THE ADULTERY OF DELICATE OBJECTS

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For my family and Nic.
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. . . they only pretend to imitate.
—Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*
**Moechus**

*Moechus* means adulterer, a man who secretly pollutes the marriage bed of another. From *moechus* we call mechanical art any object which is clever and most delicate and which, in its making or operation, is beyond detection, so that beholders find their power of vision stolen from them when they cannot penetrate the ingenuity of the thing.

—Martin of Laon, *Scholica Graecarum glossarum*¹

Notice the almost poetic magic of Martin’s etymology, the subtle way in which, deriving *mechanicum* from *µοιχος* instead of its more obvious (and, from the perspective of modern lexicography, correct) etymon, *µηχανικος*, he invests an entire class of made things with a prosopopoecic sense of sexually-charged agency.² Not every artifact, it seems, falls under the heading “mechanical art”; but, following the logic of his wordplay, those that do—those delicate enough to manifest some convincing deception at their surface, clever enough to hide the true nature of their inner workings—are, or at the very least are *like*, adulterers. And not in name only—as if the history of words were a process prone to accidents or corruptions, or in any way arbitrary—but in act and effect: they take up with their beholders’ helpmeet sight, dissolving into conflict and confusion, what Augustine, among a host of other medieval writers

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² The Greek etymons are proposed by Taylor. See Taylor, *Didascalicon*, 191n64. For slightly different etymons, see Lynn White, Jr., “Cultural Climates and Technological Advance in the Middle Ages,” *Viator: Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 2 (1972), 192. For the modern (i.e. “correct”) etymological derivation, see the *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “mechanic.”
(including Alain of Lille and Richard of Saint Victor), described as the hard-won marital harmony of body and soul, raw corporeal sensation and divinely-inspired will. ³ “Your flesh is like your wife,” the bishop wrote; “it rebels against you, just as your wife does. Love it, rebuke it, until it is made into one harmony, one bond of flesh and spirit.”⁴ To subordinate one’s fleshy “wife” to the authority of one’s “husband-soul” is, he elsewhere suggests, to mitigate, perhaps even to cancel, the sinful state of concupiscence into which the first parents’ fall from grace plunged them and their descendants.⁵ Postlapsarian Edenic beatitude—earthly redemption—in other words, stands the consecrated goal of this tyrannical, well-nigh abusive, espousal. And if that is so, if the (supposedly) blissful meet of soul and sense is understood to reverse the fall, then to have the achievement of that union, to whatever degree one (believes one) has

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⁵ “Iam quippe anima libertate in peruersum propria delectata et Deo dedignata seruire pristino corporis seruitio destituebatur, et quia superiorem dominum suo arbitrio deseruerat, inferiorem famulum ad suum arbitrium non tenebat, nec omni modo habebat subditam carnem, sicut semper habere potuisse, si Deo subdita ipsa mansisset. Tunc ergo coepit caro concupiscere aduersus spiritum, cum qua controuersia nati sumus.” Saint Augustine of Hippo, De Civitate Dei, Volume 2, eds. Bernardus Dombart and Alphonsus Kalb (Turnholt: Brepols, 1955), 395. For the soul, reveling in its own liberty, and scorning to serve God, was itself deprived of the command it had formerly maintained over the body. And because it had willfully deserted its superior Lord, it no longer held its own inferior servant; neither could it hold the flesh subject, as it would always have been able to do had it remained itself subject to God. Then began the flesh to lust against the Spirit, in which strife we are born. Marcus Dods, trans., The City of God (United States: Random House, 1950), 422. See also Biernoff, Sight, 29-31.
managed to achieve it, forcibly vitiated—defiled—by the adulterous designs of some
mere thing is no doubt to experience a particularly humiliating kind of quasi-fall, a
manmade version of the divine punishment that caused Adam and Eve to feel the
shameful stirring of “disobedient flesh” that Augustine felt still intimates in all of us the
presence of original sin.6 Nothing more than an old word in a foreign tongue, moechus,
we might say, nevertheless moves the artifacts that Martin would call mechanica ars,
situating them within an established discourse of Christian redemption that makes, and
can only make, of their art—their craft and craftsmanship—something lustful,
transgressive, dangerous. And they, those artifacts, by virtue of the same scholarly
incantation, move us in turn—to a kind of intellectual impotence, or, rather, to (what is
the same thing) a condition of carnal arousal uninhibited by the dominative salvation-
drive of the soul—“a pleasure,” as Augustine once put it, “so intense . . . that when it
reaches its climax there is an almost total extinction of mental alertness.”7

But already we’re moving too quickly, presuming a silent intercourse between
these meager scraps from the medieval archive, allowing the meaning of µοιχεία,
adultery, to slip unremarked between base sexual trespass and purely ideational
debasement, allowing it, moreover, to perform something like the secret pollutions that
it names, slipping from Martin to Augustine and back again—all in an effort to flesh out

6 Biernoff, Sight, 30. Augustine’s phrase is “motum inobedientis carnis.” Augustine, De
Civitate, 395.

7 Augustine, City, quoted in Biernoff, Sight, 30. “Maior in corporis uoluptatibus nulla est; ita ut
momento ipso temporis, quo ad eius peruenit extremum, paene omnis acies et quasi uigilia
cogitationis obruatur.” Augustine, De Civitate, 439.
and render intelligible the almost poetic maneuvers of a gloss that, from a modern perspective, might itself be considered adulterate, corrupt, and, therefore, ironically, as impenetrable, as unintelligible, as the very artifacts that it defines, and defines precisely to condemn. Martin’s passage, after all, says nothing about our potential deliverance from original sin—at least, not explicitly. And Augustine, for his part, seems nowhere to have written on the sex lives of made things. But the near seamlessness with which the metaphor implied by the former author fits and extends that proposed explicitly by the latter—drawing out the infidous underside, as it were, of the psycho-theological marriage model of redemption—is, I think, sufficient to suggest that the moechus-mechanicum connection is a product not of ignorance, flawed scholarship, or any personal predilection for, shall we say, quirky sources, but of an informed and culturally-engaged ideological program—a program that, despite its apparent secularity, takes its formative impetus, its structure and significance, from the pervasive undergirding of a markedly Christian body-self concept (or, somewhat anachronistically, a Christian-inflected psychology), at the time, largely indebted to Augustine.8

Moechus, Friedrich Ohly might have said, reveals for Martin the “spiritual sense” of the phrase mechania ars, its sensus spiritualis. “The Middle Ages,” he wrote in his classic study of the period’s significs, “practice a form of etymology that is

8 I follow Biernoff, who remarks that “the writings of Saint Augustine are arguably the single most influential source of medieval formulations of the flesh, particularly in its imbrication with sexuality and morality.” Biernoff, Sight, 26.
speculative, belongs to theology, and serves the illumination of the meaning of the word that is concealed within it”; its purpose was not to detail scientifically the developmental modifications of linguistic units (a professedly “harmless” drudgery more or less invented during the Enlightenment9), but to offer useful explanations of “the meaning of the world or of life” inspired by the methods of Biblical exegesis and derived from “the Christian spirit.”10 Beyond the literal sense of a given word, medieval philologists sought its allegorical significance, “a way of leading one’s life, by indicating to the soul the path to . . . salvation,” and, beyond that, its anagogical meaning, “its statement about the promises which will be fulfilled in the afterlife.”11 Such an ambitious disciplinary enterprise (more moral philosophy than lexicography, really) could not, of course, afford to adopt a standard so limiting as genealogical accuracy—words simply meant too much, were too weighted, that is, with multilayered meanings and, more important, religious value, to be reduced to superficial definitions and right derivations. At stake, with each lexeme—with each individual instance of an utterable sign, in fact—was the legibility of a guide to redemption, a means, if interpreted correctly, of deciphering the will of God, coded everywhere in the world, in

9 An allusion, of course, to Samuel Johnson’s famous definition of the word lexicographer: “a writer of dictionaries, a harmless drudge, who busies himself in tracing the original, and detailing the signification of words.” Samuel Johnson, A Dictionary of the English Language, s.v. “lexicographer.”


11 Ohly, Sensus, 16-8.
things and their properties, via the classical languages used (typically Latin, but also, as in Martin’s glossary, Greek\textsuperscript{12}) to express those things and properties.\textsuperscript{13} “Thus,” writes Ohly, “we differentiate a twofold meaning, once from the sound of the word to the thing, from the *vox* to the *res*, and a higher one, linked to the thing, which points from the thing to something higher,” something more obviously relevant to the pursuit of a Christian life.\textsuperscript{14} To the medieval etymologist, the word *stone*, for example, not only designated ‘rock,’ ‘boulder,’ ‘mineral substance,’ and so on, but, according to (again) a rather poetic catalogue from the *Distinctiones monasticae*, also

\begin{quote}
Christ, and angelic virtue, Christ’s bride as well, 
The just man, justice, carnal sense, and depraved Habit, grave sin, demon, false Jew, 
True Gentile\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

—the context of its appearance determining which particular spiritual valence, from this range of possibilities, was activated. And like the polysemic reach of “stone”—the situated word and the significative ‘essential nature’ of the thing (‘hard,’ ‘cold,’ ‘firm,’ etc.) together pointing to matters more lofty than either alone could signify—Martin’s recourse from *mechanicum* to *μοιχος*, his turning of *mechainca ars* into *μοιχεία*,

\textsuperscript{12} According to Ohly, “the etymological substantiation of the signification of words is . . . reduced in the Middle Ages to the extent that the vernaculars gain in importance.” Ibid., 19.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 4.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 5.

\textsuperscript{15} Christus, et angelica virtus, Christi quoque sponsa, Iustus, iustitia, carnalis sensus, et usus Pravus, peccatum grave, daemon, falsus hebraeus, Verus gentilis.”

participates in the task of reconciling our post-Edenic state of self-conflict by making
the objects to which it applies meaningful—not in and of themselves, of course, as they
are defined by the confusion to which they bring beholders, but within the broader,
redemption-oriented framework of Christian theology. *Moechus*, in other words,
functions for Martin as an intelligible warning about those artifacts that, because they
are in some way unintelligible, because they in some way confound the lucidity
demanded by the notion of insight (or ‘in-sight,’ our penetrative “power of vision”),
operate beyond the interpretive scope of medieval philology, speaking (so to speak)
only to the rebellious unreason of their beholders’ fleshy senses, and thus escaping the
oppressive will-to-knowledge of their redemption-bound souls. As an effort to exert the
explicatory power of Christian etymology at the acknowledged limit of its efficacy, we
might think of the peculiar articulation (jointure and expression) of sex and religion that
*mechanica ars* represents in the *Scholica* passage as more of a guardrail against a threat
to salvation than (its more common disciplinary counterpart) a signpost showing the
proverbial ‘straight and narrow’: a last-ditch preventative (rather than positive) measure,
intended to keep us focused on the right and righteous path to a blessed state of inner
unity.

