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Will's Imagination in *Piers Plowman*

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For medieval theologians, knowledge falls into two categories: natural knowledge, which derives from the senses and the intellect, and revelation, which is acquired knowledge, expressed primarily in the Bible. As Thomas Aquinas (1225–74) explains early in the *Summa theologiae*, one science “deals with those things that are known by the light of natural reason, and another science deals with those things that are known through the light of divine revelation.”¹ To the former belongs natural theology, which includes all that the intellect can know about God through its own powers of reasoning. To the latter belongs supernatural theology, which “exceeds human reason” and is necessary to the intellect in order that it think correctly about God.² Based only on its own powers, the intellect would err frequently on the subject (it would badly botch the doctrine of the Trinity, for instance), and so it requires an influx of divine light to guide it. To the reader of *Piers Plowman*, these categories of knowledge are instantly recognizable: the poem calls them “kynde knowynge” and “clergie,” respectively. It has been the tendency of Langland scholarship to privilege the former over the latter, and this article argues against that tendency, demonstrating that natural knowledge depends on revelation if it is to contribute to an accurate conception of God, if it is to constitute natural theology. Within this rather small point, however, lie two larger ones. The first is that it is the job of imagination to mediate between the two fields of knowledge, thus justifying Ymaginatif’s pride of place in the poem.³ After receiving Ymaginatif’s instruction, Will is much better able

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1. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* part 1, q. 1, a. 1, ad 2: “. . . philosophicae disciplinae tractant secundum quod sunt cognoscibilia lumine naturalis rationis, et aliam scientiam tractare secundum quod cognoscuntur lumine divinae revelationis” (*Summa theologiae*, Iussu impensaque Leonis XIII, P.M., vols. 4–12 [Rome: Ex typographia Polyglotta S.C. de Propaganda Fide, 1888–1906], IV, 7).

2. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* part 1, q. 1, a. 1, resp.: “quae rationem humanam excedunt” (IV, 6).

3. Imagination has many jobs and participates in every act of understanding, but to medieval scholastics, its mediation between sense and intellect was its most important task.

to reconcile them, seeing the spiritual in the natural so firmly that the spiritual simply becomes the natural—Will simply lives Biblical narrative—at the poem's end. The second is that it takes sustained intellectual effort to make proper, spiritual use of the natural world, and this undermines some entrenched oppositions in medieval scholarship between laity and clerisy, the “popular” and the “elite.”⁴

The “discovery of nature” in the twelfth century corresponds, in medieval literary history, with the emergence of a new, intensely affective piety that dominates Christian devotion through the fifteenth century.⁵ According to this crudely sketched narrative, the universities, which establish themselves in the thirteenth century, are incorporated by being separated. Nature and affective piety are apportioned to the laity, and rational, intellectual theology to the clergy. In Langland studies, this binary expresses itself in the many allegiances of “kynde knowynge” and “clergie”; the former is associated with experience, works/deeds/action, will, affect, the vernacular, the laity, charity, individualism, and poetry, and the later with words (as opposed to works), Latin, institutions (the church, the university), the intellect, hierarchy, communalism, systematization, cognition, and learning. There have been efforts to soften the intensity of this divide, but it persists, and persists in favor of nature.⁶ Not all forms of natural knowledge in the period's religious literature are created equal, of course; intensely affective texts do not receive the respect that, from this perspective, more serious Middle English religious literature does, literature whose worth is often defined through its opposition to affective texts.⁷

4. Drawing on Roger Chartier, Thomas Bestul argues against the partitioning of medieval society along the lines of popular and elite; see *Texts on the Passion: Latin Devotional Literature and Medieval Society* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), pp. 11–12.

5. It is M.-D. Chenu who credits twelfth-century thinkers with this discovery. See *Nature, Man, and Society in the Twelfth Century*, trans. Jerome Taylor and Lester K. Little (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1997), pp. 4–18. On twelfth-century naturalism, see also Winthrop Wetherbee, *Platonism and Poetry in the Twelfth Century: The Literary Influence of the School of Chartres* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1972), and James Simpson, *Sciences and the Self in Medieval Poetry: Alan of Lille's Anticlaudianus and John Gower's Confessio amantis* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995). Rachel Fulton discusses narratives of the emergence of affective piety in *From Judgment to Passion: Devotion to Christ and the Virgin Mary, 800–1200* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2002), pp. 60–64.

6. Nicolette Zeeman argues against this bias, suggesting that volition is often more error-prone than is intellect. See *Piers Plowman and the Medieval Discourse of Desire* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2006), p. 65. Nonetheless, she returns to the standard narrative, which sees in the poem a movement away from clergy and toward nature, when she claims that, with the feast of Pacience, “The poem leaves *clergie* behind, and Conscience and Pacience depart for new encounters with the spirit within the order of *kynde*” (p. 262).

7. For instance, David Aers sees Langland as rejecting the conventions of affective piety, thus being freed up to offer potent social criticism (“Christ's Humanity and *Piers Plowman*: Contexts and Political Implications,” *Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 8 [1995], 107–25). Likewise, an article on Julian of Norwich holds up her sophisticated treatment of compassion as evidence that she

Nonetheless, even literature that is seen to engage intelligently with the natural world is typically read in opposition to scholastic intellectualism. Subsumed under the category "vernacular theology," vernacular religious texts in particular end up pitted against those of the university.⁸

The distance between natural knowledge and revelation in current scholarship, then, expresses a more fundamental division between the lay and the learned, a division that this article hopes to bridge by calling attention to the necessary interdependence of the two bodies of knowledge in medieval thought. It does so with attention to *Piers* because it is a veritable manual on the natural world, specifically on its spiritual value. As is well known, the poem concerns itself with the spiritual life not of enclosed religious but of wayfarers living in the world. When Will offers to give up his poetry-making for an understanding of Dowel, he determines to find Dowel through the active, earthly life. He says, "if þer were any wight þat wolde me telle / What were dowel and dobet and dobest at þe laste, / Wolde I neuere do werk, but wende to holi chirche / And þere bidde my bedes but whan ich ete or slepe" (B XII.25–28), a comment that initially might confound given the fact that, if Will were to devote his life to prayer in this manner, he certainly would have achieved and surpassed Dowel.⁹ In C's revision, Will even claims already to be living a life of prayer and devotion (C V.45–47), but this neither resolves nor obviates his need for a wayfarer's guide to salvation. Insisting that Will approach spiritual matters from the perspective of the active life, the poem thus foregrounds the natural. Will's quest, then, is to make his experience of the natural world spiritually profitable, to make of his earthly life a path toward salvation, learning key lessons about charity and love from his experiences along the way. As I will argue below, Will progresses in his journey by learning to reconcile natural knowledge and revelation, or clergy, through his imagination. Following his discussion

has "been delivered from the weary conventions of contemporary passion poetry." Vincent Gillespie and Maggie Ross, "The Apophatic Image: The Poetics of Effacement in Julian of Norwich," in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England*, Exeter Symposium V, July 1992, ed. Marion Glasscoe (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1992), p. 61.

8. Thus Nicholas Watson's clearest argument for the existence of a vernacular theology argues for vernacular interest in universal salvation in opposition to Latin theology. See "Visions of Inclusion: Universal Salvation and Vernacular Theology in Pre-Reformation England," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 27 (1997), 145–87.

9. Steven Justice notes that, if Will were to act in this way, he would also be following Piers's lead (*Writing and Rebellion* [Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1994], p. 114). I cite the Athlone Press edition of the three texts of *Piers Plowman* (all repr. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press): *The A Version*, ed. George Kane, rev. ed. (1988); *The B Version*, ed. George Kane and E. Talbot Donaldson, rev. ed. (1988); *The C Version*, ed. George Russell and George Kane (1997). Following scholarly convention, I refer primarily to the B text and cite C only when it differs significantly from B, and A when it differs from both. I have retained the editors' brackets, removing them only when I have restored the base manuscript's text.

with Ymaginatif, he attains to newly vivid and spiritual forms of experience, ultimately achieving a clear goal of the poem, which is the direct witnessing of the passion and the living of Biblical narrative.¹⁰ Will's lived experience becomes spiritual, and that movement is consolidated here, as in gospel meditations, by the passion meditation.¹¹ The poem shows, then, how hard it is to arrive at this meditation, and how powerful it can be. The difficulty of *Piers Plowman* as a whole has been much commented upon, and it makes an important point: Will's journey is not easy because the work he performs is not easy. Perceiving the spiritual significance of the natural world instead takes all the resources of the intellect and the will.

NATURE IN THE LATE MIDDLE AGES

Even the most cursory survey of medieval discussions of Christian faith would show the natural world to be the principal means of learning about God and Christian virtues. According to Basil of Caesarea (ca. 329–79), the created world is “the school for reasonable souls to exercise themselves, the training ground for them to learn to know God.”¹² As a school, the natural world merits diligent and rational study. Thus Augustine's proof of the existence of God begins with the senses: because the senses cannot sense that they sense, there must be a power above them, reason, that judges them. Reason, in turn, recognizes that its judgments of truth and falsity cannot come from itself alone but depend on a higher power, indicating the existence of truth or God.¹³ The senses not only point to God's existence, but they also show that all good things, including free will, come from God. Augustine (354–430) can therefore conclude, “whoever has contemplated the whole creation and considers it carefully, if he follows the way that leads to wisdom, will indeed see that wisdom reveals itself graciously to him along the way and that in all of providence it runs to meet him.”¹⁴ By design, then, the senses are one's first point of access to spiritual truth. Their truth-finding power only expands in the works of later

10. As I use it in this paper, “experience” refers to direct, conscious encounters with the natural world. It is linked to natural knowledge as its primary source.

11. I discuss *Piers*'s relationship to gospel meditations more fully in Chapter 5 of my book in preparation, *The Age of Imagination: Meditation and the Medieval Mind*.

12. Basil of Caesarea, *Hexaemeron* I, 6, in Basile de Césarée, *Homélies sur L'Hexaéméron*, trans. Stanislas Giet, Sources chrétiennes, 26 (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1949), p. 110: “εἴπερ τῷ ὄντι ψυχῶν λογικῶν διδασκαλεῖον καὶ θεογνωσίας ἐστὶ παιδευτήριον.”

13. Augustine, *De libero arbitrio*, Book II, 3–17, in *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina* [CCSL] 39, 239–68.

14. Augustine, *De libero arbitrio* II, 17, CCSL 29, 268: “Intuitus ergo et considerans uniuersam creaturam quicumque iter agit ad sapientiam, sentit sapientiam in uia se sibi ostendere hilariter et in omni prouidentia occurrere sibi.” Trans. Thomas Williams, Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992), p. 63.

