general.
Leaving aside the difficult question of how events "occur" in imagined
worlds (and leaving aside also the possibility that this notion actually
undermines Kleinberg's entire "real/imaginary" distinction), this passage
is important because it articulates a fundamental dichotomy between the

world and its representation in language. Advocating a seemingly uncontroversial and common sense understanding of history, Kleinberg clearly believes that reality, historical and otherwise, is in no way a product of discourse; in other words, talk about the real world follows necessarily from the simple fact that there is a real world to talk about. In the case of historical writing, extra-textual events cause narrative effects, and historical knowledge depends upon a kind of reading that traces representation back to its original reality.

It is hardly my purpose here to contest this understanding of the relationship that obtains or should obtain between language and reality. As I indicated in the previous chapter, this understanding is currently the subject of intense debate in many areas of the humanities, and it could be argued that this so-called "conventional" historical realism has never enjoyed the kind of hegemonic cultural authority that its critics sometimes ascribe to it. Regardless of the outcome of this debate, however, it seems safe to say that, by its own lights, the bulk of hagiographic writing will never be recognized as a legitimate source of historical knowledge. The work of scholars like Kleinberg will continue to condition saints' Lives, thereby locating their contributions within the discourse of modern hagiology. But to condition hagiography in this

way is, as I have shown, likely to stigmatize it, to kill it with a scholarly kindness that seeks to rescue the genre by quarantining its more obvious referential deficiencies. Now, to read sacred biography directly, without any scholarly intervention, is, I will admit, an ill-advised endeavour, one that would require a degree of faith not often associated with the rationalist sensibility of modern audiences. Difference is, as Kleinberg (and others) would have it, an inevitable component of the modern experience of hagiography and accordingly, difference must be acknowledged. This acknowledgement, however, need not entail a pejorative assessment, and in fact it should inaugurate the recognition of hagiography's positive achievement. As I mentioned in my introduction, my primary purpose in this study is to integrate (or perhaps re-integrate) into the field of sophisticated and complex medieval literature, a field that is more typically illuminated by the work of such "celebrities" as Geoffrey Chaucer, Chretien de Troyes, and Guillaume de Mauchant. The writing of saints' Lives, like the writing of *The Canterbury Tales* or the *Roman de la Rose*, comprises a highly self-aware mode of literary representation, one that is chiefly concerned with the rather ominous task of rendering the concomitance of divine and human identity and existence.[43] At the core of this concern lies the

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[43] Arguably (and certainly this argument informs Robertsonian criticism), a concern

Incarnation as the moment of human history that seeks to transcend history itself. As I have pointed out, the enfleshment of the Word is intended (in part) to return language to the Father and to redeem the process of signification. According to Augustinian hermeneutic theory, the Incarnation has as one of its consequences a guarantee of signification such that humanity can understand and communicate the divinity that is the original source of human existence. This divinity necessarily invokes an ahistorical or anti-historical principle, that of pure and eternal presence unto itself, and therefore to locate this principle in time (i.e. in history) is to recognize the timelessness of undifferentiated presence. But a substantial practical question follows upon what might appear to be an example of theological esoterica; namely, how are we to read those documents that purport to historicize the life of Christ? Perhaps the most common solution to this problem places the claims of the Incarnation in a special non-historical category of interpretation, therefore acknowledging the dichotomy of history and faith. Certainly this approach is used by scholars interested in evaluating the Bible as a

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for theological issues provides the bulk of medieval literature with its thematic unity. Hagiography, however, constitutes a special case, as it disqualifies itself from any recourse to important rhetorical tropes such as irony, satire and parody, and therefore makes certain commitments in terms of its representational intent. Therefore, while other medieval literature can be said to tackle theological issues, it can do so from a safe (i.e. fictional) distance and without making any strong claims

document within the interrelated web of documents that contribute to

(or, arguably, constitute) our knowledge of the ancient world, and more

importantly for this study, it recalls the "wheat and tares" attitude of

modern hagiology.[44] I believe, however, that a more sensitive response

to this question recognizes the extraordinary challenge that the

Incarnation offers to the conventional boundary separating empiricist

history and religious faith. Typically, this boundary articulates a clear

distinction between lived experience and its linguistic representation, for

this is simply the difference between reality and its various descriptions.

But in the case of the Incarnation a circular and ultimately

self-referential sequence is enacted, as the Word becomes flesh and this

flesh then inspires the words of the Gospels. The power of what is in

fact a consequence of metaphoric translation should not be

underestimated.[45] Stephen Nichols, speaking in particular of the twelfth

century *Passion du Christ*, notes that the function of this translation would

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of representational veracity.

[44] See, for an example of this attitude, a recent *Time* cover story appropriately entitled "The Bible: Fact or Fiction?" (Dec. 18, 1995).

[45] Indeed this is a reading that, stripped of any onerous philosophical grasping, John Hick and like-minded anti-metaphysical theologians endorse. For Hick, locating the Gospels within a network of parallel religious tracts from Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu (et al.) traditions, far from enervating the spiritual claims of Christianity, serves instead to open a dialogue with other faiths, to enrich and emphasize a trans -cultural sense of spiritual connectedness.

have been immediately apparent in "... a culture in which writing was

done on skin that had been stretched out to dry [and] to which marks

would then be added to reveal truth" (*Romanesque Signs* 122). According

to Nichols, Christ "sign[ed] himself as a text written in the flesh"

