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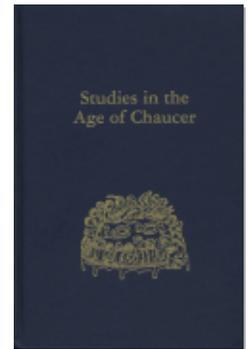
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## Practices of Satisfaction and *Piers Plowman's* Dynamic Middle

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**I**AN MCEWAN'S NOVEL *Atonement* seems to end with the scene of its invention, the moment its fictional author, Briony Tallis, begins to write the book we have just read. She writes in order to exonerate her sister's lover, the man she has fatefully and wrongly accused of rape, before his conviction in the court of law can irreversibly ruin his life: "She knew what was required of her. Not simply a letter, but a new draft, an atonement, and she was ready to begin."<sup>1</sup> It turns out that the story we have read was meant to set the legal record straight and restore justice. However, the book does not end there. It begins again on a new leaf, where Briony confesses, now in the first person, that the people she injured had died long before they could enjoy the relatively happy reunion narrated in the previous thirty pages. Briony has been revising her story, her confession, for fifty-nine years, always too late. Her decision to write a happy ending came late in life and seemed to her the only way to satisfy the "love of order" that inspired her to write as a girl and that "shaped the principles of justice."<sup>2</sup> "As long as there is a single copy," Briony writes near the real end of the book, "a solitary transcript of my final draft, then my spontaneous, fortuitous sister and her medical prince survive to love."<sup>3</sup> Briony has to settle for giving literary immortality to those she has wronged because literature by her definition cannot atone. "There is no one, no entity or higher form that [the novelist] can appeal to, or be reconciled with, or that can forgive her."<sup>4</sup>

*Atonement's* ending registers Briony's grief not only for unreconciled

<sup>1</sup> Ian McEwan, *Atonement* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 330.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 371.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

sin, but also for the loss of a cosmos in which a sinner can make satisfaction even if the injured party cannot forgive. Even as Briony recognizes the medieval distinction between satisfaction directed to God and legal satisfaction, or restitution, directed to an offended party, her quandary is particularly modern. She stands near the extreme end of a history of satisfaction: after Gratian and Peter Lombard had formalized it as one of the three parts of penance;<sup>5</sup> after Thomas Cranmer's prayer book had obviated human practices of penance on account of Christ's "full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction;"<sup>6</sup> after the Roman Catholic Church introduced the confessional box, signaling "the decay of the idea that sin was a social matter;"<sup>7</sup> after both sacred and secular "institutionalizations of charity" evacuated of their efficacy the practices and languages of satisfaction;<sup>8</sup> and after the modern subject tamed truth so that it could no longer transfigure the self or give subjectivity.<sup>9</sup> If Martin Luther disrupted medieval complacency about the sufficiency of sacramental satisfaction, Briony Tallis is desperately certain that nothing can ever satisfy.

It is tempting to read Briony as a figure for modern failures of acknowledgment, recognition, and communal reconciliation, alienated by at least one epoch from the medieval school of forgiveness, the peni-

<sup>5</sup>See Joseph Goering, "The Scholastic Turn (1100–1500): Penitential Theology and Law in the Schools," in *A New History of Penance*, ed. Abigail Firey (Boston: Brill, 2008), 219–37.

<sup>6</sup>Church of England, *The Booke of the Common Praier and Administratio{n} of the Sacramentes and Other Ryttes and Ceremonies of the Churche, after the Vse of the Churche of Englande* (Worcester: John Oswen, 1549), fol. 161r; available at *Early English Books Online*, ebo .chadwyck.com/home (accessed May 5, 2013).

<sup>7</sup>John Bossy, "Practices of Satisfaction, 1215–1700," in *Retribution, Repentance, and Reconciliation: Papers Read at the 2002 Summer and 2003 Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society*, ed. Kate Cooper and Jeremy Gregory (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2004), 106–18 (111). See also John Bossy, "The Social History of Confession in the Age of the Reformation," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 5, no. 25 (1975): 21–38 (29–33).

<sup>8</sup>Ivan Illich, *The Rivers North of the Future: The Last Testament of Ivan Illich*, ed. David Cayley (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2005), 175–200. Illich's arguments are best appreciated in the haunting recordings of the radio series, *The Corruption of Christianity: Ivan Illich on Gospel, Church and Society*, produced by Cayley for *Ideas* (Toronto: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2000).

<sup>9</sup>"If we define spirituality as being the form of practices which postulate that, such as he is, the subject is not capable of the truth, but that, such as it is, the truth can transfigure and save the subject, then we can say that the modern age of the relations between the subject and truth begin when it is postulated that, such as he is, the subject is capable of truth, but that, such as it is, the truth cannot save the subject." Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, ed. and trans. Frederic Gros (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 19.

tential system in which the living and the dead practiced the social grammar of reconciliation.<sup>10</sup> Briony rightly grieves. Too late, Briony! Too late for a tribunal, too late for a confessional, too late for God. "Is't not too late?," asked a sixteenth-century Lutheran doctor, hoping it might not be. "Too late," said the Evil Angel. "Never too late," said the Good Angel, "if Faustus will repent."<sup>11</sup> Briony might not have a good angel to turn to, but Marlowe's post-penitential drama reveals how her despair presumes a certain periodization of history and structure of time. "Behold, now is the acceptable time," Paul wrote, "now is the day of salvation," but Briony's window of opportunity for effective satisfaction has passed, and she lives and writes after the "now," after religion.<sup>12</sup> Briony subscribes, then, to a subtraction story of secularization, according to which modernity is what remains after religion has dwindled away.<sup>13</sup> To be modern means to come after religion and its trappings, to live—if now is the day of salvation—after the now. It is always too late, even if she wants to repent.

But this essay seeks to postpone and assay the consequences of such a foreclosure by allowing several medieval, early modern, and contemporary voices to speak about satisfaction alongside one another and challenge each other. This method of speculative, transhistorical conflict is designed not so much to narrate a shift in religious forms as to cast a series of flash-bursts from a variety of angles that reveal by a manifold of shadow and contrast the contours of belief about and practices of

<sup>10</sup>See Sarah Beckwith, *Shakespeare and the Grammar of Forgiveness* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2011), 20–33.

<sup>11</sup>Christopher Marlowe, *The Tragedy of Doctor Faustus, B-Text*, in *Doctor Faustus and Other Plays: A Text*, ed. David Bevington and Eric Rasmussen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 2.3.75–78.

<sup>12</sup>2 Corinthians 6:2. All English biblical quotations are cited from the Challoner revision of the Douay-Rheims, and Latin from the Stuttgart Vulgate; both are available in parallel online at [www.latinvulgate.com](http://www.latinvulgate.com) (accessed 24 February 2014).

<sup>13</sup>On subtraction narratives, see Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2007), 569–79. I find Taylor's critique of subtraction narratives compelling. However, from the perspective of medieval religious history, Taylor tends toward the opposite error, imaginatively adding to the Middle Ages a surplus of faith sufficiently robust to sustain all of modernity's subtractions and still persist. While not reductively Weberian, Taylor's account also avoids the reason for continuity most religions themselves give: that God continues to exist and work in the lives of humans and their institutions. This exaggeration occurs mostly in Chapter 1, "The Bulwarks of Belief." For more cautious accounts of medieval faith and practice, see 90–95. For an alternative account of medieval belief, explicitly contrasted to Taylor's, see Steven Justice, "Did the Middle Ages Believe in Their Miracles?," *Representations* 103 (2008): 1–29.

satisfaction. These new vantages grant, in turn, a new perspective on *Piers Plowman* as a key text in the history of satisfaction and as a poem structurally as well as authorially invested in writing for the sake of satisfactory participation in salvation history.

My larger argument about the history of satisfaction in late medieval and early Reformation literary culture centers on a major point of disagreement among *Piers Plowman*'s readers across the centuries, namely, how to understand the work as a whole in light of the apparent failures that dominate its ending. Like Briony's story and the larger story of satisfaction's demise, *Piers Plowman* suggests glum conclusions. The poem ends in disaster with the total corruption of the Church and the undoing of the penitential self as the pitiful Contrition abandons his own allegorical essence and "clene forȝete to crye and to wepe."<sup>14</sup> No wonder some of the poem's best readers have identified failure as its chief engine of invention and closure.<sup>15</sup> Yet I argue in this essay that Langland designs the poem to reframe failure within a history of salvation in which Christians can participate sacramentally to redeem failure, especially by penitential satisfaction.<sup>16</sup> Satisfaction, then, not failure itself, motivates the poem's inventive impulse. Langland conceives of sacramental and literary satisfaction not as the termination of a discrete penitential sequence (contrition, confession, satisfaction), but as an ongoing, open-ended habit of beginning again and making good ends.

<sup>14</sup>William Langland, *Piers Plowman*, C XXII.369. Unless otherwise noted, I quote from *Piers Plowman: The C Version*, ed. George Russell and George Kane (London: Athlone Press, 1997); *Piers Plowman: The B Version*, ed. George Kane and E. Talbot Donaldson (London: Athlone Press, 1988); and *Piers Plowman: The A Version*, ed. George Kane (London: Athlone Press, 1960). I have also consulted *Piers Plowman: A Parallel-Text Edition of the A, B, C and Z Versions*, ed. A. V. C. Schmidt, 2 vols. (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2011).

<sup>15</sup>See especially Anne Middleton, "Narration and the Invention of Experience: Episodic Form in *Piers Plowman*," in *The Wisdom of Poetry: Essays in Honor of Morton Bloomfield*, ed. Larry D. Benson and Siegfried Wenzel (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1982), 91–122; D. Vance Smith, *The Book of the Incipit: Beginnings in the Fourteenth Century* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 82–86; D. Vance Smith, "Negative Langland," *YLS* 23 (2009): 33–59; and Nicolette Zeeman, "*Piers Plowman*" and the Medieval Discourse of Desire (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>16</sup>For a reading of the ending as dominated by the pattern of failure, rebuke, and loss, see Zeeman, "*Piers Plowman*" and the Medieval Discourse of Desire, 263–83: "For a brief phase, the poem's protagonists are all 'patient' enough to allow the redemption to happen. It is doubly notable, therefore, that a narrative of failure reappears again at the end of the poem. . . . Once more Piers is gone. Once more Conscience departs. Such narratives of denial and loss have shaped the poem since its inception, and it is no surprise that one more such narrative brings the poem to its famously gaping close" (283). Zeeman's book ends here.

In support of these claims, I interpret both formal and historical evidence, and demonstrate how the two kinds of evidence mutually support each other.<sup>17</sup> Formally, *Piers Plowman* employs chiasmic structures to resist purely linear reading and to reinscribe patterns of failure into larger histories of redemption. I will identify chiasmic structures at work locally in alliterative patterning and more broadly in the plot of the poem, especially the visionary and liturgical climax where the dreamer Will witnesses and participates in the signal events of salvation history: Christ's Passion, descent to hell, Resurrection, Ascension, and Pentecost. Historically, *Piers Plowman* develops a currently underappreciated, capacious understanding of penitential satisfaction. Drawing on late medieval penitential liturgy and literature and on the work of historians of penance, I retrieve an understanding of satisfaction according to which writing a poem such as *Piers Plowman* can constitute a work of mercy and therefore count as sacramental satisfaction. These two kinds of evidence are linked by *Piers Plowman's* unique announcement of its writtenness in the midst of its most significant chiasmic structure. When the dreamer Will announces that he woke up and wrote what he had dreamed, he does so in the context of penitential participation in the history of salvation through liturgy. Will's dream of that history merges with the real-time Holy Week liturgies. If Will and William Langland are writing as an act of penitential satisfaction, then they occupy what may seem like a strange place in the medieval economy of salvation, both outside the clerically controlled sacrament of penance, yet also seeking that sacrament's benefits. The central part of this essay, then, seeks to make that place seem less strange and to articulate how Langland's questionable vernacular making both stands outside clerical sacramental authority and stakes a claim to being legitimate *lele labour* as a penitential practice.

