Chapter 8

SENSES’ OTHER SIDES

AN INITIAL PAIR of propositions: senses work in language, but are not original to, dependent on, or servile to it; and on account of that nonlinguistic basis of senses, many entities, maybe all, but at least far beyond language’s reach, sense their worlds. Such propositions are simply that: possibly or even just intuitions or inferences; that is to say, they engage philosophical and ethical questions, at best, and become intellectual passatempo, at worst. Naturally, I want to argue for the former, because on the one hand, our own resources for understanding relations among entities in late antiquity and Byzantium are so incomplete and inarticulated that engagement with how we relate to and judge our own worlds is crucial. Patchwork, piecemeal, puzzling is our approach to the consistency of sense lives across living things, both in beings we easily assume have feelings (ourselves, animals) and those we assume do not (inert materials such as metals, for example). And so on the other hand, confronting our assumptions about life and our responsibilities can arise from historical investigations and determine both our attitudes toward the past and toward our common present. For these reasons, a highly provisional exercise that stretches the historical imagination and accords sense lives to others can be mutually beneficial.

My specific attention in this chapter is directed at the viscous in Byzantium. By that I mean (mostly, but not only) the molten: the state that wax, metal, glass, stone, and similar, can achieve when heat is applied to it, a state that can bridge the liquid and heated and that can also be the process in which fusion of otherwise separate materials can take place. The state between solid and liquid is always in process; almost no substance stays viscous. Something is always on the way to something else when in a state of viscosity. In that mobile passage between states, essences are declared, as in alchemy’s belief in the process of purification toward gold when some materials are melted and fused with others. One could take a lead on viscosity from a Christology of matter, because all matter can; for Christ’s own blood, flowing and turning to gore, is the most significant precedent of all for Christian thinking on matter’s sliding states and their holy mimesis. Mimesis is a deep need for humans and for all other entities.

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1 Sensing ought not to be confused with thinking, though the tension between the two is long-standing. For a rich treatment of such issues, see Shiff 2013. Thought, mind, and brain can extend into the world.

2 Serres 1995b, 30, and 34: “Can I think without thinking something? To be sure. But when I think this object, that subject, there is doubt that I am this subject, that object, if I truly think them”; and “Inventive thinking is unstable, it is undetermined, it is un-differentiated, it is as little singular in its function as our hand.”

3 See Fricke 2013.

4 See Taussig 1993.
But what can be discovered from thinking of how materials feel when viscous or molten? In the first place, some of that question has to be approached from our isolationist sensorium: How does it feel to us when a material state is changed, when states are bridged, when new forms and meanings arise from observing those states? But in the second, the more challenging question is: Can we know how it feels, however inadequately or approximately, to be in something else’s molten or viscous passage from one state to another? Is language up to the task? Is our sense of empathy sufficiently developed for such a leap of imagination? A historical imagination is one extra leap, and we enter a different event now, the triple jump: to an absent situation and even perhaps thing, analogical thinking, and an expansive ontology.

To try this argument and to feel how it fits and suits representation in this world we perceive and answer to, let us turn once again to wax. In the hands of some important scholars (Herbert L. Kessler, Bissera Pentcheva, and Charles Barber, in varying degrees), wax has been a significant (if secondary) material for the demonstration of Byzantine explanations of and attitudes toward matter and representation. It has stood for a commonsense demonstration of the distinction between form and matter that is necessary for seemly Christian worship. Those scholars have opened up a revealing aspect of theological rationalizations, but in doing so, they have also neglected implications of the work of wax and other viscous materials in a lived economy—as opposed to the theoretical, linguistic world of theologians.

As we’ve noted above, such scholars have often accepted theologians’ metaphor concerning the relationship between an image and its model in terms of the analogy of seals pressing into wax (as well as other materials). Recall that according to this long-standing assertion, an image is left behind in matter without any essential (that is, sharing essence) relation between image and model. This explanation of image making has all kinds of shortcomings: mind or spirit making the world with almost incidental participation of matter, for one thing. It implies a hierarchy of ontologies, too, in which a sentient, invisible agent (the hand holding seal here) controls process and outcome. The “world,” however, operates a little differently, and the analogy of the molten, quickened material poured onto a surface or into a shaped form by a conscious, thinking hand—

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5 Maybe not. See Serres, trans. in Connor 2005, 164: “We have lost hopelessly the memory of a world heard, seen, perceived, experienced joyfully by a body naked of language. This forgotten, unknown animal has become speaking man, and the word has petrified his flesh, not merely his collective flesh of exchange, perception, custom, and power, but also and above all his corporeal flesh: thighs, feet, chest, and throat vibrate, dense with words.”