Christian theologians, who are not content with the general guidance that Augustine attributes to nature but empower it to give specific knowledge of God's attributes. In his *Didascalicon* dating from the 1120s, Hugh of St. Victor comments on the expanse of knowledge available to the attentive natural observer: "every nature tells of God; every nature teaches man . . . and nothing in the universe is infecund."¹⁵ So knowable is God's existence through these means that Bonaventure allows no merit to attach to belief in it.¹⁶ Only subsequent articles of faith are strictly speaking meritorious because the created world makes God's existence so knowable. Nature, however, has become considerably more opaque by the time that Langland turns to it for his protagonist's spiritual guidance. That Will struggles so obviously to read nature profitably might also lead us to question the apparent ease with which the task is performed in other late-medieval texts, even those flagrantly affective ones.

It takes no great skill to experience the natural world, of course; the senses, whose only object is the natural world, may be error-prone but they are certainly easy to use, and as Chaucer likes to remind his readers, nothing is as easy to believe as experience.¹⁷ The challenge, for Langland though not for the sublunary focused Chaucer, lies in understanding those experiences profitably, in correctly perceiving spiritual lessons within the natural world.¹⁸ In the natural theology of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, nature tends to act as a particularly transparent guide to spiritual truths, but the development of natural theology and natural philosophy in the late Middle Ages makes nature both more fruitful and less easy to read. Historians assign the origins of natural philosophy—which seeks "natural explanations for natural phenomena"—to the thirteenth century, when Aristotle's *libri naturales* were first available and studied in the West, and identify its heyday as the century from 1277–1377.¹⁹ The impact of this movement on theology depends in part on the fact that theologians, often

15. Hugh of St. Victor, *Didascalicon*, VI, 5, PL 176: 805C: "Omnis natura Deum loquitur. Omnis natura hominem docet . . . et nihil in universitate infecundum est." Trans. Jerome Taylor, *The Didascalicon of Hugh of St. Victor* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1961, repr. 1991), p. 145.

16. Bonaventure, *De mysterio Trinitatis*, q. 1, a. 1, resp. 14, in *Opera omnia*, ed. Collegii S. Bonaventurae, 10 vols. (Quaracchi: Collegii S. Bonaventurae, 1882–1902), V, 31.

17. See, for instance, the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*, F text, ll. 1–28 (*Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry Benson, 3d ed. [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987]).

18. Bernard of Clairvaux inverts Chaucer's ranking of experience over books: on spiritual matters, he notes, the Bible trumps experience every time. See *Sermones super Cantica Canticorum* in *Opera omnia*, ed. J. Leclercq et al., 8 vols. (Rome: Editiones Cistercienses, 1957–77), sermon 77, 4. Trans. Kilian Walsh and Irene Edmonds, *On the Song of Songs*, 4 vols. (Spencer, MA: Cistercian Publications, 1971–80), IV, 124.

19. See Edward Grant, "God, Science, and Natural Philosophy," in *Between Demonstration and Imagination*, ed. Lodi Nauta and Arjo Vanderjagt (Leiden: Brill, 1999), p. 265. Grant, along with various intellectual historians like J. M. M. H. Thijssen, sees this movement as the beginning of modern science.

having earned a master's degree in natural philosophy themselves, applied such research to theological inquiry, thus extending the parameters of natural theology, which treats reason as a welcome adjunct to faith.²⁰ This concord between philosophy and theology is unique to the Middle Ages, given the fragmentation of philosophical methodologies and theological doctrines in later centuries, and it invests nature with paramount spiritual value.²¹ The late-medieval promotion of nature depends not just on this union, however, but also on the acceptance of an Aristotelian understanding of nature. Whereas twelfth-century Neoplatonists interpret natural phenomena as symbolic of divine attributes, Aristotelian investigations into nature treat it not as a microcosm inevitably distant from an analogous macrocosm. Rather, in Aristotle's thought, truth resides within nature and is discovered through nature, not symbolically but actually. Nature accordingly becomes the object not just of the senses but also of the intellect.

Aristotle enjoyed considerable authority over all things natural in the Middle Ages: as the Commentator, Averroes, explains, he is "the rule [or standard] in Nature, and the model which Nature created to demonstrate the ultimate human perfection in material matters."²² Aristotle's intimacy with Nature here implied takes explicit allegorical form in Deguillville's *Le pèlerinage de la vie humaine*, where Aristotle is Nature's spokesperson. Aristotle can serve as Nature's defender because he provides nature with nearly unlimited authority in his philosophy. At the beginning of the *Posterior Analytics*, he affirms, "All teaching and all learning of an intel-

20. Edward Grant writes that theologians "were expected, if not required, to attain a masters' degree in natural philosophy" ("God, Science, and Natural Philosophy," p. 247). Natural theologians use reason to investigate theological matters, as Aquinas expresses when he writes that "natural reason should minister to faith" (quoted in Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Growth of Medieval Theology (600–1300)* [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1978], p. 285). For a lucid, succinct account of natural theology, see John Van Engen's entry for "natural theology" in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1984), pp. 752–53.

21. On natural theology in the Renaissance, see William A. Wallace, "Traditional Natural Philosophy" and Alfonso Ingegno, "The New Philosophy of Nature," both in *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, ed. C. B. Schmitt, Quentin Skinner, and Eckhard Kessler (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1988), pp. 201–63.

22. Averrois Cordubensis, *Commentarium magnum in Aristotelis De anima libros*, ed. F. Stuart Crawford (Cambridge, MA: Mediaeval Academy of America, 1953), III/4, p. 433 ll. 142–45: "Credo enim quod iste homo fuit regula in Natura, et exemplar quod Natura invenit ad demonstrationem ultimam perfectionem humanam in materiis." It is certainly the case that the Condemnations of 1270 and 1277 discouraged uncritical acceptance of Aristotle's natural philosophy, but it is equally clear that Aristotle retained authority on natural matters in its wake. For a review of different positions on the Condemnations and their impact on medieval Aristotelianism, see Hans Thijssen, "The Condemnation of 1277," especially section 5, in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/condemnation/>>.

lectual kind proceed from pre-existent knowledge" (I.1, 71^a 1–2).²³ This pre-existent knowledge, he proceeds to explain, is in us but only becomes actively known by us thanks to sense-perception. Sensation is thus the starting point for all knowledge, a role that Aristotle's medieval commentators interpreted in the broadest terms. According to Robert Grosseteste (ca. 1175–1253), for instance, sense-perception provides knowledge of the first principles from which all deductive knowledge derives, as well as the knowledge that derives from them.²⁴ Christian theologians, who had long applied pagan natural philosophy to their work,²⁵ reflect this emphasis on nature in their spiritual programs, as in the many thirteenth-century treatises that position the senses as the first stage in a process that leads toward knowledge of or union with God.²⁶ Of course, according to these theologians, Aristotle misinterpreted the natural world when it came to divine matters; he recognized the existence of God, but did not have access to divine revelation and so did not understand God properly. His authority extended to nature, not its creator. However, Aristotle's perceived limitations did not limit natural philosophy, but rather showed its potential. With access to revelation, theologians like Aquinas felt they could raise natural philosophy to the heights that Aristotle did not.

As a result, nature becomes a more promising but also a more complicated guide to spiritual truths. It must be understood properly, and therein lies the challenge, as we see so clearly in Langland's Will. One cannot make spiritually profitable use of nature without a firm grasp of the truths of revelation. Failing that, the wayfarer will, like Will, follow his reason to whatever uncharitable and even heretical conclusions it supports. As this article will argue, before he is corrected by Ymaginatif, Will relies almost exclusively on his natural faculties of reasoning, appealing

23. Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics* I, 1: "Omnis doctrina et omnis disciplina cogitativa non fit nisi ex cognitione cuius preceedit esse" (*Aristoteles Latinus* IV/3, ed. Laurentius Minio-Paluello [Bruges: Desclée de Brouwer, 1954], p. 3). Trans. Jonathan Barnes, *Posterior Analytics*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975, repr. 1993), p. 1.

24. See Robert Grosseteste, *In Aristotelis Posteriorum analyticorum libros*, printed with Walter Burleigh's *Super libros Posteriorum analyticorum Aristotelis*, facsimile of 1514 edition (Frankfurt/Main: Minerva, 1996.), II, 6, 40r: "cognition rises from these [singulars] until it arrives at simple universals. And from these it is likewise clear how the first composite universals, like simple universals made inductively by sensibles, are made clear to us. In this way it [i.e. thought] is drawn from sense to simple as much as to composite universals" ("ascendit ab his cognitio donec perveniat in simplicia vniuersalia. Et in hoc similiter manifestum est quoniam vniuersalia primo composita sicut et simplicia ex inductione a sensibilibus facta nobis sunt manifesta. Quomodo autem ex sensu perveniatur in vniuersalia tam simplicia quam composita").

25. Jaroslav Pelikan locates the origins of this tradition in the Cappadocian fathers of the fourth century. See *Christianity and Classical Culture: The Metamorphosis of Natural Theology in the Christian Encounter with Hellenism* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1993).

26. The best known of these today is probably Bonaventure's *Itinerarium mentis ad Deum*.

to Thought and Wit without the guidance of revelation and so falling into error. The lessons of revelation at first fail to help him because he uses his own reason to oppose them. Ymaginatif schools Will in the proper use of natural knowledge and revelation, teaching him to subordinate the former to the latter. He is well suited to the task because, as we will see through a brief survey of medieval theories of cognition, it was imagination's job to help the intellect find truth (for Christians, spiritual truth) within sensory, natural knowledge. Langland's imagination is not identical with the imagination of the scholastics, but both charge imagination with enabling the intellect to achieve understanding through sensory data. That Ymaginatif serves this function is evident not just in his instruction of Will but in the effects of that instruction on Will. In the remainder of the poem, Will showcases his new ability to reconcile the natural and the spiritual. He perceives the spiritual significance of Haukyn's sullied coat, he understands charity through its source in Christ, and, in the final two passūs, he understands the corruption of clerics as the Antichrist's attack on the faithful. He becomes an expert interpreter, integrating himself into Biblical narrative and translating the events of his life and society into Biblical terms. Ymaginatif, then, not only tells Will how to make better use of his natural faculties, but is the very mechanism by which he does so.

LANGLAND'S NATURAL THEOLOGY

As the poem begins, Will wonders what to make of the world as it appears before him, desiring interpretation but unwilling to offer it: "What þis metels bymenep, ye men þat ben murye, / Deuyne ye, for I ne dar, by deere god in heuene" (B Pro.209–10). By begging off interpretation, he diagnoses its necessity, one not wholly met by Holi Chirche and her successors. His task is more specific: Will needs to master natural interpretation by making proper uses of his senses, whose object is the natural world. When Will asks Holi Chirche what the initial vision means, she directs him to his senses: God, she says, "yaf yow fyue wittes / For to worshiþe hym perwiþ while ye ben here" (B I.15–16). In other words, Will misuses his senses, his "fyue wittes," to the extent that he uses them for any purpose other than worshipping God. The idea is a common one, expressed with conviction in the early fourteenth-century expansion of James of Milan's *Stimulus amoris*. There, nature chastises the speaker for sinning and so failing to make proper use of nature itself:

Clamant suo modo creaturae, et dicunt: Iste est qui nobis abusus est, et qui debuit in beneplacito Creatoris nos ordinare, fecit nos ad diaboli dolum servire: dum nos supra Deum amavit, magnam nobis injuriam fecit. Iste est

nefandissimus homo, qui nos ad honorem Dei factas in injuriam Dei convertit: debuit nobis in beneplacito Dei uti, et voluit potius nobis in diabolica servitute abuti. Erat anima ejus ad imaginem Dei facta, et ipsam deturpans voluit omnium nostrum imagine insigniri. Terrenior enim fuit terra.²⁷

(All creatures cry in their way and say, "This is he who has misused us, and who should use us to please the creator, but has made us serve the evil intent of the devil. While he has loved us above God, he has done us great injury. This is that most wicked man who has turned us away from honoring God and toward injuring God. He should use us in order to please God, but he prefers rather to misuse us in order to serve the devil. His soul was made to the image of God, and he destroys it and wants to be marked with the image of all of us. He is more earthly than earth.)