If we can understand Langland's writing as satisfactory, we can better

<sup>17</sup> While I am adducing two kinds of evidence for this argument—formal and theological-historical—a third type of evidence could further support the argument for the importance of Langland's writing from the middle, namely, evidence of *Piers Plowman's* order of composition and revision, though I do not have the space to develop the relationship here. For an argument from the evidence of revision that Langland's making is essentially penitential, see Alan Fletcher, "The Essential (Ephemeral) William Langland: Textual Revision as Ethical Process in *Piers Plowman*," *YLS* 15 (2001): 61–84. My analysis here suggests that Fletcher should shift his focus from contrition to satisfaction. I discuss the potential for corroboration with Lawrence Warner's hypotheses about *The Lost History of Piers Plowman* in note 103 below.

appreciate the failures and successes of penance in the late Middle Ages, and better recognize practices of satisfaction across the Reformation that narratives of decline and loss tend to overlook.<sup>18</sup> *Piers Plowman's* eschatological vision of hope and satisfaction beyond personal and institutional religious failure challenges Briony's self-binding temporality, her *post-apocalyptic* sense of belatedness that rebukes hope and occludes present help. The poem also challenges Faustian histories of the Reformation and modernity—not necessarily those that register loss and shed a contrite tear, but those that less than halfway through the play say, “*Consummatum est*” (2.1.74) and so see devils holding down repentant hands and cannot see the angels there all along.

The history of modernity within which we necessarily practice criticism and historiography is not yet finished and likely holds many surprises. We do not know its end, and therefore we do not know how “late” we really are. If the age of reform had its unintended consequences, as Brad Gregory has argued, it also had its unrealized intentions and multiple futures—futures that may not yet even have arrived.<sup>19</sup> This essay is designed to recognize some of those futures by studying practices of satisfaction not only over a long duration of literary and religious texts, but in the manifold permutations, returns, and possibilities inscribed in the texts themselves and in the futures they collaborate in inventing. The next section looks closely at two forms of permutation and return in *Piers Plowman*, a text that resists simple linear reading toward an ending and instead invites readers to layer their inter-

<sup>18</sup>I include some of the most influential of these narratives in notes 7, 8, and 9. For a similar approach to continuity and change, see Katherine C. Little, “Transforming Work: Protestantism and the *Piers Plowman* Tradition,” *JMEMS* 40, no. 3 (2010): 497–526, which explores continuities and transformations of labor and works across the Reformation.

<sup>19</sup>Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2012). This admirably ambitious work tells multiple overlapping, and at times conflicting, stories about the origins of modernity, marshaling an impressive array of primary and secondary texts to do so. Taken as a whole, the book wields nuanced explanatory power. Yet its powerful method prevents it from treating its primary texts as more than markers of historical developments. The book must perforce move on with its arguments; it cannot linger with a text, respond to its recursive invitations, or tease out its multiple possible futures in disparate communities of interpretation. This book, which illuminates the sources and contours of modern pluralism, cannot itself give a good account of the plural possibilities of its primary texts. (I am grateful for a conversation with Will Revere in which he articulated this perspective.) *Piers Plowman* stands at the center of this essay because it is a text that invites its readers to return, revise, and layer their responses, as its reception history bears out.

actions with it, repeatedly returning to certain structural “middles” that produce the meaning of the poem more than its actual ending.

### Chiasmus and *Piers Plowman's* Dynamic Middle

For all the attention that has fruitfully been lavished on the forms and energies of beginning and ending in *Piers Plowman*, it is a surprisingly centripetal poem. To be sure, the center does not hold. But the poem begins again so many times because it is constantly trying to return to a center of gravity. That center is the Incarnation of Christ, as Cristina Maria Cervone has argued in her study of “Incarnational poetics” in Middle English poetry. “In making the hypostatic union so central to the work that form does, an Incarnational poetic encourages a process of thought that comes back again to that good and fundamental beginning. In all of these poems, . . . the Incarnation is the pivot point around which thought and form coalesce.”<sup>20</sup> In *Piers Plowman*, the Incarnation comprises a narrative structure of exit and return, of the Son’s descent from the Father into human flesh and ultimately the region of the dead, and of his ascent by way of the Resurrection to the right hand of the Father in heaven. That narrative structure provides a template for humanity, which fell from grace in Adam and Eve, suffered death, but through Christ can rise again and ascend not only into heaven but even into union with the triune God. As the patristic dictum puts it, “God became man that man might become God.”<sup>21</sup> That famous saying absorbs the symmetry of the narrative structure of the Incarnation into its syntactic structure, producing the poetic figure of chiasmus. This section of the essay explores how William Langland employed metrical, syntactic, and narrative chiasmus to give *Piers Plowman* an incarnational form that directs readers’ attention repeatedly back to the middle, the place of salvific exchange between God and humanity.

Modern literary scholars have been cautious about chiasmus on historical and methodological grounds. Historically, there has been little evidence of conscious chiastic patterning by literary writers, though new

<sup>20</sup>Cristina Maria Cervone, *Poetics of the Incarnation: Middle English Writing and the Leap of Love* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 208.

<sup>21</sup>Cf. Athanasius, *De incarnatione Dei Verbum*, 54.3; in *Select Writings and Letters of Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria*, ed. Archibald Robertson (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1953); available at Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf204.vii.ii.liv.html> (accessed February 18, 2014).

research in the past fifteen years has begun to change that.<sup>22</sup> Methodologically, the fear is that once you start looking for chiasmus, you see it everywhere. I use the term advisedly, with due historical caution. I employ the term chiasmus to name an array of parallel and concentric reversals or reciprocity, from syntactical arrangements grouped in medieval rhetorical manuals under the figure *commutatio* to larger structural patterns that reflect the semantic symmetry David Howlett has noted as one mark of “biblical style” in early medieval writings such as Saint Patrick’s *Confessio*.<sup>23</sup> Langland’s chiasmic effects depend on a complex interplay of line-level chiasmus, larger structural chiasmus, and conceptual or narrative chiasmus as found in the basic Christian plot of Creation, Fall, Incarnation, redemption.

Medieval poetics and rhetoric hardly register the term chiasmus (it became popular only with Renaissance rhetoric).<sup>24</sup> More common are the figures *isocolon*, *antimetabole*, *commutatio*, and *annominatio*. In the widely cited definition of the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, *commutatio* “occurs when two discrepant thoughts are so expressed by transposition that the latter follows from the former although contradictory to it.”<sup>25</sup> In this strict sense, *commutatio* must occur at the sentence or line level, where two opposing ideas are expressed using the same root word or words. But such a line can still express larger chiasmic structures, even plot structures, as in “that was tynt thorw tre, tre shal hit wynne” (C XX.143). In this line, the plot of salvation history and its central events of winning and losing revolve around a tree—or two trees: the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden and the tree of the cross on Golgotha. I therefore speak of chiasmus as an umbrella term to describe the wide

<sup>22</sup> On chiasmic structure in medieval meditative theology and poetry, see Robert McMahon, *Understanding the Medieval Meditative Ascent: Augustine, Anselm, Boethius, and Dante* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2006), 36–42. For a study of chiasmus based on late medieval and early modern mnemonic culture, see William E. Engel, *Chiasmic Designs in English Literature from Sidney to Shakespeare* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2009).

<sup>23</sup> See *Liber epistolarum Sancti Patricii episcopi: The Book of Letters of St. Patrick the Bishop*, ed. D. R. Howlett (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1994); and D. R. Howlett, *British Books in Biblical Style* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1997).

<sup>24</sup> Medieval awareness of the Greek *chiasmus* comes across primarily in the figure of *isocolon*. See Heinrich Lausberg, *Handbook of Literary Rhetoric: A Foundation for Literary Study*, ed. David E. Orton and R. Dean Anderson (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 322.

<sup>25</sup> *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, 4.28.39; “Commutatio est cum duae sententiae inter se discrepantes ex transiectione ita efferuntur ut a priore posterior contraria priori profiscitur.” In *Ad C. Herennium: De ratione dicendi (Rhetorica ad Herennium)*, trans. Harry Caplan (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1964), 324.

array of symmetrical, reciprocal, or concentric parallelisms and antitheses that Langland deploys not only in his rhetoric, but also in his disposition of salvation history and the events that constitute the plot of *Piers Plowman*, in his marking of topographical ascents and descents, and in the various metrical balancing tactics he enlists to create a range of effects with his alliterative lines.<sup>26</sup> While one can appreciate the methodological objection that once we start looking for chiasmus, we find it everywhere, it is significant that in the case of *Piers Plowman*, we do not find chiasmus everywhere. We find it in strategic places, in the middles to which Langland wants us to return in our meditative reading habits, and especially in the middle on which this part of the essay focuses, a middle between two episodes dominated by the figure of Christ's cross.

Chiasmus has long been associated with the cross. The term derives from the Greek letter  $\chi$  (*chi*) because chiasmus involves a crossing of elements in a symmetrical array. The crossing may be expressed *abba* or in diagram form (Figure 1). Early Christians associated the letter *chi* with Christ; the *Chi Rho* Christogram, derived from the first two letters of the Greek *Christos*, predated the cross as the central Christian symbol. New Testament scholars have found chiasmus to be an essential rhetorical structure of the Gospels, especially John.<sup>27</sup> *The Dream of the Rood* anchors structural chiasmus with single-verse chiasmus, such as "Rod wæs ic aræred. Ahof ic ricne cyning" (As a cross was I raised up | lifted



Fig. 1

<sup>26</sup>For an even more capacious understanding of chiasmus, anchored in pre-Socratic thought and formal logic, see Patrick Lee Miller, *Becoming God: Pure Reason in Early Greek Philosophy* (New York: Continuum, 2011), 1–42.

<sup>27</sup>See John Breck, *The Shape of Biblical Language: Chiasmus in the Scriptures and Beyond* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1994).

I the mighty king).<sup>28</sup> Beyond the line level, cruciform symmetries structure many Middle English meditative lyrics such as “The Four Leaves of the Truelove,” which conveys a cross-patterned homily on the saving love embodied in the flower truelove and Christ’s form “spred on a Crosse,” or Thomas of Hales’s “Love Rune” with its cryptic inscription of the sign of the cross at the precise numerical center of the hermetic *roune*.<sup>29</sup> In *Piers Plowman*, deep within the Incarnation’s narrative chiasmus, Mercy sets the dream’s larger structure on a pivot around the cross in a line-level chiasmus: “And that was tynt thorw tre, tre shal hit wyne” (C XX.143). At the end of the same passus Will exhorts his wife and daughter to participate in an Easter Sunday liturgy that involves creeping to the cross and kissing it. The next passus begins with a dream of Christ, dressed in Piers’s armor, bearing a cross. It is to these particular crosses and this chiastic crossing that Langland draws our recursive, meditative attention. These crosses are particularly poignant because they frame the first explicit announcement of the poem’s writtleness, which allows us to understand how the work of writing relates to the cross by means of penitential liturgy.

In order to appreciate how and why Langland creates intense chiastic effects in this part of the poem, we first need to step back and consider what is going on in the larger plot of Will’s dreams. The pivotal first line of C XXI is also the first line of the *Vita de Dobest*, the final movement of the poem as rubricated in most B and C manuscripts. The line is situated between two passus comprising vivid dreams of biblical-liturgical action. They begin with Will alienated from community, going along “ylike a lorel al my lyf tyme” (C XX.3), and they end with the Church, the king, and the commons alienated from each other. The plot of the two passus progresses from spiritual dryness and disorder to intense

<sup>28</sup> *The Dream of the Rood*, ed. Michael Swanton (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1970), line 44. “This line . . . divides the active Christ from the passive one and the passive cross from its active role. It also bisects the four portions of the narrative so that they form a chiasmus, the central juxtaposed scenes depicting the dual acts of Christ ascending the cross and of the cross raising Christ and being pierced by the nails, the framing scenes being on the one side the enemies raising the cross and on the other side the friends taking down Christ and burying the three crosses.” Carol Braun Pasternack, “Stylistic Disjunctions in *The Dream of the Rood*,” *Anglo-Saxon England* 13 (1984): 167–86 (178).