(*Romanesque Signs* 122), and the resonance of this double metaphor,

wherein the identities of text and flesh flow each into the other, is

essential to understanding the Incarnation as a doctrine offering, among

other things, a philosophy of history. The conflation of being and

representation that this metaphor signals is itself an indication of the

dialogic relationship that obtains between language and reality in a

post-Incarnational theology, and this relationship can be said to

engender an Incarnational hermeneutic. As Marcia Colish notes, the

"possibility of intellectual contact with God through words would seem

inadmissible" due to the fallen nature of human language, but this

contact is made both possible and real by the function of that language

which communicates the redemptive presence of God in the world

(25-26). In characterizing the Gospels, one can truly say that Christ has

entered into language, ostensibly because his life has become a series of

linguistic signs which, properly read, unites the reader with a presence

prior to the words that communicate it.[46] But as the Word, the Son

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[46] I use the phrase "properly read" as a rough equivalent of "understood at least

enters into language in order to restore its ability to comprehend the presence of God – in other words, to restore the metaphysics of signification – and the consequence of this restoration is manifest in the language of the Gospels themselves. To quote Colish again: "[t]he Incarnation conveys the knowledge of God to the world by communicating God himself. It also enables man to respond to God in human terms, by restoring man's words to God in Christ" (26). It should be clear from this appraisal, itself a precursor of Nichols's notion of theosis, that the Incarnation is paradoxically an extra-linguistic phenomenon that employs words as its means of operating in the world. But this paradox is resolved, or at least diminished, by the fact that these "words" in turn offer passage outside of or beyond the world of their apparent inscription. Read simply as words within a world of human capability, the Gospels act as linguistic substitutions for a historical presence and therefore serve to convey the various messages of this presence. According to this formulation, the Gospels are valuable primarily as repositories of moral instruction, instruction that has exerted an enormous influence in the ethical development of Western

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literally." The questions raised by different levels of proper interpretation (i.e. allegorical, tropological, and anagogical) do not concern me here, for it seems to me sufficient to expect a reader of the Gospels to understand that (at least grammatically) these texts make representational claims about a historical figure.

culture. Working from an Augustinian theory of language, however, the Gospels instantiate God himself within the framework of human epistemology, for the fact of Christ's life have made this divine presence a sensible thing. Dorothea Krook writes that Paul, unlike idealists such as Socrates and Plato, can claim a genuine, empirical knowledge of God as a result of his vision on the road to Damascus (135). Similarly, Christians can point to the Gospels as a source of revelation that makes a direct relationship with God – what Colish calls "the beatific vision" – possible.

If the words that communicate the life of Christ are understood as more referential entities, then it follows that the words that seek to imitate this life are likewise something more than words. However, the question that problematizes imitation asks simply "Is the origin of imitation actions or merely other language?" In other words, is hagiographical imitation rhetorical rather than historical in design and function? Certainly, the traditional conception of hagiography contends that saints' Lives place narrative in the service of imitation to such a degree that they end up with no referential connection to their putative biographical subjects. This misdirection of reference is, as I have pointed out, a deliberate rather than a naive feature of hagiographic

representation. Imitation in this sense articulates the early Christian

attitude toward personal identity within a community of faith; the self

was saved only insofar as it accepted the necessity of Christological

agency.[47] Thus Paul writes in Galatians I: "I have been crucified with

Christ and yet I live; and yet no longer I live but Christ liveth in me."

Clearly this relinquishment of personal identity and self-determination

tends to remove the self from the contingencies of lived reality and

embraces instead the tangible security of a predestined existence.[48]

Geoffrey Galt Harpham characterizes asceticism, one of the most

powerful modes of human sanctity, as "an attempt by human beings to

step 'outside the world' by assuming the character of language" (20).

But more importantly for hagiography, the imitative configuration of

identity invokes a textual principle engendered by the Incarnation,

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[47] In contrast to this culturally affirmative mode of signification, the Lives of saints could also be used in order to contest or modify prevailing theological or sociological attitudes and customs (see, for example, Charles Altman's discussion of the *vita* of Guthlac in his essay "Two Types of Opposition in Latin Saints' Lives"), but these efforts were always underwritten by appeals to a more accurate and genuine interpretation of the consequences of the Incarnation. Accordingly, the truth of these consequences was never in question, but rather the application of this truth by and for humans. In this context, I would argue that saints' Lives operated as affirmative texts because they sought to represent, in terms accessible to humans but sanctioned by God, the irrefutable and transcendental fact of God's condescension into flesh.

[48] Harpham offers a rather extreme example of this point in his description of cenobitic monks: "... the cenobite sought not to led into temptation so that the self would grow indistinct in its outlines, and would, ideally, simply cease to be ... " (28).

wherein the self invests itself into language so as to emerge to the world as a reiterative signification of Christ the Word, the originary language. Thus while it is perhaps accurate to characterize hagiography as an imitation of language, this language is at once a cause and a product of redemption because it manifests, both epistemologically and ontologically, the presence of the Word. The act of imitation points back to this cause and locates it within its own imitative economy of expression, thereby transgressing the boundary defining the complementary concepts of "original" and "derivative." Moreover, imitation, on this model, becomes both regressive and generative, as it seeks to reproduce, temporally and/or spatially, a single moment so as to foreground its continuing presence in a mutable world.

To recognize this principle, is, I believe, to recognize the power of redeemed language, especially as this power is described within Augustinian sign theory. Surely the coherence of his so-called "preemptive hermeneutic" relies on the guaranteed correspondence between language and the world that is offered by the active participation of the Word in human language. In what can be called a corollary of this guarantee, Augustine characterizes saints as both *signum proprium* and *signum translatum*; that is to say, as both signs and things (*On*

Christian Doctrine Book 3, XVII), thereby employing saints, identified

here as both textual and physical entities, to close the gap that would

seem, necessarily, to separate representation and reality. I would argue

that this profound integration of language and being provides the

foundation for sacred biography, and contemporary readings must

therefore recognize and include its operation. Harpham's observation

that ascetic saints aim to assume the character of language in order to

step outside the world accurately depicts what I would call the

"interstitial" nature of sainthood, for the status of sanctity, following the

Incarnational model, tends to problematize typical (and, I would argue,

entirely valid) assumptions about what it is to be "in" the world as

opposed to "in" language. Accordingly, Harpham characterizes

asceticism as "always marked by ambivalence, by a combined binarism"

that positions itself between (essentially artificial) poles of representation

and reality (xii). As a result of this binarism, it is possible to collapse the

categories of "saint" and "saint's Life" for saints, understood here as

both textual and historical/ontological entities, occupy the boundary

that makes these categories possible. By structuring their lives as a

textual reiteration, saints seek to conflate the temporally distinct modes

of experience and interpretation such that the seemingly immediate

phenomena that comprise lived existence facilitate (indeed necessitate)

their own means of exegesis.