At some point, we realize, Will will need to use his senses as they were intended to be used, to draw spiritual conclusions from the natural world and see cause in nature to praise God. From the poem's outset, Will roots his search for Dowel in nature, but in no way does wisdom "run to meet him" as a result. Nature is not so self-explanatory in the poem, and Will fails to interpret it properly for two related reasons. The first concerns disposition: he is hampered by a willful will that exposes itself in his penchant for criticism. Positioning himself against the Christian community, he seeks opportunities to criticize clerics, Clergie, Reson, and the rest, rather than responding to nature with love for its creator.

Will's second obstacle is his misunderstanding of the mechanisms of natural theology, and so his pursuit of the wrong sort of natural knowledge. He many times diagnoses his need for natural knowledge, beginning in the poem's first passus when he pleads lack of "kynde knowynge" to defend his inability to understand Holi Chirche's discussion of truth (B I.138).²⁸ He is not wrong: he does need natural knowledge in order to discover

27. The best edition of the expanded *Stimulus* is attributed to Bonaventure in *S. Bonaventurae Opera omnia*, ed. A. C. Peltier, 15 vols. (Paris: Ludovicus Vivès, 1864–71), XII, 288–91 and 631–703. The reference is to part 1, cap. VII, p. 649, a chapter not present in the original version of the *Stimulus amoris*. The passage is slightly altered in the Middle English translation; see *Prickynge of Love*, ed. Harold Kane, 2 vols. (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 1983), I, 55 (ch. 6).

28. There is a great deal of scholarship on the meaning and significance of "kynde knowynge" in the poem. See, for instance, James Simpson, "The Role of *Scientia* in *Piers Plowman*," in *Medieval English Religious and Ethical Literature*, ed. Gregory Kratzmann and James Simpson (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1986), pp. 49–65; Joseph Wittig, "'Piers Plowman' B, Passus IX–XII: Elements in the Design of the Inward Journey," *Traditio*, 28 (1972), 211–80; and Mary Davlin, "Kynde Knowynge as a Major Theme in *Piers Plowman* B," *Review of English Studies*, n. s. 22 (1971), 1–19, and "Kynde Knowynge as a Middle English Equivalent for 'Wisdom' in *Piers Plowman* B," *Medium Ævum*, 50 (1981), 5–17. Andrew Galloway offers some specific interpretations of the use of the phrase here (*The Penn Commentary on Piers Plowman*, vol. 1 [Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2006], pp. 200–1). For my purposes, it matters less how we might best define the phrase in each of its appearances than how natural knowledge, understood in all its eccentric breadth, stands in relation to "clergie."

truth, but he fails to recognize a joint need for “clergie,” or revelation, to guide his natural observations.²⁹ Natural theology, it turns out, is not as easy as he wants it to be. Ymaginatif explains the difference between the two categories of knowledge in this way: “Of *quod scimus* [what we know] comeþ Clergie, [a] konnyng of heuene, / And of *quod vidimus* [what we see] comeþ kynde wit, of sizte of diuerse peple” (B XII.66–67).³⁰ “Kynde wit” derives from natural faculties, while “clergie” is revealed and must be learned.³¹ That clergy, understood in this sense, represents the body of revealed knowledge in *Piers Plowman* is largely accepted by Langland scholars, who regularly link clergy to Scripture, the source of revelation.³² As Nicolette Zeeman explains, “If Clergie represents the synthesis of Christian teaching, Scripture represents the bare bones of the originary texts themselves; the one is a teacher and guide, the other is an ultimate and authoritative resource.”³³ Clergy, then, is the body of Christian teaching that derives from Scripture, and as such Will cannot simply dismiss it. What Will has yet to understand is that natural knowledge does not simply rely on the application of reason to the natural world. Rather, it assimilates its natural observations to revealed truths, culled from the Bible, and to this extent distinguishes itself from the natural philosophy of the Greeks.³⁴ Whereas natural philosophers like Aristotle had no given set of doctrine to which their natural investigations had to conform, Christian philosophers, or natural theologians, had to let revelation guide them. For them, nature is evidence of doctrine or revelation that it cannot contradict.

Not only is revelation a necessary adjunct to natural knowledge, but it takes precedence: nature demonstrates predetermined conclusions

29. This is also a term that has been much scrutinized in the poem. See, for instance, Nicolette Zeeman, *Piers Plowman*, pp. 134–42 and 201–26; Fiona Somerset, *Clerical Discourse and Lay Audience in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998), pp. 22–61; and Wittig, “‘Piers Plowman’ B, Passus IX–XII,” esp. p. 263. Again I prefer a general translation with “revelation,” a definition which Zeeman uses interchangeably with *doctrina* to translate the word (see pp. 134–42). Wittig also translates “clergie” as *doctrina* (p. 263), and Hugh White translates “clergie” directly as revelation in *Nature and Salvation in Piers Plowman* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1988), p. 22.

30. The C text removes these lines and revises some earlier ones in a way that might at first seem confusing. There we find, “Ac clergie cometh bote of syhte and kynde wit of sterres” (C XIV.30). However, as the passus continues, we see that “clergie” derives from metaphorical seeing, made possible by clerics’ books (C XIV.43–45).

31. I treat “kynde wit” and “kynde knowynge” as inextricable. As Ymaginatif explains, “kynde knowynge” is the kind of knowledge that a “kynde witted man” possesses (see B XII.107 and 135, and a clearer link at C XIV.72 and 79).

32. See Zeeman’s survey of Langland scholars’ definitions of “clergie” in *Piers Plowman*, p. 133, n. 1.

33. Zeeman, *Piers Plowman*, p. 206. For her extended definition of Scripture, see pp. 143–47.

34. L. P. Gerson distinguishes the two in *God and Greek Philosophy: Studies in the Early History of Natural Theology* (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 1–2.

rather than establishing its own. In other words, revealed truths are always prior to natural investigation. In the first half of the poem and particularly in the third vision (B VIII-XII), Will fails to recognize this basic principle of Christian natural theology, instead rejecting in clergy what should shape and determine the lessons his experience provides him. He opposes natural knowledge to revelation, incorrectly privileging the former over the latter. That Will does so hardly requires demonstration: in his response to Scripture in B X, Will goes so far as to claim that wise instruction, or clergy, has damned many. Even the most sinful deeds, he claims, hurt one's chances for salvation less than sound Christian teaching: those who "wrougte wikkedlokest in world" have been saved, while "þo þat wisely wordeden and writen manye bokes / Of wit and of wisdom wiþ dampned soules wonye" (B X.432-35). According to Will, deeds do not damn anyone, no matter how bad, but wise words have consigned many to hell. Will's position is rendered suspect if only by its flawed reasoning, for he concludes, in a blatant confusion of correlation with causation, that Aristotle and Solomon were damned *because* they were wise simply because they were wise and, according to Will's authorities, damned. His logical error contains a more significant one: by figuring clergy, or spiritual instruction, as an impediment to salvation, Will chooses natural knowledge to the exclusion of revelation.

By opposing the two categories of knowledge and choosing one over the other, Will anticipates modern scholars of the poem who likewise tend to privilege "kynde knowynge" over "clergie."³⁵ However, Will falters to the extent that he prefers either. It is thus in clergy's defense that Ymaginatif appears: "Why I haue told [þee] al þis, I took ful good hede / How þow contrariedest clergie wiþ crabbede wordes" (B XII.155-56). As Ymaginatif explains, Will does not have the option to reject clergy; while he may object to the behavior of various clerics, clergy as a category of knowledge

35. James Simpson's influential reading of the third vision sees it in terms of a long-standing tradition of dividing the soul into cognitive and affective powers, which he translates into an opposition between reason and will (*Piers Plowman: An Introduction to the B Text* [London and New York: Longman, 1990], pp. 95-96). Though offering that Langland makes this "commonplace scheme" into "a more elaborate psychological scheme," with joint indebtedness to Augustine and Aristotle (pp. 97-99), Simpson ultimately sees Will as using the "acquired arts of learning" in order to move beyond them "to a kind of knowledge which is more profound, more experiential, and more 'natural'"—in other words, more affective than cognitive (p. 134). In "From Reason to Affective Knowledge: Modes of Thought and Poetic Form in *Piers Plowman*," *Medium Ævum*, 55 (1986), 14 and 17, he reads this progression through a formal shift in poetic modes: from "disputative and analytical" up through the third vision to a "poetic mode of paradox and prophecy" thereafter. Anne Middleton, however, notes that Ymaginatif teaches Will to wed experience to clergy: "Narration and the Invention of Experience: Episodic Form in *Piers Plowman*," in *The Wisdom of Poetry: Essays in Early English Literature in Honor of Morton W. Bloomfield*, ed. Larry D. Benson and Siegfried Wenzel (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1982), p. 112.

deserves no scorn. He accordingly advises Will, and all people, “no clergie to dispise / Ne sette short bi hir science, whatso bei don hemselue” (B XII.121–22). As Ymaginatif makes clear, Will will not discover or become Dowel without it. In the same way, then, that Dowel depends on a harmonizing of word and deed, as many scholars have shown, so its discovery depends on the harmonizing of natural knowledge and revelation.³⁶ Will’s interpretive blunders early in the third vision make it clear that Will needs to see continuity rather than discord between nature and doctrine and thus needs to learn the art of Christian interpretation. When Ymaginatif appears, he offers to fill this need, explaining Will’s errors and their solution. The reader, however, does not require Ymaginatif’s championing of clergy to recognize Will’s mistake; before he happens on Ymaginatif, Will has demonstrated all on his own the limitations of his particular brand of natural theology.