<sup>29</sup> “The Four Leaves of the Truelove,” in *Moral Love Songs and Laments*, ed. Susanna Greer Fein (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1998), line 199. Fein argues that Hales’s line 100—“Est and west, north and suth!”—“may be meant to invoke the sign of the Cross and thereby sanctify the rune. . . . If this interpretation is correct, the line is integral to the cryptic, runic nature of the poem” (41 n. 100).

liturgical and visionary participation in the events of Holy Week and Pentecost, and back again to spiritual dissolution.<sup>30</sup> More immediately, Will wakes and writes between two liturgies involving the cross. At the end of Passus XX, six lines earlier, Will urges his wife and daughter to “arise and go . . . crepe to þe croes on knees and kusse hit for a iewel” (C XX.470–71). Then at the beginning of Passus XXI, seven lines later, Will falls asleep in the middle of mass and dreams “That Peres þe plouhman was peynted al blody / And cam in with a cros before þe comune peple” (C XXI.6–7). It is fitting and significant that this chiasmic structure—with writing in the middle framed on either side by liturgical devotion—should depend on the cross and, as we shall see, on Langland’s distinctive theology of the cross. The next section of this essay develops an understanding of how Langland’s use of chiasmus in the alliterative line performs theological argument about Christ’s Passion and frames the signal moment when Will wakes and writes. The following section takes up the question of what it means, given this framing, to wake up and write.

### Alliterative Chiasmus and Langland’s Theology of the Cross

The standard alliterative long-line is notably unbalanced. Like *Piers Plowman* itself, the end of an alliterative line swerves away from the prior pattern of stress: *aa|ax*. But Langland was able to enlist the alliterative line to produce a wide variety of effects, including balance and symmetry, as Macklin Smith has demonstrated in his studies of Langland’s “balancing tactics.”<sup>31</sup> These tactics include line-level alliterative meter as well as chiasmic “frames” established by interlinear alliteration. Smith demonstrates that alliterative stress can perform the function that polyptoton—deploying a word or form of the word twice to different

<sup>30</sup>The significance of this liturgical, penitential, and Eucharistic setting for the poem’s central problems cannot be overstated. For an appreciation of how penance and Eucharist finally and fittingly support each other here, see David Aers, *Sanctifying Signs: Making Christian Tradition in Late Medieval England* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), 29–51.

<sup>31</sup>Some of these tactics are discussed in Macklin Smith, “Langland’s Alliterative Line(s),” *YLS* 23 (2009): 163–216 (190–93). I rely also on Smith’s unpublished working papers and personal correspondence, including “Chiasmic Form in *Piers Plowman*,” Forty-Fourth Annual International Congress on Medieval Studies (Kalamazoo, May 9, 2009); and “Balancing Tactics in *Piers Plowman*,” Fifth International *Piers Plowman* Conference (Oxford, April 16, 2011).

effects<sup>32</sup>—performs in standard *commutatio*. Instead of repeating the same words in reverse order to express opposed thoughts, those thoughts can be opposed or apposed by different, yet alliterating, words. This is precisely what occurs at C XXI.14.

Here Conscience tells Will that his vision of Piers “peynted al bloddy” and bearing a cross at mass “Is Crist with his croes, conquerour of Cristene” (C XXI.14). This “enriched” line, with its *aa|aa* alliterative patterning, is the closest Langland usually comes to alliterative chiasmus, but it nevertheless capitalizes on the full potential for symmetry that the four-beat line bears.<sup>33</sup> The chiasitic alliterative structure can invite speculation about conceptual chiasmus: in what ways might the inner and outer full staves, when paired, produce effects of symmetry, balance, antithesis, or parallelism? A. V. C. Schmidt notes the line’s “heavily emphatic enriched fourth lift growing, as it were, out of the root *Crist* planted as the (anticipated) first *k* lift.”<sup>34</sup> Taking the “commutative property” of this alliterative *commutatio* even further, “Crist” and “Cristene” can be interchangeable in the economy of salvation as a consequence of the identity that obtains between the inner alliterating terms, “croes” and “conquerour.” Christ is the conqueror and belongs to all Christians (“conquerour of Cristene”), and by commutation these properties apply also to the cross: it is a conqueror, it belongs to all Christians, and they conquer under its sign. Because the cross is the conqueror, Christ and Christians are *at one*; through the atonement humanity completes the second half of the great Patristic chiasmus, “God became man that man might become God.”<sup>35</sup> Through the crossing of Christ’s Passion, humanity crosses back to its original *telos* of participation in the divine life.

The line’s chiasitic argument does not just recapitulate, however neatly and heuristically, Chalcedonian Christology.<sup>36</sup> Rather, it chiasitic

<sup>32</sup>See Lausberg, *Handbook of Literary Rhetoric*, 288–92.

<sup>33</sup>I use A. V. C. Schmidt’s terminology, which indicates that the line alliterates as usual on the first three lifts and then enriches or “fills” the final lift of the *b*-verse with another alliterating syllable. See A. V. C. Schmidt, *The Clerkly Maker: Langland’s Poetic Art* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1987), 32. There are only ten *ab|ba* lines in *Piers Plowman* B, but three of them do not map on to the stress pattern. See Tomonori Matsushita, ed., *A Glossarial Concordance to William Langland’s “The Vision of Piers Plowman,” The B-Text*, 3 vols. (Tokyo: Yushodo Press, 1998–2000), 3:700.

<sup>34</sup>Schmidt, *Clerkly Maker*, 47.

<sup>35</sup>Athanasius, *De incarnatione*, 54.3.

<sup>36</sup>The Council of Chalcedon’s (451 CE) articulation of the hypostatic union depended on the notion of *communicatio idiomatum*, the exchange of attributes between Christ’s divine and human natures, expressed in Leo the Great’s influential *Tome* (449 CE): “Thus

cally substantiates the claims in the previous passus that the cross completes the incarnation. C amplifies the argument of B that “God . . . Bicam man of a mayde . . . to se þe sorwe of deying” (B XVIII.213) with the even bolder claim that God’s knowledge was incomplete without experiencing human death and suffering:

Ne hadde God ysoffred of som oþer then hymselfe,  
 He hadde nat wist witterly where deth were sour or swete.  
 (C XX.217–18)

The omniscient God could not have proper knowledge of death without becoming a human. The line’s chiasmic structure absorbs and focuses reverberations from these bold soteriological overtures elsewhere in the poem, illustrating Smith’s argument that

the occasional crisscross patterns in *Piers Plowman* communicate *extra*, higher meanings at play in—or over—the course of this complex, recursive, experiential, messy, and pervasively imbalanced poem. . . . Langland . . . seems to have theorized his frames and symmetries, using them to suggest Providential forms and even . . . to describe God’s essence and agency. In other words, Langland also theorizes chiasmus, translating it, as it were, from rhetoric into theology, via poetics.<sup>37</sup>

This particular line in fact transposes the thematic chiasmus of salvation history into an alliteratively chiasmic line, thus translating theology into poetics. The soteriological commutation of “Crist” and “Cristene” across the middle terms of “cross” and “conquerour” contributes to the larger centripetal force of the Holy Week liturgy as it bears out the chiasmic structure of Incarnation and redemption centered around the

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in the whole and perfect nature of true man was true God born, complete in what was His own, complete in what was ours. And by ‘ours’ we mean what the Creator formed in us from the beginning and what He undertook to repair.” “Letter 28,” trans. Charles Lett Feltoe, in *Leo the Great, Gregory the Great*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series 12 (Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing, 1895); available online, rev. and ed. Kevin Knight, at <http://www.newadvent.org> (accessed June 10, 2011). Langland elaborates the anthropological consequences of the hypostatic union in terms of consanguinity. As Christ says during the Harrowing of Hell, “Ac to be merciabe to man thenne my kynde hit asketh / For we beth brethrene of blood” (C XX.417–18). This is significant in Will’s dream because Christ bearing the cross not only wears Piers’s armor, but is “al bloody,” with the blood covering and presumably making indistinguishable what is Christ and what is Piers.

<sup>37</sup>Smith, “Chiastic Form,” 1–2.

triumphant defeat of the Crucifixion and descent into hell. Such a grand defeat can result in triumph only thanks to the hinge-like properties of the Incarnation, which can be expressed poetically in a line of chiastic alliteration. The normative alliterative line is unbalanced (*aa|ax*), just as defeat does not normally balance itself out with victory. Yet for those rare defeats that result in victory there are rare balanced and chiastic alliterative lines. This one functions as a hinge mechanism for the poem's entire plot, opening onto the victory of the cross and transferring the benefits of that victory to those in need of salvation.

On the other side of the chiastic fold between passus XX and XXI, another alliteratively balanced line binds repentant sinner to saving God across their asymmetrical relationship. As we have seen, upon waking from his dream of the Harrowing of Hell, Will exhorts his wife and daughter, Kitte and Calote,

Arise and go reuerense godes resureccion  
And crepe to þe croes on knees and kusse hit for a iewel.  
(C XX.470–71)

The first line of Will's exhortation could hardly be more imbalanced thematically. The *a*-verse's imperatives put Kitte and Calote in a passive, penitential position even as the *b*-verse comprises God's greatest action. Yet chiastic, contrapuntal alliteration yokes the two halves together, facilitating commerce between penitent sinners and glorified God.<sup>38</sup> Three full staves alliterating on [r] are counterpointed with a secondary alliteration on [g] in the *a*-verse and a corresponding, stressed [g]-syllable in the *b*-verse position normally reserved for the key-stave: "Arise and go reuerense | godes resureccion" (*a(b)a|ba*).<sup>39</sup> The following line amplifies this exhortation, identifying the object of reverence as the cross, which stands in for "godes resureccion," thus converting the instrument of death into the sign of life.

Langland's contemporaries might have appreciated a similar transla-

<sup>38</sup>Schmidt, *Clerkly Maker*, 62–67.

<sup>39</sup>This is a rare line indeed, one that the standard typology would not admit if scanned *aa|xa*. ("The minimum requirement of metricality is that two full staves must appear in the *a*-verse and the first staff in the *b*-verse must be full." Hoyt N. Duggan, "Notes toward a Theory of Langland's Meter," *YLS* 1 [1987]: 41–70 [43].) Nor does "godes" here submit to the distinction between full, mute, and blank staves. It cannot be full since it does not alliterate on the primary [r] sound. It cannot be mute since it has stress. And it cannot be blank since it *does* alliterate on the secondary [g] sound.

tion in the liturgical chronology, for although the ceremony of creeping to the cross was occasionally observed on Easter morning, it was much more commonly associated with Good Friday. Whichever practice was familiar to Langland's readers, the Easter morning veneration of the cross renders the instrument of defeat the sign of victory, not only by carrying it across the cosmic reversal of the Harrowing of Hell on Holy Saturday, but also by making the cross available to penitents for participation. For the victory of the cross can only be complete when sinners repent, take up their crosses, and follow Christ—when their rising and going alliterates in counterpoint, as it were, with God's own Resurrection. In this sense, the line's highly anomalous absence of a key-stave invites alliterative participation. God ("godes") occupies the key position, alliterating only with the secondary, unstressed, human-oriented "go" of the *a*-verse. Whereas the key-stave normally "unlocks" the primary alliterative pattern of the *a*-verse, here what it reveals about the *a*-verse is the urgency of human agency, the tropological imperative that makes every "go" in the Gospels faintly echo with Jesus' exhortation, ". . . and do thou in like manner" ("vade et tu fac similiter," Lk 10:37). To "go" in this line is to alliterate with "godes," and so to participate in "godes resurreccion."

The two chiasmic, crucicentric lines just analyzed frame with a rough symmetry the clearest signal in all of *Piers Plowman* that Will and William Langland are self-consciously making a public literary artifact. At the middle of this crucicentric middle, at the middle of the chiasmic fold between passus XX and XXI, between cross and cross, Will says, "Thus y wakede and wrot what y hadde ydremed" (C XXI.1). In this line, writing—"wrot"—is situated directly between waking and dreaming; it is in fact the numerical center of the line's nine words. Will enjoys one of his precarious, always interstitial waking moments eight lines after waking and just four before falling asleep again. This middling site of writing becomes, in turn, a frame in its own right, reappearing in similar form at the end of the passus to bracket the poem's climactic vision of the Resurrection's communal consequences.