Appealing, perhaps, in a prescriptive, authoritarian kind of way. But this essay
—I may as well admit at the outset—is devoted to straying from that path and crossing
into the strange, precipitous space beyond its guardrails—devoted, that is, to the clever,
delicate objects of Martin’s gloss; to the coercive affairs of the psychosexual economy
that it raises between those objects and the subjects who, encountering them, yield (inevitably, it seems) to their seductions; and, in the end, most of all, to the eroticized extinction of our apperceptive faculties that, Augustine hints, comes with that yielding. Its general premise is simple: an act of transgression—*any* act of transgression, objectal, verbal, bodily, or otherwise—is most easily and, insofar as it is in some way *productive* (a notion that, for I hope obvious reasons, I leave unqualified), most effectively performed when it does little more than adopt the terms of the prohibition that gives it its shape and moment. Such an act disturbs the logic of its forbiddance from the inside, as it were, while simultaneously appropriating, for its own subversive ends, whatever cultural currency, whatever discursive force, its condemnation has accumulated, like physical momentum, over time. The moralizing tenor of Martin’s etymology—to take the only prohibition, if so subtle a warning can even be called a prohibition, directly relevant to this project—in no way exhausts the potency of the link that it establishes between art and adultery, between objects and subjects, theology and psychology. *Moechia* is more supple (or more devious) a concept than the exacting purposes of Christian salvation, which would consign it to sin, can safely admit. And while it is undoubtedly true, as Bernice Kaczynski has remarked, that “the uses to which medieval authors” of glossaries and encyclopedias “put words suggests to us something of the

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16 Although a number of the sources that Martin drew from for other entries in his *Scholica* have been identified—Isidore of Seville, Fulgentius, and Martianus Capella, among them—there is, it seems, no known precedent for tracing *mechanicum* to the root *moechus*. See Bernice M. Kaczynski, “Some St. Gall Glosses on Greek Philanthropic Nomenclature,” *Speculum* 58.4 (1983), 1008; and M. L. W. Laistner, “Candelabrum Theodosianum,” *The Classical Quarterly* 16.2 (1922), 107n4.
nature of their intellectual concerns,” and maybe even “gives an indication of their patterns of thought,”¹⁷ there are other, less ‘direct’ (though I would argue, in some respects, more rigorous) ways available to us of reading those words and the conceptual structures laid out around them. Why should it be Martin’s “patterns of thought” that come to mind first—or at all, for that matter—when we dip into his etymological researches? Why not those of his readers, among whom, after all, we must (now) count ourselves? It is, to my mind, equally, if not more, valid to examine the self-consciously foundational efforts of medieval lexicographers for the possibility of a- or even anti-foundational ‘misuses’—weak points, points of equivocation, and outright errors, practically begging to be exploited—that others, whose interests perhaps tended toward more worldly matters than redemption, might have discerned in their work, the unauthorized ends that their self-anointed authority might have been manipulated to serve. As Ohly points out, the interpretive methodology of sensus spiritualis made its way from the religious to the secular literatures (and, in particular, the legends) of the Middle Ages, where it was used not only to excavate Christian subtexts, but also, in some cases, to elaborate reflexively the thematic significance of plot lines, narrative

¹⁷ Kaczynski, “Glosses,” 1009.
devices, and descriptive details. And if this Christian etymological model could be secularized, repurposed, so to speak, to suit to the needs of the poet rather than those of the religious scholar (assuming, for the moment, the aims of each to be at least somewhat distinct), then why not its material as well? Already availing itself of poetic ‘logic,’ or, as Ohly says, “characterized by a poetic devotion to the essence of things, precisely at that point where they remain prose,” medieval etymology bore fruits that would have been easily transplanted to the realm of ‘poetry proper.’ From this angle, the theologically meaningful framework that Martin erects for the wanton experience of un-meaning (by which I mean the felt lapse of reason, the release of meaningless sensuality) brought on by certain objects, the religiously-inflected warning that it offers as to the danger that they represent, begins itself to look at least potentially

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18 Ohly’s example is the minne grotto, or “cave of lovers,” scene in Gottfried von Strassburg’s Tristan, which he identifies as “the first application expressis verbis, in German, of the methodology of the spiritual interpretation of a text applied by a poet to his own work.” Ohly, Sensus, 26. The relevant passage begins (in Arthur Thomas Hatto’s translation), “now I beg you to bear with me while I reveal to you on account of what hidden significance that cave was thus constructed in the rock,” and proceeds, over the course of several paragraphs, to illuminate the relevance of the grotto’s specific features to such concepts as “Love’s Simplicity,” “Constancy,” “Love” itself, “Kindness,” “Breeding,” and so on. Nowhere does the text venture beyond this explicative veneration of love, its attributes, and concerns, or touch on anything immediately recognizable as Christian allegory. Arthur Thomas Hatto, trans., Gottfried von Strassburg: Tristan, with the ‘Tristran’ of Thomas (London: Penguin Books, 1960), 264-66.

19 Ohly, Sensus, 12.
transgressive. Not only does it endow those objects with an identifiable cultural potency that clearly exceeds that of their objective materials, shapes, purposes, and so on—whatever potency such bare facts can be said to possess—it also makes that excess potency, like some low-hanging Edenic apple, temptingly accessible to those who would embrace its counter-redemptive effect, who would propagate, by manufacture, the lustful confusion arising from original sin.

If nothing else (and, of course, there is a great deal else), the mere possibility—however perverse or simply unlikely it may at this point appear—that Martin’s gloss might be exploited for such unregenerate ends should give us pause when, about midway through one of the most popular romances of the Middle Ages, we come across a passage that seems almost a gross literalization—a verbatim translation, from theory to figure—of its central conceit: an ekphrastic statue, or, more precisely, an automaton, that moves, breathes, looks uncannily like its subject, and shows no evidence of fabrication; a statue, moreover, that depicts one of the most famous adulterers of the

20 As, indeed, it must: prohibitions constituting their transgressions and vice versa. Michel Foucault puts this eloquently in the opening pages of his essay “Preface to Transgression”: “the limit and transgression,” he writes, “depend on each other for whatever density of being they possess: a limit could not exist if it were absolutely uncrossable and, reciprocally, transgression would be pointless if it merely crossed a limit composed of illusions and shadows . . . Perhaps [transgression] is like a flash of lightening in the night which, from the beginning of time, gives a dense and black intensity to the night it denies, which lights up the night from the inside, from top to bottom, and yet owes to the dark the stark clarity of its manifestation, its harrowing and poised singularity.” Michel Foucault, “Preface to Transgression,” Language, Counter-memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 34 and 35.
medieval period—Yseut la Blonde. So delicately wrought outside and so cleverly engineered within that it achieves an undetectable illusion of life—an illusion of specific personhood, no less—the Yseut statue denies its (primary, though not only) beholder, Tristran, the opportunity to see it, as we say, for what it really is—not a person, and not his lover, but a thing—taking from him his ability to reason, and leaving him in a state that, though somewhat ambiguous, a number of modern readers have identified as obscene, even masturbatory. Perhaps it—the statue, the scene played out around it—represents nothing more than a reification of the warning expressed more abstractly in Martin’s Scholica gloss. Perhaps not even that. But, then again, maybe (how can we know?) it is a kind of erudite joke at Martin’s expense, the redundancy of the object—an adulterous image of an adulterer—mockingly taking his warning at its word, to the letter of its law, as it were, in an attempt to take advantage of the very tradition that his gloss marshals against it, and, thus, in some way, to take advantage of its reader-beholders.

But we’re getting ahead of ourselves again. We’re not there yet, to the Yseut statue, much less to the possibility of its adulterous exploits. There are, to be dealt with

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21 It has, in fact, been suggested that Martin had something very like the Yseut statue in mind when he penned his ‘definition’ of mechanica ars: the steam-driven automata, or aeophiles, invented by the first century mathematician Heron of Alexandria. Heron’s “engines,” as they are sometimes called, were meant to be placed in temples, where they would awe worshippers, reinforcing their faith by deception. See White, “Cultural Climates,” 192.

first, several obvious questions that my proposed ‘misreading’ of Martin’s *moechus-mechanicum* connection raises. What, exactly, is the nature of the objectal transgression that his curious formulation makes available (to other medieval writers, to us as readers of medieval texts)? What purpose, if any, aside from something like pornographic indulgence, might such transgressive objects serve (for the individuals who make them, those who encounter them, their shared culture at large)? And, at a more practical level, on what grounds is it possible, critically, historically, to bridge the three hundred years that separate Martin’s admittedly obscure gloss (which, according to Lynn White, Jr., had but “small influence in the West”\(^{23}\)) and (what must have been) the considerably better-known statue at the center of the Tristan romance? To answer the first two questions, we will go by way of the third. For standing, impossibly, unavoidably, between the *Scholia Graecarum glossarum* and the earliest known records of the Tristan legend is Hugh of Saint Victor’s *Didascalicon*, a masterwork of medieval philosophy that happens to contain perhaps the most important reinterpretation of Martin’s *moechia* scheme—which I would like summarily to describe as ‘the adultery of delicate objects’—before Jacques Lacan, in his writings on vision and the fine arts, took up the subject and adapted it (with characteristic obscurity) to the modern field of psychoanalysis. We will proceed through Hugh and Lacan before arriving at the image of Yseut, the work of both thinkers contributing to our understanding of a thing asserted

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and, as I will suggest, designed to resist understanding, to bring us, as it brings Tristan, to the strange pleasure of objectal adultery.
“Naked and Unarmed”

When, in the tenth chapter of the first book of his Didascalicon, Hugh sets about defining the work of man—distinguishing it from that of God and nature—he introduces, in an indirect way, the adulterous heart of Martin’s gloss.\(^{24}\) It comes between commas, an explicatory clause that, though it sounds almost like an afterthought, resonates at the theological core of the Victorine canon’s philosophy.

“Human work,” he writes, “because it is not nature but only imitative of nature, is fitly called mechanical, that is adulterate, just as a skeleton key is called a ‘mechanical’ key.”\(^{25}\) Mechanicum and adulterinum are Hugh’s words—neither moechus nor any variation thereof appear. The undergirding presence of the Greek term, however, the authority with which it links the mechanical arts and adultery, registers in his simple conjunction (offered as if the omitted etymon were all but obvious), id. est. Moechus, then: a ghost note of sorts. The mechanical arts are adulterate. The work of man, in fact, is adulterate—all of it. Unable to create ex nihilo, such feats being the sole province of God, and unable to tap the generative potencies of mysterious but earthly sources, as does nature, man is consigned exclusively and inexorably to the role of mimic—our made things are, and, it seems, can only be, imitations, adulterate insofar as

\(^{24}\) Taylor seems to have been the first modern scholar to note Hugh’s indebtedness to Martin on this point. See Taylor, Didascalicon, 191n64.

\(^{25}\) Taylor, Didascalicon, 55-6. “Opus humananum, quod natura non est, sed imitatur naturam, mechanicum, id. est. adulterinum nominatur: quemadmodum et clavis subintroducta mechanica dicitur.” Hugonis de Saint Victore, Eruditionis Didascalicæ (Documenta Catholica Omnia, 2006), 747.
they are the outcome of a kind of intellectual expropriation of nature, or rather, insofar as they represent a mingling of our bare human existence, “naked and unarmed”26 as Hugh puts it, with elements of the world around us, adapted, transposed, or simulated. Thus, “the builder who constructs a house has taken into consideration a mountain” for the way that water runs off its ridges, “he who first invented the use of clothes had considered how each of the growing things one by one has its proper covering by which to protect its nature from offense,” and—an example to which we will return—“the founder who casts a statue has gazed upon man as his model.”27 For Hugh, adulterate names not, as it does for Martin, the defining characteristic of a certain group of artifacts, but a condition of possibility inflecting every product of the mechanical arts—every product of “fabric making, armament, commerce, agriculture, hunting, medicine, and theatrics,”28 according to his list—no matter how clever or simple its operation, how delicate or crude its making.

This marked expansion of the implicative scope of Martin’s etymological play does not, however, entail a similar expansion of its condemmatory charge. As the

26 Taylor, Didascalicon, 55. Hugh’s famous phrase is “nascitur et nudus.” Hugonis, Didascalicae, 748.


broader arguments of the *Didascalicon* make clear, the adultery, that is to say, the secondariness, that determines the subordinate position of *opus humanum* in Hugh’s God-nature-man hierarchy of works is related to the religious value of their practice, but not indicative of any degenerate, much less dangerous, quality thereof. Hugh regards neither the processes nor products of man’s imitative arts as inimical to the redemptory aspirations of those good Christians everywhere rebuking their rebellious senses into Godly submission, subjecting the desires of their flesh to the force of their reason. In fact, quite the reverse: the mechanical arts are, he indicates, a boon to that endeavor.

“The intention of all human actions,” he writes,

> is resolved in a common objective: either to restore in us the likeness of the divine image or to take thought for the necessity of this life, which, the more easily it can suffer harm from those things which work to its disadvantage, the more does it require to be cherished and conserved.”