In the course of conversing with his faculties Thouzt and Wit, Will shows that natural knowledge, when divorced from clergy, goes badly astray. That it does so does not support the common reading that the poem rejects clergy in favor of natural knowledge: the third vision demonstrates not the failure of clergy but the failure of natural faculties that are not governed by it. Accordingly, both Thouzt and Wit comment ably on the natural world, but neither addresses spiritual topics with any success. Reasoning from natural observations to spiritual conclusions, they discover error. When Thouzt appears to Will, he seems a promising guide—Will is thinking, at any rate—but Will’s initial faith in Thouzt’s ability to lead him to Dowel turns out to be misplaced.³⁷ Thouzt begins well enough, expanding Dowel into the triad Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest, an expansion that the poem’s subsequent characters generally adopt, but Thouzt shows himself to be more expert at creating trinities than explaining them.³⁸ Although his early

36. On Dowel, see in particular Ame Middleton, “Two Infinities: Grammatical Metaphor in *Piers Plowman*,” *ELH*, 39 (1972), 186, and D. Vance Smith, *The Book of the Incipit: Beginnings in the Fourteenth Century* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2001), pp. 202–11.

37. Readings of Thouzt vary dramatically. Zeeman links him to Ymaginatif and reads both as lower internal powers (*Piers Plowman*, pp. 78–84), while Harwood, for instance, calls him “the highest faculty of medieval psychology short of *intelligentia*” (*Piers Plowman and the Problem of Belief* [Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1992], p. 54). “Cogitatio,” the Latin from which “Thouzt” presumably derives, is too capacious a term to offer much clarity, so I read Thouzt simply in terms of his own presentation in the poem.

38. Thouzt’s limited learning is evident in his academic ambitions. Vance Smith notes that Thouzt “appears in a setting that recalls the three-day disputation . . . in which a university candidate establishes his status as *baccalarius principians* or *incipiens*” (*Book of the Incipit*, p. 195). He also notes Middleton’s compatible comments on academic features in other parts of the third vision (*ibid.*). Will’s imperfect emulation of academic discourse, along with his interlocutors, casts him as foolish as much as the Wife of Bath’s “learning” serves as an ironic commentary on herself.

comments on the triad seem innocuous enough, after twenty lines *Thouȝt* starts to ramble about the three having elected for themselves a king to “rule þe Reme” (B VIII.109). The king, they determine, will punish *Dowel* and *Dobet* should they oppose *Dobest* (“if dowel [and] dobet dide ayein dobest / [And were vnboxum at his biddynge, and bold to don ille],” B VIII.102–3), yet the king will act only as the three together determine he should (B VIII.101–10).³⁹ *Thouȝt* has accordingly transformed his trinity into a secular and internally divisive power structure that is expressly illogical, especially as it accounts for the ill-doing of *Dowel* and *Dobet*. Comparing spiritual matters to earthly ones, *Thouȝt* reasons so badly that he flirts with heresy. In his analysis of the Trinity, he anticipates the lords whom *Studie* excoriates for saying of the Trinity “[how two slowe þe þridde]” (B X.54), a phrase replaced in all of the surviving B manuscripts.⁴⁰ Though less commented upon, *Thouȝt*’s reflections on the Trinity are no less controversial. His most striking comment, at VIII.103, cited above, is excised in all but one B manuscript, the unauthoritative F manuscript, surely because it too bears heterodox implications. *Thouȝt*’s exposition overreaches when it departs from its initial, rather grounded definitions of the three persons of the Trinity/*Dowel* triad to consider the relationship among the three figures—analogously shifting focus from the three persons of the Trinity to their more perplexing relationship to each other—in a manner that is at best confounding and at worst heretical.⁴¹ *Thouȝt*’s deductive failings indicate Will’s inability to think capably about spiritual matters with this natural faculty alone.

Wit represents a more sophisticated stage of natural data processing than *Thouȝt*, though his purview remains natural knowledge—“kynde wittede men” rely on “kynde knowyng” (C XIV.72, 79). Steven Justice defines *Wit* as representing “the Aristotelian vocabulary of the arts faculty, which is committed to philosophical deduction from the known world,” and though *Wit* may be adept at philosophical deduction when confined to the natural world, he fares less well when he ventures into theological matters without

39. The C text omits any mention of *Dowel* and *Dobet* opposing *Dobest*, but keeps the political metaphor and so shows *Thouȝt* to commit the same general error. See C X.100–6.

40. David Lawton discusses the removal of *Studie*’s line along with various fraught efforts by vernacular authors to describe the Trinity in “Voice, Authority, and Blasphemy in *The Book of Margery Kempe*,” in *Margery Kempe: A Book of Essays*, ed. Sandra J. McEntire (New York: Garland Publishing, 1992), pp. 93–116, esp. pp. 108–11.

41. In a discussion primarily of Abraham and Samaritan’s trinitarian analogies, Andrew Galloway observes their indebtedness to “immediate social experience” (“Intellectual Pregnancy, Metaphysical Femininity, and the Social Doctrine of the Trinity in *Piers Plowman*,” *Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 12 [1998], 134). As we see here, the association of the Trinity with such experience makes understandings of the Trinity as morally volatile as that experience.

the guidance of revelation.⁴² Wit's speech might at first seem more strange than wrong; Zeeman thus faults Will's actions for having "put *wit* in the wrong," because "Wit does not seem to have said anything misleading or overly abstruse."⁴³ Nonetheless, Studie, and particularly Wit's response to Studie, suggest otherwise, identifying the culprit not as Will but specifically as his wit. We have already seen that Studie's comments about the blasphemous lords help to cast light, retrospectively, on Thouzt's trinitarian blunder, and her comments serve a similar function with respect to Wit's lesson. Her most explicit, and for Wit her most damning, criticism comes in her discussion of the lords at the table who "carpen ayein clerkes" (B X.107). The lords ask why God allowed Satan to beguile Eve and then question the fairness of a punishment for Adam and Eve's sin that affects all of humankind. In the course of their imagined complaint, the lords directly echo Wit's own comments. The presumptuous lords and Wit rely on the same Biblical verse to make their arguments, a repetition that casts doubt on Wit retrospectively and shows him to fare as badly at Biblical exegesis as Studie's impious lords.

The lords dispute clerics by noting an apparent scriptural discrepancy: Ez. 18:20 indicates that sons will not bear the sins of their fathers, but all sons were punished for Adam's sin (B X.113–16). The fictive lord fulminates against what he calls the unreasonable punishment. The verse from Ezekiel strikes the reader as familiar because Wit discussed it himself not long before (B IX.149ff.). Wit likewise highlights a contrast between the verse and a father's sin, though he focuses on Seth's sin in allowing his kin to copulate with Cain's rather than Adam's in eating from the tree.⁴⁴ Wit says that Seth's sin resulted in the Flood, which punished sons for their fathers' sins, and calls attention to the contrast between Ez. 18:20 and this far-reaching punishment. Wit does not question the fairness of the punishment—indeed, he endorses it, making reference to his own witnessing of inherited sin—but his error is still parallel to the lords' to the extent that both dispute scripture by appealing to their own powers of reasoning. Wit disagrees with a verse because it is contradicted by his experience, and the mocked lord disagrees with an event because it

42. Justice, *Writing and Rebellion*, p. 112. It should be noted that Wit and Thouzt are clearly both Will's wit and thought: Thouzt resembles Will and Wit mirrors his behavior (compare, for instance, Will and Wit's similar "louting" to Studie at B X.140, 145, and 147). Through his errors in reasoning, then, Wit reflects the sorry state that Will's wits are in.

43. Zeeman, *Piers Plowman*, p. 121. She reads Will's wit-based errors as an indication of Will's misuse of his intellect and his need to submit himself to the rigors of study, or Studie (pp. 202–5). Teresa Tavormina also blames Will for his failure to learn from Wit's instruction. See *Kindly Similitude: Marriage and Family in Piers Plowman* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1995), p. 103.

44. On medieval readings of Cain and his presentation in *Piers Plowman*, see Tavormina, *Kindly Similitude*, pp. 84–87.

is, in his opinion, unreasonable. Vance Smith, observing that Wit here “contradict[s] Biblical observations” through recourse to his own experience, thus believes Wit serves “to illustrate imperfect understanding” in this section of the poem.⁴⁵ What is imperfect about it, I contend, is its ill-conceived effort to interpret the Bible through empirical reasoning, rather than allowing the Bible to guide that reasoning. Together, Wit and the misguided lord show how volatile Biblical interpretation is when it defers to personal experience and misdirected reason. Pitting Biblical verse against Biblical verse is a hubristic, zero-sum game.

Studie's reference in her pointed satire of the lords to the Biblical verse introduced by Wit casts suspicion on Wit's own glossing.⁴⁶ By misapplying lessons learned from his own experience, he favors his natural, experience-derived knowledge, supported by a reading from the commentary tradition (which links the Flood to the sexual sins of Seth's progeny), over explicit Biblical verse.⁴⁷ That he errs in doing so appears not just from the repetition of the Ezekiel verse and his opposition to it. His treatment of Scripture may seem suspect, but it is his response to Studie's speech that really inculpates him. As she winds down, Studie wishes on one “þat wilneþ to wite þe [whyes] of god almyzty” that “his eize were in his ers and his fynger after” (B X.127, 128). She then says, “þo þat vseþ þise hauylons [for] to blende mennes wittes, / What is dowel fro dobet, [now] deaf mote he worþe” (B X.134–35). In wishing that such overreachers be deaf, blind, and mute, Studie directly attacks their senses, the source of natural knowledge and of their error. Wit, in his response, adopts her wished-for punishment: “whan þat wit was ywar [how his wif] tolde / He bicom so confus he kouþe nozt loke, / And as dounb as [a dore] droug hym [aside]” (B X.140–42).⁴⁸ Wit's silence in response to not just hearing

45. Vance Smith, *Book of the Incipit*, p. 153. As Smith proceeds to observe, Wit of the C text bases his objection not on personal experience but on “Westm[in]stre lawe” (C X.239). His use of man-made law rather than experience to resolve an apparent scriptural discrepancy is, however, no less presumptuous.

46. It should be noted that Studie's indictment of the blasphemous lords and the other passages cited in this paragraph (B X.92–139 and 141–43) are absent from the C text and are replaced only with a short pun. Studie says, “For is no wit worth now but hit of wynnyng soune. / Forþy, wit,’ quod she, ‘be waer holy writ to shewe / Amonges hem þat haen hawes at wille’” (C XI.77–79). “Wit” should not show “writ” to those disposed to earthly delights, because their errant wills deprive them of any benefit their wits might offer them. Will, then, is clearly culpable here, but in such a way that still implicates Wit for overreaching by discussing “writ.” Certain passages, notably B V.587–88 and C XII.2, oppose Will to Wit, but here both are equally incapable of considering Scripture profitably.

47. Wittig cites Peter Comestor's *Historia scholastica* and the *Glossa ordinaria* as blaming the Flood on the mixing of Seth's progeny with Cain's: “‘Piers Plowman’ B, Passus IX–XII,” p. 227.

48. As a gloss on Wit's actions and errors here, consider the following comment from Bonaventure, condemning those who refuse to interpret nature correctly: “Whoever is

but understanding Studie's speech indicates his recognition of his error; he henceforth communicates only through motions, used simply to direct Will to Studie.