CHAPTER FOUR: ST. ANTONY AND THE LIFE OF MIMESIS

Petronius' literary ambition, like that of the realists of modern times, is to imitate a

random, everyday, contemporary milieu with its sociological background, and to have

his characters speak their jargon without recourse to stylization. (Eric Auerbach,

Mimesis p. 30)

It is, of course, stylization, identified here by Auerbach as external

to realistic representation, that originally animates hagiography and

currently problematizes its reception as historical writing. Saints' Lives

are, for the most part, overwhelmed by their style, understood as a series

of generic techniques and conventions that tend (and were intended) to

minimize if not extinguish any sense of personal expression. The

Christian community (the largest single audience for hagiography)

generated conventions in order to foster and enforce a narrative

coherence within the hagiographic genre, and while these conventions

were by no means strictly and universally observed, the influence of the

Church did manage to convey a fairly clear and narrow idea of what a

saint's Life was and wasn't.[49] Thomas Heffernan has commented on the

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[49] Aviad Kleinberg emphasizes the particular and specific nature of saints' Lives, claiming that hagiographers, "[r]ather than trying to fit individuals to a clearly defined

communitarian and, more importantly, the consensual nature of

hagiographic composition (*Sacred Biography* 19), and it is therefore hardly

surprising that this authorial technique tended to diminish individualized

or idiosyncratic portraits of saints who would ascend to the canon of

saints. Style, therefore, can be said to define hagiography in a way that

is perhaps familiar to contemporary readers of early medieval literature,

as the meaning of the message is conveyed exclusively of the individual

agent or agents who are ostensibly responsible for its content.[50]

Moreover, hagiographic style imparts upon the *oeuvre* a patina of

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ideal ... [instead] shaped their ideals of sainthood around specific individuals" (5). Kleinberg, however, distinguishes between the phenomena of sainthood (i.e. speeches, miracles, journeys, etc.) and the inscription of these phenomena. Thus he supposes on the one hand that "the writer of a Life written shortly after the saint's death was quite likely to produce a surplus of information that blurred the fine contours of the ideal" whereas on the other hand "the simplified adaptations of earlier works [adaptations presumably written long after the saint's death] ... stripped the saint of most of her contradictions and eccentricities and presented [her] ... in an ideal form" (2). The tension engendered by this distinction is both fascinating and revealing. Essentially, Kleinberg argues that the distance separating a textual representation from its phenomenal reference is a mark of its degeneration into an unrealistic performance of style. I would argue, however, that saints' Lives are compelling documents largely because they try to collapse the boundary defining phenomena against representation in such a way as to foreground the inescapably linguistic (read Incarnational) nature of the Christian historical narrative.

[50] A. J. Minnis, in his *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages*, characterizes this conception of writing in terms of its relationship to *auctoritas*, whereby the words of a human author in fact evidence divine intentions (5). Jesse Gellrich excavates the idealist underpinnings of this rather commonplace critical notion when he describes the profoundly essentialist exegesis employed by medieval scholars commenting on the Bible: "Learning to read the signs of that Book was a process not of 'inventing' or 'creating' *sententia* for the 'sentences' in the Bible or nature, but of coming to comprehend a writing that exists [prior to human inscription]" 34).

predictability, jettisoning particular detail in favour of familiar patterns of reference and allusion. It is this sameness that accounts in large part for James Earl's plaintive and rather infamous dismissal of the *oeuvre* itself.

It was the primary argument of my last chapter, however, that hagiography operates according to strong theological underpinnings, and that in fact it cannot be adequately interpreted without some account of its effort to come to terms with (or perhaps to offer terms to) the Incarnation. Certainly both the style and the content Lives, that is to say, what is said and how it is said, should be understood as indispensable to success of this theological intent. Predictably, features such as repetition and exaggeration are targeted by the relatively narrow realist hermeneutic of modern hagiology (realist roughly in the sense evoked by Auerbach's comment on Petronius) because these gratuitous elements of style impede our grasp of the real by denying it a simple and direct portrayal. Nevertheless, I aimed in my second chapter to expose the methodological shortcomings of this kind of realism, and more importantly, the sheer breadth and range of the hagiographic canon suggests the need for a more nuanced and sympathetic interpretive strategy, one that aims to recognize hagiography's full achievement,

especially as that achievement exceeds the bounds of the historical in the twentieth century.[51]

The complex interaction of time and identity, wherein the latter term overwhelms the former by eliminating the principle of difference, comprises a fundamental feature of this achievement. The willingness to speak of, and more importantly to write, one life that embraces all possibilities of living (as does, for example, Gregory the Great) indicates on the one hand the recognition of a supervening identity deemed more *significant* than individual biographies, but on the other it suggests a complementary human effort to render referentially sufficient a single account of what would otherwise seem to demand multiplicity. This double move, however, should not be understood as a deferral of particularity, a triumph of didactic rhetoric over realism, but rather as a deliberate and sustained effort to render a "living testament" to the power and presence of the original Word within the transience of human time and history. The words "living" and "testament" are bracketed here to signal the particular use that hagiography makes of

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[51] I say sympathetic simply because it seems unproductive and perhaps unfair to regard a significant body of medieval literature as immature or simple minded. Such regard merely repeats the mistaken assumption that the social sciences (and in particular, history) constitute a mode of rigorous scientific inquiry that inevitably improves with age.

these words, a use that transgresses the distinction between referent and reference and transforms the causal hierarchy upon which this distinction depends. According to this transformation, a saint's Life is not simply produced by an effort to document his or her life, thereby marking the derivational transition from existence to narrative, nor should it be understood as arising solely from polemical or didactic intent. The Life is instead part of a broader attempt to invest humanity with an identity that exceeds or transforms normal temporal bounds.

Of course, the model for the imitation is Jesus Christ, for his story traces the original movement from Word to life to text.[52] Following a hagiographical account of imitation, it is impossible to separate the life of Christ and the text of Christ, for these entities participate equally in the Word, the originary principle that comprises both generation and expression. Sacred biography therefore employs mimesis in two directions at once by placing both life and text in a mutually imitative, mirror-like relationship that is engendered by and directed back towards the Incarnation. From a historiographical point

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[52] The necessarily sequential arrangement of these terms in my text repeats and summarizes the dilemma that hagiography encounters even as it is reconfigured as a kind of mimesis working against time and difference. Harpham describes Christ as "a derivation with the status of original" (7), thereby capturing the paradox of the Word producing an equal yet distinct Other that can likewise claim to be original and therefore not "produced."

of view, hagiography radically alters the function of language as substitute, creating instead an "act of writing in which the presence of the word [in this case, historical rather than transcendent] is maintained in the flesh of the letter" (Gellrich 120).[53] As suggested here by the miscegenation of distinct terms (presence/word, flesh/letter), this act of writing doubles or extends the very nature of writing itself, as language incorporates presence through the transfiguration of the body (read consciousness, being) into the words that would normally only symbolize or re-present it. Similarly, hagiography marks the space where writing both produces the body and is derived from it.