Critics have gravitated to this juncture between C XX and XXI (B XVIII and XIX) as a site of heightened interpretive vision even as the poem proceeds to its irresolute ending. Morton W. Bloomfield writes, "In a profound sense, the powerful scene of the Harrowing of Hell is the true end of the poem, of the quest for Christian perfection which

this poem exemplifies.”<sup>40</sup> But the poem does not end with B XVIII/C XX in any of the extant manuscripts. If the quest for Christian perfection from the ethical-soteriological crises of the “fair feld ful of folk” (C Prol.19) culminates in B XVIII/C XX, then the final two passus mirror that development in reverse, declining from the perfect unity of Pentecost to the ruin of Holy Church. This plot of Fall-to-redemption, redemption-to-Fall bears a broadly chiasitic pattern. Thus Anne Middleton notes “the latent similarities, a pattern of cyclical return, of theme and form that joins the beginning to the end of the poem, markedly enhancing a broad chiasitic symmetry between the two opening visions and the two post-Resurrection visions that conclude both long forms of the poem.”<sup>41</sup> Middleton recognizes that something happens around the beginning and ending of *Piers Plowman* that keeps the beginning and ending from fully determining the work’s *ratio*. Beginning and ending do not map on to the work’s first and final causes, and they can give a misleading sense of the formal and efficient causes. I have focused on the literary form of chiasmus as a formal cause that refuses the determinations of beginning or ending. The centripetal force of chiasmus invites a new critical perspective on *Piers Plowman*, one that reads middles as at least equally productive of its *sentence* as its beginnings and ends. If Bloomfield and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton’s early work read Langland through his endings, and Middleton and D. Vance Smith read him through his beginnings, then I am arguing for a reinvigorated focus on the middle.<sup>42</sup>

My argument about the chiasitic middle where Will wakes and writes hovers around the end of *Piers Plowman*. But other structural and thematic middles earlier in the poem—from its numerical mid-point to Will’s middle age to the theological middle of the Incarnation—have prepared for this late, crucicentric middle. This late middle is particu-

<sup>40</sup>Morton W. Bloomfield, “*Piers Plowman*” as a *Fourteenth-Century Apocalypse* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1961), 125.

<sup>41</sup>Anne Middleton, “Acts of Vagrancy: The C Version ‘Autobiography’ and the Statute of 1388,” in *Written Work: Langland, Labor, and Authorship*, ed. Steven Justice and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 208–317 (269).

<sup>42</sup>Bloomfield, “*Piers Plowman*” as a *Fourteenth-Century Apocalypse*; Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, *Reformist Apocalypticism and “Piers Plowman”* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Middleton, “Narration and the Invention of Experience”; Smith, *The Book of the Incipit*. Middleton also reads from the end in “Making a Good End: John But as a Reader of *Piers Plowman*,” in *Medieval English Studies Presented to George Kane*, ed. Edward Donald Kennedy et al. (Wolfboro: D. S. Brewer, 1988), 243–63.

larly significant because it dilates the most prevalent middle in the poem, the Incarnation, and makes it available to literary and sacramental participation. Will wakes and writes between two penitential liturgies—one in waking life, one in a dream—that involve the Incarnation and the cross. Because Will and his wife and daughter are here able to participate in the drama of the Incarnation, this chiasmic middle consummates the dozen or so visionary, metaphoric, and figural accounts of the Incarnation earlier in the poem.<sup>43</sup> I call this middle “dynamic” because it is not anchored to a point in the sequence of reading or of composition. Rather, this incarnational and crucicentric middle bears a centripetal force that draws the poem’s acts of invention and the readers’ acts of interpretation back to it. And because this middle becomes a middle by virtue of readers’ recursions to it in their own lives of sacramental participation in crucicentric satisfaction, it dynamically moves outside the text.

This crucicentric middle stands out for its framing of the poem’s writtleness, and its connection of writing to penitential liturgy and therefore to satisfaction. Because this middle comes near the end, it concerns *novissimis*, the poem’s internal eschatology, its hope for an ending, and its analogical *ratio* of invention, according to which, as the Latin term suggests, last things entail new things, new hopes. By chiasmic patterning, Langland draws the focus due a poem’s ending away from the actual ending, reorienting it to a site at the middle of the ending where Will participates intensely in the salvific work of doing well. Writing in the middle is important for Langland because it becomes the chief activity by which Will does well. The writer and the readers might do well beyond the poem in countless ways, but writing is the most appropriate form of labor by which to model doing well in a literary work. Making *Piers Plowman* performs the work of penance that Langland goes out of his way to articulate in some detail. Langland renders Will’s writing as one kind of satisfaction, the literary way to fulfill the “silent middle term” of Truth’s laconic pardon, the assurance that mercy abounds for sinners who repent.<sup>44</sup> So it becomes especially urgent to understand what it means, in Langland’s literary milieu and in the context of the poem thus far, to say, “I waked and wrot.”

<sup>43</sup>On some of these figural and metaphoric middles, see Cervone, *Poetics of the Incarnation*, Chapter 5: “‘He is in the mydde point’: Poetic Deep Structure and the Frameworks of Incarnational Poetics,” 159–208.

<sup>44</sup>Traugott Lawler, “The Pardon Formula in *Piers Plowman*: Its Ubiquity, Its Binary Shape, Its Silent Middle Term,” *YLS* 14 (2000): 117–52.

## What Does It Mean to Say, "I woke up and wrote"?

Up to the point of Will's announcement that he woke up and wrote, Will has been identified as someone who writes only three times in the A- and B-texts combined, and not at all in C. The A-text represents Will as a copyist in the service of merchants.<sup>45</sup> When Imaginatif accuses Will in B of meddling with making "bokes" to "telle men what dowel is, dobet and dobest bope," Will does not deny the charge (B XII.16–22b). Later in B, Will worries that priests "wol be wroop for I write þus" (B XV.489). On the whole, as Wendy Scase has observed, "there is only sporadic internal conceptualization of the poem as a written text."<sup>46</sup>

The waking and writing scenes that bookend B XIX/C XXI therefore stand out for their literary self-consciousness, and so they participate in a rich, late medieval tradition of waking and writing in dream-visions. Like the dreamer in Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*, Will hears bells in his dream that wake him up to a scene of composition:

Ryght thus me mette, as I yow telle,  
 That in the castell ther was a belle,  
 As hyt hadde smyten houres twelve.  
 Therwyth I awook myselve  
 And fond me lyinge in my bed;  
 And the book that I hadde red,  
 . . .  
 I fond hyt in myn hond ful even.  
 Thoghte I, "Thys ys so queynt a sweven  
 That I wol, be processe of tyme,  
 Fonde to put this sweven in ryme  
 As I kan best, and that anoon."  
 This was my sweven; now hit ys doon.<sup>47</sup>

Chaucer's dreamer describes his waking, his reflections on his dream, and his resolution to write it down in rhyme. The last line of the poem

<sup>45</sup> "Þanne were marchauntis merye; many wepe for ioye, / And yaf wille for his writyng wollene cloþis; / For he copiede þus here clause þei couden hym gret mede" (A VIII.42–44).

<sup>46</sup> Wendy Scase, "Writing and the Plowman: Langland and Literacy," *YLS* 9 (1995): 121–31 (127).

<sup>47</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Book of the Duchess*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, gen ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 1321–34.

indicates that what we have just read constitutes the work the dreamer set himself to do when he awoke from his dream.

As in many medieval dream-visions, Chaucer and Langland both “focused attention on a human experience clearly linked to literary process, and the reader of a dream vision was prepared for a poem that, examining the dream experience, might also examine its own status as poetry.”<sup>48</sup> Like Chaucer, Langland indicates the two waking moments on either end of B XIX/C XX as prompts to writing. But Langland’s scenes of waking composition differ from Chaucer’s and those of most other medieval dream-visions in that they do not neatly conclude the poem. Will’s writing functions as more than a frame that links dreaming to literary process. Writing here constitutes part of the plot, part of Will’s spiritual and ethical itinerary.

Langland’s momentary etiology of the poem’s invention also pointedly avoids the didactic rhetoric of some prophetic dream-visions in which dreamers are called to make known certain teachings and judgments to the powers that be.<sup>49</sup> In *Mum and the Sothsegger*, the bee-keeper evinces none of Imaginatif’s caution about making when he exhorts the dreamer,

Loke thou write wisely my wordes echone;  
Hit wol be exemple to sum men seuene yere here-after.  
. . .  
And make vp thy matiere, thou mayst do no better.  
Hit may amende many men of their misdeedes.  
Sith thou felyst the fressh lete no feynt herte  
Abate thy blessid bisynes of they boke-making[.]<sup>50</sup>

The bee-keeper places the vision in the tradition of political counsel books, the various “mirrors of princes” that convey wisdom to the powerful so that they may “amende . . . their misdeedes,” solving the problem of disordered action by supplying right knowledge. The bee-keeper

<sup>48</sup>Steven F. Kruger, *Dreaming in the Middle Ages* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 135.

<sup>49</sup>On prophetic and apocalyptic visionary vocations and their significance in *Piers Plowman*, see Richard Kenneth Emmerson, “The Prophetic, the Apocalyptic, and the Study of Medieval Literature,” in *Poetic Prophecy in Western Literature*, ed. Jan Wojcik and Raymond-Jean Frontain (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 1984), 40–54.

<sup>50</sup>*Mum and the Sothsegger*, in *The “Piers Plowman” Tradition: A Critical Edition of “Pierce the Ploughman’s Crede,” “Richard the Redeless,” “Mum and the Sothsegger” and “The Crowned King,”* ed. Helen Barr (London: J. M. Dent, 1993), 1268–69, 1278–81.

betrays a naïvely Platonist anthropology, according to which agents must only know the good in order to do it, while the work as a whole expresses a satirist's cynicism about the likely impact his truth-telling will have on society. The dreamer awakes confident that his visions were

nedeful and notable for this newe world,  
and eeke plaisant to my pay for thay putten me reste  
Of my long labour and loitryng aboute.

(1295–97)

But instead of writing down his dream, the narrator proceeds to unpack “a bagge” of “poyse,” “Of vice and of vertue fulle to the margyn” (1343, 1344, 1346), and these fragments of satire and moral allegories ramble on for 400 inconclusive lines. Since he never directly links his dream to the invention of the foregoing lines, they merge into the rag-tag collection of “poyse.” As A. C. Spearing puts it, “ultimately the dream has been used as an excuse for the collapse of literary form into a mere catalogue.”<sup>51</sup> Unlike B XIX/C XXI of *Piers Plowman*, *Mum and the Sothsegger* fails to incorporate the invention of the poetry and the act of writing into a plot of ethical and spiritual development. This may be why “boke-making” remains for the bee-keeper an unambiguous good: writing never promises to take on the responsibility of sacramental penance.

Guillaume de Deguileville's *Pèlerinage de la vie humaine* comes closer to the liturgical context of waking and writing in B XIX/C XXI. As at the end of B XVIII/C XX, liturgical bells also wake de Deguileville's dreamer, inspiring him to write down his dream:

Algates up I ros me and to Matines I wente, but so tormented and weery I was  
þat I mihte nothing doo þere. My herte I hadde so fichched to þat I hadde met  
þat me thouhte, and yit do, þat swich is þe pilgrimage of dedliche man in þis  
cuntre, and þat he is ofte in swich periles—and þerfore I haue sett it in writinge  
in þe wise þat I mette it.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>51</sup> A. C. Spearing, *Medieval Dream-Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 166.

<sup>52</sup> Guillaume de Deguileville, *The Pilgrimage of the Lyfe of the Manhode*, ed. Avril Henry, 2 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 1:174. On Langland's awareness of and indebtedness to de Deguileville, specifically in the waking moments, see Stephen A. Barney, *The Penn Commentary on "Piers Plowman,"* Vol. 5, *C Passūs 20–22; B Passūs 18–20* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 104–5; and J. A. Burrow, *Langland's Fictions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 113–18.