Wit thus seems to have understood Studie accurately, becoming mute after Studie wishes that such be the fate of irreverent and critical expositors. When he does so, he assumes Studie's punishment not just for bad glossers but also for inappropriate examiners. Indicting those who use tricks to confuse men's wits about the distinctions among Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest (B X.134–35, cited above), Studie clearly refers to Will's own testing of Wit, for he had asked Thought to test Wit ("to preven his wittes"—B VIII.125) about these very distinctions. We see then, how badly prepared Will is to consider spiritual matters with the aid of his natural faculties alone.⁴⁹ Wit, however, is capable of better, a potential implied by his relation to Inwit and by Studie's own marriage to him. When Studie calls Clergie a man who "kan manye [wittes]" (B X.172), she offers Clergie as a means to mould Will's wit and put it to profitable, clergy-friendly ends. This makes an important point: Wit, as well as Thought, can support spiritually valid conclusions in the right circumstances but, when divorced from clergy, they flounder. Scripture and Clergie, however, prove no more helpful to Will because, with his anti-clerical prejudice, he lacks the proper disposition toward learning, and a proper disposition is the *sine qua non* of any medieval spiritual program. Thus, after Clergie's address, Will simply relies on his own empirical reasoning once again ("I se ensamples myself"—B X.475) to deny clergy any role in the well-done, salvation-worthy life.

The two internal dreams of B XI encourage Will to adopt a different attitude toward the natural world, each from a different perspective, and each without success. Both are lessons in the misuse of nature: Will first fails to realize how fruitless sensual gratification turns out to be, and then mishandles a prime opportunity to derive appropriate conclusions from the natural world.⁵⁰ In the first dream, Fortune shows Will what life looks like when it seeks from nature pleasure rather than spiritual profit—

not enlightened by such splendor of created things is blind; whoever does not heed such outcries is deaf; whoever does not praise God from all these effects is mute" (Bonaventure, *Itinerarium mentis ad Deum*, I, 15, *Opera omnia* V, 299: "Qui igitur tantis rerum creaturarum splendoribus non illustratur caecus est; qui tantis clamoribus non evigilat surdus est; qui ex omnibus his effectibus Deum non laudat mutus est.") For Bonaventure, the natural world is so transparent a spiritual guide that its misinterpretation signifies a fundamentally insensate viewer.

49. Will could well be seen as modeling Wit's error in his bizarre commentary on Noah's ark and his questioning of the Bible, specifically the legitimacy of Mary Magdalene and Paul's salvation (B X.405–19 and 428–31).

50. On the inner dreams and their relation to the action of the poem, see A. V. C. Schmidt, "The Inner Dreams of *Piers Plowman*," *Medium Ævum*, 55 (1986), 24–40.

when Rechelesnesse tells Will “it be *wel do* Fortune to folwe” (B XI.39), there is an apparent pun: to follow Fortune is not to Dowel but rather to choose Dowel’s inverted and perverted twin, “*wel do*”⁵¹—while Kynde instead tries to show Will the spiritual lessons that might be inferred from creation. When Will wonders who taught the magpie to build a nest and marvels that birds conceal their eggs so cleverly, he seems to be on the right track, making exactly the sorts of observations that should lead him to see God’s hand in creation. This is Natural Theology 101: the very least that any Christian should be able to apprehend from the natural world is the fact of its creation by God and his fundamental goodness.⁵² Kynde clearly encourages such reasoning, setting Will on “a mountaigne þat mydelerþe hizte,” so that he might “knowe / Thorugh ech a creature kynde [his] creatour to louye” (B XI.324–26). Instead, however, Will’s “mood chaunged” and he concludes angrily that Reson rules all animals except man (B XI.369). His errant will again expresses itself in undisciplined reasoning that perverts spiritual truth, here leading him to misunderstand God’s purpose in creation. Without the guidance of revelation, Will follows his natural observations to whatever flawed conclusions they appear to support.

THE YMAGINATIF DOCTRINE

That natural knowledge must coexist with clergy in order to create a creditable natural theology is well demonstrated by Kynde, whom the C text expressly introduces as Clergie’s aid—“kynde cam clergie to helpe” (C XIII.131). Kynde thus seeks to establish continuity between natural and spiritual knowledge, but Will resists, and it is only with Ymaginatif’s overt instruction on the topic, and the correct functioning of his imagination, that he can do otherwise. Ymaginatif’s discussion with Will has typically been interpreted as the site of clergy’s rejection in the poem, thus paving the way for the ascendancy of affect in Will’s quest for Dowel. Interest-

51. My emphasis. The phrase “*wel do*” appears in all the referenced B manuscripts except F.

52. Bonaventure, for instance, writes, “The beauty of things in terms of the diversity of light, shape, and color in bodies that are simple, inorganic, and organic, as in the heavenly bodies and in minerals, in stones and in metals, in plants and in animals clearly proclaims the three attributes [God’s power, wisdom, and goodness] mentioned above” (“*Pulcritudo autem rerum secundum varietatem luminum, figuram et colorum in corporibus simplicibus, mixtis et etiam complexionatis, sicut in corporibus caelestibus et mineralibus, sicut lapidibus et metallis, plantis et animalibus, tria praedicta evidenter proclamant*”). *Itinerarium mentis ad Deum*, I, 14, *Opera omnia* V, 299. Trans. Zachary Hayes in the *Works of St. Bonaventure*, vol. 2, ed. Philotheus Boehner, rev. ed. (Saint Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2002), p. 59.

ingly, Ymaginatif serves this function whether he is aligned with clergy or affect: Somerset calls Ymaginatif “the poem’s most committed spokesperson for ‘clergie’ in the conventional status-bound sense” whereas Wittig sees Ymaginatif as demonstrating “the bounds of *intellectus*,” but for both scholars Ymaginatif consolidates a movement away from the poem’s intellectual orientation.⁵³ Either by promoting that orientation in such a way that demonstrates its failings or by criticizing it directly, Ymaginatif is seen to effect a fundamental transition in the poem. Ymaginatif, however, cares more about reconciling natural knowledge and revelation than choosing one over the other, and by teaching Will to do the same, he schools Will in the rudiments of natural theology.⁵⁴

By the time that Will encounters Ymaginatif, he has expended considerable effort repelling clergy, particularly in the earlier passūs of the third vision (B VIII-XII). The vision, which Alford calls “the most detailed analysis of the learning process in Middle English literature,” nonetheless features a hostile, willful learner; Will resists his lessons more than he learns from them, as he demonstrates in the inaccurate summary of his lessons that he provides at the end of B XI.⁵⁵ His persistent confusion when he comes across Ymaginatif does not reflect badly on his teachers or on clergy, but instead demonstrates Will’s need precisely for clergy, as Ymaginatif shows. Ymaginatif contrasts salutary knowledge, defined as the proper balancing of natural knowledge and clergy, with unsalutary knowledge, which is the cognitive overreaching demonstrated by Will in earlier passūs. Ymaginatif’s prescribed approach to knowing therefore remedies Will’s cognitive and dispositional problems; by learning to make use of experience in the way that Ymaginatif outlines, he will also learn to quash the hubristic tendencies that have derailed his quest for Dowel in the past.

53. Fiona Somerset, *Clerical Discourse*, p. 39; her argument about Ymaginatif runs from pp. 39–50. James Simpson’s expresses a comparable view in “The Role of *Scientia*,” p. 62. See also Wittig, “‘Piers Plowman’ B, Passus IX-XII,” p. 276. Zeeman has a similar position; see *Piers Plowman*, pp. 245–62.

54. Implicit in the aforementioned comments about Ymaginatif is a more basic disagreement about the character, that is, whether he possesses intellectual authority. Minnis, for instance, grants him significant authority, though opposing scholars for whom “Langland’s conception of imagination is an unusually elevated one” (“Langland’s Ymaginatif,” p. 91) while Hanna is concerned to limit the purview of Ymaginatif’s learning and authority, which he notes are “not at all august” (“Langland’s Ymaginatif: Images and the Limits of Poetry,” in *Images, Idolatry, and Iconoclasm in Late Medieval England: Textuality and the Visual Image*, ed. Jeremy Dimmick, James Simpson, and Nicolette Zeeman [Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002], p. 93). By reading Ymaginatif in the context of scholastic theories of cognition, this paper obviously accepts Ymaginatif as both learned and authoritative, but it does not require Langland to have had in-depth knowledge of scholastic philosophy. The Aristotelian concept of imagination to which I claim Ymaginatif is partially indebted had made its way into medieval religious literature well before Langland composed any version of his poem, as in various meditational works like the *Meditationes vitae Christi*.

55. John Alford, “Langland’s Learning,” *Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 9 (1995), 3.

Ymaginatif enters into these themes in a less than straightforward manner; although scholars criticize Wit's speech for flagrant disorganization, Ymaginatif's requires at least as much parsing. After introducing himself and criticizing Will, Ymaginatif jumps into a warning against excess, urging married and religious to act in such a way that befits their station and indicting the wealthy who do not give as they should (B XII.29–58). As he ends his introductory discourse on excess, he seems to change topics abruptly with the line, "Clergie and kynde wit comeþ of sizte and techyng" (B XII. 64). He informs Will that he can avoid cognitive excess, or hubris, by submitting natural knowledge to the oversight of clergy.

The common thread in Ymaginatif's initial and scattered comments is excess, whether material or spiritual, recalling Studie's dual concern with misspent words and money: some seek spiritual authority that their works do not support while others acquire more goods than they profitably distribute, putting all such overreachers in spiritual peril. These people demonstrate Ymaginatif's theme at this stage: "Catel and kynde wit was combraunce to hem alle" (B XII.45). When material possessions and natural reasoning outpace their proper, spiritual use, they lead to one's damnation.⁵⁶ Ymaginatif implies that "clergie" and "kynde wit," when unified, decrease the risk of cognitive excess. Toward the end of his speech, he makes it clear that Will overreached both when he discussed at the end of B X who was saved and why, and when he sought to know the causes of natural phenomena in opposition to Reson in B XI (B XII.217–26). In doing so, he exceeded the bounds of both clergy and natural knowledge. Regarding Will's interest in the reason why animals are situated and flowers are colored as they are, Ymaginatif says, "Clergie ne kynde wit ne knew neuere þe cause, / Ac kynde knoweþ þe cause hymself, no creature ellis" (B XII.225–26). By saying that such information cannot be grasped from nature or clergy, Ymaginatif suggests that natural knowledge, here "kynde wit," and clergy together define the proper boundaries of Will's knowledge.