Jerome Taylor calls this Hugh’s masterstroke, his most original departure from the Augustinian tradition that considered scriptural study alone to lead to the restoration of man to his divine likeness, and that eventuality itself to be something “altogether reserved to the perfect vision of God in the glory to come”—certainly “not . . . a process which begins with a study of the arts of this life.” Rather than cordon off worldly knowledge from true spiritual growth, Hugh’s scheme incorporates the theoretical and

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practical arts (including the mechanical arts, an especial focus of the *Didascalicon*) into
the general “pursuit of Wisdom”—one of the two ways in which, he says, we strive
after, and by increments attain, personal beatitude (the other being the “practice of
Virtue”). The need (a postlapsarian effect, no doubt) and capacity (perhaps inherent)
to imitate nature is precisely what sets man apart from nature, demonstrates his God-
like mastery over nature, and, thus, contributes to his return to an Edenic state of
unsullied harmony with himself—his own original state of nature. The work of man is,
in short, redemptive work, our adulterate objects moving us toward an unadulterated
existence in which, Hugh suggests, we will no longer “seek outside ourselves what we
can find within.”

Paradoxical as this passage from armed and armored to total self-sufficiency
may seem, Hugh reasons his way through its apparent contradiction by way of an
analogy that makes the psychological concerns of his tract explicit. The human mind,
he argues, develops like a coin: when impressed with an image, it begins to represent
something other than its own raw material, and not merely “from the outside,” like a
painting, but “from its own power and natural aptitude to do so.” We are, in other

31 Taylor, *Didascalicon*, 54-5.
32 Taylor, *Didascalicon*, 47. “Reparatur autem per doctrinam, ut nostram agnoscamus naturam,
et ut discamus extra non quaerere, quod in nobis possumus invenire.” Hugonis, *Didascalicae*,
742.
33 Taylor, *Didascalicon*, 47. “Videmus quod paries extrinsecus, adveniente forma imaginis
cujuslibet similitudinem accipit: cum vero impressor ne allo figuram imprimit, ipsum quidem
non intrinsecus, sed ex propria virtute et naturali habilitate aliud jam aliquid reprentare incipit.”
Hugonis, *Didascalicae*, 742.
words, mentally malleable, and thus capable, he claims, of accommodating within
ourselves “all things,” “virtually” and, more important, “potentially.” We make, see
made, or otherwise investigate the made things around us, and, by our efforts, come to
know those things, to understand them, the accumulation of our knowledge marking our
progress on the road to redemption and bringing us gradually closer to something like
the omniscience of God.

Hugh’s is a perspective that, in its broad sweep and unconditional belief in
human intellectual capacity seems (the operative word here) to whitewash the ingenious
mechanicum-moechus connection that so animates the clever, delicate objects of
Martin’s Scholica entry. Lost—though, as we will see, not irrecoverably so—is any
sense of adultery as a delimiting, or even a graduated, quality of made things. The
entire class of lustful, sight-stealing objects set off and disparaged by Martin simply
disappears—and with it, of course, the coercive liaisons that bring us and our things into
such intimate, if unwelcome, contact. For Hugh, everything manmade appears not only
potentially intelligible, but, because of that potential intelligibility, potentially
 commodious to the pursuit of proper Christian aims—the threat of a lustful fall, of
ignorantly wallowing in the effects of original sin, has been artificially drained from
what Martin seemed to regard as an essentially virulent segment of the subject-object

34 Taylor, Didascalicon, 47. “Sic nimirum mens rerum omnium similitudine insignita, omnia
esse dictur, atque ex omnibus compositionem suscipere, no integraliter, sed virtualiter atque
potentialiter continere.” Hugonis, Didascalciae, 742.
economy, and replaced by an almost naive optimism that embraces every work of man, regardless of its quality, effect, or intention.

But it is, after all, only a matter of perspective; a matter, that is, of reorienting the discourse of objectal adultery away from what M. H. Abrams might have called a “pragmatic” theory of objecthood—focused on the effects of objects on their audiences—and toward something more like what he called an “expressive” theory—focused on the spiritual lives of object-makers, or as Abrams put it, commenting on the makers of a different era, a theory focused on “the compulsion of the ‘creative’ imagination, which, like God the creator, has its internal source of motion.”

Martin’s interest in the beholders of delicate objects places him squarely in the camp of the pragmatic theorists, while Hugh, taking up the cause of those who study and practice the mechanical arts, produces a religiously-oriented version of an expressive theory (in which knowledge functions as an expression, so to speak, of the soul’s will-to-Godliness). The two approaches are not, of course, necessarily contradictory, and the fact that Hugh should begin from precisely the same place as Martin and yet arrive at so strikingly different an understanding of the significance of artifacts to the project of redemption suggests only that his view is as blinkered as that of his source.

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36 Thomas Aquinas, for example, accommodated both perspectives when he wrote that “we marvel at something when, seeing an effect, we do not know its cause. And since one and the same cause is at times known to certain people and unknown to others, it happens that, of those seeing the effect, some marvel and some do not.” Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, quoted in Michael Camille, *The Gothic Idol: Ideology and Image-making in Medieval Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 244.
Or rather, almost as blinkered. For Hugh, by reducing the meaning of moechia to imitation, has brought us—humanity—as artificers after our divine likeness, dangerously, or I would suggest enticingly, close to impinging on the truly “creative” potency that his tripartite hierarchy explicitly reserves for God. “The earth cannot create the heaven,” he writes, “nor can man, who is powerless to add a mere span to his stature, bring forth the green herb.” And yet, imitating nature—itself, he remarks, quoting either Cicero or Victorinus, “an artificer fire coming forth from a certain power to beget sensible objects”—man threatens to circumvent the restrictions of this hierarchy, to make another nature, one that is not God’s creation but his own invention. Unintentionally, perhaps, Michael Camille discerns this latent negative valence to Hugh’s “use,” as he puts it—that is, his implicit reinterpretation or manipulation—“of the term moechus” in the example of the sculptor who, having taken the human form as his model, makes a statue: “representation,” he remarks, refining Hugh’s notion of imitation, “is something appropriating or stealing that which it should not.” Stealing that which it should not—a characterization that, though consistent with certain contemporary (religious) attitudes toward the visual arts, contradicts the redemption-by-imitation program explicitly laid out in the Didascalicon. If Hugh’s sculptor of figures

37 Taylor, Didascalicon, 55. “Neque enim potuit vel terra coelum creare, vel homo herbam producere; quia nex palmum ad staturam suam adjecere potest.” Hugonis, Didascalicæ, 747.

38 Taylor, Didascalicon, 57 and 193n71. “Natura est ignis artifex, ex quadam ut prodens in res sensibiles procreandas.” Hugonis, Didascalicæ, 748.

takes something that should not be taken from nature rather than borrowing that which he or she, acting in good faith and in accordance with Hugh’s doctrine, should, then the artist’s efforts begin to look more like a usurpious grab for the divine fiat—like an artificial attempt at the Zelem Elohim, perhaps—than a theologically-sanctioned engagement with the “safe,” redemption-oriented “cycle of duplication and secondariness” more typical of medieval image-makers. This kind of abuse of the notion of imitation does not, of course, appear to be what Hugh had in mind when he penned his definition. But, for those like Camille, steeped in the image culture of the Middle Ages—medieval artisans and modern medievalists alike—the ghost note of Martin’s moechus gloss resonates audibly between Hugh’s mechanicum and adulterinum, lending, at the very least, a vague undertone of warning to his blanket claims for a beneficent mode of objectal adultery. The concept, we are reminded, cannot be purged of the trespass and pollution that define it, nor reduced to any truly neutral understanding of imitation. Adultery, in other words, slips away from the almost unaccountably narrow meaning that Hugh would give it, leaving his discourse open, vulnerable, to precisely the kind of informed misreading that Camille and, no doubt, many others were (and are) all but bound to commit.

We need not, however, look beyond Hugh’s own text for evidence of the pollutive effects of grounding the work of man on moechia. Consider, for example, the remarkable closing lines of his chapter on the three works:

40 Ibid.
Bark encircles the tree, feathers cover the bird, scales encase the fish, hair garbs the cattle and wild beasts, a shell protects the tortoise, and ivory makes the elephant unafraid of spears. But it is not without reason that while each living thing is born equipped with its own natural armor, man alone is brought forth naked and unarmed. For it is fitting that nature should provide a plan for those beings which do not know how to care for themselves, but that from nature’s example, a better chance for trying things should be provided to man when he comes to devise for himself by his own reasoning those things naturally given to all other animals. Indeed man’s reason shines forth much more brilliantly in inventing these very things than ever it would have had man naturally possessed them. Nor is it without cause that the proverb says: ‘Ingenious want hath mothered all the arts.’ Want it is which has devised all that you see most excellent in the occupations of men. From this the infinite varieties of painting, weaving, carving, and founding have arisen, so that we look with wonder not at nature alone but at the artificer as well.41

A kind of encomium to the mechanical arts, the passage attempts to dignify the lowly place of man’s worldly labors by pointing to the “reason”—the flesh-working tool of the soul on which redemption depends, remember—evinced as we go about imitating our surroundings. We may not, Hugh suggests, possess anything like the power of the divine fiat or the fecundity of nature, but, God-like, we exercise reason when we adapt the forms and materials presented to us to answer our needs and better our post-Edenic

existence. Man, unlike any other animal, thrust unarmed and naked into the world, is, in a word, privileged to go about making the best of things by imitating nature.

A fine and certainly familiar sentiment—at least until, in Hugh’s last sentence, reason disappears, becomes “wonder,” and we are swung suddenly around to the pragmatic outlook expressed by Martin, to the question, that is, of the beholder’s experience, rather than that of the maker’s spiritual standing. There is no mention, of course, of any object, much less any class of objects, too delicate or clever for safe observation. But the casual equivalence of the wonder with which Hugh says we regard nature and that with which we regard the artificer is a striking departure from the praise that he all but lavishes on man for his ability to think through the relations between his own condition and the example provided by his natural environment. If we look on nature with wonder, if we marvel at it (Hugh’s Latin is mire), it is no doubt for what he describes as the hiddenness, the mystery, of the means by which it “brings forth the green herb,” and so on. And if we look on the artificer (and not even the artifact that he or she produces) with that same wonder, as Hugh’s syntax (constructed around eadem) indicates, then it is, it would seem, for that same effect of hiddenness, that same mystery. The reason, which Hugh says shines so brightly in the object-maker, is, in other words, lost on others: beholders stand in awe, wondering at the secret behind the artificer’s work, or, worse, misunderstanding the nature of that work altogether, perhaps mistake it for some natural or supernatural phenomenon. A compelling hint of this latter possibility is found a few pages earlier in the Didascalicon, where Hugh,
expanding on his mind-coin analogy, writes that an intellect “stupefied by bodily sensations and enticed out of itself by sensuous forms has forgotten what it was, and, because it does not remember that it was anything different, believes that it is nothing except what is seen.”\(^{42}\) An inherent risk attending such inherently malleable minds as our own, it seems, is that they can be too impressionable, that certain “forms” we encounter can overwhelm our reason, our knowledge, and our notion of what, he suggests, we, as good Christians, (believe we) really are—which is something other than our bodies and the unprocessed stimuli they receive, other than our flesh and its raw desires—beings possessed of “dignity” to the extent that we have restored ourselves to a prelapsarian state of harmony by acts of understanding, moments of intellectual clarity, effected at the expense of our fleshly desires.\(^{43}\)

And if Camille’s, shall we say, informed slip of the pen, his “not,” is more right than it is wrong, at least when it comes to Hugh’s sculptor, then something of the essential transgression of adultery lurks just beneath the surface of this philosophical panegyric on the mechanic arts, and, specifically, in those “sensuous forms” that comprise the subcategory thereof identified in the passage as “the infinite varieties of painting, weaving, carving, and founding”—what we today call the fine arts. If, in other words, Camille is right—and I think that he is—then it is in the artistic imitation

\(^{42}\) Taylor, *Didascalikon*, 47. “Animus enim corporis passionibus consopitus, et per sensibiles formas extra semetipsum abductus, oblitus est quid fuerit, et quia nil aliud fuisse se meminit, nit praeter id quod videtur, esse credit.” Hugonis, *Didascalicae*, 742.