Like Will at the start of B XIX/C XXI, when he wakes up, the dreamer of the *Pèlerinage* promptly goes to church, however reluctantly, and has trouble concentrating on the prayers because the dream has wearied him and still demands his affective attention. He had so affixed his heart to what he had dreamed that he perceived its profound affinity to waking life: “me thouhte . . . þat swich is þe pilgrimage of dedliche man in þis cuntre.” To “sett” the dream “in writinge” cements the connection between dream life and waking life and renders the dream available to others’ participation.

Will’s writing also opens his dream to others’ participation, but in a mode more closely united to penitential liturgy in the intricate Holy Week and post-Resurrection plotting of passus B XVIII–XIX/C XX–XXI. As Míceál Vaughan and Raymond St.-Jacques have established, the intricate plot of passus B XVIII–XIX/C XX–XXI follows the Holy Week liturgies by quoting from and alluding to them.<sup>53</sup> The Holy Week and Pentecost liturgies set the itinerary for Will’s progress through the scenes of redemption history, with Conscience as his guide. Along the way, Will participates in these quasi-historical events by making liturgical acts of devotion, such as kneeling at the coming of the Holy Spirit. When, upon waking from his dream of the Four Daughters of God, Will sends his wife and daughter to “go reuerense godes resureccion / And crepe to þe croes on knees and kusse hit for a iewel” (C XX.470–71), he is inviting them to participate in the drama of redemption he has just witnessed in his dream. They are to participate liturgically by creeping to the cross and kissing it, a practice so integrated into penitential culture that it was treated simultaneously as an expression of contrition and work of satisfaction in the thirteenth-century Constitution of Giles of Bridport, bishop of Salisbury and codifier of the Sarum Use: “Let no one presume on Easter Day to approach the Body of Christ unless he has first confessed and adored the cross.”<sup>54</sup> The liturgical con-

<sup>53</sup>Míceál F. Vaughan, “The Liturgical Perspectives of *Piers Plowman* B, XVI–XIX,” *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History* 3 (1980): 87–155; Raymond St.-Jacques, “Conscience’s Final Pilgrimage in *Piers Plowman* and the Cyclical Structure of the Liturgy,” *Revue de l’Université d’Ottawa* 40, no. 2 (1970): 210–23; and Raymond St.-Jacques, “Langland’s Bells of the Resurrection and the Easter Liturgy,” *ESC* 3, no. 2 (1977): 129–35.

<sup>54</sup>Henry John Feasey, *Ancient English Holy Week Ceremonial* (London: Thomas Baker, 1897), 120; available at *Internet Archive*, [archive.org/details/ancientenglishho00feas](http://archive.org/details/ancientenglishho00feas) (accessed May 25, 2011). Here adoration of the cross is the fitting expression of contrition and satisfaction, the other parts of penance in addition to confession.

text of this waking interlude draws all prior and subsequent episodes into its orbit—just as the Triduum encompasses and reframes the entire Christian liturgical year. Whatever comes beyond this point will necessarily have to refer back to the centrality of the cross and the penitential participation by which the cross effects salvation. By signaling the writtleness of the poem at this theologically pivotal moment of the work, Langland unites his work of making to a penitential practice of satisfaction. Will's writing in the waking state corresponds to the textually encoded liturgical actions of kneeling and creeping to the cross. Langland connects this marker of invention, of written labor, to the penitential liturgy of devotion to the cross and to the sacrament of the Eucharist by placing the first explicit acknowledgment of the poem's writtleness in the chiasmic fold between two liturgies.

### Sacramental Penance and Literary Satisfaction

Having situated the writing of *Piers Plowman* within theologically significant chiasmic patterning that unites the work of writing the poem to the work of penitential liturgy, I now turn to the evidence from historical theology concerning practices of satisfaction. Langland invests so much in these formal dynamic middles perhaps because he is chiefly concerned with the lives of the spiritual middle class, the *mediocriter boni* who have not given themselves over to evil, nor reached the state of perfection, but who must repent and rely on God's mercy if they are to make it to heaven.<sup>55</sup> Truth's pardon, the poem's most succinct soteriological statement, assigns those who do good to heaven and those who do evil to hell, leaving the vast middle category of sinners who repent for further explication.<sup>56</sup> This middle category is vast indeed, for the Christian life, even the life of a saint, requires continuous conversion. It is always lived in and from the middle, *in via*.<sup>57</sup> Traugott Lawler has

<sup>55</sup> See Giles Constable, *Three Studies in Medieval and Religious Social Thought: The Interpretation of Mary and Martha, the Ideal of the Imitation of Christ, the Orders of Society* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 342–60.

<sup>56</sup> The pardon Truth gives to Piers comprises two lines of Latin from the Athanasian Creed: "Et qui bona egerunt ibunt in vitam eternam; / Qui vero mala in ignem eternum" (C IX.286a–b). A priest looking on glosses the Latin: "do wel and haue wel, and god shal haue thy soule / And do yuele and haue euele and hope thow non oþere / Bote he þat euele lyueth euele shal ende" (C IX.290–92).

<sup>57</sup> As Alan Fletcher has argued, drawing on evidence of Langland's practice of revision from version to version, "if the *conversio morum* and its socially desirable by-products were to be sustained, contrition must ever be renewed. It was not a once-off event. And such ongoing contrition is necessarily a project that only a fluidly adaptive text is likely to succeed in enabling: a continuing *conversio morum* requires a coextensive *conversio textus*;

demonstrated how Langland articulates this middle option throughout the poem, especially in revisions from the B- to the C-text.<sup>58</sup> Peace and Mercy carry the day in their debate with Truth and Righteousness (B XVIII/C XX) precisely because Christ's mercy extends to sinners who repent, and extends to them for the sake of their salvation. Lawler summarizes the soteriology thus: "if to do penance is to do well, and to do well is to enter eternal life, then those who sin but do penance will enter eternal life."<sup>59</sup>

Langland identifies the public penitential work of *Piers Plowman* by drawing on the pastoral theology of satisfaction in all its diversity. Penitential practices and theology figure prominently in *Piers Plowman*. Patience explicitly rehearses the conventional penitential theology:

*Cordis contricio* cometh of sorwe of herte  
 And *oris confessio* cometh of knowlechyng and shrifte of mouthe  
 And *operis satisfaccio* for soules paieth and alle synnes quybeth.  
 (C XVI.29–31)

Satisfaction remains largely undefined in *Piers Plowman*, and its conventional tripartite analysis as prayer, fasting, and almsgiving does not readily correspond to the work many readers understand the poem to be doing. Scholars have given much more attention to confession because this part of the sacrament clearly corresponds to the poem's narrative of failure.<sup>60</sup> But three themes from the pastoral literature on

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it demands an ongoing, restless adaptation, a re-making by and in the agents of its manufacture. Writing, and the unending business, until death, of repenting and doing well in the real world, may for Langland have been reciprocal activities, and this reciprocity, I would suggest, yields another way of accounting for why he was drawn repeatedly back to his poem. His repeated acts of 'making' may in themselves have embodied a moral venture as much as they indulged some guiltily self-absorbed pleasure in the writing of poetry." Fletcher, "The Essential (Ephemeral) William Langland," 67–68.

<sup>58</sup>Lawler, "The Pardon Formula in *Piers Plowman*," 128–31. Lawler adduces evidence from emphatic C-text revisions, such as this amplification of Repentance's prayer on behalf of the repentant *commune*:

[W]hat tyme we synnefole men wolden be sory  
 For dedes that we han don ylle dampned sholde we ben neuere  
 Yf we knowlechede and cryde Crist þefore mercy:  
*Quandocumque ingemuerit peccator omnes iniquitates eius non recordabor amplius.*  
 (C VII.145–47a)

<sup>59</sup>Lawler, "The Pardon Formula in *Piers Plowman*," 140.

<sup>60</sup>Of the three parts of penance, confession has received the most attention in studies of *Piers Plowman*. Its first lines signal that the work involves confession. The narrating "I" reflects back on another time from a particular moral vantage, one from which the "werkes" of his past seem "vnholly" (C Prol.3). The Londe of Longynge episodes, espe-

satisfaction complicate and enrich an understanding of satisfaction as prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, and illuminate how Langland understands satisfaction.

First, one aspect or “part” of satisfaction is contrition for and recollection of past sins *in prayer*, apart from and subsequent to auricular confession to a priest. As the Good Samaritan tells Will, “sorwe of herte is satisfaccion for suche þat may nat paye” (C XIX.604). The fourteenth-century preaching manual *Fasciculus morum* suggests the narrative quality of prayerful satisfaction:

Therefore, the words of the Psalm apply well to these and others who thus grieve for their sins: “I will recount to you all my years,” and so forth; add: the years I have spent in vain endeavors, for which I have held the eternal years in my mind which I have lost with their glory, and therefore I have kept them firmly in my contrite mind.<sup>61</sup>

This kind of contrite recollection *as satisfaction* could describe much of what readers of *Piers Plowman* have typically and problematically treated as confession. To understand *Piers Plowman*’s narratives of failure as confession is problematic because auricular confession must be made to a priest, and so any analysis of *Piers Plowman* in terms of confession has had to use an analogy to confession, rather than the sacrament itself. If we understand the narratives of failure as satisfaction, we can see how Will within the poem and William Langland as author could both be performing the work of satisfaction by recounting “the years I have spent in vain endeavors.”

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cially, can be read as the extended confession of error. Vaughan argues that *Piers Plowman* “is one man’s confession of mouth, his contrite narration of his past life of sleeping, of misunderstanding, ignorance, and sin, from which he finally ‘gan awake.’” Míceál F. Vaughan, “‘Til I gan awake’: The Conversion of Dreamer into Narrator in *Piers Plowman* B,” *YLS* 5 (1991): 175–92 (191). See also Vaughan, “Liturgical Perspectives,” 87–101. John Bowers doubts whether Will has the requisite contrition to make a good confession, arguing that his sleepiness in the early passus represents a slothful disposition that resists contrition; John Bowers, *The Crisis of Will in “Piers Plowman”* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1986), 61–77. Katherine C. Little leaves the poem’s penitential work to one side to focus on its critical function, arguing that “Langland’s portrait of confession [in B V] underlines the magnitude of the task of reform as well as ‘some misgivings’ about it.” Katherine C. Little, *Confession and Resistance: Defining the Self in Late Medieval England* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 27. For a consideration of the poem’s lived theology of penance ordered toward reconciliation, see Rachael Deagman, “The Formation of Forgiveness in *Piers Plowman*,” *JMEMSt* 40, no. 2 (2010): 273–97.

<sup>61</sup>*Fasciculus morum: A Fourteenth-Century Preacher’s Handbook*, ed. and trans. Siegfried Wenzel (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989), 525.

Second, by the fourteenth century the category of “almsgiving” had greatly expanded to include all the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, with the latter including “to teach the uneducated, give counsel to people who are in doubt, console the sorrowing, correct the sinner, forgive those who offend, support those who are burdened, and pray for all.”<sup>62</sup> The meaning of “alms” is similarly dilated in *Piers Plowman*, where the *lorelles* who do not want to help Piers plow his half-acre pray that his grain will multiply, in exchange for his “Almesse þat ȝe ȝeuen vs here” (C VIII.133). The material alms Piers might give the *lorelles* are later transfigured into the fruits of his scriptural plowing as the seeds of virtues that he plants grow into good deeds (C XXI.258–75). Likewise, *Fasciculus morum* turns the parable of the sower and the seed to consider satisfaction by almsgiving: “Next you must . . . put on it some soil that is rich and fertile, called *marl* in English, which is true and just penance for this and that sin. And then let us sow the seed of good works.”<sup>63</sup> Alms, dilated to include all the spiritual and corporal works of mercy, resist the privatization of satisfaction. Satisfaction by alms is oriented toward the person or community offended, making it a public action rather than a private transaction of the kind satirized throughout *Piers Plowman*, the “pryue payment” that Friar Flatterer accepts from Contrition at the low point of the final passus (C XXII.364). Furthermore, the works of mercy prominently include edification, counsel, and fraternal correction. *Piers Plowman* is full of such works of mercy and therefore the writing of the poem constitutes the work of “alms” as penitential satisfaction.