This principle of duality can be observed at the beginning of the hagiographic tradition in the *passiones* of the martyrs. On the one hand, the passion seems to follow the fact of martyrdom, referring to it in a fairly typical sequence of phenomenal cause and textual effect. On the other hand, however, the saint's martyrdom is itself a textual effect, the result of a mimetic act that inscribes the self in the scriptural model provided by the Gospels. The situation is even more pronounced in the case(s) of living saints. Initially, it would seem that living saints offer a

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[53] Gellrich is referring specifically to the relationship between Augustine's Christological exegesis and the divinity it seeks to explain, but his formulation offers a keen insight into the linguistic nature of hagiography as well.

significant challenge to the comprehensive "textualist" approach I am proposing, for their saintly status is achieved prior to the production of a *vita*; it is the consequence of a community's recognizing an extraordinary life being lived right before their eyes as it were, outside of any narrative enclosure. Of course, precisely the opposite is true, for living saints are determined to locate their identity within the bounds of narrative by manifesting the text of the Bible (and especially the Gospel) through the medium of their corporeal existence.[54] The production of the vita, therefore, is not a compensatory response to the loss of the saint's presence to death, but rather a perfection of his/her striving towards complete narratability.[55]

In demonstrating this principle of duality at work in hagiography I have chosen to concentrate on Athanasius's *Life of Antony*. As an ascetic born during the reign of Diocletion and dying not long after the Edict of Milan, Antony effectively bridges the temporal gap separating

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[54] See the instance of St. Francis for an example of an individual enacting a public script through his own life. Paradoxically, the controversy that surrounded the Franciscan order for centuries after the saint's death demonstrates the profound difficulties entailed by any attempt to apprehend God's word directly and reiterate it as a "living" text.

[55] Some scholars maintain that it is often the saint's ability to successfully challenge and transform text-based practices that earns him/her saintly status. See, for example, Charles F. Altman's "Two Types of Tradition in Latin Saints' Lives" for this alternative view. The response to this argument would likely invoke the difficulty of pinning down the "true" text that is being challenged and would instead

martyrs of late antiquity and the living saints of early and later Middle

Ages. Moreover, his practice of asceticism comprises an integration of

these distinct modes of sanctity, for in retreating to the desert, Antony

sought to die to the world by subordinating his entire self to the

discipline of the text.

The *Life of Antony* corresponds to Geoffrey Galt Harpham's

characterization of hagiography as "the most action packed mode in our

literary tradition" (3). It is, of course, this "action" that has placed

hagiography beyond the pale of legitimate history, for Antony's

numerous battles with demons, set in a geographical and figurative

desert, challenge the bounds of credibility, to say the least. To cite just

one passage as an example:

> ... so when it was night-time they made such a
>
> crashing noise that the whole place [Antony's cave]
>
> seemed to be shaken by a quake. The demons, as if
>
> through the building's four walls, and seeming to
>
> enter through them, were changed into the forms of
>
> beasts and reptiles. The place was immediately filled
>
> with the appearances of lions, bears, leopards, bulls,

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identify the challenge as a "clarification," thereby maintaining the act of imitation.

> and serpents, asps, scorpions and wolves, and each
>
> of these moved in accordance with its form....
>
> Struck and wounded by them, Antony's body was
>
> subject to yet more pain (38).

Obviously reminiscent of the large and fantastic body iconography

depicting the temptations of Antony, this glimpse into the desert

existence of the eremite characterizes it more as an epic battle between

heroic and malevolent forces rather than a life of solitude and spiritual

contemplation. And yet, the *Life* also features subdued moments that

offer a level of detail more suited to a realistic narrative style:

> ... and barricading the entrance once more, and
>
> putting aside enough loaves for six months (for the
>
> Thebans do this, and frequently they remain
>
> unspoiled for a whole year), and having water inside,
>
> he was hidden within as in a shrine (40-41).

Here the care with which Antony's retreat into his mountain cell is

verified through an accounting of the particulars of his supplies is the

antithesis of excess. Moreover it establishes Athanasius as a writer

concerned with the plausibility of his text, a text that aspires to truth in

all the senses (literal as well as allegorical, tropological, and anagogical)

of the term .

Nevertheless, a critical debate over plausibility, over the operation of style and how it supports or undermines the purpose of the text, merely repeats the assumptions and arguments of traditional hagiology, and forces critics to choose between apologia (Duckett) and dismissal (Delehaye, Colgrave), and in the case of the *Life of Antony*, it is particularly unproductive. Proceeding in this tradition, the critic will likely conclude that numerous unrealistic or antirealistic parts are complemented by passages of striking detail and concern for the particular, and will, with Robert C. Gregg, judge the *Life* "a classic of several kinds, intended for readers of more than one type" ("Introduction" 6).[56] Gregg, in his introduction to the English translation of Athanasius's Latin original, goes on to say that Antony "represented an issue at the heart of the Christian proclamation – the danger, as Paul put it, of 'being conformed to this world'" (6), and the issues of conformity and worldliness offer an excellent opening point for understanding both the text of Antony's life and Antony's life as a text. While Gregg offers a useful synopsis of interpretive possibilities that have been realized by the legacy of Antonian scholarship, my

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[56] For antirealism, see the *Life of Antony*, p. 65: "Do not be anxious for your life, what you shall eat, nor about your body, what you shall put on ..."