\(^{43}\) Taylor, *Didascalikon*, 47. “Et haec est illa naturae nostrae dignitas, quam omnes aequae naturaliter habent, sed non omnes aequae noverunt.” Hugonis, *Didascalicae*, 742.
of nature, in the *mimetic* works of man, that we should look for the objects that, Hugh suggests, threaten to stupefy us out of ourselves, so to speak, that excite our bodily sensations beyond the dominative sway of our rational thought processes and amassed experiential knowledge, and bring us to a condition of inner crisis in which our rational sense of selfhood finds itself somewhat too pleasurably at odds with its other, fleshy self. Mimesis, then, constitutes one (and perhaps the only) mode of adultery by which human works can undo the hard work of subjugating the flesh in the interest of redemption—but only, of course, at the point at which the imitation of nature becomes deceptively like nature, when it becomes, in fact, indistinguishable from nature—in short, when the works of man begin to *look* at bit too much like those of God.
But maybe the wrong path we have willfully chosen—embracing the adultery of
delicate objects despite Martin’s warning—is more wrong than we anticipated; maybe it
is, as the overtly positive thrust of Hugh’s reinterpretation of objectal adultery implies, a
dead end. After all, no work of visual art, no creative imitation of nature, regardless of
its medium or the quality of its execution, can ever quite capture the full scope and
complexity of human visual experience. And only rarely—in fact, one suspects almost
never—does anyone actually need to be reminded that an artwork is not the object or
objects that it represents. Even when an artist aspires to reproduce as faithfully as
possible every nuance of some slice of reality, to hold a true mirror up to the face of
perceived nature, as it were—to the visible works of God—the product of his or her
labor is, at best, fleetingly persuasive. We may be convinced for a moment or two that
what we see is the thing itself and not its depiction in paint or plaster or resin or what-
have-you, but “by a mere shift of our gaze,” as Lacan puts it, “we are able to realize that
the representation does not move with our gaze and that it is merely a trompe-l’œil,” an
illusion of some sort, a trick played on the eye.44 Such works fade in and out of their
own deceptive efficacy, in a flux between seeming reality and patent illusion, briefly
confusing us, but only briefly, before we decide that whatever it is we are looking at is,
in fact, nothing more than some colored lines on a flat surface or a worked hunk of

44 Jacques Lacan, “Of the Gaze as Objet Petit a,” The Four Fundamental Concepts of
inanimate material mimicking, with limited accuracy, our visual sense of the world around us.

Try to imagine, for example, Zeuxis’s famous grapes, which Lacan mentions several times in his discourse on vision and the arts, and Pliny tells us were “so successfully represented that birds flew up to the stage-buildings” to try to eat them. Because this painting no longer exists—if it ever did—it can serve as a kind of paradigm of the entire *trompe-l’œil* genre, a gold-standard of visual realism that, one would think, by virtue of its nonexistence, stands a good chance of escaping the vicissitudinous play of reality and illusion suffered, so to speak, by its real-life counterparts. But can you conflate what you know about paintings with what you know about grapes to form a consistently believable mental image of painted grapes? Or do they vacillate in your mind’s eye between material objects and dabs of paint?

An inevitable mimetic failure (I assume?), with a touch of irony: the visual arts cannot, it seems, even under literally the most ideal circumstances, re-create vision. And (if you will excuse the pun) even more damning to our efforts here, Lacan argues that this is precisely what makes those artworks that at least attempt to correspond to our visual experience appealing, precisely the reason that we delight and find satisfaction (a *meaningful* pleasure, and *not*, as we will see, a pleasurable meaninglessness) in *trompe-l’œil* paintings and other lifelike modes of representation.

45 Ibid., 103 and 111-2,

The impossibility of achieving in art a persistently creditable effect of reality—the very effect that some artworks, to all appearances anyway, set out to achieve—“broadly speaking, . . . calms people, comforts them,” he says, because that impossibility offers “something profitable for society,” or at least “for that part of society that comes under its influence.”\(^{47}\) In other words, because mimesis inevitably ‘fails,’ any attempt to re-make nature (or, according to the terms we have established, usurp the power of the divine fiat) by way of imitation can only reinforce the very cultural norms that, in the Christian West at least, such acts of re-making would seem to (want to) transgress.

What, then, and where, we might ask, are the adulterous objects that we have been pursuing? Are there no such things? Are they nowhere to be found? Are we forced to admit the logic of Hugh’s outlook, forced to admit the absolute intelligibility of every artifact, and abandon the compelling (tempting) magic of Martin’s etymology, dismissing it as nothing more than an idiosyncratic and, in the final analysis, intellectually barren superstition? Perhaps. But ‘nothing’ and ‘nowhere’—a lack of mundane being and place—are not, as concepts, utterly devoid of significance—in fact, they are concepts of especial importance to both Lacanian psychoanalytic theory and medieval image theology, where (for both, in different ways) they represent the collapse of meaning that attends at least some of the products of human labor. And ‘represent’ is almost exactly the right word in this case: impossible to literally embody in any material thing, artistic or otherwise, ‘nothing’ and ‘nowhere’ can only be gestured toward

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figuratively, imagined from within the features and qualities of objects that manifestly do have some kind of being and place. Reading Lacan’s discourse on vision and art with an eye for its medieval precedents, allowing each to implicate the other, suggests that, despite the practical impossibility of truly unintelligible artifacts, which would escape meaning altogether, there are those that take whatever meaning they are, or would be, ascribed precisely as their means of resisting meaning.

We might begin on the theologically “safe” side of things, by noting that when Lacan identifies “something” comforting and even of social value in the limitations of mimetic artwork, he strikes a chord that resonates, in a general way, with Hugh’s approbative reworking of Martin’s etymology, and, more specifically, with certain medieval Christian attitudes toward religious imagery. Like the twofold meaning—literal and spiritual—by which words were understood to refer first to things in the world and then to their otherworldly creator (and thus to salvation), images, too, were considered both doubly inflected and redemptive: signs of, but (significantly) fundamentally inadequate to, their referents, and those referents themselves signs of, and (again) fundamentally inadequate to, God. The redemptory index, in other words, the spiritual sign-quality, of images was considered a function of what we might today regard as an aesthetic failing. Thus, Gregory the Great, in a letter to Secundinus, could recommended the use of private devotional panels depicting Christ for their affective, faith-affirming power, provided that the worshiper did not forget the referentiality of the images and end up, he suggests, like an idolater, venerating them as self-present deities.
Your request [for images] pleases us greatly, since you seek with all your heart and all intentness Him, whose picture you wish to have before your eyes, so that, being so accustomed to the daily corporeal sight, when you see an image of Him you are inflamed in your soul by love to Him Whose picture you wish to see. We do no harm in wishing to show the invisible by means of the visible . . . I know, however, that you do not appeal to the image of Our Savior as if you worshiped God, but that you are warmed by the memory of the Son of God in His love, Whose image you desire to behold. And we should not kneel in front of it as if before a deity, but adore Him that we, by means of the image remember as having been born, having suffered, or as sitting on the throne. And by taking us back to the memory of the Son of God, the image, like the Scripture, delights our mind with the Resurrection, or caresses it with the Passion.48

Insofar as the Western church was a socializing force in medieval Europe—and, undoubtedly, it should be classed among the most powerful socializing forces in the region at that time—Gregory’s image theology can be said to provide “something profitable”—that is, something cohesive, rewarding, comforting, etc.—for Christian society simply by distinguishing, semiotically, its images (intrinsically referential, mimitically flawed) from those of the pagans (who, it was thought by Christians, saw their idols as semiotic tautologies, collapses of signifiers and their signifieds, and not in any way representations—a point to which will return).

Lacan’s understanding of images is, of course, slightly more worldly and slightly more complicated than Gregory’s: artworks, for Lacan, profit society by means of an effect, the dompte-regard, that, though analogically related to Gregory’s redemptory view of images, is aimed at another type of return, one structured and given

meaning not by the promise of salvation but by our earliest experience of specular selfhood. The “scopic field”—that is, the articulated system of what we might call genuine, as opposed to artistically reproduced, vision—is, Lacan argues, traumatic, in the psychoanalytic sense of the word. From the moment that one recognizes one’s self in a mirror (the beginning of developmental “the mirror stage”) and thus “assumes” one’s own specular image, or “imago,” one is split between what he terms “the eye” and “the gaze.” The eye is simply vision: the process by which I see the outside, and the process by which that outside appears to me in the form of representations that I identify as mine, as “my representations.” Vision centers me, seems to offer a definite inner locus of potential selfhood, of fully-present subjectivity—what Lacan calls the “ideal-I.” The gaze, however, confounds the possibility of this fully-present self by cutting it—that is, by cutting me—down the middle, so to speak. Situated in the same place as the eye, but outside of me, on the side of the other, the gaze is the look that the

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49 In his discourse on vision and the arts, Lacan is somewhat vague on this point. But if, as he suggests in “The Mirror Stage,” there is no evidence that a child younger than six months recognizes his or her own image in a mirror, then it would seem difficult to prove that the scopic field is fully, or at all, operative before attaining that developmental milestone. I choose this moment of self-identification as the trauma at which the scopic field at least begins to take effect because, insofar as the mirrored self-image is, as Lacan puts it, “given” to the child “only as gestalt,” appearing “as the contour of his stature that freezes it and in a symmetry that reverses it, in opposition to the turbulent movements with which the subject feels he animates it,” that image is already fraught with otherness, and, thus, already split from the child. Jacques Lacan, “The Mirror Stage,” *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 75-76.


51 Ibid., 81.

outside gives me, making me into a representation of its own, in the same way that I see
the outside as “my representations.” I look and I am looked at. But—and this is the
important point—the eye and the gaze—my sense of self, oriented by “my
representations,” and my sense of others’ representations of me—never coincide. As
Lacan puts it, “you never look at me from the place from which I see you.”53 I am thus
always divided from myself—divided from my sense of a fully-present self—as a
representation.

Initiating and ensuring the perpetual continuation of this split in the subject is
the third element of the scopic field: the image/screen.54 The image/screen is both the
function that sets the system of the scopic field in motion and the boundary that
separates the eye from the gaze. That is to say, the image/screen names the Symbolic—
the organizing structure within which we experience reality, and, more important,
experience it as meaningful—in the realm of vision. Like language, it filters the Real,
blocking out its essential meaninglessness (“the candle that overturns and the sheets that
catch fire”) by imposing a fantasy of order and intelligibility on the world around us
(“the element of poignancy, however veiled, in the words father, can’t you see I’m
burning”).55 Without the image/screen not only would we be unable to identify visual
objects, to separate figure from ground (to use the terms of gestalt psychology), we

54 Ibid., 103.
55 Ibid., 69.
would be unable, Lacan suggests, to see anything at all. Drawing on Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *La Phénoménologie de la perception*, he writes:

If, by being isolated, an effect of lighting dominates us, if, for example, a beam of light directing our gaze so captivates us that it appears as a milky cone and prevents us from seeing what it illuminates, the mere fact of introducing into this field a small screen, which cuts into that which is illuminated without being seen, makes the milky light retreat, as it were, into the shadow, and allows the object it concealed to emerge.\(^56\)

In other words, the image/screen introduces an *invisible* opaque spot—physiologically, the scotoma—to the blindingly overwhelming light of the visual Real, making vision, as we know it, possible. The images we see (the ‘image’ half of the image/screen function) appear to us *only* because a portion of the Real has been suppressed.

At the same time, however, because meaningful sight becomes possible only by means of this opacity—which, significantly, is located directly at center of the our field of vision, precisely the point in front of us at which we think we are looking, where the thing that we think we understand, or are coming to understand, is situated—that suppressed portion of the Real always escapes our perception, “slips,” as Lacan puts it, “passes, is transmitted, from stage to stage, and always to some degree eluded in” our visual “relation to things.”\(^57\) It is this excess of the Real, which is generated by the imposition of the image/screen, and which—because it is always on the other, or ‘screen,’ side of the image/screen—we can never see, that we associate with the gaze. Thus, “\textit{what I look at is never what I wish to see},” where “\textit{what I wish to see},” is, of

\(^{56}\) Ibid., 107-8.

\(^{57}\) Lacan, “Gaze,” 73.
of the other that would make me fully present to myself.\textsuperscript{58} This is the “primal separation,” Lacan says, the “self-mutilation induced by the very approach the Real, whose name, in our algebra, is the objet a,” the subject-constituting lack that initiates the scopic drive and the unattainable object of what we might call scopic desire.\textsuperscript{59} To put this in slightly different, and perhaps slightly clearer, terms: we desire the image of ourselves that we believe is hidden behind the scotoma, in the eye of the other.