6 OED: imagination, 1a, “The power or capacity to form internal images or ideas of objects and situations not actually present to the senses, including remembered objects and situations, and those constructed by mentally combining or projecting images of previously experienced qualities, objects, and situations. Also (esp. in modern philosophy): the power or capacity by which the mind integrates sensory data in the process of perception.”

7 A useful reminder from Stoller 2011, 23: “To put the matter bluntly, we often avoid acknowledging the contingent nature of situated experience, which distances us from the ambiguous, from the tangential, from the external textures and sensuous processes of our bodies.”

8 See, for example, Kessler 2000.
which is always resistant to analogy—simply and directly recapitulates every process of
image making, but that image making is not what those theologians imagined it was. It
is not so easily instrumentalized. It is, rather, participation among relational agents that
work with and against each other to bring something new and necessary into this world.

Bissera Pentcheva, for example, has built a large part of her arguments around ideas
of seals and impressions. For her, these practices fundamentally informed the making
and meaning of images in Byzantium, and they led her to propose *repoussé* icons, with
gems, gold and enamel, as the paradigmatic iconic form in Byzantium after the period of
Iconoclasm. The process begins for her with late antique tokens of the elder Symeon the
Stylite (ca. 388–459). She describes these small objects as miraculously potent impres-
sions in matter that had taken on powers of the saint, and such processes also paral-
leled processes in divinized and divinizing materials such as the Eucharistic bread.

Ensouling, or *empsychosis*, is an important transmission mode in this model for the ways
imprinting or sealing showed the movement of the divine through the world. “The Spirit
sealed the saint; his *pneuma* in turn sealed the column, the soil around it, and the eulo-
g giai [tokens] made from this earth […]. This serial imprinting ensured continual access
to the miraculous.” The movement of soul throughout matter is a compelling way of
seeing chains of operation in Byzantine materiality, but it still stops short of according
self-regulating agency to matter and leaves very often a bias in place that assumes the
impression of form on matter.

Moreover, magic appears as an unproblematic term in her model and seems to stand
straightforwardly for the way sacred power enters matter. Sealing matter is a way the
divine enters it, so matter becomes a passive field for the divine to spread its special
potency in the world. Perhaps a(n impossible) parallel would be opening a circuit for elec-
trical current that does not depend on the physical transfer of electrons for the passage
of electric charge; in other words, disembodied electricity passes through matter without
affecting or depending on it. This quasi-material magic also seems to stand for an ani-
mism, a belief that allows for a harnessing of nature, a.k.a. spirits, in inanimate objects.

Both these usages, of magic and animism, are strikingly reminiscent of nineteenth-
century precedents for a history of religion. As sympathetic as Pentcheva is to her sub-
ject, she also works to create distance to it and within it: Byzantines belong to a more
primitive world of shimmering effects that mesmerize its inhabitants, and all things
obey their Cartesian compartmentalization.

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9 See Caseau 2014.

10 Pentcheva 2010, 34.

11 Pentcheva 2010, 30–31: “The potency of the ring stems both from the precious stone and the seal
carved in it. It is this seal that controls the evil spirit: the *sphragis* of the master imprinted on all. Again
the seal introduces the master-slave relationship.” Similarly to my mind (pace) Caseau 2012. See, for
example, Herva 2012, 74–75, on Greenwood 2009, who has “stressed that magic is not about belief
or the supernatural but a form of knowledge. Magical practices, in her view, manipulate perception
and consciousness which in turn restructure one’s relationship with the world” and “artefacts can
facilitate ‘magical’ connections with reality.” The single quotation marks here do a lot of work.