"textualist" approach, wherein imitation comprises not only a way of writing but (and at the same time) a way of living as well supply the basis for a new perspective not only for the Life of Antony but for hagiography in general. By trying to be in two places at once, saints sought to make of their lives (text/phenomena) a kind of bridge. In the case of Antony, this bridge was the consequence of his imitation; his ascesis can be read as a kind of mimesis in which the self renounces its own determination and gives over to the model of text. In the words of Geoffrey Galt Harpham, the effect of mimesis "is to displace and so stabilize the wandering subject, to humble human pretensions to autonomy by submitting life to the rules of grammar, rhetoric, and generic convention, including the constant interpolation of citations from Scripture" (14)

Paul rounds out his advice to the Romans with affirmative instruction, urging them to be "transformed by the renewing of [their] your mind[s], that [they] may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God." Certainly, Antony had just this sort of profound transformation of self in mind when he removed himself to the desert, foregoing the concerns of the household and for the demands of the discipline (32). Antony's decision was motivated by

Scripture, and of course ermeticism recalls (and is most obviously an imitation of) Christ's forty days in the desert. Christ's journey is one of denial and temptation, but more importantly, it is one of purification and definition, as Jesus responds to and silences the challenges of Satan. That this episode occurs just prior to his commencing his ministry is especially important, for it signalled Jesus's complete and positive assumption of his earthly role; by passing the trials invoked by Satan, he for the first time defined himself in the service of God and thus he fully assumed and confirmed his intercessionary identity. Similarly, Antony's ermeticism is easily read as self-defining endeavour, wherein self-definition is achieved through self-denial. This denial, however, is more than simply the suppression of desire, for it involves the articulation of an *essential* self, one that is absolutely and in the strongest possible sense, self-sufficient. Certainly fasting, dwelling in caves, and exercising rigorous sexual continence, the typical trappings of ascetic life, diminished the extent to which the self relied on any exterior agency or supply for its physical sustenance.

But in a more complex and significant manner, ascesis affects a psychological denial, whereby temptation, seemingly apprehended outside of the mind, becomes internalized as a manifestation of

self-doubt that must be exposed and purged. Antony himself suggests this localization of the demonic when he identifies the potentially bewildering affinity between demons and monks: "[i]t is possible, when [demons] model themselves after the form of monks, for them to pretend to speak like the devout, so that by means of similarity they deceive" (50). Later in the same lesson, Antony tells his listeners that the actions of demons "correspond to the condition in which they find us; they pattern their phantasms after our thoughts .... Whatever we are turning over in our minds, this – and more – is what they do" (63). This individuating of temptation, whereby the demonic fashions itself in response to the path of least resistance, supposes that the demonic finds its *origin* in precisely the same manner that it seems to *enter* the consciousness of the devout Christian; accordingly, temptation is defeated when it is recognized as an opportunity for self-purification.

As a result of this blurring of psychic boundaries, it is possible to understand a part of one's psyche as demonic, but it is a non-essential part, and its purgation is largely the true function of ascesis.[57] Peter

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[57] The demonic, therefore, can be described as anything that impedes the perception of the soul in its essential form. Along these lines, Harpham labels as demonic "any obstruction of reference, any impediment to understanding." He goes on to write that "[a] sign that truly signifies, on the other hand, is like a person who has been cleansed so that the apparent is identical to the real" (10).

Brown touches on this function when he characterizes ascesis as a

"social death" (more so than a deadening of the physical body through

mortification) by which the ascetic "[cut] away all dependence on his

fellows" (*The Making of Late Antiquity* 88). This solitude had profound

psychological consequences, for in the desert, the hermit was expected

to "settle down [and] resolve the incoherences of his own soul" (*The*

Making of Late Antiquity 89). By turning away not only from society but

also inward through a "long process of self-discovery," the individual

was supposed to be able to perceive his/her identity in complete

isolation, removed from the defining context of social roles and

relations. The challenge to this perception, what Brown calls

"incoherences," was therefore an interior phenomenon and to be "tried

by demons" meant "passing through a stage in the growth of awareness

of the lower frontiers of the personality" (*The Making of Late Antiquity*

90).

Following this line of thought, Brown goes on to say that the

demonic "stood not merely for all that was hostile to man; the demons

summed up all that was anomalous and incomplete in man" (*The Making*

of Late Antiquity 90, emphasis in the original). The idea that the demonic

"stood" for an absence in the individual, that is to say, that it

represented or took the place of this absence, serves at once to hypostatize the non-essential features of the psyche, and to signal the complex and transitory locus of temptation in its relation to the "inner" or "true" self. Indeed, temptation, as it is figured in the form of desire, emerges within and thus splits the self in such a way as to produce a schism in identity, one that can have rather startling results:

> Abba Olympios ... was tempted to fornication. His thoughts said to him, "Go, and take a wife." He got up, found some mud, made a woman and said to himself, "There is your wife, now you must work hard in order to feed her." So he worked hard in order to feed her. The next day, making some mud again, he formed it into a girl and said to his thoughts, "Your wife has had a child, you must work harder so as to be able to feed her and clothe your child." So he wore himself out doing this, and said to this thoughts, "I cannot bear this weariness any longer." They answered, if you can not bear such weariness, stop wanting a wife." God, seeing his efforts, took away the conflict from him and he was

at peace (quoted in Brown 88).

The extraordinary dialogue that unfolds in this passage testifies to the doubling of self that was characteristic of the asceticism practiced in the Egyptian desert of the late antique period, and it was characteristic largely because desire had to be located both inside of and outside of the body to ensure first its recognition and then its removal. The ambiguity of this placement, essentially an ambiguity over the origin of desire itself, is evident in Abba Olympios's predicament, one in which "his thoughts" (distinct both grammatically and ontologically from "he" or "himself") are at first the cause of his dilemma and later serve to indicate its solution. After initially reading this passage, it would seem that Olympios's thoughts, or perhaps more precisely the process by which he thinks, must at first be considered a part of his corporeal being, for if it were merely an external agent, it is difficult to imagine why he would go to such elaborate lengths to answer the desire to fornicate. In this way, temptation manifests itself as a "voice" in the mind, one that urges the individual form the most intimate vantage point to act on behalf of the flesh instead of the spirit. At the same time however, the thoughts seem to have a persona of their own, and consequently Olympios emerges from the text as a rather hapless figure, one whose dogged struggle to

maintain the purity of his true self posits the integrity of that self in the first place. More specifically, the phrase "he ... said to himself" is central to what is happening to Olympios, constructing as it does a dialogic opposition between purity and temptation that is challenged by the syntactic (and by extension, ontological) unity of the pronouns that identify and identify with the Abba. Thus the weariness that Olympios can no longer bear is better understood in psychological rather than physical terms; in other words, he is tired of being at odds with himself. That "his thoughts," projected at first as an insidious "other," seek to resolve this psychic conflict should be taken to typify the means by which challenges to the ascetic project are met and overcome. The alienated self, interpreted as an externalized representation of desire, is reunited with the pure self once this desire is recognized as suitably alien and can be purged with little risk of internal psychological damage.