Third, *Piers Plowman* holds a mechanistic understanding of penance up to critique, promoting instead what I call open-ended satisfaction. Priests from at least the thirteenth century frequently imposed, in addition to a specific penance, this general penance as part of the absolution: “May whatever good you do and suffering you endure be for the remission of your sins.”<sup>64</sup> Thomas Aquinas praised this penance for its psycho-

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., 529.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., 549.

<sup>64</sup>This is the rubric as it was eventually formalized after Trent in the penitential rite of Paul V: “Passio Domini nostri Iesu Christi, merita beatae Mariae Virginis, & omnium Sanctorum, & quicquid boni feceris & mali sustinueris sint tibi in remissionem peccatorum, augmentum gratiae, & praemium vitae aeternae.” *Rituale romanum Pauli Quinti* (Rome, 1636), 48–49; available at Google Books, <http://books.google.co.uk/> (accessed October 4, 2014). The exact wording varies in pre-Tridentine sources. Relevant to England is this rubric for absolution in the Sarum Pontifical: “Passio Jesu Christi, merita beatae Mariae, et omnium sanctorum, et totius ecclesiae catholicae, quicquid etiam boni

spiritual sensitivity, noting that the debt of sin is often so great that a fittingly heavy penance would extinguish the small flame of contrition. Better, he thought, “that the priest should tell the penitent how great a penance ought to be imposed on him for his sins; and let him impose on him nevertheless something that the penitent could tolerably bear.” Then if the penitent does more good beyond the penance, those works will avail for the remission of sins because the priest has endowed them with the expiatory power of the keys.<sup>65</sup> By 1614 this general penance was enshrined in the mandatory Roman penitential rite, but it was in widespread use in the late Middle Ages.<sup>66</sup> This meant that when wisely

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feceris et mali sustinueris pro dilectione Dei et proximi, cedant tibi in remissionem istorum et aliorum peccatorum tuorum, in augmentum gratiae, et praemium vitae aeternae.” *Monumenta ritualia ecclesiae Anglicanae; or, Occasional Offices of the Church of England According to the Ancient Use of Salisbury*, Vol. I, ed. William Maskell (London: W. Pickering, 1846), 228.

<sup>65</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones de quodlibet*, quodlibet III q. 13 art. 1; available at <http://www.corpusthomicum.org/q03.html> (accessed January 15, 2011). This quodlibetal question, composed during Thomas’s second regency in Paris, 1268–72, is the earliest record of the rubric I have found, besides the Sarum Use (see previous note). Thomas suggests that the rubric is already in widespread use: “These things which he does beyond the expressed command more greatly receive the power of the expiation of present sins from that general imposition that the priest says: *May whatever good you do be for the remission of your sins*. So it is praiseworthy that many priests became accustomed to saying this—although they do not have the greater power to grant remedy against future sin; and insofar as such satisfaction is sacramental in this case, it expiates [already] committed sins by the power of the [office of the] keys” (“et haec quae praeter iniunctionem expressam facit, accipiunt maiorem vim expiationis culpae praeteritae ex illa generali iniunctione qua sacerdos dicit: *quidquid boni feceris, sit tibi in remissionem peccatorum*. Unde laudabiliter consuevit hoc a multis sacerdotibus dici, licet non habeant maiorem vim ad praebendum remedium contra culpam futuram; et quantum ad hoc talis satisfactio est sacramentalis, in quantum virtute clavium est culpae commissae expiativa”).

<sup>66</sup> The rubric seems to have become more closely united with routine absolution and more widely used over the course of the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. The Sarum Pontifical, which likely has its roots in the early thirteenth century, gives this rubric in the context of the reconciliation of excommunicates (see note 64 above). In *Pupilla oculi* (1385), an influential manual for priests, John of Burgh, chancellor of the University of Cambridge, assumes that the rubric is being used regularly for the penance of lay communicants. He remarks that “after the imposition of the specific penance, priests are accustomed to say, ‘May whatever good you do be for the remission of your sins,’—and this practice is extremely praiseworthy” (“Solent namque sacerdotes post iniunctam penitentiam specialem sic dicere, *Quicquid boni feceris sit tibi in remissionem peccatorum et valde laudabiliter*”). John of Burgh, *Pupilla oculi* (Strasburg: Schott, Knobloch, and Götz, 1516), xl; available at Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, gateway-bayern.de/VD16+J+374 (accessed June 13, 2013). The Middle English verse adaptation of *Pupilla oculi*, John Mirk’s *Instructions for Parish Priests* (c. 1400), includes the rubric in Latin as an intrinsic part of the absolution, with no comment on its laudability. See John Mirk, *Instructions for Parish Priests*, ed. Gillis Kristensson (Lund: Gleerup, 1974), 162–63. To situate the mainstream adoption of this rubric in the broader historical development of penance, see Henry Ansgar Kelly, “Penitential Theology and Law

applied, the three parts of penance did not constitute a closed sequence with a discrete beginning and end, confined to the parish church during obligatory annual shrift in Holy Week, but permeated all of life, since every good work and every suffering could avail for the remission of sins.

*Piers Plowman* is not the only fourteenth-century example of writing as an alms-deed, a spiritual work of mercy in an open-ended, lifelong practice of satisfaction. According to Richard Rolle's *Form of Living*, alms-deeds involve "nat only to gyf pouer men met or drynke, bot for to . . . enfourme ham how þay shal do þat ben in poynt to perisshe."<sup>67</sup> *Piers Plowman* is if nothing else an effort to "enforme" those who will some day face death "how þay shal do" by making of the phrase a question and enacting the search for its answer in the quest for Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest. Rolle's penitent can "enfourme ham how þay shal do" by "clennesse . . . in hert, in mouth, and in werke," three spheres of the spiritual life that continuously interact in "honest occupacioun and profitable," and in "litelle . . . speche." The economy of speech Rolle envisions cannot be achieved until "þi hert be stablet in þe loue of Ihesu, so þat þe þynke þat þou lokest euer on hym [Christ], wheþer þou spek or noȝt." This means that the task Holy Church enjoins on Will—"Lere hit thus lewed men . . . : / Than treuthe and trewe loue is no tresor bettre" (C I.135)—might constitute a work of satisfaction, an "almes dede" of "clennes of mouth," but not without great travail and habituation: "Bot such a grace may þou nocht haue in þe first day, bot with longe trauaille and gret businesse to loue, and with custume."<sup>68</sup> To do well in such work will require lifelong practice.

While Rolle's immediate audience was the anchoress Margaret Kyrkeby, his conception of *clene speche* as a lifelong work of satisfaction extends to the project Nicholas Watson finds him sharing with Dante: "to engage in complex processes of reinterpretation of their lives and writings in order to present them as patterned in meaningful ways . . . creating retrospective patterns where none were before."<sup>69</sup> As Watson notes, the evangelistic goals of such a project require author and literary

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at the Turn of the Fifteenth Century," in *A New History of Penance*, ed. Abigail Firey (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 239–98.

<sup>67</sup> Richard Rolle, *The Form of Living*, in *Richard Rolle: Prose and Verse*, ed. S. J. Ogilvie-Thomson, EETS o.s. 293 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 13.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> Nicholas Watson, *Richard Rolle and the Invention of Authority* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 267.

persona to overlap, connecting the subjectivities and work of invention inside the poem to the work of an author outside the poem, thus rendering the fictive material real and publicly available for use and participation. Middleton has also recognized that “the visionary duration of Will’s life, the making of the poem that records it, and a life of penitential self-knowledge through confession are . . . rendered synonymous.”<sup>70</sup> This obliquely autobiographical connection causes the internal, fictional work of the poem—Will’s quest—and, eventually, his writing, to participate in the external work of its invention, composition, and disposition: William Langland’s work of satisfaction, understood as a lifelong project to “kenne it aboute” (C I.88) “how þai sall do”—in Rolle’s terms—by “clennes of mouth.”<sup>71</sup> Rolle’s and Langland’s shared sense of the lifelong, open-ended nature of satisfaction anticipates the expansion of the absolution rubric in Mirk’s *Instructions to Parish Priests* (c. 1400) to emphasize just this aspect of satisfaction. Mirk integrates the “whatever good you do” rubric with the traditional absolution and makes explicit what was only implied in earlier versions of the rubric: “may all the good deeds which you have done *and will do up to the end of your life* be for the remission of these and all your other sins.”<sup>72</sup> Langland approaches the relationship between penance and Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest from this open-ended perspective on penance, this sense of satisfaction as ongoing and potentially imbuing all of life.<sup>73</sup> The poetry’s representational mode absorbs the form of the sacrament. The writing of the poetry can then become a means of enacting the sacrament of penance, of doing well for the remission of sins.

### Making Satisfaction across the Reformation

If we wanted an image of a pivotal juncture between Langland’s practice of making satisfaction, Conscience’s tears in the final passus “for the

<sup>70</sup> Anne Middleton, “William Langland’s ‘Kynde Name’: Authorial Signature and Social Identity in Late Fourteenth-Century England,” in *Literary Practice and Social Change in Britain, 1380–1530*, ed. Lee Patterson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 15–82 (60).

<sup>71</sup> Rolle, *The Form of Living*, 13.

<sup>72</sup> Mirk, *Instructions for Parish Priests*, 163 (my italics). The full rubric after the traditional absolution reads, “Ista humilitas et passio domini nostri ihesu christi / et merita sancte matris ecclesiae, et omnes indulgencie / tibi concessae, et omnia bona que fecisti et facies vsque / in finem vite tue, sint tibi in remissionem istorum et / omnium aliorum peccatorum tuorum. Amen” (162–63).

<sup>73</sup> Larry Scanlon has recognized this dynamic in the B V pageant of the Seven Deadly Sins, where the penitential “discourse this piece of poetry draws on offers no moment where semiosis stops. Langland’s personifications of penitential discourse are drawn into

failure . . . of the penitential system,"<sup>74</sup> and Briony Tallis's authorial despair over the impossibility of atonement, we might turn to Sir Thomas Wyatt's *A Paraphrase of the Penitential Psalms*, written likely in the wake of a revision of penitential theology by the 1536 *Articles about Religion* (commonly known as the Ten Articles). In passages of connecting commentary, as well as in the Psalm paraphrases themselves, Wyatt dwells on the incommensurable difference between God and man, and the impossibility of satisfying the infinite debt not only of David's grave sins, but of any sin whatsoever.

But when he weigh'th the fault and recompense,  
 He damn'th his deed and findeth plain  
 Atween them two [David and God] no whit equivalence  
 Whereby he takes all outward deed in vain  
 To bear the name of rightful penitence,  
 Which is alone the heart returned again  
 And sore contrite that doth his fault bemoan,  
 And outward deed the sign of fruit alone.<sup>75</sup>

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an endless signifying loop by the requirement of doctrines no less than by their poetic complexity." Larry Scanlon, "Personification and Penance," *YLS* 21 (2007): 1–29 (29).

<sup>74</sup>Nicholas Watson, "Piers Plowman, Pastoral Theology, and Spiritual Perfectionism: Hawkyn's Cloak and Patience's Pater Noster," *YLS* 21 (2007), 83–118 (116). Watson labels this interpretation of Conscience's cries as "Lutheran" or more generally "post-Reformation," and after interrogating the post-Lateran IV "pastoral project" and its failures, he concludes that "even in crisis, Langland's commitment to the universalism of the pastoral project remains unshaken." As evidence, he turns to the chiasmic passages that have occupied much of this essay: "the sacrament of the Eucharist survive[s] untouched, given renewed emphasis by Will's reintegration with the church through the Mass in passūs 18–19, as he experiences the life and death of Christ and lives the same events liturgically in his waking life (especially B.18.427–33, 19.1–4)" (117). According to my reading here, *Piers Plowman* embraces and transcends penitential "failure," absorbing it in the ongoing life of sanctification and satisfaction, not only for individuals, but for the corporate Church as well—a topic for another essay. Langland's understanding of open-ended satisfaction, as I have developed it here, resists Watson's understanding of the meaning of pastoral and institutional failure in *Piers Plowman*. The poem is not just a critique of a failed project, nor a desperate act of hope predicated on an overrealized eschatology (*ibid.*, 96). Rather, it contributes to the pastoral project and articulates an eschatological horizon in which the failures of the institutional Church must constantly be repaired and atoned for in a penitential quest for union with the crucified Lord. The pastoral project is not a progressive nor an apocalyptic project, and therefore need not be abandoned when it does not succeed in effecting or witnessing an "imminent transformation of the world" (*ibid.*). To apply a phrase of Protestant coinage to Langland, *Ecclesia semper reformanda est* (the Church must always be reformed).