12 Pentcheva 2010, 34.

13 See the Introduction to the present book.
But this world was animist, and distance was not part of it. Many animisms exist and have existed, but they all posit (to generalize) a relational system among agents, a system that can potentially encompass human and nonhuman entities, as well as places and natural phenomena.\textsuperscript{14} And such a system also depends on “serious, lively, socially relevant intellectual traditions and knowledges,” ways of knowing “that would support an expression of animism.” Without those features, we lapse into Romanticizing views of exotic and mystifying otherness.\textsuperscript{15} So dialogue among participants, ontological flexibility, deeply and thoughtfully lived—these are explicit characteristics of animisms.\textsuperscript{16} To plant spirit on matter and discuss it as manipulation is another system from animism altogether, one closer to that imagined by previous generations of historians of religions for their own purposes, which are now subject to historical analysis more than their erstwhile “animist” subjects.\textsuperscript{17}

That preceding paragraph probably unfairly judges Pentcheva’s argument (and lets others off the hook), but the lack of precision in basic definitions—and the dangerous assumptions behind those definitions that are offered—is strongly at odds with the clear competency in her mastery of sources and their historical settings. That discrepancy is difficult to assimilate. And yet the presentation of seals and stamps is forthright. To take the most important source for her argument, here is a passage from the great iconophile champion, St. Theodore of Stoudios (759–826): “A seal is one thing, and its imprint is another. Nevertheless, even before the impression is made, the imprint is in the seal. There could not be an effective seal that was not impressed on some material. Therefore, Christ also, unless he appears in an artificial image, is in this respect ideal and ineffective.”\textsuperscript{18} This formulation reveals “a perfect objective reciprocity between intaglio and imprint” for Pentcheva, and so we come to see in this way how the seal and its imprint in matter take on a theoretical symmetry—each relates to other in natural and obvious ways, each receives shared veneration, and each possesses mutually supportive identity for and with the other.

But wax has had almost no voice in this series of analyses (here both Pentcheva and Theodore are guilty), because it is an empty receiver, a passive field for signification, an invisible viscosity. Yet wax—indeed, matter—does not have limits; it arrives us; or, to put it bluntly: it has to be the \textit{whole world}\textsuperscript{19}. The miniature, the mere, stands for the mighty,

\textsuperscript{14} Curry 2006.
\textsuperscript{15} See, for example, Rooney 2006, 13.
\textsuperscript{16} Bird-David 2006, 48: “In the animistic cosmos, beings are invoked as participants and members of a single community of sharing. They cannot be depicted and looked at as objects. They have to be invoked and engaged with as co-subjects. They cannot be looked at; rather one has to look with them sharing a perspective.” See also Bird-David 1993 and Bird-David 1999.
\textsuperscript{17} See, for example, Engelke 2012.
\textsuperscript{18} See Pentcheva 2010, 86; Roth 1981, 112.
\textsuperscript{19} Taussig 2009, 14: “To thus consciously see ourselves in the midst of the world is to enter into ourselves as image, to exchange standing above the fray, the God position, for some other position that is not really a position at all but something more like swimming, more like nomads adrift in the sea, mother of all metaphor; that sea I call \textit{the bodily unconscious}.”
as metaphor allows it to do. Wax is not empty, passive, invisible, however much texts seek to disappear it. Simply dripped or poured molten onto a surface, wax pools, oozes, spreads—depending on the surface, angle, temperature, all contingencies matter—and then it buckles, waves, sighs when pressed and penetrated by the metal seal, and then it holds that memory of shape and form, but with imperfect recall, since it is in viscous passage from solid to viscous and back to solid, and then it sits, lies legible and witnessing to a moment of intimate enveloping of itself on hard metal, but like memory—smoothed of some detail and intensified in others, the unpredictable import and pathos of one detail over another—still able to support and contain that inerasable contact.

How does it feel to traverse those states and senses? And what is at stake in asking that question? I’ll argue that the second question should wait until the first is attempted. On the one hand, the imagining necessary for the first question means looking at texts, an imperfect way in and perhaps useful only as a negative exemplar (not because it’s wrong as such, but because its basic premise is off). On the other, that waxy ontology is not our own, and not only will we have to think wax, but we will also have to think past wax (both in the senses of old wax and of distant wax, in each process done, passed, and ageing, aged). Seals often declare identity, and identity with the person sealing (I am the seal of [...] ; I validate the letter of [...] ) or servitude to the saint portrayed (Saint [...] help thy servant [...] watch over me [owner, wax and document, presumably] [...] ). Theodore also gives intentionality to the seal, which “shows its desire for honor when it makes itself available for impression in many different materials.” The seal is manifestly Christ himself here and takes upon itself to press pliant wax to that extra body. Theodore also gives necessity—an effective seal is pressed into matter, otherwise it is ineffective. (And to carry the implications forward, Christ needs our resemblance more than we need his.)