It is important to note that ultimately it is God who relieves the monk of his conflict, apparently in recognition of his struggle, for this fact introduces the relationship between human will and divine grace that is central to ascetic self-discipline. If temptation is understood as a confusion of identity occasioned by a split between (genuine) being and desire, then the final sentence in the passage quoted above seems to

indicate that divine intervention simply closes the gap by eliminating the latter element. Indeed, the force of divine agency is especially evident in the Life of Antony, and the saint regularly attributes the triumph of his asceticism to the grace of God working within him (Ch. 5, Ch. 7, Ch. 20, Ch. 42). Deriding the peripatetic nature of Greek intellectualism, Antony tells his followers that "there is no need for us to go abroad on account of the Kingdom of heaven, nor to cross the sea for virtue [f]or the Lord has told us before, *the Kingdom of God is within you*" (46, emphasis in the original). However, this fairly commonplace notion, itself a citation of Matthew and an echo of Paul's sentiment in Galatians, serves more importantly to preface Antony's conception of virtue and how virtue is, in part, necessarily a product of human will. Once the presence of God is recognized as integral to the self, "[a]ll virtue needs, then is our willing, since it is in us, and arises from us." "For virtue," Antony continues, "exists when the soul maintains its intellectual part according to nature. It holds fast according to nature when it remains as it was made – and it was made beautiful and perfectly straight" (46). Virtue, on this rather optimistic account, follows upon an act of will, but one that acknowledges and enacts an essentialized being made in the image of, and thus resonant of, God himself. Accordingly, it can be

understood as a kind of active mimesis in which the self, upon realizing

an inherent propensity for divine grace, employs the will to enforce its

"natural" manifestation.

It is, of course, temptation that undermines this account of virtue.

More importantly, as we have seen in the case of Abba Olympios and as

was the case for ascetics in general, temptation emerged as the result of

a fracturing of the self, wherein non-essential features were figured as

demonic "invasions." The role of desire in this configuration of ascetic

selfhood is understandably crucial, and the example offered by Antony

is especially instructive. As I have already pointed out, his retreat into

the Egyptian desert can be understood as a radical response to Paul's

cautionary dictum against conforming too much to the world; ultimately

Antony was concerned with constructing and inhabiting a viable space

between the social imperatives of this world and the spiritual reality of

the next.[58] His removal from the town of his birth effected a severing of

social ties, but more to the point, his "dying" unto this world had as its

goal a removal from the realm of time and mutability, a realm that is

defined by the presence of desire. Stated simply, desire is constituted (in

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[58] Of course, Antony's withdrawal into the desert occasioned a less solitary existence than might be expected. Although he lived most of his life alone in caves, the middle of the *Life* is comprised by a lengthy instructional discourse given to disciples drawn to the desert by Antony's reputation.

part) by an awareness of an absence in the self, an absence that can be remedied only by the transformation of the self as it moves through time. Desire therefore occasions self-perception in terms of an image of that which it is not; in other words, the self is *in itself* incomplete and must, if it is to conform to desire, effect some change to close this gap between selves, both literal and figural. In this way, a sense of incompleteness (and accordingly a sense of desire) can come to seen as essential components of the self and self-fulfilment, understood as completion or plenitude, is always something to be accomplished. Temporally it is always figured as other, as a future state of being to which the self is directed towards becoming, and the realization of this transformation is transitory at best and is more realistically conceived of as a merely illusory. Moreover, desire, by foregrounding mutability, ties the self to this world, to eventual and inevitable non-being as it works against the purity and unity of the self by introducing the possibility of that which could be. Needless to say, this possibility is always, from an ascetic point of view, a deception, a ruse by which desire gains its point of entry into the body and entices the self with the transitory pleasure of acquisition. But following the logic of ascesis, the moment of acquisition is in fact a moment of acquiescence, wherein the eternity of

the soul is lost to the temporal sequence of desire and destruction.

Ascesis can be seen as an inevitable response to temptation, for, in its effort to render simplicity through repetition, it is the natural complement to the self-transformations wrought in the name of desire. It works to overcome temptation by purifying the self of any transformative element, and the repetition of nothingness (manifested, for example, in Origen's exhortation to "pray without ceasing") is not a retreat from the dilemmas of a social existence but is instead evidence of the battle successfully concluded. The operation of temptation in the *Life of Antony* is, not surprisingly, a central narrative concern, and Antony understood his discipline as central to his salvation: "[p]utting off the body, then, which is corruptible, we receive it back incorruptible" (44). More specifically, Antony's response to temptation illustrates both the psychological model of ascesis that I have been discussing and the recourse to Incarnational theology posited by this model as an affirmation of the "incorruptible body" that ascesis claims as its goal.

Athanasius depicts Antony's journey towards this body – constituted as a pure, coherent self, purged of transforming desire – early on in the *Life of Antony*, portraying the monk's discipline as an incorporation of practices that had previously been fragmented and

diffuse: "[having observed the habits of other hermits], he returned to

his own place of discipline, from that time gathering the attributes of

each in himself, and striving to manifest in himself what was best from

all" (33). Antony's initial achievement, therefore, is assimilative, as he

gathers together what was nascent in the contemporary practice of

ascesis and realizes its completeness in his own being. Similarly, the

challenge to this unity emerges early within Athansius's narrative.

Desire is deployed against Antony in familiar fashion, relating itself to

those elements of social life that the ascetic has foregone. While

recourse to "memories of his possessions, the guardianship of his sister,

the bonds of kinship, love of money and glory, the manifold pleasure of

food, [and] the relaxations of life..." manages to raise in the young

ascetic's mind a "great dust cloud of consideration," these images of

luxury fail to entice (33). Indeed, Antony's determination affects a deft

reversal upon this malicious representation of absence, such that "the

enemy [sees] his own weakness in the face of Antony's resolve" (33).