What, for Lacan, distinguishes those works of visual art that try to approximate vision from genuine visual experience is the obvious and unavoidable absence of the blind spot, and, thus, the absence of the gaze of the other that seems to hide behind it. How, after all, can an artist be expected to create a mimetic representation of something that, Lacan says, is “unapprehensible,” something that no one, under any circumstances, could ever actually see?\textsuperscript{60}

There is something whose absence can always be observed in a picture—which is not the case in perception. This is the central field [the “field” of the “milky cone,” the light of the Real, from the previous long quotation] where the separating power of the eye is exercised to the maximum in vision. In every picture, this central field cannot but be absent, and replaced by a hole—a reflection, in short, of the pupil behind which is situated the gaze. Consequently, and in as much as the picture enters into a relation to desire, the place of a central screen is always

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 103.

\textsuperscript{59} Although Lacan never uses this phrase, he does name the “scopic drive.” And insofar as desires are organized “through the framework of the fundamental drives,” it seems reasonable to call the desire of the scopic drive ‘scopic desire.’ See Lacan, “Gaze,” 83 and 89.

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 83
marked, which is precisely that by which, in front of the picture, I am elided as subject of the geometral field.  

In painting, instead of the central field—the scotoma blocking the gaze—there is only “a hole”: nothing. And this is the reason that the mimetic failure, so to speak, of the visual arts can offer a kind of welcome imaginary escape from the traumatic split of the scopic field. So long as I remain standing in front of an artwork, studying the movements of its perceptual effects—“the lines dividing the surfaces created by the painter, vanishing traces, lines of force,” and so on—62—the antinomic economy of the eye and the gaze is mitigated, and I am “elided as subject,” or relieved (to feel free) of the exigencies of the scopic drive. I forget, temporarily at least, that I am a subject of the gaze, a split subject; forget that I am not just a self but also a representation in the world. In short, I forget that the world is looking at me. Instead, I see only the reassuring images of the image/screen (and not the screen); the real work of vision, the exercise of “the separating power of the eye,” has already been accomplished, and I have only to enjoy a physiologically and psychologically ‘predigested’ version of some genuine visual experience. What a trompe-l’œil or otherwise realistic work of art presents to me is a vision of vision, as it were, that corresponds to the limitations of my perception without admitting—to my unconscious, of course—those limitations as such.

Thus, visually mimetic works of art occasion a kind of hallucination of subjective wholeness. Not, of course, the hallucination of a state in which the eye and

61 Ibid., 108.
62 Ibid.
the gaze fuse, since there is no gaze in or ‘behind’ the painting, but the hallucination of a pre-fission (pre-mirror stage) state. In other words, I find in certain artworks an opportunity to recall the imagined “jubilant assumption” of my “being” in its fulness, its “primordial form, prior to being objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores to” me, “in the universal,” my “function as subject.” The painter, says Lacan, defining the full effect and meaning of the dompte-regard, or ‘tame-the-gaze,’

gives something for the eye to feed on, but he invites the person to whom this picture is presented to lay down his gaze there as one lays down one’s weapons. This is the pacifying, Apollonian effect of painting. Something is given not so much to the gaze as to the eye, something that involves the abandonment, the laying down, of the gaze.

I can ‘lay down’ my gaze, my necessarily unending search for my fully-present self in the other, in front of a painting, because the gaze, the Real, isn’t hidden, but simply absent—literally nowhere in the painting.

Already, Lacan’s understanding of the role that art plays in returning beholders to an imagined former state of total self-harmony recalls, in its rough outlines, Hugh’s inclusion of the fine arts in his redemptory program: for both thinkers, artworks signal a promise, so to speak, showing us ourselves as the unified beings we want to be but, due to some past trauma (the mirror stage or the fall), are not (and, for Lacan, can never be). But a deeper engagement between the two authors becomes apparent when one realizes


(as Jonathan Scott Lee points out\textsuperscript{65}) that the peculiar metaphor Lacan chooses to indicate the psychological effect of the \textit{dompte-regard}, that of laying down one’s weapons, alludes to another passage from the psychoanalyst’s oeuvre, one in which he describes subject’s entry into the Symbolic, the decisive moment of his split from himself, as “the finally donned armor of an alienating identity that will mark his entire mental development with its rigid structure.”\textsuperscript{66} Man, Lacan might say, brought into the world unarmed and naked, given a purpose and a sense of self by the products of his invention, his arms and armaments (principally language and the law, but also meaningful sight), is imaginally returned to his natural state when standing before certain works of art.\textsuperscript{67} Instead of a counterfeit fall precipitated by the most subtle works of man, his illusory artworks, Lacan posits a kind of secular counterfeit redemption that,


\textsuperscript{66} Lacan, “Mirror,” 78.

\textsuperscript{67} It is possible, of course, that Lacan had in mind Plato, Augustine, Aquinas, or any number of the other authors, from antiquity to the modern age, who took up the “unarmed man” \textit{topos}. But the specificity with which his language echoes that of Hugh, and not, to my knowledge, that of any other writer on the subject, suggests that he was alluding to the \textit{Didascalicon}. Consider, for example, this passage from the same seminar: “if a bird were to paint would it not be by letting fall its feathers, a snake by casting off its scales, a tree by letting fall its leaves? What it amounts to is the first act in the laying down of the gaze. A sovereign act, no doubt, since it passes into something that is materialized and which, from this sovereignty, will render obsolete, excluded, inoperant, whatever, coming from elsewhere, will be presented before this product.” And again: “if I referred to birds who might let fall their feathers, it is because we do not have these feathers. The creator will never participate in anything other than the creation of a small dirty deposit, a succession of small dirty deposits juxtaposed.” Lacan, “Gaze,” 114 and 117. See also Elspeth Whitney, “Paradise Restored: The Mechanical Arts from Antiquity through the Thirteenth Century,” \textit{Transactions of the American Philosophical Society} 80.1 (1990), 94.
insofar as it perpetuates the subject’s desire for meaningful wholeness within the
Symbolic, can be compared to Hugh’s tacit insistence on the “reason” of the fine arts.

This is perhaps an opportune moment to return to Gregory’s letter to
Secundinus, which, itself, if stripped of its most explicitly theological content, reveals
striking similarities to the structure and socially cohesive effect of Lacan’s dompte-
regard. The image delights our mind, caresses it, Gregory’s writes, by taking us back to
a memory. Not, however, to the memory of some object or event we experienced
personally, directly, in its own place and time (since, presumably, we weren’t present at
the Crucifixion or the Resurrection), but to a more remote kind of memory, an inherited
memory, a tradition. The memory of a story, then. But not, for us, a fiction, exactly.
Rather, a story we have come to believe, even to feel, so strongly that it inflames our
soul, warms us, emotionally, perhaps, or spiritually, just to be reminded of it. (The
intensity of Gregory’s imagery of ‘innerness’ cannot, I think, help but call to mind a
kind of imaginary ideal-I). And we want to be reminded of it, want to feel inflamed and
warmed, every day, constantly, if possible (a feeling of want, something like our scopic
desire). So we seek it out (the gaze). And, to our delight and consolation, we find it,
the remote memory of that powerfully convincing story, somehow (precisely in its
absence: in the image of Christ that, thanks to Gregory, we remember is not Christ
himself), through the image. So, again, the satisfying effect of the dompte-regard, like
that of Christian images, is produced by the fact that, in an artwork, the gaze is not
there.
Except, of course, that it is—at least potentially. Artworks are never just scopic desire-satisfying, comfortably inadequate representations of true visual experience. Quite apart from the subject matter they depict, and quite apart from success with which they depict that subject matter, they are also worldly objects of perception in their own right. A painting, for example, may, by the play lines and shades within its frame, delight me, calm me, reaffirm my illusory sense of an ideal-I, etc.—but, if it does so, it is only because that play of lines and shades has diverted me from the bare—admittedly, somewhat generic—objecthood of the painting itself. Zeuxis’s grapes were not just illusory, after all: they were, in fact, dabs of paint on a wall, like every painted representation—like every painting whatsoever, for that matter—pigments applied to a support. From a certain perspective—one that Lacan might say stresses too much “the object-like side of the art product”68—there is almost nothing that distinguishes Zeuxis’s painting from the famous floating sardine can that Lacan, as “a young intellectual,” searching “desperately,” he says, for “something practical, something physical” (something unlike a painting, perhaps?), suddenly discovered glancing at him, looking at him “at the level of the point of light,” like everything else in the world, making him into a kind of picture.69

Now, I am not, in any way, disputing the existence, so to speak, of the dompté-regard or the “Apollonian effect” (the particular effect of sublimation, the socializing


69 Ibid., 95-6.
force) that it has on the subject—if anything, pointing out the object-status of artworks only underscores the imaginary quality of the comforting space, the hole, that a realistic work creates for the subject-beholder. Nor am I suggesting that the *dompte-regard* is necessarily a conflicted phenomenon, always on the verge of undermining its own efficacy (although, I must admit, this seems to me very likely). What I am suggesting is that, even in the most ‘comforting’ works of art, there is always the possibility of perceiving, beyond the safe play of its obvious illusions, an irreducible object that, like any and every other object we encounter, from people to simple sardine cans, gazes back at us.
Body Parts

Directly beneath the center of the arch they set up a figure so well crafted in the face and bodily proportion that no one looking at it could think that any of its limbs were not alive. It was so handsome and well made that there wasn’t a more beautiful statue in the whole world. Such a wonderful fragrance emanated from its mouth that it filled the whole house, as if it contained all of the most precious herbs. The ingenuity behind this fine fragrance coming from the statue lay in Tristram’s having bored a hole in the nipple of the breast near the heart and placing inside a container full of gold dust mixed with the sweetest herbs to be found in all the world. Two thin tubes of pure gold led from this container. One of them released the fragrance from the back of the neck, where the hair meets the flesh, and the other in a similar fashion led to the mouth. In shape, beauty, and size this statue so resembled Queen Ísönd, it was as if she were standing there herself, so animated as if it were alive.

—Brother Robert, *Tristrams saga ok Ísöndar*

“Nipple,” “breast,” “heart,” “neck,” “hair,” “flesh,” “mouth.” Corporeal remains, so to speak, organic scraps that cannot properly belong to any statue as such, appear scattered throughout the passage, the inexplicable—or at least unexplained—left-overs of an objectal life “set up” (as Peter Jorgensen suggestively translates from the Old Norse) to be done in. We will return to this illusory life—submit ourselves to the pleasures of its

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indiscretion—but only gradually and by way of the fragmented yet unmistakably fleshy body that Robert’s cluster of nouns evokes. That body, after all—dismembered, incomplete, corpse-like as it is—represents the sole survivor of an ekphrastic gesture that seems all but determined to self-destruct, the insoluble (irreducible and mysterious) afterimage of a figure wrought in and immediately wrecked by language—and the last, yet perhaps most potent, refuge of the strange objecthood within art that we are here working to track.

To begin again: there is something conflicted about the modulations executed between life and likeness in the passage above, something anxious, excessive, as if Robert were hedging his creative/theological bets (as it were), protecting us, his readers, from even the possibility of the precipitous fall into concupiscence that so delicate and clever an object as the Ísönd statue threatens to effect—as if he were protecting us, that is, from the very perfection, the uncanny realism, of the thing that his passage conjures. Without fail, at every descriptive point, his language turns on itself—turns in on and, in a sense, against its own imaginal figure—performing an almost over-studied and certainly auto-eversive act of illumination by which both the statue’s visible signs of life and its hidden craftsmanship, the artistry and engineering that explain, and thus explain away, those signs, are given simultaneously at the explicit surface of the text. Not only is the mimetic precision of the artwork’s exterior (its breath, beauty, and liveness)
invariably expressed in the subjunctive mood, but the statue’s interior (its secret apparatus of little gold tubes and jars filled with herbs) is exposed in a kind of verbal cross section that intrusively splits both the passage and the image at their respective and, of course, reflexive middles. We might imagine a hybrid anatomical model of sorts, a woman posed serenely as her skin is peeled back to reveal a gleaming engine where tissues, organs, and bones should be. But then again, because the passage repeats that engine’s installation in such insistently fleshy terms (“Tristram having bored a hole in the nipple of the the breast near the heart”), we might well imagine something significantly more violent—an act visual penetration, as Martin might put it, an act of embodied ‘in-sight,’ that mingles ideas of image desecration and bodily wounding to the point of undecidability. At once depthless and deep, caressing and incisive, Robert’s language operates in both an evocative and instrumental capacity, calling forth an irresistible illusion of life and at the same time pointedly subjecting that illusion to an exploratory procedure, an exposition (in the literal and figurative senses of the word), that forces it into mundane intelligibility. Over and over, the lines communicate the same contradictory message, ‘She is a made thing,’ drawing us into the uncertain space where the works of man begin to look too much like those of God and nature—and where perhaps we become confused as to the origin of the object—only to call us back to the comparatively dull realm of wholly comprehensible artifacts.