Ymaginatif repeatedly emphasizes that the two need to operate in conjunction with each other. After defending the value of clergy, Ymaginatif tells Will, "Forþi I counseille þee for cristes sake clergie þat þow louye; / For kynde wit is of his kyn and neize Cosynes boþe / To our lord" (B XII.92–94). Clergy's value here derives not only from its origins in Christ but from its

56. It should be noted that the C text shifts emphasis somewhat. Not nearly as concerned with material overreachers, C XIV expands on the dangers of cognitive overreaching (adding Ymaginatif's advice to Will that he not "lere þat is defended" [XIV.6]) as part of greater emphasis on accepting rather than questioning God's will, the topic with which C Ymaginatif concludes. D. Vance Smith discusses the burdens of possession in late-medieval literature in *Arts of Possession: The Middle English Household Imaginary* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2003).

proximity to natural knowledge. As Ymaginatif summarizes most clearly in the C text, “So grace is a gifte of god and kynde wit a chaunce / And clergie a connyng of kynde wittes techyng” (C XIV.33–34): although grace is God’s to give, clergy comes from natural knowledge and so depends on the natural world. The dependence of clergy on natural knowledge does not mean, however, that natural observations determine the content of clergy, but rather (and counterintuitively) the opposite. Although clergy follows upon natural knowledge, it also supervises such knowledge: “And zut is clergie to comende for cristes loue more / Then eny connyng of kynde wit but clergi hit reule” (C XIV.35–36). Natural knowledge unsupervised by the truths of revelation lacks merit. Clergy may derive from natural knowledge but it also turns that knowledge in a spiritually profitable direction. Ymaginatif thus diagnoses Will’s fundamental problem in the third vision: unwilling to submit his natural observations to clergy, he is guilty of cognitive excess. As we saw in his exchanges with his Thought and Wit, Will’s natural faculties cannot proceed independently to spiritual topics without significant error. Will becomes like the pagan philosophers whose natural knowledge, while commendable, never saved anyone because it confined itself to the natural world (B XII.133, 135). What Will needs, and what Ymaginatif tells him he needs, is to let clergy determine the conclusions he reaches on the basis of his natural observations.

Ymaginatif demonstrates the direction such natural observations should take in his analogy of the peacock and the lark at the end of the passus. Ymaginatif there turns his attention to birds and beasts and the “ensaumples” that men have long taken from them (B XII.233–37, 237). He continues with an analogy of peacocks to rich men and larks to poor men, demonstrating the theme he introduced early in the passus, the spiritual dangers of possession and excess. Accordingly, after noting that the peacock’s lavish plumage prevents it from flying, he concludes, “So is possession peyne of pens and of nobles / To alle hem þat it holdeþ til hir tail be plukked” (B XII.250–51). Ymaginatif here implicitly contrasts the wrong sorts of inquiries, namely Will’s seeking after “þe whyes” whose understanding belongs to God alone (B XII.217), with the right sort, namely those which use the natural world to illustrate spiritual truths. Wealth imperils the soul as lush plumage imperils the peacock, making it easy prey because it cannot easily flee. And Ymaginatif has proceeded in the proper order: he discusses the dangers of possession directly early in the passus, and then uses the natural world to reinforce a conclusion he has already established. Clergy, here rooted in the Biblical passages about charity and wealth that Ymaginatif uses for his support earlier, precedes natural knowledge, which functions only to illustrate it. Ymaginatif thus offers his discussion of the peacock and the lark as a corrective and alternative to Will’s less profitable

use of his experience. Instead of using the natural world as a basis from which to question divine mysteries, he should use it to provide spiritual instruction.

It is therefore fitting that Ymaginatif's speech should abound in metaphors and puns.⁵⁷ To take one of many examples, Ymaginatif describes clergy as the "roote" of Christ's love immediately before explaining that God "wroot" to instruct people—clergy is the written root (B XII.71, 72). At the larger level, he tends to compare spiritual matters to natural ones: he uses the example of swimmers in the Thames to demonstrate the necessity of clergy, he mentions the near-stoning of the adulterous woman as well as the saving of criminals who know the neck verse to demonstrate the value of clergy, he likens the different positions of the blessed in heaven to the seating arrangement at a formal meal, and of course he discusses the damnation of the greedy through peacocks. Ymaginatif overtly makes connections, albeit often bizarre ones, and they help to define his purpose in the poem. It is Ymaginatif's job to harmonize revelation and natural knowledge, to show how the natural world supports spiritual truths. In giving Ymaginatif this function, Langland evokes an Aristotelian concept of imagination that was actively embraced by scholastics well into the fourteenth century. Aristotelian imagination functions to connect sense-perception, or observations of the natural world, with intellectual understanding, and so subtends Ymaginatif's own capacity to direct natural knowledge toward its spiritual significance.

ARISTOTELIAN IMAGINATION

Langland's Ymaginatif has long been analyzed in conjunction with medieval philosophical and theological discussions of imagination. Typically making recourse to the role of the *vis* or *virtus imaginativa* in medieval theories of knowledge, such scholarship has reinforced long-held characterizations of the poem's third vision as its most academic. Although most scholars agree that Ymaginatif evokes the *virtus imaginativa*, they disagree about which aspect of the imaginative power is embodied in Ymaginatif. Ralph Hanna has recently argued against a common approach, which is to read Ymaginatif in relation to the cognitive functions of the imagina-

57. Ymaginatif's tendency in this direction is well noted. See, for instance, Britton Harwood's discussion of the prominence of metaphor and similitudes generally in "Imaginative in *Piers Plowman*," *Medium Ævum*, 44 (1975), 255–59, as well as Ralph Hanna's characterization of Ymaginatif's language as figurative and punning ("Langland's Ymaginatif," p. 85) and his several observations about Ymaginatif's interest in establishing similarities ("Langland's Ymaginatif," pp. 81–94).

tive power, and has drawn on different aspects of the imaginative power to align Ymaginatif with “sub-learned discourses.”⁵⁸ The two options are not exclusive, however; the imaginative power performed a wide range of seemingly inconsistent functions in medieval philosophy, and scholars have shown how various of these aspects are reflected in Ymaginatif’s operations. Nonetheless, one aspect of medieval theories of imagination remains only distantly hinted at in Langland criticism, although entirely prominent in medieval philosophy. It is one of imagination’s cognitive functions, or rather its most important cognitive function, the one that makes imagination, according to Aristotle, necessary for any act of knowledge. It also helps to explain Ymaginatif’s concern with the interdependency of natural knowledge and clergy. By better understanding this function, we can see that Ymaginatif represents both a cognitive resource and, more importantly, a method by which experience becomes spiritually useful. Imagination, after all, was believed to be a faculty of the soul, and as such it had a concrete, though wide-ranging and sometimes ambiguous, series of functions.⁵⁹

Since there has been a great deal of debate about medieval theories of imagination, particularly as they pertain to Ymaginatif, it seems worthwhile to examine the topic in some detail. There is good warrant for the diversity to be found in scholarship on Ymaginatif and medieval theories of imagination. So plentiful and varied are imagination’s roles even in Aristotle’s philosophy that scholars struggle to find a coherent power among them.⁶⁰ It is all the less surprising, then, that imagination would be a polyvalent concept in the Middle Ages, and all the more legitimate that modern scholarship on it would be correspondingly divergent. The most ambitious readings of Ymaginatif make use of imagination’s role in prophecy, a role suggested by Plato and most fully developed by Avicenna.⁶¹ Ymaginatif is least contentiously linked to imagination’s ability

58. Hanna, “Langland’s Ymaginatif,” p. 87. The tendency to situate Ymaginatif in medieval psychological theories nonetheless lives on. In her recent book, Nicolette Zeeman thus positions Ymaginatif with *Thouȝt* as internal powers subordinate to reason (*Piers Plowman*, pp. 245–62).

59. Zeeman concludes that Ymaginatif is a “hypothetical and exploratory power” which works in “a provisional way,” a view reminiscent of Minnis’s, that Ymaginatif provides “plausible hypotheses” rather than “necessary truths” (Zeeman, *Piers Plowman*, p. 246, and Minnis, “Langland’s Ymaginatif,” p. 81). Although imagination’s work is often deductive, it is not merely uncertain and unstable. Medieval philosophers instead credit imagination with specific mechanisms by which it serves precise cognitive functions.

60. See, for instance, Malcolm Schofield, “Aristotle on the Imagination” and Deborah Modrak, “*Φαντασία* Reconsidered,” *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, 68 (1986), 45–69.

61. See Ernest N. Kaulbach, “The ‘Vis Imaginativa’ and the Reasoning Powers of Ymaginatif in the B-text of *Piers Plowman*,” *JEGP*, 84 (1985), 16–29, and “The ‘Vis Imaginativa Secundum Avicennam’ and the Naturally Prophetic Powers of Ymaginatif in the B-text of *Piers Plowman*,” *JEGP*, 86 (1987), 496–514.

to create dreams, as we have seen above with reference to the internal dreams of B Passūs XI.⁶² A more Neoplatonic function regularly assigned to imagination, namely its imperfectly met obligation to serve reason, often, and often with reference to Richard of St. Victor, supports claims for Ymaginatif's inconsistent reliability.⁶³ Various elements of Aristotelian imagination—its capacity for forethought, its storage and reconfiguration of sensory data, and its relationship to memory—appear in Minnis's survey of imagination in his classic essay on Ymaginatif.⁶⁴ Nonetheless, one staple function of imagination contained in medieval theories of cognition, the one that makes it necessary for every act of knowledge, remains absent from this list.⁶⁵ Of course scholars have long noted that imagination resides between sense and intellect in medieval psychology,⁶⁶ but what is important to realize is that it functioned actively *and reliably* to convert sensory data into intellectual understanding, that it performed a crucial, even central function in the process of cognition and that its own performance suggests the means by which natural knowledge might be made spiritually useful.⁶⁷

Many of the functions assigned to imagination above derive from Aristotle, for whom imagination (or *phantasia*) is a sense faculty that retains images of things sensed, creates mental images of things not sensed by combining sense images (the ubiquitous example is the golden mountain), facilitates consideration of likely future events, creates dreams, catalyzes desire to incite movement, and presents images to the intellect that

62. Ymaginatif's dream-making power has also been extended to the entire poem. Minnis, accordingly, calls the *virtus imaginativa* "the medium through which everything in the poem has passed," thus giving its personification special purchase on some of the poem's most confounding topics ("Langland's Ymaginatif," p. 94), and Anne Middleton associates Ymaginatif with Will *and* Langland's poetry-making, writing that Ymaginatif "presides . . . over both autobiographical 'sense-making' and the human employment of knowledge generally" ("Narration and the Invention of Experience," p. 113).

63. See, for instance, H. S. V. Jones, "Imaginatif in *Piers Plowman*," *JEGP*, 13 (1914), 583–89; Hugh White, "Langland's Ymaginatif, Kynde and the *Benjamin Major*," *Medium Ævum*, 55 (1986), 241–48; and Alastair Minnis, "Langland's Ymaginatif," pp. 75–76.

64. See Minnis, "Langland's Ymaginatif," pp. 72–79.

65. Minnis almost addresses it in his discussion of Aquinas but never acknowledges it ("Langland's Ymaginatif," pp. 81–83).

66. See Jones, "Imaginatif in *Piers Plowman*," p. 587; Nicolette Zeeman, "The Idol of the Text," p. 43; and Thomas Ryan, "Scripture and the Prudent Ymaginatif," *Viator*, 23 (1994), 230.