Undeterred, Satan pursues Antony's virtue through carnal desire,

unfolding a sequence of desire and denial through which the saint

asserts the resistance and triumph of the disciplined self:

> Then [Satan] placed his confidence in the weapons

in the navel of his belly, and boasting in these ... he

advanced against the youth, noisily disturbing him

by night, and so troubling him in the daytime that

even those who watched were aware of the bout that

occupied them both. The one hurled foul thoughts

and the other overturned them through his prayers;

the former resorted to titillation, but the latter,

seeming to blush, fortified the body with faith and

with prayers and fasting. And the beleaguered devil

undertook one night to assume the form of a

woman and to imitate her every gesture, solely in

order that he might beguile Antony. But in thinking

about Christ and considering the excellence won

through him, and the intellectual part of the soul,

Antony extinguished the fire of his opponents

deception (34).

While this sequence differs significantly from the details of Abba

Olympios's trial (Antony's psyche, for example, remains more or less

intact), it is powerfully resonant in the determination of its outcome.

Like Olympios, Antony's "excellence" is "won through Christ" in a

moment of human will directed towards the divine grace that inhabits it.
Moreover, his victory turns on the irony that characterizes at once
Christ's being and purpose in the world. Athanasius evokes this irony in
local terms when he writes of the devil that "he who considered himself
to be like God was now made a buffoon by a mere youth, and he who
vaunted himself against flesh and blood was turned back by a flesh-
bearing man" (34). It is, of course, more accurate to say that Satan
works *through* the flesh and thereby against it, for his intent is to separate
the intellectual part of the soul from the body that is its worldly
counterpart. It is therefore fitting that Satan's hubris, indicated by his
God-like self-regard, is refuted by a man whose flesh can claim a truly
legitimate likeness as this likeness is expressed in God's original creative
act. More generally, this refutation of Satanic guile is ironic in the sense
that Antony's victory can be attributed to the very flesh that endangered
his soul in the first place, inasmuch as this flesh is connected to the
body of Christ. While Jesus identifies the divine with humanity through
his assumption of flesh and all its attendant frailties, this assumption at
the same time realizes a displacement of this same humanity understood
in terms of its frailties, its susceptibility to desire and decay. Christ, as
Athanasius makes clear, bore flesh *for us* (34 my italics), thereby

comprehending the force of temptation, as it is directed towards humanity, within the act of his condescension. As is made clear in Incarnational orthodoxy, God becomes fully human in the figure of Jesus and his humanity opens him to the question of change and self-fulfilment that temptation insinuates within the self. This question is both heard and answered (I could say "disarmed") by Christ's affirmation of and submission to the will of his father; in effect, his sacrifice of selfhood (endured in order to gain eternity) constitutes the original enactment of asceticism's moment of fulfilment through denial. Moreover, this enactment is profoundly archetypal. Antony's identification with the body of Christ draws on this archetype, incorporating his own body into the corruptible but forever and absolutely uncorrupted body of Christ: "Working with Antony was the Lord, who ... gave to the body the victory over the devil" (34).

It is therefore the fact of Antony's flesh that facilitates his salvation through Christ, for the Word became flesh in order revivify the connection, itself lost as a result of temptation, between God and humanity. Moreover, the process by which Antony responds to demonic temptation manifests the double exchange of identity characteristic of theosis. Christ's bearing of flesh effectively relieves

Antony of the burden of his own corruptibility, and offers him a means by which he can confirm the stability of his own selfhood; Antony's body, then, becomes Christ-like through his exercise of denial. But this instance of the theotic moment engenders consequences beyond the moral or normative realm in which asceticism most obviously operates. In addition, it constitutes within the *Life of Antony* an aspiration towards the timelessness that is made present in the Incarnation. In my second chapter, I discussed this notion of timelessness in relation to Augustinian theology, claiming that the undifferentiated presence of divinity finds its human analogy in the process of memory, a process by which the self internalizes temporality. In the case of Antony, the unity of self and time is particularly crucial, for Antony's discipline, the means by which he establishes and maintains the absolute integrity of his self, works to overcome the fragmentation of identity effected by the passage of time. To be "in" time is, as I have already mentioned, to be subject to a loss that Augustine would circumvent through a sort of a self-presencing recourse to memory. Antony seeks to extend the logic of this procedure by eliminating the function of memory all together. This is not say, however, that Antony expels memory utterly from his being, for such a move would clearly be at odds with his profound sense of

scriptural awareness, his awareness, in other words, of the model of Christ that he has received (and receives) through the text of the Gospels. What it does mean is that Antony, through a specifically ascetic denial of the self as it is composed by the past, seeks to situate himself *in* this textual model, thereby articulating an identity that is the site of its own transcendence.

Antony's discipline demands that he forego the temporal residue of life as it lived by his peers, for in this residue (i.e. memory) lies the source of those "transformative" elements – longing, regret, disappointment – that give rise to temptation. Instead, Antony chooses to "die daily" to his rigorous conception of self, and in doing so he affirms the presence made real by the Word made flesh. As he informs his disciples:

> ... it is good to carefully consider the Apostle's statement: *I die daily*. For if we live as people dying daily, we will not commit sin.... If we think this way ... we will not sin, nor will we crave anything ... but as people who anticipate dying each day we shall be free of possessions, and we shall forgive all things to all people (45).

To die daily, then, is to constitute the self without anticipation, desire, remorse; in a word, without difference. As Athanasius tells us, Antony "endeavor[s] each day to *present* himself as the sort of person ready to appear before God" (my italics 37). The spectre of sin, therefore, is not a consideration for the ascetic precisely because his indifference to time precludes the self-alienation that precipitates contrition and atonement.

While the *Life of Antony* explicitly endorses the ideal of a self characterized utterly by presence, this ideal should be situated within the larger notion, implicit in the *Life*, of the self saturated by language. Harpham claims that hagiography "documents a class of people trying to achieve complete narratability, trying to become dead to the world and recuperable only through textuality" (73) Through his asceticism, Antony seeks to inscribe himself within a grammar of selfhood so as to evade those elements of contingency, accident, and the unforeseen that would undermine the singular purpose of discipline. On Harpham's formulation, the purpose of discipline is precisely to close the gap between reference and referent that necessitates historical writing in the first place.