71 The Old Norse is more consistent in its use of the subjunctive than Jorgensen’s English translation can be.
The anxiety of Robert’s self-effacing ekphrasis becomes clear when compared to
the simple elegance and almost unreserved admiration with which Master Gregory, in
his roughly contemporaneous *Narratio de Mirabilibus Urbis Romae*, describes a
particularly naturalistic statue of Venus that he encountered during his travels. “This
image,” he writes,

is made from Parian marble with such wonderful and intricate skill, that
she seems more like a living creature than a statue; indeed she seems to
blush in her nakedness, a reddish tinge colouring her face, and it appears
to those who take a close look that blood flows in her snowy
complexion. Because of this wonderful image, and perhaps some magic
spell that I'm unaware of, I was drawn back three times to look at it
despite the fact that it was two stades distant from my inn.\(^2\)

In its diction and most salient details, Gregory’s passage resonates with Robert’s: the
same fine craftsmanship (“wonderful and intricate skill”), the same appeal to
lifelikeness (though not, of course, the same sense of portraital specificity), the same
linguistic ‘safeguards’ (the repetition of the word “seems”) are found in both texts.

Even Gregory’s “close look”—which, though not what we might call penetrative,
nevertheless manages to get beneath the statue’s skin—suggests the inspective depth, if
not the explicative power or lacerative violence, of Robert’s cross section. And yet, the

\(^2\) For a brief discussion of this passage in relation to the Ísönd statue and the English translation
quoted above see Tracy Adams, “Archetypes and Copies in Thomas’s Tristan: A Re-examination
Pario marmore tam miro et inexplicabili perfecta est artificio, ut magis viva creatura videatur
quam statua: erubescenti etenim nuditatem suam similis, faciem purpureo colore perfusam gerit.
Videturque comminus aspicientibus in niveo ore imaginis sanguinem natare. Hanc autem
propter mirandam speciem et nescio quam magicam persuasionem ter coactus sum revisere,
cum ab hospitio meo duobus stadiis distaret.” Gregory, *Narratio de Mirabilibus Urbis Romae*,
4.
Narratio proceeds through these details via a course, in a sense, directly opposed to that of the Norse Saga. Gregory’s is a descriptive unfolding that, like Robert’s, recalls the work of the sculpture’s maker, but in order to extend rather than undermine the transformation from block to lifelike body achieved by the original artist. From Parian marble—a mass of rock, significantly, not equated with the statue, but only its raw material—Gregory evokes an increasingly embodied image that, by the time it is complete, with the near translucence of its skin and the soft depth suggested just below, all but contradicts its stoney beginning. The result is a hybrid as strange as the Ísönd statue—a marble “creature,” as the Master puts it, virtually (but only virtually) pulsing with sanguine vitality. He even admits to being so enthralled by the Venus—by either the artistry invested in its making or some necromancy issuing from elsewhere (a choice that he leaves undecided, as if the two were interchangeable)—that he found himself “drawn back” to it repeatedly. In short, Gregory himself indulges (or is made to indulge), and, more important, allows us to indulge, the fantasy of his Venus’s life, building by layers an image that becomes more bodily, more living, the closer we look.

No such indulgence seems possible with Robert’s Ísönd. The violent interruption of the expository lines, which insist on the intelligibility of the thing, cannot help but disrupt whatever illusory surface features the passage as a whole may have convinced us of. We are brought face-to-face, as it were, with both the statue’s exterior artificiality, and, more impressively, the animatronic nature of its insides. And yet, if we look again, more closely (like Martin, like Gregory), at the demystifying lines
themselves, the very lines that seem to remind us so reassuringly that the statue is only a
statue and not a living thing, we find its “nipple,” “breast,” “heart,” “neck,” “hair,”
“flesh,” and “mouth”—its remains, linguistically at least. A constellation of body parts
that not only escape the demystification of Robert’s penetrating gaze, but are the
products, or rather the byproducts, of that demystification. They arrive like chunks of
new matter, brought forth almost inadvertently, almost secretly (working “beyond
detection” within the text), by Robert’s knowledge-driven “power of vision,” and
signifying something more corporeal—more bare, interior, vital even—than any merely
realistic veneer that the statue could hope to present its beholders. While they, those
dissevered parts, are not, perhaps, quite so suggestive of life as is the blood flowing
through the stoney flesh of Gregory’s Venus, they do suggest a body, or at least a
bodiliness, emerging irrationally from within the very act of accounting rationally for
the statue’s impossibly perfect lifelikeness. The effort to maintain our reasonable
“power of vision,” in this case at least, generates a kind of obdurate waste product that
denies that power absolute efficacy.

Perhaps this seems mere pedantry, occupying ourselves at such length with a
few words that, arguably, represent nothing more than the most expedient metaphors
available to any writer of statuary. One cannot, after all, discuss a figurative work of art
without more or less acritically reinscribing (or translating from image to word) its
figurative quality—not, at least, without resorting to some mode of excruciatingly self-
conscious technical language. This is a reasonable objection to our ‘close’ reading, I
think. Imagine, for example, if Gregory had catalogued the physical attributes of his Venus, praising its lips, ears, fingers, arms, etc. somewhat in the manner of a bad love poem. Certainly, whatever delinquent nouns arose as a result of his efforts would look more or less natural to the reader—the most trivial evidence of his illusory summoning of flesh from marble, and hardly worth mentioning. Gregory’s Venus is, he would have us imagine, almost alive: a fantasy that might be expected to involve the appearance of a fleshy body like that of any other living being. Robert’s Ísönd, however, is not Gregory’s Venus. Again: ‘She is a made thing.’ Or, we might say, she is conspicuously undead (a contradictory state to which even Robert’s word for the statue contributes: the Old Norse likneskja, which also means “shape,” “graven image,” and “metaphor,” comes from the root lik, denoting both “living body” and “corpse”). Its body parts are notable because they arise not from the desire to imagine a life emerging from stone or wood or wax or any other material (the medium of the Ísönd statue is never given), but from precisely the opposite impulse: to demystify the compelling humanness of the thing expressed everywhere else in the passage, to assert anthropomorphism against anthrogenesis. Instead of being elements of the illusion, the statue’s “nipple,” “breast,” “heart,” and so on, are the (apparently) unintended expressions of an ideologically-motivated effort to undermine the very illusion of the living body that they seem, in some way, to indicate—they appear, in other words, because of that effort, within the verbal structures of its execution, and yet beyond the sphere of intelligibility, the knowledge, that it produces.
To grasp more fully the ‘escape’ of these body parts from Robert’s expository gesture, it is helpful to draw another distinction between the Venus and Ísönd statues. Gregory’s Narratio is a travelogue of sorts, a document detailing the Master’s journey to Rome, his impressions of the city, its sights, and so on. It seems reasonable, therefore, to assume that his passage is based on his encounters with some real statue of Venus, some physical object—indeed, this assumption has led some scholars to speculate that his Venus was of the familiar capitoline variety. With the Ísönd statue, however, we are not dealing with “genuine” ekphrasis, but with a particular kind of literary fantasy that John Hollander has termed “notional ekphrasis”—that is, “the verbal representation of a purely fictional work of art.” Without any material artifact to which the descriptive passage might refer—without, that is, any stable ground for the establishment of an endlessly circulating series of metaphors between the object and the words supposed to refer to it—the passage effectively reduces the distance between words and things to a minimum (though not, of course, to nothing): whatever ‘vision’ the words inspire in the reader is subject only to his or her previous experience, cultural conditioning, and imaginative faculties—not to the material reality of any museum piece. “Hair,” “heart,” “breast,” etc. are perhaps understood to possess a metaphoric quality, but a metaphoric quality particularly difficult to grasp: what I. A. Richards


termed the “tenor” and “vehicle” of the metaphor are here almost entirely indistinguishable. In other words, no ‘correction’—by which we might understand the statue’s “neck,” for example, to be a representational effect of the sculptor’s workmanship—is even possible under these circumstances. Our only recourse is to a kind a tautological negation that, because it abandons the strictures of ‘sound’ logic, only underscores the vexed state of the statue’s exclusively verbal existence: ‘its mouth is not a mouth, but neither is it anything else,’ is perhaps the most we can say by way of clarification, ‘its breast not a breast, its hair not hair . . .’ The combination of figuration and notional ekphrasis opens a field of alogical expressions that, though adequate to their incantatory task, nevertheless violate the circuit of referentiality that they seem designed to produce. They are expressions that point to an object that isn’t there (anywhere), and, thus, can be made to point to almost anything: the unequalled beauty of the Ísönd statue, for example, its perfectly executed exterior, and its absolute correspondence to its subject.

Reflecting on the systematic mutilation and destruction of idolatrous images undertaken periodically throughout the Middle Ages, David Wallace writes that while the “removal of an image just leaves an empty space . . . defacement leaves the old in view with the mark of the iconoclast, as it were, freshly struck: an image (ironically enough) suggesting permanent revolutionary intent. And yet,” he adds, “the careful

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reader might always read or re-imagine missing lineaments from a vestigial image.”

The question his comment raises is, of course, a matter of dialectical timing: where, exactly, in the recurring cycle of revolutions, of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, are we lineaments-readers to locate that “revolutionary intent”? In the defacement of the image (the revolution of the iconoclast)? Or in the defaced image itself (the revolution of the idolater)? And, returning to the matter at hand, what are we to make of an image, like Robert’s ekphrastic statue of Ísönd, that conspicuously defaces itself? What are we to make of the lineaments that it leaves behind, in which we might read something other than a vestigial image, divine, idolatrous, or otherwise? One explanation presents itself immediately. Perhaps the passage takes itself apart, so to speak, in a subterfuge of complicity, a disingenuous act of sculptural self-sacrifice, precisely so that it can leave behind the solid, inscrutable waste of a fleshy body—a waste that resists even the possibility of explanation, that perhaps represents (figures) the impossibility of interpretation. Perhaps it, that waste, amounts, if it amounts to anything, to an act of resistance aimed at the domineering authority of Augustine’s “husband-soul,” of Martin’s ‘in-sight,’ of Hugh’s “reason.”

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Yseut

. . . the joys of the great love between them,
and the sufferings and sorrows,
the pain and tribulations,
of all this Tristran reminded the statue.

—Thomas of Britain, *Tristran*\(^7\)

These lines—which begin the only surviving fragment of Thomas’s *Tristran*, the source of Robert’s *Saga*, to touch directly on the Yseut statue—plunged me immediately into uncertainty. I am well aware, of course, that “the joys,” “the sufferings and sorrows,” and “the pain and tribulations” referred to can only be those of the ‘flesh-and-blood’ Tristran and Yseut. After all, the extant nine hundred-plus lines of Thomas’s poem preceding this passage are given over almost entirely to presenting the couple’s love affair and its emotional consequences. Naturally, I expect that the same subject to which Thomas has already devoted so much attention will continue to occupy his poem. And yet, no matter how strongly the broader narrative context, not to mention readerly ‘common sense,’ has predisposed me to such a sure, comfortable reading, syntactically, it is at the very least possible that Tristran reminds the statue of the amorous transports and trials he has shared with it. In other words, the deictic *them* is ambiguous: depending on how ‘closely’ I read the passage, it can point either to Tristran and Yseut, or to Tristran and the statue. While, admittedly, this ambiguity seems oversubtle in

Stewart Gregory’s English translation of the passage, in Thomas’s original, it is practically unavoidable:

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\begin{align*}
&\ldots E \text{ les deliz des granz amors} \\
&E \text{ lor travaus e lor dolurs} \\
&E \text{ lor paignes e lor ahans} \\
&\text{Recorde a l’himage Tristrans.}^{78}
\end{align*}
\]

Where in the English the problematic \textit{them} appears only once, the Old French has its equivalent, \textit{lor}, four times. Had Gregory re-created Thomas’s parallel constructions verbatim, the result may well have been something like ‘\ldots the joys of the great love between them, / and their sufferings and their sorrows / and their pain and their tribulations, / of all this Tristran reminded the statue.’\textsuperscript{79} A poetically clumsy rendering to be sure, but revealing: \textit{their}, or \textit{lor}, by sheer force of its repetition, becomes as conceptually significant to the passage as the emotions to which it is in each case attached. The word punctuates the lines, it is brought to the fore of my attention, registers as somehow important, and even presents itself as an unanswered question of sorts—who or what exactly are the referents of \textit{their}? While I want to believe (for

\textsuperscript{78} Thomas, \textit{Tristran}, 50:942-45.