Identity is transferred in this way and now legible in a new medium, but legible always as the medium allows and is able. I have focused on wax here, but wax is fragile, flakeable, and fragmentable, and it seldom survives. As a result, the primacy or exclusivity of seal over wax is always too easily accepted. The linguistic content of so many seals, too, gives them authority over seemingly blank fields for representation. Words speak and represent and fix, and their hegemonic strength is expressed into the softened, yielding wax ground. But when the seal withdraws and the wax shows, only then does the incoherence of the seal clarify. Illegible, reversed characters come to take on a new, fuller identity in matter. If theologians neglected that weakness of the seal (the incoherence of the divine) before matter arrives it, they had their reasons. We have less of an excuse for overlooking that gap in a confused self-expression (of God) and its real expression only on emergence in matter (in wax). This gap rather turns the tables in matter’s favour.

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20 Most important precedent for this attempt is Didi-Huberman 2008.
21 Roth 1981, 112.
22 Very few wax impressions are extant. The majority by far of the impressions surviving are in lead, and are much more numerous than wax impressions.
Moreover, this language is lazily gendered: the wax is feminine (accepting, pliant, furrowed, fertile), and the seal is masculine (demanding, pressing, imprinting, withdrawing). It may reduce to an easy gender binary that was enforced by uniformly male theologians in the past. It also belongs to a long tradition in Western thought describing a binary-based cosmology of human thought and action on/in the world. That is to say, human agency, primarily mind generated, imposes its will on the environment, any environment, in which humans live. Here is another real danger of this metaphor so often deployed by theologians and accepted by art historians, and it is a trap laid by the great Aristotle himself—a productive mistake, but a wrong turn just the same. In the simplest formulation, being derives from matter and form, and body works with soul in this way to create a living, animate being. In that way, wax and the seal are a metaphor that Aristotle could prefer: just as wax takes its form from its seal or impress, so form and matter create a unity of body and soul. This metaphor opened up a whole line of other metaphors that made making or action in the world a process of imposing form on matter, of mind projecting its will into the world.

Here is where mind, brain, will come to seem dominant. But really, how can any such system survive experience of the world we live in, which is after all a world of sense and matter independent of our desires? Theologians had an agenda, to be sure, and they were countering specific arguments about the essential relations of things to God. One side said images refer to a model by resemblance, custom, and even human frailty, while the other said such weak resemblance makes images beside the point, but in themselves images are too compelling, insistent, urgent, to be permitted. Both sides had only a few avenues open to counter those arguments, which are essentially right—everything is in relation to God, who filled the world with grace and presence—but it was a matter of submerging that relational position in other terms, for example, idolatry and decorousness, excessive and respectful veneration, correct and incorrect interpretations of the past. That’s to say, the question is fairly simple, but also simplistic, because matter is either innocent or guilty in this debate. (As has been pointed out before, iconoclasts are far more invested in the independent power of made things than the so-called iconophiles; the former were aware, but afraid, the latter disingenuously found neutralizing language, always language, that ploughs once again in the ancient plots of Plato and Aristotle.)

This statement can bring us back to wax’s feelings, that is, to try to take matter’s side again—and not to judge, just to empathize. A hand presses a seal (metal, stone, hard) into warm (even room temperature, let’s say) wax. Hand and seal withdraw. Their work is brief. Look at (imagine) the wax field, its luscious, viscous spillage, pressed and peaked and left to cool and harden, over against (but really under and around) the imprint, which pushes out the wax into that frozen lava ooze. The first (only) thing you see, experience, is the wax, that uneven and splayed edging, and searching, an eye finds an image, verbal and/or figural, that coalesces on secondary inspection. That field is a little unsettling: it has shape and form insisted on by the seal, and yet it has other (its own) direction and dimensions in ruffing wax. It escapes a little its category (impres-

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25 See Warner 2015.
sion, but then it is not a real mirror of its seal, yet it is also not independent, because it exists in this form because of the seal); it is both still molten or viscous (it never quite loses that quality, even when cooled and dried) and yet compliant with the seal, too. No wonder theologians took the side of the seal. The wax is in fact defiant: it absorbs the seal’s form, but submerges it, and (quasi-selflessly) wax lets the seal subside and withdraw into a spectre of itself.  