67. It should be clear that imagination in this study is not "a sort of draught-horse of the sensitive soul" whose "lowly, working-day status" makes it unworthy of the "awe" reserved for memory (Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, 2d ed. [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2008], p. 1). Imagination enjoys greater prominence here than in Carruthers's studies on memory primarily because this article focuses on Aristotelian psychology whereas Carruthers's work focuses on Platonic/Augustinian psychology, especially as it features in monastic meditation.

enable its understanding.⁶⁸ The word *phantasia* itself seems to have been coined by Plato, who uses it to describe a combination of sensation and belief that appears, for instance, when one concludes that stars are tiny or that a moving wheel has no spokes when it does.⁶⁹ For Aristotle, *phantasia* is neither sensation, belief, nor a combination of the two. Although still responsible for the misinterpretation of sensory data—Aristotle affirms, in fact, that “imaginings are for the most part false” (*De anima* III.3, 428^a11–12)—Aristotle’s *phantasia* is a faculty of the soul that ventures beyond sense perception to facilitate intellectual understanding. In that capacity, Aristotle makes clear, *phantasia* does not err. Instead, it functions correctly every time knowledge occurs: “the soul never thinks without an image (*phantasma*),” and that image always comes from *phantasia* (*De anima* III.7, 431^a16–17). Although imagination (for *imaginatio* early on became a standard translation for *phantasia*⁷⁰) lacks such dependability both in our modern usage and in medieval Neoplatonism, its Aristotelian understanding dominated the universities. Its function there, I contend, made it a valuable devotional tool, for Langland as for other authors of medieval religious texts.

When Aristotle says that knowledge always requires an image, he is not simply saying that we have to imagine a triangle when we think about the concept “triangle.”⁷¹ Rather, imagination provides the intellect with its thinkable object. As the senses perceive the material attributes of an object—its color, size, and so on—so the intellect perceives its quiddity or whatness. The intellect understands not the individual object, for instance a particular person, but the universal “people.” Material things being subject to change, the intellect cannot understand them in their individual materiality but, for Aristotle, finds the intelligible, universal object within the material one.⁷² After the senses perceive the material

68. Aristotle’s most focused discussion of imagination comes in his *De anima* III, 3.

69. Rees somewhat hesitantly gives Plato credit for coining the term; see D. A. Rees, “Aristotle’s Treatment of ‘Φαντασία,’” in *Essays in Ancient Greek Philosophy*, vol. 1, ed. John P. Anton and George L. Kustas (Albany: SUNY Press, 1971), p. 503, n. 7. On the meaning of *phantasia* in Greek philosophy and the term’s early translation as *imaginatio*, see Gerard Watson, *Phantasia in Classical Thought* (Galway: Galway Univ. Press, 1988), pp. 1–37.

70. Watson credits the elder Pliny with introducing “*imaginatio*.” He mentions other pre-Augustinian uses by Tacitus and Calcidius, but nonetheless writes that Augustine gave the term “currency in the Latin West” (*Phantasia in Classical Thought*, p. 138). Certain Aristotle scholars dispute the accuracy of the translation (see, for instance, Malcolm Schofield, “Aristotle on the Imagination,” in *Essays on Aristotle’s De anima*, ed. Martha C. Nussbaum and Amélie Oksenberg Rorty [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992; repr. 1997], pp. 249–53 and 264–71), but there is no question that it was standard.

71. Aristotle uses this example at *De memoria* 449^b30–450^a10.

72. The universal is not physically within the sensory object, but the relationship is hard to express (even for Aristotle) without metaphors.

qualities, imagination, the last of the sensory faculties, passes along to the intellect an image of the object which the intellect can use, first divesting that image of material attributes through a process generally called abstraction, and then understanding the intelligible, immaterial image that remains. As Aristotle says, "actual perception is of particulars, while knowledge is of universals" (*De anima* II.5, 417^b22–23). Imagination accordingly provides the intellect with a sensory image which contains an intelligible one, and it is that intelligible image which is thinkable by the intellect. Thus, "to the thinking soul images (*phantasmata*) serve as sense-perceptions" (*De anima* III.7, 431^a14–15); the intelligible image is to the intellect what the sensible image is to the senses. Imagination thus offers a crucial connection between sense perception and intellectual understanding: it configures the sensory image in such a way that the intellect can find the intelligible image within it and, as a result, know. It is the purpose of Aristotelian imagination to connect sense and intellect, to exist, in the words of Aristotle's earliest extant commentator, "as if in a no man's land (*hosper methorion*)" between sense and intellect such that the former can communicate with the latter.⁷³ As Aristotle's commentators, both Arabic and Latin, provide ever more detailed accounts of imagination's operations in human cognition, they firmly establish it as *the* transitional faculty between sensory and intellectual knowledge. When Ymaginatif, then, insists that Will's sense-based knowledge of the natural world support proper intellectual conclusions, that he interpret natural data properly and spiritually, he invokes an Aristotelian tradition of imagination that makes it the intermediary between sense and intellect, between the natural world and its true intellectual understanding.

By offering sense-based data to the intellect in a form that it can understand, imagination thus presents the intellect with its thinkable object and so allows sensory knowledge to become intellectual understanding. It is not difficult to find Aristotelian commentaries that credit imagination with this function, elaborating on Aristotle's own bold but rather enigmatic statements about this function in surprisingly similar ways. They reach a general agreement that imagination provides the agent or active intellect with an image (*phantasma*) from which the intellect can extract the universal, that is, the thinkable, intelligible content in the sensory image. Only imagination's image is amenable to such abstraction, and thus only imagination is able to give the intellect the data it requires to understand. Western scholastics adopt this basic system first from Arabic philosophers, principally Avicenna (980–1037) and Averroes (ca.

73. Themistius, *On Aristotle's On the Soul*, trans. Robert Todd (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1996), III/3, p. 111, modified.

1126–98). Avicenna briefly defines the relationship between imagination and the agent intellect in his *Liber de anima seu Sextus de naturalibus*, a section of his magnum opus, the *Kitbb al-Shifā*, that was translated into Latin in the late twelfth century, the same period that saw the translation of Aristotle's *De anima*.⁷⁴ Avicenna was more interested in imagination's role in prophecy and dreams than cognition, but he nonetheless states, "When the rational power considers the individuals that are in imagination and is illuminated with the light of the agent intellect in us, of which we spoke before, the individuals are denuded of matter and its conditions and they are imprinted on the rational soul." The agent intellect acts on the individuals, or images, within imagination so that the rational soul can receive and understand the immaterial image that remains. Averroes, Avicenna's successor, provides a far more extensive account of imagination's cognitive function, and it is to him that western treatments of the topic appear to be most indebted. For Averroes, imagination is what connects each individual to the universal intellect that comprises, for Averroes, the potential and agent intellects.⁷⁵ One's only access to intellectual understanding is therefore imagination: "the potential intellect is not joined to us *per se*. It is only joined to us by being joined to imagined forms."⁷⁶ As goes the potential intellect so goes the agent intellect, leaving imagination the individual's sole avenue to the intellect and its understanding.

One of the earliest western scholastics to grapple with Aristotle's philosophy of the soul and Arabic works on it was the Dominican Albertus Magnus (ca. 1200–1280). Albert was profoundly influenced by Averroes's philosophy of the soul, so much so that Albert's own work on the topic is, in Alain de Libera's words, "nothing but a dialogue with Averroes on thinking."⁷⁷ It is then no surprise to find in Albert's works a powerful imagination that is responsible for intellectual understanding: "the cause of understanding," he writes, "is the universal in phantasms moving the intellect."⁷⁸ Imagination,

74. Avicenna's clearest statement on the topic can be found in his *Liber de anima seu Sextus de naturalibus*, V, 5, ed. S. Van Riet, 2d ed. 2 vols. (Louvain: Éditions Orientalistes, 1968), II, 127: "Virtus enim rationalis cum considerat singula quae sunt in imaginatione et illuminatur luce intelligentiae agentis in nos quam praediximus, fiunt nuda a materia et ab eius appendiciis et imprimuntur in anima rationali . . . quia ex consideratione eorum aptatur anima ut emanet in eam ab intelligentia agente abstractio [*mujarrad*]."

75. Averroes's doctrine of a separate, single potential intellect is what makes his thought so controversial in the West. If an individual has neither a potential or agent intellect to call his or her own, there is clearly no possibility of an immortal soul.

76. Averroes, *Commentarium magnum* III, 36, ed. Crawford, p. 486, ll. 200–2: "intellectus materialis non copulatur nobiscum per se et primo, sed non copulatur nobiscum nisi per suam copulationem cum formis ymaginalibus."

77. Alain de Libera, *Métaphysique et Noétique: Albert le Grand* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 2005), p. 265.

78. Albertus Magnus, *De anima* pt. 1, II, 3, 3, ed. Clemens Stroick, in *Opera omnia*, 37 vols., gen. ed. Bernhard Geyer (Aschendorff: Monasterium Westfalorum in Aedibus, 1951), VII, 100, ll. 70–72: "causa intelligendi est universale in phantasmatis movens intellectum."

which creates phantasms, thus enjoys an elevated role in the process of human understanding, and it continues to do so in Albert's wake. Albert's most famous student, Thomas Aquinas, adopts his mentor's view that imagination gives the intellect its intelligible object—"the agent intellect abstracts intelligible species [the universal] from phantasms"—and extends imagination's functions even further.⁷⁹ For Aquinas, imagination not only enables the understanding of universals but of individuals as well—of the particular person as well as people generally.⁸⁰ And imagination retains its prominence into the fourteenth century: John Duns Scotus (1265/6–1308), for instance, explains that "the essences of things are known in virtue of the agent intellect, which participates in the Uncreated Light that illumines the phantasms and in this way purity of truth results."⁸¹ By creating the images that the intellect uses to understand, imagination thus establishes its place at the heart of medieval theories of cognition, one of the most actively debated topics in the university in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The remarkable stability of imagination's cognitive function in quite disparate philosophies makes it all the more likely an influence on Langland's Ymaginatif.

WILL'S LESSON LEARNED

This review of scholastic theories of imagination provides insight into Ymaginatif's concern with joining natural to spiritual knowledge and with the larger structure of the poem. Some Langland scholars tend to be suspicious of philosophical or theological readings for fear that they shut down the poem, but more sources and discourses simply yield more

79. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, part 1, q. 85, a. 1, ad 4: "Abstrahit autem intellectus agens species intelligibiles a phantasmatis" (V, 332).