\textsuperscript{79} My own corruption of Gregory’s translation. In the interest of full disclosure, I should point out that there are at least two other ways of reading these lines. First, an even more rigidly literal translation (largely my own) would render the passage, ‘\ldots and the delights of great loves, / and their sufferings and their sorrows, / and their pains and their tribulations, / of this Tristran reminded the statue.’ In this case, the word \textit{lor} could be taken to refer to the general concept of “granz amors”; in other words, all “granz amors” involve “deliz,” “travaus,” “dolurs,” etc. And second, Hatto, whose prose translation of the lines is no less an interpretation than Gregory’s or my own, suggests this: “\ldots by means of the image Tristran recalls the delights of their great love, their troubles and their grieves, their pains and their torments.” Hatto attempts to resolve the ambiguity of the passage by reading Thomas’s preposition \textit{a} in the construction \textit{recorde a l’himage} to mean “by means of” or “through” rather than “to” or “at.” Hatto, \textit{Tristan}, 315.
obvious reasons) that the recollected “joys” and “sorrows” and so on were shared by
two sentient characters, I cannot escape the fact that the most syntactically convenient
referents to which the insistent deictic can attach itself, into which its ambiguity can
resolve, are Tristran and the statue. I am left with the impossible choice of deciphering
the lines based either on my knowledge of the poem as a whole (what I think the
passage ‘means’ despite what it seems to ‘say’), or on the syntactic evidence of the
immediate language (what the passage seems to ‘say’ despite what I think it ‘means’).
The result is an aporia, but (somewhat paradoxically) a meaningful aporia, at least
insofar it aligns my experience with that of Tristran, who, over the course of the next
forty lines of the poem, struggles in vain to decipher another ambiguous deictic: the
Yseut statue itself.

Of course, the Yseut statue is not ambiguous in quite the same way that the word
lor is ambiguous. It is not an unanchored linguistic shifter—like I, or it, or she—that
can be used to refer to any number of different items in any number of different
contexts. In fact, it is not linguistic at all: it is an “image,” an iconic signifier, and,
as such, exhibits at least some of the features of the object or class of objects it was

80 The term “shifters” is Roman Jakobson’s. See his “Shifters, Verbal Categories, and the
Russian Verb,” in Selected Writings: Word and Language, (The Hague: Mouton & Company,
1971), 131-33.

81 “Image” is Thomas’s Old French word for the statue (see Thomas, Tristran, 50:945, 967, 974
and 52:986). No less multifaceted than its modern English counterpart, it can mean “image,
likeness; figure, drawing; reflection; portrait, statue” (Old French-English Dictionary, s.v.
“image”). The definition of “image” found in Sainte-Palaye’s Dictionnaire suggests the word’s
moral ambiguity: “1. Image of a false god. 2. Statuette of the virgin, of saints. 3. Portrait. 4.
Metaphor.” (My translation of Sainte-Palaye’s French. See Dictionnaire, s.v. “image.”)
designed to signify (features associated with ‘person,’ for example, or ‘woman,’ or ‘queen,’ etc.). Moreover, it apparently points very definitely to the real Yseut (and not to any other ‘person,’ ‘woman,’ or ‘queen’). All of this would seem to argue against the Yseut statue’s ambiguity. And yet, Tristran is talking to the statue: he is obviously, in some way, confused. To understand why he is confused, and in what sense the statue is ambiguous, we must consider again the passage quoted earlier from Robert’s Saga, this time not from our perspective, the privileged view afforded the reader, but from Tristran’s, who.

Presented with so richly detailed and insistently specific image, it is tempting to regard the Yseut statue as a kind of mimetic portrait (a radical enough concept in the artistic culture of medieval Europe, which had largely forgotten or ignored the ancient art of rendering likenesses—but, clearly, the image is meant to convey a much more vivid impression of its subject than any portrait with which I, at least, am familiar, medieval or otherwise. Not only does it faithfully portray the static physical attributes of the real Yseut (her “shape, beauty, and size”), it also reproduces certain dynamic signs of life: movement (as we will see below), a general sense of litheness (“no one looking at it could think that any of its limbs were not alive”), and even respiration (“a


83 “There were no portraits as we understand them in the Middle Ages. All the artists did was to draw a conventional figure and to give it the insignia of office—a crown and sceptre for the king, a mitre and crozier for the bishop—and perhaps write the name underneath so that there would be no mistake.” E. H. Gombrich, The Story of Art (London: Phaidon, 1995), 196.
wonderful fragrance emanated from its mouth”). From the poet’s description of the statue’s outer surface and signs of life, we can, I think, only conclude that Tristran has made, or caused to be made (Robert’s text is unclear on this point), a more realistic representation of his lover than even that which could be achieved by modern photographic technologies. The image is specific, accurate, life-size, materially present, three-dimensional, animated, even olfactive—to all appearances, indeed to all senses, it simply is Yseut. And ‘Yseut’ is precisely what the statue ‘says’ to Tristran.

But ‘Yseut’ is also all the statue ‘says’ to Tristran. And therein lies its peculiar ambiguity. Roland Barthes describes what he calls “the absolute Particular, the sovereign Contingency” of photographs—that is, the general and utter dependance of photography on empirical reality—as being like “the gesture of a child pointing his finger at something and saying: that, there it is, lo! but says nothing else.” Therefore, as Barthes goes on to explain the semiotic nature of medium, “a specific photograph . . . is never distinguished from its referent,” and even “has something tautological about it.”

A photograph seems simply to be whatever it represents. (“One paints a painting, not what it represents,” but it makes almost no sense, in Barthes’s view, ‘to photograph a photograph.’) This semiotic analysis can, I believe, be applied more or less unproblematically to Tristran’s image of Yseut, which renders, if anything, a more


realistic ‘portrait’ than would a photograph. (‘Portraiture,’ after all, is not the medium, mode, or defining feature of any artwork in and of itself, but rather a generic label describing the relationship that exists between some artworks and the real-world persons to whom they refer; remove the concept of a referent from a portrait and it is no longer a portrait, but merely an image of a human form.) As long as the Yseut statue is understood to be a portrait—and Tristran, who knows the real Yseut and either commissioned or created the Yseut statue, seems bound to hold this view—it too “cannot escape [the] pure deictic language”86 of Barthes’s pointing child, the language, that is, of photography. Taken together, the extreme realism of the statue, its seemingly complete correspondence with the ‘flesh-and-blood’ Yseut, and its consequent inability to ‘say’ anything to Tristran beyond ‘Yseut,’ all end in a familiar paradox: the statue is at once Yseut and not Yseut.

As ahistorical as my discussion may, at this point, seem (artists in the Middle Ages not being known to have had particularly keen eyes for realism, practiced portraiture in the modern sense of the term, or invented photography), it does find at least some precedent in early medieval sign theory. John Freccero, investigating Augustine’s semiotics, points out that the bishop understood Christian signs (as we have already seen) as essentially allegorical, “continually pointing beyond” themselves to establish an “infinite regression” in which “words point to things, but those things are

86 Barthes, Camera, 5.
themselves signs pointing to God, the ultimately signified.” More important for our purposes here, however, is his semiological understanding of idols: “reified signs,” as Freccero summarizes, “devoid of significance . . . coextensive with their representations, as though they dwelt not on Olympus or in the skies, but within a golden calf, a stone, or a piece of wood.” Idols, in other words, collapse the referentiality that defines Christian signs: an idol’s ‘meaning’ is not located anywhere in the world (which would, in turn, locate its ‘meaning’ in God), but entirely within itself. As a result, Nicolette Zeeman adds, “the idol refuses to be read as part of a larger sign system, drawing attention only to itself and to its own malleable materiality.” If the Yseut statue does not quite manage the idol’s totalizing collapse of signifier and signified (because it persistently points to the real Yseut), neither does it exhibit the allegorical referentiality of a Christian sign (because it is so convincingly realistic and therefore apparently semiotically ‘self-sufficient’). Instead, it has it both ways, so to speak, pointing simultaneously and with a single gesture to the real Yseut and to itself.

If, as I suspect, realistic signs (such as the Yseut statue) occupy a place in medieval semiotics between and overlapping the poles of Christian referentiality and idolatrous tautology, then the paradox of realism (by which the statue is and is not

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87 John Freccero, “The Fig Tree and the Laurel: Petrarch’s Poetics,” *Diacritics* 5, no. 1 (1975), 35 and 36.

88 Ibid., 37.

Yseut) cannot be regarded as a mere semiological curiosity. Rather, it constitutes a profound, even intolerable, epistemological problem: the more convincingly an artwork reproduces its referent, the more ‘true’ its representation, the more likely we (Tristan, myself, anyone) are to mistake that artwork for its referent, to be tricked into the false belief that it simply is what it represents. As W. J. T. Mitchell, who refers to this as the paradox of “illusionism” and traces its history from Pliny to Leonardo da Vinci to E. H. Gombrich, helpfully puts it, “the ‘truth’ in painting [and, presumably, in sculpture or any other artistic medium] is verified by its ability to deceive.”

To the medieval mind, it must have seemed as though the referentiality of good, honest Christian signs bore an inherent mimetic threshold, beyond which that referentiality verged dangerously on idolatrous self-reflexiveness. And, more troubling, it must have seemed that realistic signs existed precisely at that threshold, accommodating both Christian and idolatrous semiotic systems, but irreducible to either.

No wonder, then, that Tristan is confused by the hyper-realistic Yseut statue. And no wonder that he encounters it with such demonstrative anxiety. “When in a happy frame of mind,” Thomas writes, Tristan

kissed it often,
but became angry with it when he was himself in anger,

Whenever his mind dwelt on such painful thoughts [of Yseut taking a new lover] he would vent his hatred on the statue, having no further wish to sit and speak with it.

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He then remembered the pact
that he had made as they [presumably he and Yseut] parted,
and cried and begged forgiveness,\(^{91}\)

and so on. As erratic as this behavior seems, it is not neurotic, but, in a sense,
desperately interrogative. Each of his actions—kissing the statue, becoming angry with
it, begging for its forgiveness—is motivated by an implicit desire to elicit a response from
the statue—a kiss in return or a slap on the face, a defense or a counterattack, absolution
or condemnation. Each is an effort to make the statue ‘mean’ more than it ‘says,’ to
resolve its paradox, to make it into a Christian sign (a ‘truthful’ window on reality) or an
idol (a ‘false’ being, but a being in its own right nonetheless), either of which would be
a preferable alternative to the confounding mixture of both that it insists upon.

But, to Tristran’s continual frustration (Thomas suggests his actions are repeated
often\(^{92}\)), the statue remains a statue: it cannot respond in any way, and therefore cannot

\(^{91}\) Molt la baisse quant est haitez,
Corrusce soi quant est irez,

Quant il pense de tel irur,
Donc mustre a l’image haiur,
Mais ne volt seoir ne parler.

Menbre lui de la covanence
Qu’il ot la deseverance;
Hidonc plurê e merci crie.

\(^{92}\) Thomas, \textit{Tristran}, 52 and 53:993-95.