By constructing his identity in this way, displacing experience with the structure of imitation, Antony aims to partake in the economy

of redeemed language, language that, through the Incarnation, has been returned to the Lord. Antony demonstrates an affinity for this economy very early in his life when, as a child, he cannot "bear to learn letters" (30). Initially, this reluctance might seem odd, coming as it does from one deeply implicated in the replication of the text of Scripture. In fact, his illiteracy demonstrates his wariness of the difference between the subject as reader and the other as read, a difference that necessarily splits writing understanding. Antony circumvents this fissure by marking the written word of Scripture within own his consciousness. According to Athanasius, Antony came to know Scripture by "paying attention to the readings, [and] carefully [taking] to heart what was profitable in them" (30-31). Harpham characterizes this epistemological mode as "a way of reading that is enacted in life, a hermeneutics that tries to overcome the gap between (divine) intention and (human) understanding through the 'reader's' ... rewriting of the text ... in his own being" (42).[59] Moreover, it is through this "rewriting" that Antony can render himself a perfect object of reference, what Harpham terms a

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[59] This notion is demonstrated again in Antony's dispute with a group of specious philosophers, intent on embarrassing Antony for his illiteracy. Following Antony's inquiry, the philosophers commit themselves to the idea that the mind precedes (and "invents") language, upon which the saint replies "Now you see that in the person whose mind is sound there is no need for the letters" (84). Not surprisingly, the philosophers are amazed to find "such understanding in an untrained mind," and it is

"durable sign ... [that is itself] intimate with the divine essence" (10). It

is therefore an entirely fitting paradox that Antony's sainthood became

strongly associated with the symbol of the Book shortly after his death.[60]

It is not, however, as simple as Antony "becoming" language so

as to elide the difference of time. Geoffrey Harpham ascribes this

duality to the "doubleness of all temptation," which he describes as:

> 1) the temptation to wander in the unprecedented
>
> and the unmotivated, to express the personal and
>
> unique self at the expense of the grace of God
>
> within; and 2) the temptation simply to collapse into
>
> mere citation of Scripture, easing the alienation of
>
> humanity by forgetting it, so that Scripture
>
> accomplishes no work in the world, yielding no
>
> profit" (73).

According to Harpham, then, the "only proper reading [of hagiography]

is one in which the historical and the archetypal, the literal and the

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this lack of training that reinforces Antony's identity as a "natural" ascetic.

[60] I would argue that it is in becoming a "durable sign" that the ascetic's effort towards self-purification realizes its most *significant* ambition. In this "becoming," the essence of an individual, understood in terms of its private interiority, is externalized so as to close the demarcation separating being and reference. Reference can thus be said to be located *within* human essence, thus obviating the need for a referential, mediating language.

metaphorical, are suspended in mutual resistance" (73). Indeed, the temptation to give over to "mere citation" is perhaps the most insidious of demonic assaults upon the self, for it subverts the resistance that establishes asceticism in the first place. Antony is clearly aware that empty repetition is a telling feature of the demonic, and he counsels his followers to beware those apparitions that claim to be angels, who utter, "as if in echo," the content of Scripture, and who commend the hermits on the strength of their discipline (57, 50). Such commendation is, Antony asserts, merely an attack on vigilance and an invitation to complacency (57). Discipline, on the other hand, is of its nature constituted by effort, by a constant moving towards the moment of perfect stasis. Similarly, the gesture toward presence is always contested by the fact of temporality, and thus hagiography is a mode of writing deeply characterized by struggle.

CONCLUSION

... history is a text that the social body communicates to itself while reacting to it,

history locates itself both within this reading and in the production of new sentences

generated by the reading. (Paul Zumthor, *Speaking of the Middle Ages* 32-33)

The idea of struggle, of moving towards a state of being

contested by its opposite returns me to a position articulated in the

introduction to this study, for Antony's yearning for stability and stasis

prefigures in a loose sense contemporary discussions concerning

language and historical reality. In effect, Antony's struggle is one of a

resistance to time, and he gives himself over to the presence of a text

that marks his absence from the social world. And yet temporality is

inevitably implicated within his struggle by the very repetition of self by

which it is prosecuted. Mimesis, by admitting the gap between the

origin and its imitation, instantiates that which it seeks to eliminate

through replication. Thus *identity* is at the centre of Antony's dynamic

of denial and assertion; he seeks to collapse his being through

Christological imitation and in so doing assert his eternity. He wishes,

in other words, to attain the status of a transcendental signifier,

meaningful and legible regardless of historical circumstances. The writing of the self, the entering into language, is his means of realizing this status. Paradoxically, the evidence (i.e. *witness*) of this process of "non-being" is Athanasius's written record, a historical document which has in effect traversed time from past to present. To recognize Antony's ascetic effort, as it is reported in the *Life*, is therefore to understand Antony himself as an origin of ascetic effort, and to realize that his existence (as it is structured and transmitted by the text) seeks to resist language. It is, to draw upon Toews's formulation, not simply reducible to the text.

In characterizing the ascetic self (construed as both an ontological and textual presence/identity) as a "structure of resistances," Harpham captures the necessary paradox of ascetic praxis and writing poised between the modes of being and knowing, reality and language (61). It would seem, therefore, inadequate, if not altogether naive, to suppose that hagiography's ambivalences toward time and writing are in fact symptomatic of a general intellectual deficiency, one that must be identified and remedied by modern critical practice. Certainly, this remedial approach is an important and valuable contribution to hagiology; indeed, it is safe to say that the salvage operation initiated by

Delehaye has organized the structure in which the current reception of hagiography is inscribed. Nevertheless, it is equally important to inflect this reception within the terms offered by recent efforts to theorize history, efforts which themselves seem to reiterate hagiography's textual principles and problematics. Zumthor's dynamic model of transmission and accumulation implicates the historical consciousness *within* an ongoing act of self-fashioning that gathers the strands of the past into an essential core of awareness and understanding even as it extends itself forward in new modes of self expression. Thus, as is true of hagiographic representation, the self exists as both a cause and an effect of textuality. Consequently, the hagiographic self, as it emerges in writing produced by and for sacred biography is concerned with producing a space that is a culmination of temporality and yet is not subsumed within its flow.

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