80. See, for instance, Thomas Aquinas, *Sentencia libri De anima* III, 2, Iussu Leonis XIII, P.M. (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1984), XLV/1, pp. 211–12: "cognoscit enim naturam speciei siue quod quid est directe extendendo se in ipsam, ipsum autem singulare per quamdam reflexionem in quantum redit supra fantasmata a quibus species intelligibiles abstrahuntur . . . directe apprehendit quidditatem carnis, per reflexionem autem ipsam carnem." Trans. Robert Pasnau, Thomas Aquinas, *A Commentary on Aristotle's De anima* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1999), pp. 355–56: the intellect "has cognition of the nature of the species (or what-it-is) by directly extending itself into it, whereas it has cognition of the individual itself by a kind of reflection, insofar as it returns to the phantasms from which the intelligible *species* are abstracted . . . it apprehends the quiddity of flesh directly, but flesh itself by reflection." Pasnau discusses this feature of Aquinas's account in *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature: A Philosophical Study of Summa theologiae Ia 75–89* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002), pp. 278–84.

81. John Duns Scotus, *Opus Oxoniense* I, d. 3, q. 4, in *Philosophical Writings: A Selection*, trans. Allan Wolter, OFM (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), p. 132 (translation modified). The Latin, on p. 131, is "virtute intellectus agentis, qui est participatio lucis increatae, illustrantis super phantasmata, cognoscitur quidditas rei, et ex hoc habetur sinceritas vera."

interpretive possibilities. Ymaginatif's concern with "kynde knowynge" and "clergie" may not seem perfectly analogous to imagination's work regarding sense and intellect, but the two clearly overlap. Will's natural knowledge simply *is* sense knowledge, given that senses gather data from the natural world, their only object. And to reach spiritual conclusions—to see peacocks as models of the perils of the wealthy, for instance—just *is* seeing the true meaning of nature. Intellectual understanding requires that one comprehend a thing's nature, that one understand a house, for instance, to be a shelter in which people live rather than simply appreciating the particular attributes of any individual house. For any Christian, the truth of the natural world is spiritual and any real comprehension of that world must likewise be spiritual. What matters in *Piers Plowman* is not that Will comprehend the nature or whatness of a peacock, but rather what the peacock represents spiritually. In helping Will to transform sensory data into spiritual truth, Ymaginatif represents a creative adaptation of an Aristotelian faculty of the soul. Although he fades from view after the third vision, his influence clearly remains, for it is surely the imaginative power that helps Will to make better use of his experience in the remainder of the poem. Under the tutelage of various guides, Will minimizes the distance between his experience of the natural world and its spiritual significance until experience just *is* spiritual in the final passus of the poem. That such minimization is the point of the final passus is suggested by various of Will's guides, who model for him the proper method of reasoning by interpreting the natural world spiritually.

As noted above, it has become common to read the poem's progression as one from intellect to nature or affect, a transition generally located around B XII or XIII, but Ymaginatif instead indicates that Will's journey henceforth needs to wed nature to revelation, and the subsequent development of the poem indicates that Will has taken Ymaginatif's words to heart. As his ability to reconcile the two increases, so does his spiritual progress in the final third of the poem, though I can only address the section briefly here. Will not only finds greater continuity between nature and doctrine, but extends the boundaries of his own natural life to encompass key events in salvation history. Experience realizes its spiritual potential when it perceives its Biblical roots. The emphasis on experience in the remainder of the poem is unmistakable: Conscience joins Patience on a pilgrimage to learn more, Will uses this pilgrimage to learn to identify the sins that can accompany the active life, Will touches the tree of charity, he witnesses the Passion and the Harrowing of Hell, and he lives Armageddon. Further, Peace explains that Christ's incarnation reflects his own need for experience in the natural world,

and the experience of Christ, or particularly his blood, earns Longinus instant enlightenment. Nature becomes spiritual, and Biblical narrative expresses itself through nature. What does Armageddon signify at the poem's end but the dangers of clerical corruption? Will translates the sins within his society into Biblical terms, seeing the true significance of clerical corruption.⁸²

As in meditations on Christ's life, here experience penetrates temporal distance most vividly when directed toward episodes of Christ's life, surely reflecting the unique potential provided by Christ's joint humanity and divinity. The doctrine of Christ's two natures was definitively established at the Council of Chalcedon in 451,⁸³ and for later theologians who built on it, Christ brought divinity within reach of humanity, with the result that humans could enter the sphere of the divine after death and have greater access to it before death. John Scotus Eriugena (810–ca. 877) thus writes that Christ “unites in Himself with incomprehensible harmony the sensible and intelligible worlds.”⁸⁴ Christ's extreme humanity, his assumption of an eternal and universal human nature, makes him utterly accessible and so makes his life vividly imaginable. As Will's relatively unaffective engagement with that life demonstrates, such imagining serves more than an affective purpose; however accessed, it is not just the paramount means of spiritual growth but its very essence and achievement. Living Biblical narrative, Will shows that he understands its relevance to his own life and salvation. In the final third of the poem, not only does experience simply become spiritual, but dreamed experience becomes all the more closely connected to lived experience. Will's sleep cycles become shorter and shorter, thus drawing more attention to the relationship between the dreams and his life and drawing the one more vividly into the other. Further, the attention to Will's waking devotion as he creeps to the cross and the extensive liturgical references which carefully place Will in a church, listening to mass during Holy Week when the final visions occur, insist that his present-day devotion is interconnected with its basis in the Passion. The church's own commemoration of the Passion here provides access to its historical reality: Will is able to translate liturgy into Biblical

82. The fraught, unresolved ending of the poem is thus inevitable: although seen through the lens of Scripture, Will continues to see the society of which he is a part and whose future is uncertain. There is no possible for heavenly ascent or peace here because Will remains within the realm of the natural, even if the natural is here resolved to its spiritual meaning.

83. On the establishment of the doctrine of Christ's dual natures, see Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)* (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1971), pp. 256–66.

84. John Scotus Eriugena, *Periphyseon*, V, PL 122, 912D: “mundum sensibilem et intelligibilem in seipso incomprehensibili harmonia adunans.”

event, thus integrating the Bible into his devotion.⁸⁵ He moves from present to past in a way that ties them all the more closely together.

In doing so, he follows the lead not only of Ymaginatif but of his later guides, particularly Patience and Anima, who insist that spiritual truths be perceived through the natural world by themselves repeatedly associating the one with the other. The difference is even visible at the formal level, for as Helen Barr has shown, Will's immersion into Biblical narrative corresponds with the poem's greater incorporation of Latin references into the alliterative line in B XVIII.⁸⁶ Prior to his interactions with these guides, Will repeatedly makes spiritual conclusions based on his experiences, but he does so badly, rationalizing without a net. What Ymaginatif teaches Will is to rein in his generalizing tendencies and redirect them toward their proper, spiritual conclusions. Ralph Hanna notes that Ymaginatif "generalizes from the particulars experience has provided, perceives some connection among specific, yet apparently dispersed, sense data, and groups these connected items together under abstract categories."⁸⁷ While for Hanna this indicates Ymaginatif's lack of sophistication, for any Aristotelian the process here described simply is the process of knowing. As Will's later guides show, grouping such data and making deductions from it in this way is Will's best means toward Dowel. Although Ymaginatif reasons eccentrically, the conclusions he reaches are above reproach, spiritually speaking. He shows that nature is flexible with regard to interpretation, as long as the conclusion it supports is accurate. His successors teach the same lesson, positioning Will more clearly within the world to show him how he might best understand it. When Will witnesses the Passion and then the Harrowing of Hell "*secundum scripturas*," he not only shows himself to have been a good student of Ymaginatif, who first taught him to unify nature and its spiritual significance, but flaunts his increased capacity to use his imagination. Rendering nature spiritual and Biblical narrative natural, Will showcases the powers of his honed and properly motivated imagination. The poem's ending remains ambiguous, but it is clearly a victory for Will to have immersed himself in the drama, to live the crisis that draws the poem to its close.

Imagination figures in a great deal of late-medieval religious literature,

85. As Elizabeth Kirk notes regarding B XVIII, "the liturgy makes the past present in the world of Langland's and the society's 'now,' whereby history is (literally) represented in its immanence to the life of that community" ("Langland's Narrative Christology," in *Art and Context in Late Medieval English Narrative*, ed. Robert R. Edwards [Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1994], p. 27).

86. Helen Barr, "The Use of Latin Quotations in *Piers Plowman* with Special Reference to Passus XVIII of the 'B' Text," *Notes and Queries*, n. s. 33 (1986), 440-48.

87. Hanna, "Langland's Ymaginatif," pp. 82-83.

but Langland shows with particular clarity that its use requires rather than precludes intellectual effort: Will's own need to wed clergy to natural knowledge reflects his larger need to bring his intellectual resources to bear on his experience of the natural world. The poem makes the optimism of theologians like Bonaventure and Hugh of St. Victor seem utterly distant, like voices of a bygone era when nature spontaneously imparted enlightenment to anyone who looked upon it. As scholars we tend to separate the lay from the clerical in the late-medieval period, cordoning devotional literature off from scholastic theology, assigning them opposing allegiances to affect and reason, respectively, and confining them to different corners of the medieval world (and, generally, to different languages). The intellectual difficulty of experience in *Piers*, as well as the poem's indebtedness to originally scholastic understandings of imagination, however, might encourage us to weaken those barriers. That nature no longer offers its secrets so freely in the late fourteenth century at least encourages us to recognize that reconciling the natural to the spiritual within one's own life took considerable intellectual effort.

Late-medieval religious literature is often described as humanizing God, making him more accessible to the average Christian by prioritizing an affective rather than intellectual engagement with him. Emile Mâle makes the point with respect to the period's art: explaining the greater affective content of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century religious art, he distinguishes the doctrinal commitments of thirteenth-century artists, who "made little effort to bring the Gospels down to man," from later artists who focused on emotion rather than doctrine and so catalyzed a movement by which, "little by little, the people brought their God down to their own level."⁸⁸ Opposing a rational perspective on God to an affective commitment to him, Mâle renders affectivity anti-speculative and undocrinal. God finds himself demoted, made human rather than divine, circumscribed by the people for whom he is now "their God." Making reference to Aelred's *De institutione inclusarum* and the pseudo-Bonaventuran *Meditationes vitae Christi*, Barbara Newman likewise describes a movement toward "the domestication of the sacred."⁸⁹ Not only has God descended to the level of the people, but he has moved in with them. Although Langland's poem

88. Emile Mâle, *Religious Art in France: The Thirteenth Century: A Study in the Origins of Medieval Iconography*, trans. Marthiel Mathews (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1984, French ed. 1898), p. 206, and his *Religious Art in France: The Late Middle Ages: A Study in the Origins of Medieval Iconography*, trans. Marthiel Mathews (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1986, French ed. 1908), p. 137.

89. Barbara Newman, "What Did it Mean to Say 'I Saw'? The Clash Between Theory and Practice in Medieval Visionary Culture," *Speculum*, 80 (2005), 27.

is not especially affective, it helps us to see what the obsequious affectivity of other religious texts causes us to miss: to find God within one's own life in the natural world is hard. Whether using affect as a means of engaging with the natural world or considering nature proper, late-medieval English devotional literature seems less interested in demoting God to the realm of the human than identifying mechanisms by which the human might tend toward the divine.