<sup>75</sup>Sir Thomas Wyatt, *A Paraphrase of the Penitential Psalms*, in *The Complete Poems*, ed. R. A. Rebholz (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), 648–55.

Wyatt's suspicion of the "outward deed" echoes the 1536 *Articles'* emphasis that works cannot of themselves merit anything: "not as though our contrition, or faith, or any works proceeding thereof, can worthily merit or deserve to attain the said justification."<sup>76</sup>

Reading both of these texts from the perspective of later developments in radical Puritan thought, James Simpson notes that for Wyatt's David, "nothing but grace, or God's unprovoked, unmerited gift, defines the relation between sinner and God. . . . Grace, in this account, renders the virtuous accretions of the individual life entirely redundant, or at best a 'sacrifice.'"<sup>77</sup> To be sure, certain strains of English theology would develop in this direction, and Thomas Cranmer's Forty-Two Articles of 1552 would exclude penance from the sacraments, grouping it among those practices "grown partly of the corrupt following of the Apostles," leaving only the "dominical" sacraments of baptism and Eucharist.<sup>78</sup> Yet the 1536 *Articles* include penance in the triad of sacraments "instituted of Christ in the New Testament as a thing so necessary to man's salvation, that no man which after his Baptism is fallen again, and hath committed deadly sin, can, without the same, be saved, or attain everlasting life."<sup>79</sup> While the Ten Articles consider that the sinner "hath no works or merits of his own, which he may worthily lay before God, as sufficient satisfaction for his sins,"<sup>80</sup> they emphatically endorse practices of satisfaction that might as well find their place in a medieval Catholic penitential manual:

all men truly penitent, contrite, and confessed, must needs also bring forth the fruits of penance, that is to say, prayer, fasting, almsdeeds, and must make restitution or satisfaction in will and deed to their neighbour, . . . and also must do all other good works of mercy and charity, . . . or else they shall never be saved.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>76</sup> *Articles about Religion, Set Out by the Convocation, and Published by the King's Authority*, in *Formularies of Faith Put Forth by Authority during the Reign of Henry VIII*, ed. Charles Lloyd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1856), 12; available at Google Books, <http://books.google.co.uk/> (accessed February 14, 2012).

<sup>77</sup> James Simpson, *The Oxford English Literary History*, Vol. 2, 1350–1547: *Reform and Cultural Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 324.

<sup>78</sup> Gerald Lewis Bray, *Documents of the English Reformation 1526–1701* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2004), 299.

<sup>79</sup> *Articles about Religion*, 8.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 10–11.

In the political welter of subsequent decades, the Ten Articles' palpable tension between the real social consequences of sin, the gratuitousness of salvation, and penitential cooperation with grace in works of satisfaction would appear to have been no more than "a careful, if finally incoherent, compromise between radical and conservative views."<sup>82</sup>

But Langland's practices of satisfaction—performed as contrite, questing, and edifying works of mercy—suggest another view on Wyatt's penitential poetic, a view from which the Ten Articles appear surprisingly coherent. Langland's careful development of the relationship between doing well, poetic making, and sacramental satisfaction finds an echo in Wyatt's penitential poetics. For David's contrite heart does more than just feel contrition; it "doth his fault bemoan" (654), not only in acknowledgment of wrongdoing, but in recognition and announcement of God's mercy, to "lere[n] hit thus lewed men," in Holy Church's terms (C I.135): "Sinners I shall into thy ways address, / They shall return to thee and thy grace sue" (486–87). Wyatt's David echoes the penitential manuals' understanding of edification as a work of mercy because medieval penitential theology was itself derived in part from the penitential Psalms—a salutary reminder that reformist preference for scripture often did not effect a rupture with tradition, which was also based on scripture. While Wyatt interjects his own concern about outward show—"But thou delights in no such gloze / Of outward deed as men dream and devise" (498–99)—he also uses the Psalm that would become the Book of Common Prayer's morning canticle to work out how deeds, and especially his own public, poetic practice of satisfaction, can constitute authentic "sacrifice." The key is God's grace cooperating within him to generate deeds that God can accept outwardly:

Thou must, O Lord, my lips first unloose,  
 . . .  
 Make Zion, Lord, according to thy will,  
 Inward Zion, the Zion of the ghost.  
 Of heart's Jerusalem strength the wall still.  
 Then shalt thou take for good these outward deeds  
 As sacrifice thy pleasure to fulfil.  
 Of thee alone thus all our good proceeds.  
 (494, 503–8)

<sup>82</sup>Simpson, *Reform and Cultural Revolution*, 324.

Wyatt takes such pains to parse outward show and inward true contrition because he keenly perceives the danger of what Sarah Beckwith has called “the mind’s retreat from the face” in early modern England—the widening gap between personal belief and collective uniformity, between private dissent and public allegiance, between authentic religion and perfunctory rites, between the invisible and the visible Church.<sup>83</sup> For Wyatt’s David, sin is the name for this retreat, and insofar as it is a retreat from the face of God, the remedy for sin is to be healed and strengthened from inside out—not just inside.<sup>84</sup> Sin has not lost its public dimension, nor has reconciliation.<sup>85</sup>

The radical Protestant Robert Crowley, who edited, glossed, and printed three editions of *Piers Plowman* B in 1550, seems to have concurred.<sup>86</sup> To be sure, he identifies Lady Mede’s ability to finagle cheap grace as “the fruites of Popish penaunce,” and he labels as “the olde satisfacion” Lechour’s preposterous rehab plan to “drynke but wiþ þe duck” for seven years of Saturdays.<sup>87</sup> But despite Crowley’s periodization, he aligns the Protestant present with Langland’s deeply conventional critique of penitential abuses, revealing a fundamental continuity between the two authors’ reforming impulses. And at what is perhaps *Piers Plowman*’s most “Catholic” moment, when Christ entrusts the office of the keys to a very Petrine Piers (B XIX.182–90), Crowley’s only gloss actually intensifies the penitential logic of *redde quod debes*, by

<sup>83</sup> Beckwith, *Shakespeare and the Grammar of Forgiveness*, 20–33.

<sup>84</sup> On the same issue of inner and outward actions, Erasmus believed, according to Jennifer Herdt, that “To imitate exemplary virtues—the charity of Christ and the saints—is not to do something merely ‘external’; to honor and admire exemplary virtue without imitating it is.” Jennifer Herdt, *Putting on Virtue: The Legacy of the Splendid Vices* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 109. Where Wyatt could differ—and where Herdt locates a fatal development in early modern ethical theory—is on the capacity of outward deeds to effect inward change. For Erasmus, “what is ‘exterior,’ what appears, can shape what is ‘interior,’ the character of our hearts” (109).

<sup>85</sup> As Simpson remarks, in David’s efforts to reconcile himself with God we can also perceive Wyatt’s suit to regain Henry VIII’s favor. While the analogy renders “the relationship between [temporal] lord and servant . . . massively disproportionate,” it also presents Wyatt’s work of poetry as secular satisfaction for his political offenses. Simpson, *Reform and Cultural Revolution*, 327.

<sup>86</sup> See R. Carter Hailey, “‘Geuyng light to the Reader’: Robert Crowley’s Editions of *Piers Plowman* (1550),” *PBSA* 94 (2001): 483–502; Sarah A. Kelen, *Langland’s Early Modern Identities* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 26–36; Little, “Transforming Work,” 508–13.

<sup>87</sup> Robert Crowley, *The Vision of Pierce Plowman, nowe the seconde tyme imprinted by Roberte Croulye . . . Whereunto are added certayne notes and cotations in the mergyne, geuyng light to the Reader* (London: Robert Crowley, 1550) (STC 19907a), fols. 12v, 21v; *Early English Books Online*, eebo.chadwyck.com/home (accessed February 15, 2012).

which “hath Pierce power . . . / To bynde and unbinde, both here and els where / And assoylen menne of all synnes” (fol. 106v). In the margin adjacent to this controversial Catholic claim, Crowley notes, “Pierces pardon is, pai that thou oweste.”<sup>88</sup> While the gloss could seem subtly to redirect the passage toward purely juridical restitution, Crowley elsewhere chimes in with Patience’s commentary on David’s penitential Psalm 32 to affirm that “Satisfaction kylleth sinne” (fol. 73r; B XIV.95–96).<sup>89</sup> Crowley’s sideline cheer for satisfaction might bespeak uneasiness about the efficacy of auricular confession, but it resonates not at all with the interiorization and privatization of sin and forgiveness that Langland and Crowley both see as threats to authentic Christian living.

That the discourses of sacramental and literary satisfaction were alive and well in the early Reformation should not surprise. As historian Thomas N. Tentler has remarked,

The polemics of the Reformation and confessional age were bitter and prolonged precisely because the opposing parties agreed on fundamentals: that there must be ecclesiastical rites of expulsion and reconciliation, dogmatic theological formulas and causal explanations of the justification of sinners, a comprehensible psychological description of the experience of that forgiveness, and belief in the eternal consequences of the success or failure to “achieve” that forgiveness.<sup>90</sup>

Martin Luther may have been driven to desperation by the impossibility of ever fully atoning for his sins, but once he rediscovered grace through faith, lifelong repentance turned from bane to boon, the very way of the cross, as the opening salvo of the Ninety-Five Theses attests:

1. Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, when He said *Poenitentiam agite*, desired that the whole life of the faithful be penance.

<sup>88</sup>Larry Scanlon cogently surmises that “Crowley tolerates the ecclesiological claims because . . . Langland is poetically extending Catholic authority and not simply affirming it, and because as the passus continues he will use this poetic extension to demonstrate that virtuous social action is an imperative of individual conscience.” Larry Scanlon, “Langland, Apocalypse, and the Early Modern Editor,” in *Reading the Medieval in Early Modern England*, ed. Gordon McMullan and David Matthews (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 51–73 (69).

<sup>89</sup>“And satisfaction seketh oute the rote, and both sleeth and voydeth / And as it never had ben, to nought bringeth dedly syn” (fol. 73r).

<sup>90</sup>Thomas N. Tentler, “Postscript,” in *Penitence in the Age of Reformations*, ed. Katharine Jackson Lualdi and Anne T. Thayer (Burlington: Ashgate, 2000), 240–59.

2. This saying cannot be understood concerning sacramental penance, i.e., confession and satisfaction, which is administered by the priests.
3. Yet he means not only interior [penitence]; indeed, interior [penitence] is nothing, unless one outwardly performs manifold mortifications of the flesh.<sup>91</sup>

Langland's understanding of open-ended satisfaction, as I have developed it here, would make a very intriguing gloss on Luther's second thesis. One scandal of Truth's pardon—"Dowel and have well and God shal have thy soul"—is that it seems to elide the penitential system, as does Luther's second thesis. But the dynamic middle of *Piers Plowman*, saturated with both sacramental penance and the grace of faith, absorbs the penance administered by priests into a much larger picture, the "whole life of the faithful" living the *evangelium crucis*, Luther's mark of the authentic Christian life.