Thomas, \textit{Tristran}, 50 and 51:946-47; 50 and 51:966-68; and 52 and 53:980-82. The scene is not
entirely unique to Thomas’s poem: similar passages can be found in Jean de Meun’s \textit{Roman de
la Rose}, Jean Bodel’s \textit{Jeu de saint Nicolas}, and the poetry of Petrarch. Kenneth Gross, in his
remarkable cultural study of ‘living’ statuary, even describes the poets of the late-medieval and
Renaissance periods as generally prone to exploring “Pygmalion’s disappointments . . . the
melancholia as well as the sense of guilt, perversity, or fetishism that attend the sculptor’s
obsession.” See Camille, \textit{Gothic}, 129; and Kenneth Gross, \textit{The Dream of the Moving Statue}
(Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 82-84.
resolve its own ambiguous ‘statement.’ In this sense, it is utterly opaque, or, as Barthes’s says of photographs, “outside meaning.” This opacity registers at the level of the text in the statue’s almost total disappearance from the poem (we will return to this “almost”). For the duration of the forty lines in which Tristran is shown kissing, berating, and entreating the image, the object toward which his behavior is directed is itself represented by only a few occurrences of the most meagerly descriptive words—*it* and *statue*. There is nothing terribly surprising about Thomas’s narrow focus, of course. Tristran is a person, capable (within the logic of the narrative) of thoughts, emotions, and actions: the statue is not a person, and is therefore, presumably, capable of none of these things. Within the context of the person-statue encounter, Tristran is simply more interesting than the Yseut statue and therefore more likely to occupy the poet’s attention.

But there is, I think, a deeper, more thematically resonant reason for imposing this blinkered perspective on the reader: had Thomas remarked on the statue’s inevitable non-responsiveness, he would only have succeeded in suggesting a kind of response. As Kenneth Gross points out, silences, like words, are “overdetermined,” “a site of conflict and misrecognition, at once muddled and infectious”; the meaning of any silence is, he says, “up for grabs.” To articulate the Yseut statue’s silence would only

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93 Barthes, *Camera*, 34.

94 “Molt la baisse quant est haitez,” for example, but, more often, the word *image*. Thomas, *Tristran*, 50:946-53:985.

95 Gross, *Dream*, 147.
invite the reader to invest that silence with a reason or motive, such as “prohibition, frustration, exhaustion, oblivion . . . panic . . . protest, concentration, anticipation, reverie . . . calm,” etc.\textsuperscript{96} Imagine, for example, if Thomas had followed the line “When in a happy frame of mind he kissed it often” with something like ‘but Yseut did nothing,’ or ‘but the statue of Yseut did not return his embraces,’ or even ‘but, of course, this Yseut, being a statue, made of stone and not flesh, did not respond at all.’ We might be tempted to think that the statue was asleep, or giving Tristran the ‘cold shoulder,’ or that the phrase ‘made of stone’ should be taken as a metaphoric suggestion of the thing’s emotional state. In other words, any statement about the statue at this point in the narrative would constitute an interpretive toehold, so to speak; something readable and therefore subject to all kinds of critical maneuvers or subtle (even unconscious) acts of psychological projection, any one of which might lead the me to believe that I had arrived at a ‘correct’ understanding of the object’s significance.

Instead, Thomas manages to represent the statue’s essential opacity by not representing the artwork at all. The statue is obscured from me and is therefore obscure to me; I am unable, literally and figuratively, to ‘read’ it. It is an instance of definition by contrast, and contrast by omission: the almost unbroken catalog of Tristran’s actions, thoughts, emotions, and words delineates for me, with greater precision than any direct textual explanation, just what makes the Yseut statue so maddeningly ambiguous for Tristran: it is an irresolvable paradox, as true as it is false, as present as it is absent, as much Yseut

\textsuperscript{96} Ibid.
as it is not Yseut. With almost nothing of the statue toward which to direct my interpretive faculties, I am left, like Tristran, in a limbo of potential and conflicting meanings. I can only complain, as Tristran does, of the statue’s “fickleness” and “trickery,” words that seem but emotionally-charged masks for the artwork’s semiotic-epistemological paradox.97

But, of course, the catalog of Tristan’s behavior is not quite, as I have suggested, uninterrupted. There is one remarkable moment in the midst of its forty lines when the statue of Yseut intrudes, so to speak, on the representation of Tristan’s futile interrogative rituals. Not only does Thomas represent the statue, but he seems to allow it to overcome its stony silence and, thereby, its ambiguity. It makes a gesture, and perhaps an expression flits across its face:

[Tristran] would look at Yseut’s hand as it made to offer him the gold ring, and see the expression on her face . . .98

For the brief space of these three lines, the statue comes alive, and seems to respond to Tristran’s struggle for meaning: it reaches toward him, offering a single moment of legibility. That this gesture might imply the statue’s status as an idol is clear: it seems suddenly and wholly endowed with a sentience and quick of its own—it is no longer a

97 Thomas, Tristran, 50 and 51:972. The Old French change, which Gregory translates as “fickleness” also, of course, accommodates the more emotionally-neutral meanings of “change” and “changeability.”

98 Regardë en la main Ysodt, Qui l’anel d’or doner li volt, Vait la cherë e le senblant . . .

Ibid., 50 and 51:976-8.
hyper-realistic image, but a responsive being. And yet the possibility that the gesture is, by a magic no less strange than that which animates it, an accurate window on (the narrative’s) reality and the ‘real’ Yseut is also present: this is the only time that the poet refers to the statue by the name of its referent. It is not ‘its hand,’ or even ‘the hand of the statue of Yseut,’ that offers Tristan the ring—it is simply “Yseut’s hand,” la main Yseut. The Old French is, of course, slightly more ambiguous, as the construction la main Yseut could be taken to mean either “Yseut’s hand” or, if Yseut functions as an adjective, something like ‘the Yseult-like hand.’ The latter translation would, of course, emphasize the problem of statue’s realism and specificity. In either case, however, the statue and the flesh-and-blood Yseut are verbally conflated.

While the concurrence of these two interpretive possibilities—by which the Yseut statue can be regarded as a tautological idol or as a referential Christian sign—might, in itself, be sufficient to indicate the object’s ambiguity, the line immediately following those quoted above (and, in the Old French, completing a couplet) drives home the intractable paradox of its realism. The expression on the statue’s face is revealed to be the one the ‘real’ Yseut wore “as she looked at her lover on their parting.”99 The statue, we (both Tristran and readers of the poem) cannot help but realize, is reenacting the scene of the lovers’ separation, found nine hundred lines earlier. It is Yseut saying again,

Though now our bodies must part company,

99 “Qu’an departier fait son amant.” Ibid., 52 and 53:979.
our love will never die.
And yet, take this ring of mine
and keep it, fair friend, to remind you of my love.

Thus, the gesture and expression reaffirm the statue’s referentiality by connecting it unmistakably with the flesh-and-blood Yseut of the larger narrative context (or the ‘real’ Yseut of Tristran’s past experience), and, at the same time, signal the real Yseut’s absence from the immediate scene, her disjuncture from the Yseut statue.

If the aporia discussed at the outset of this section can, in light of Tristran’s confusion, suggest anything, it is that there is an analogy to be drawn between the reader’s encounter with Thomas’s poem and Tristran’s encounter with the statue of Yseut. (After all, both the real Yseut and the Yseut statue are, strictly speaking, made of the same ‘stuff’; both are figments conjured by Thomas’s text, and if they are endowed with any shape, features, movements, or life at all, it is only in the reader’s imagination.) As Zeeman asserts, “texts have a certain irreducible materiality and even a disturbing ‘bodiliness’; they point back into the embodied word, and they will not go away.”

As realistic as Thomas’s text—or any other—may seem, it does not offer an

100 Nos cors partir ore convent,
Mais l’amor ne partira nient.
Nequedent cest anel permés:
Por m’amor, amis, le gardés.

Ibid., 4 and 5:50-53.

101 Zeeman, “Idol,” 47. Zeeman interprets this indexical quality of texts (by which they always seem to “point to the embodied world”) as somehow idol-like. While I agree with her first point, that the “bodiliness” of texts suggests the tautological semiotic system associated with idols, the referentiality implied by her second indicates to me that texts are also like Augustine’s Christian signs. In her haste to identify “the idol of the text,” she seems to have overlooked the semiological paradox of her definition, as well as the possibility that texts do not necessarily operate according to the semiotic systems that describe idols or Christian signs.
unmitigated or inherently ‘truthful’ window on reality. But neither it is readily identifiable as an idol, a false representation to be dismissed by conscientious readers, medieval or modern. If we are to draw any conclusions as to what exactly the poem authorizes, whether it condones or condemns the adulterous behavior of Tristran and Yseut, we must do so despite what the text ‘says.’ And locating the center of ‘meaning’ in the reader and not in the text is precisely what Thomas seems to be after in long digression that occupies most of the remaining portion of the Turin 1 fragment. After leading his readers through a recapitulation of the emotional duress experienced by each of his principal characters (Tristran, Yseut, King Mark, and Yseut of the White Hands), he remarks,

I do not think I can say here which of the four’s torment was greatest, nor can I pronounce judgement, since I have no experience in the matter. I shall simply lay the fact before you. Then let lovers reach their verdict as to who came off best in love, or, failing that, had the deepest sorrow.\(^{102}\)

\(^{102}\) Hici ne sai que dire puisse
Quel d’aus quatre a greignor angoisse,
Ne le raison dire ne sai
Po ce qué esprové ne l’ai.
La parole mettraï avant;
Le jugement facent amant
Al quel estoit mieuz de l’amor
Ou, sanz lúi, ait greignor dolur.

“Nothing but a Copy”

In the opening pages of *Aesthetic Theory*, in the midst of a lengthy critique of what he calls “the psychoanalytical perspective on art” (the perspective that, in a roundabout way, we have been tracking throughout this essay), Theodore Adorno offers a comment that takes him to, and points beyond, the edge of the expansive subject with which his text is primarily concerned. “In artistic production,” he writes, “unconscious forces are one sort of impulse, material among many others. They enter the work,” like any other material, “mediated by the law of form; if this were not the case, the actual subject portrayed by the work would be nothing but a copy.”

Nothing but a copy—there is something absolute and impossible in the formulation, something for which the word *copy* (alone) is inadequate, something for which—aside from *idol*, perhaps—we have no precise word: a truly unmediated mode of representation, any instantiation of which, would, for Adorno, even if it were possible, no longer be art, but something else entirely. Escaping the mode of sublimation that he names “the law of form,” and Lacan, the *dompte-regard*, such a work would, paradoxically, represent *itself* totally, annihilating whatever notions of “copy,” “repetition,” “representation,” “simulation,” “mimesis,” or “reproduction” we might wish to evoke in our efforts to understand its conceptual status—annihilating, that is, any notion of referentiality whatsoever. The raw material would disappear from within such an object, the world would disappear from beyond it: only the thing itself—whatever might, at that extreme point of self-

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sufficiency, constitute it—would persist, utterly divorced from meaning, to press its mere presence, its pure objecthood, on our senses.

Whether or not Adorno’s sweeping claims about the inadequacy of the psychoanalytic view of art—that it ignores the “quality” of art works, their “content,” “relation to nonpsychical reality,” their “idea of truth,” and so on—have any validity (and one suspects that, when it comes to the mode of thought opened up by Lacan at least, they do not), it is clear that art has imagined itself, through language and in poetry (if not elsewhere), as something at least potentially psychologically distinct from itself, that it has, at the very least, toyed with the limit beyond which it becomes “nothing but a copy,” and that it has done so in an effort to engage, by whatever limited means available to it, the psychical lives of its audiences, to bring them to a pleasure that is wholly its own. Structured according to the model afforded it by theology, and availing itself of precisely the religious materials that would limit its creative scope, condemn its most ambitious endeavors, or force it to serve ends other than its own, art—works of art, such as the Yseut statue—opposes itself to the kind of meaning-production to which that model and material are committed, using them, exploiting them, only to discover the efficacies unique to it. Adorno, of course, knew this, even if he preferred not to explore its implications. “If art has psychoanalytic roots,” he wrote, “then they are the roots of fantasy in the fantasy of omnipotence.”

104 Ibid., 8 and 9.
105 Ibid., 9.


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