Nor did only the Lutherans exhibit affinities with Catholic penitential practices. Later English Reformed writers stressed lifelong sanctification as participation in the life and death of Christ. Granting that hardline Calvinist election soteriology could seem to obviate a Christian's growth in holiness, pastoral practice in many branches of the Reformation cultivated a lively and robust sense of how the good a Christian might do, or the suffering she might endure, could avail for saving participation in Christ.<sup>92</sup> As Deborah Shuger argues, many Tudor Protestants believed that "the road to heaven is paved with good works."<sup>93</sup> Where Catholic

<sup>91</sup>"1. Dominus et magister noster Iesus Christus dicendo 'Penitentiam agite &c.' omnem vitam fidelium penitentiam esse voluit. 2. Quod verbum de penitentia sacramentali (id est confessionis et satisfactionis, que sacerdotum ministerio celebratur) non potest intelligi. 3. Non tamen solum intendit interiorem, immo interior nulla est, nisi foris operetur varias carnis mortificationes." Martin Luther, "Disputatio pro declaratione virtutis indulgentiarum" (1517); available at Project Wittenberg, <http://www.projectwittenberg.org> (accessed October 4, 2014).

<sup>92</sup>Peter Lake characterizes the "ordo paenitendi" of the moderate Puritan Abdiel Ashton as an open-ended experience by which "God always employed the faults of his children to their ultimate spiritual advantage, since each lapse provided the occasion for a fresh turning to God through a recapitulation of the processes of repentance. . . . Not only was Christ responsible, through his sacrifice on the cross, for our freedom from the imputation of sin, he was also the moving force in our gradual liberation from our own sins, in the process of sanctification." Lake, *Moderate Puritans and the Elizabethan Church* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 164–65.

<sup>93</sup>Deborah Shuger, "The Reformation of Penance," *HLQ* 71, no. 4 (2008): 557–71 (561). Shuger likens Edmund Spenser's penitential theology to Langland's, noting how Una entrusts the Redcross Knight "to the care of Mercy, who guides him to a 'holy hospital' where 'seven beadmen that had vowed all / Their life to service of high heaven's

and Protestant could most readily disagree was on the possibility of condign merit—whether good works performed by grace could avail for a soul's salvation—and on the necessity of the priestly office.<sup>94</sup> But all believed on the basis of biblical evidence that good works and sufferings would receive at least rewards in heaven (e.g., Lk 6:23, 35).

By arguing that we should recognize continuities in the practice of efficacious satisfaction as open-ended growth in holiness characterized by works of mercy, literary or otherwise, I do not mean to occlude the many convolutions of penitential practice and theology wrought by the cultural revolutions of the late medieval and early modern periods.<sup>95</sup> But if we are to understand penance as a sacrament, then we cannot reduce its history to the mere sum of variable practices and discourses. One brief example from recent history suggests how we might consider a changing phenomenon such as satisfaction to exceed social and intellectual history's range of vision.

The *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (1999) was the fruit of ecumenical dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the main historical branches of the Reformation that has been taking place seriously since at least the 1960s. In it, Lutherans and Catholics “confess together” that even after Baptism:

the justified must all through life constantly look to God's unconditional justifying grace . . . and are not exempt from a lifelong struggle against the contradiction to God within the selfish desires of the old Adam (cf. Gal 5:16; Rom 7:7–10). The justified also must ask God daily for forgiveness as in the Lord's Prayer (Mt 6:12; 1 Jn 1:9), are ever again called to conversion and penance, and are ever again granted forgiveness. . . . We confess together that good works—a Christian life lived in faith, hope and love—follow justification and

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King' instruct the knight in the seven works of mercy, so that 'Mercy in the end his righteous soul might save.' Here, as in Langland, this saving mercy is at one and the same time the righteous soul's own mercifulness and the mercy of God extended to the merciful; the syntax insists upon the interlacings of human and divine initiative" (561).

<sup>94</sup>For a good example of this argument, see Thomas More, *The Confutation of Tyndale's Answer*, in *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, ed. Louis Martz et al., 15 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963–97), 8.1:90–91.

<sup>95</sup>For an appreciation of these changes that emphasizes rupture, see Thomas N. Tentler, *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 345–70.

are its fruits. When the justified live in Christ and act in the grace they receive, they bring forth, in biblical terms, good fruit.<sup>96</sup>

Absent from this formulation is agreement on the function of the office of the keys, and the *Declaration* avoids explicit discussion of the distinction between temporal and eternal *poena* and *culpa*.<sup>97</sup> But it recognizes as common to both traditions a fundamental sense of penance as an ongoing, open-ended practice of good works as a way of participating more fully in Christ. The framers of the *Joint Declaration* refuse to paper over the Reformation-era disagreements; the mutual “condemnations are still valid today and thus have a church-dividing effect.”<sup>98</sup> But neither side thought it too late to move toward reconciliation. Nor are the *Declaration*’s “binding decisions” the end, for the Church is still *in via*, “on the way to overcoming the division . . . toward that visible unity which is Christ’s will.”<sup>99</sup> The *Declaration* was subsequently ratified by the World Methodist Federation and has been widely acknowledged as valid by Anglicans.<sup>100</sup>

The principle of continuity on which these bodies based their agreement was not so much a convergence of social practices or hindsight equivocation of intellectual discourses. Rather, they understood themselves to be enhancing the incomplete “visible unity” of the universal Church, which receives its coherence only from the future, from the

<sup>96</sup>Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church, *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, 4.44, 47, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc\\_pc\\_chrstuni\\_doc\\_31101999\\_cath-luth-joint-declaration\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_31101999_cath-luth-joint-declaration_en.html) (accessed February 2, 2012).

<sup>97</sup>For a modern Lutheran’s very “Catholic” view of the office of the keys in early Lutheranism, see David Yeago, “The Office of the Keys: On the Disappearance of Discipline in Protestant Modernity,” in *Marks of the Body of Christ*, ed. Robert W. Jenson and Karl E. Braaten (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), 95–122.

<sup>98</sup>Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church, *Joint Declaration*, Preamble.1.

<sup>99</sup>*Ibid.*, Preamble.4, 5.44. The decisions shed significant “new light”:

the doctrinal condemnations of the 16th century, in so far as they relate to the doctrine of justification, appear in a new light: The teaching of the Lutheran churches presented in this Declaration does not fall under the condemnations from the Council of Trent. The condemnations in the Lutheran Confessions do not apply to the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church presented in this Declaration. (5.41)

<sup>100</sup>On Anglican agreement, see R. William Franklin, “A Model for a New Joint Declaration: An Episcopalian Reaction to the *Joint Declaration on Justification*,” in *Justification and the Future of the Ecumenical Movement*, ed. William G. Rusch (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2003), 35–46 (37–38).

promised end of Christ's high-priestly prayer "ut sint unum" (Jn 17:11)—that all may be one. For the two churches, the phenomenon of sacramental penance appears fully only when seen in eschatological perspective. The two churches can recognize satisfaction and its attendant works and mortifications as an essential part of the Christian life because they are revealed in Christ, whom both churches hold to be continuously present in his extended body, the Church universal—though not with the fullness that will be manifest in the Kingdom of Heaven. As Paul writes, Christians are "always bearing about in our body the mortification of Jesus, that the life also of Jesus may be made manifest in our bodies" (2 Cor 4:10). So it is finally the Pauline logic of the always-present but not-yet-fulfilled body of Christ, rather than historical agreements, that underwrites the *Joint Declaration's* agreement about lifelong, open-ended satisfaction as growing participation in the life of Christ.

This example suggests that inquiry into religious continuity across Renaissance and Reformation should not function primarily on a logic of conservation versus loss, though it certainly involves those dynamics. Rather, on either side of the Reformation, God and the human, united in Christ, are the dual principles of continuity. A history that does not enter sympathetically into this self-understanding is capable of measuring greater or lesser degrees of change in social practices and intellectual discourses, but not of seeing continuity in the way the communities it studies see it.

To read *Piers Plowman* from its dynamic, crucicentric middle, where loss and gain hang in the balance, refreshes the temporality of penance so that even in its dismal final passus it is not too late to cry after grace, for the crucicentric middle ensures that even failure can be turned to satisfaction. Piers may end up a "presence-become-absence" by the end of the poem, but that ending is not the poem's "conclusion."<sup>101</sup> Conscience's quest might seem endless, doomed to failure because he seeks to endow the very religious orders that brought ruin to the penitential system and the pastoral project commenced in 1215.<sup>102</sup> But as Con-

<sup>101</sup>David Aers, "Langland on the Church and the End of the Cardinal Virtues," *JMEMS* 42, no. 1 (2012), 59–81 (73). For a close reading of the final passus's penitential crisis that concurs with Aers and lends detail to my argument here, see Deagman, "The Formation of Forgiveness," 90–94.

<sup>102</sup>Aers, "Langland on the Church," provides the most comprehensive account of the final passus's institutional and sacramental failures, and the various ecclesial options.

science sets off on his new search for Piers, crying after Grace, he and his readers know much more than they did back in the fair field full of folk. They know where to look. In his new quest, Conscience knows to seek again the dynamic middle where the search for Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest prompts continual repentance and renewal in the sacraments and fosters growth in holiness, and where Piers's life of *lele labour* merges with Christ's life lived unto death for humanity.<sup>103</sup>

How else could the poem end, when the principle of continuity that will leap across the Reformation intact, the only available goal for Conscience to seek after at the end of *Piers Plowman*, is a Pauline figure of the Church as the suffering body of Christ, both conquered and conqueror in the doubled illumination of eschatological hope?

. . . Peres þe plouhman was peynted al bloody  
 And cam in with a cros before þe comune peple  
 And riht lyke in alle lymes to oure lord iesu.

. . .

Quod Conciense and knelede tho, "this aren Peres Armes,  
 His colours and his cote armure; ac he þat cometh so bloody  
 Is Crist with his croes, conquerour of Cristene."

(C XXI.6–8, 12–14)

Piers or Christ?, Will asks. The answer is both, in chiasmic relation to each other. At the beginning of Will's dream, Piers looks "riht lyke" the Lord Jesus in his physical appearance, "in alle lymes," while in Conscience's response, Christ looks like Piers in the visible marks of identity, his arms, and insignia. Here the chiasmic relation formally enacts the

<sup>103</sup>These poetic and theological considerations stand to gain intriguing support from Lawrence Warner's proposal that the B-text as we know it acquired its final two passus from the C-text. Warner gives us a scenario in which Langland sits for some years on the satisfactory, heavenly conclusion of B XVIII, and then adds a new ending that includes both the clearest realization of ecclesial unity in this world in the Pentecost scene of C XXI and the crisis of dissolution in C XXII. This new ending resituates the previous ending as an intermediate phenomenon. The addition of the final two passus then would render the old conclusion as the middle term, the balancing point for the chiasmic structure I have been exploring here. In other words, by reinventing *Piers Plowman's* ending, Langland would simultaneously introduce open-ended irresolution and embed the anagogical climax of the work *in the middle*. And if he was indeed undertaking such ambitious additions and revisions, then it is highly significant that instead of unraveling the conclusion of B XVIII, Langland left the reconciliation of the Four Daughters of God and his Easter morning waking intact. See Lawrence Warner, *The Lost History of "Piers Plowman": The Earliest Transmission of Langland's Work* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

*commercium divinum* of the hypostatic union by which God and humanity enter into the eternal mutuality reflected in the patristic dictum, "God became man that man might become God." The dictum finds an image in Piers, but becoming happens in the search, in the crying after grace, in the open-ended work of satisfaction. *Piers Plowman* ends with an open-ended quest and a cry:

"By Crist!" quod Consience tho, "y wol bicomme a pilgrim  
 And wenden as wyde as þe world rennet  
 To seke Peres the Plouhman . . ."  
 And sethe he gradde [cried, prayed] after grace tyl y gan awake.  
 (C XXII.380–82, 86)

Consience's cry and prayer echo across epochs, down to Marlowe's Faustus and even to McEwan's Briony: it is still not too late; now is the acceptable time. Langland's open-ended, recursive practice of satisfaction speaks to at least part of Briony's grief, witnessing that writing can participate in atonement. Perhaps, if atonement requires a God in which to participate, and that God does not exist, then Briony is still right that her writing cannot atone. But then it is not a matter of being too late. Periodization will not put to rest the question of faith.