This chapter favours the particular ways matter constitutes itself, behaves, acts, and searches for its own meaning. In other words, it assumes we can observe how matter, the basic stuff of the world, plays a role in the unfolding of its own history. What results is a horizontal playing field that resists vertical ordering or stratigraphic description or temporal precedence; what results is a position for matter. And one might also claim that rather than showing how wax participated in its own negligence, the position taken here can also show how wax undermined that estimation of its passivity. That is, by reversing the order of the seal-wax hierarchy, we can see better how matter is the playing field through which the game is played, rather than upon.

The viscous can behave in a variety of ways. It can enfold and seep, withdraw and spread, as well as engulf and consume. Thinking through some implications of two late antique stone moulds in Jerusalem (at the museum of the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum) can also open up, some other ways that the viscous is really how making works, as well as ways that molten materials can show relations and transformations (Figure 27). These moulds generally were used to make small souvenir tokens or flasks or ampullae for storing and carrying sacred substances, such as oil, water, or soil. The first mould is two-sided, with scenes in both sides’ carved cavity. The second, aniconic mould presumably, could have provided a nearly plain reverse that could have been fitted or soldered to the moulded obverse. The two figural sides could also have been cast and soldered to make a double-sided ampulla with

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26 Didi-Huberman 2008, 155: “The reality of the material turns out to be more troubling because it possesses a viscosity, a sort of activity and intrinsic force, which is a force of metamorphism, polymorphism, imperviousness to contradiction (especially the abstract contradiction between form and formlessness). Concerning the viscous, Sartre articulates very well how that activity, that ‘sort of life,’ can be symbolized or socialized only as an antivalue.”

two scenes, heads and tails. One side shows the sacrifice of Isaac (labelled “evlogia tou avraam”), and the other has Daniel in the lions’ den (labelled “o agios Daniel,” “evlogia tou Daniel”). The two sides may have been connected with specific pilgrimage sites attached to the prophets, but the moulds were both found in different locations near Jerusalem and had some involvement in the pilgrimage trade.

The valve or opening at the bottom of the intact moulds is highly evocative, and it represents a kind of punctum, a passage of the object that emerges forcefully after the apparently necessary work of identifying and describing the figural portions is done, as it was above. In contrast to the cool, pale moulds—carved out of limestone—the valve represents a passage for change and othering. Bound together with a nonfigural backing, the moulds would be set upside-down so that the molten liquid could be poured into the receptacle created. Cooled, the moulds would be separated, and an object with raised elements, figural and textual, would remain. Unlike wax (or lead) impressed by a seal, in these moulds, the viscous here stays elevated from the ground, lead or wax, after passing to a settled state.

So how does the molten feel in these different contexts in which it finds itself? Warmed to its new, near-liquid consistency, wax pools against itself and drops into the moulds, leaving the wick’s light to fall on the rough surface, which catches the fall and stops the rush, as the cooling air had already begun to do. How does that feel—to metamorphose and stay oneself? To travel across a state, return to oneself, but find oneself in a different form and place? Because then the hard form does descend and push, penetrate, and attempt to leave a seed of its own form in wax’s forgiving, pulsed mound. Wax gets its own back by taking the other. The wax coats and blurs and swallows that form’s insistence. The form or imprint in the moulds is never absolutely, entirely itself again. The pressing hand also stands back now and watches its work duck the intracting, hardening pool: not what the hand intended, but it never is.

Lead is a material that also needs addressing. Does lead feel differently, being poured and impressed into the moulds? Bright and silverish in its usual state, lead is also prone to tarnish and corrosion on exposure to air for any period of time. It has a relatively low melting point for a metal. And it responds to other metals and bonds easily with some. Lead’s appearance changes to an even more intensely chrome-silver lustre as it forms a liquid state, and so as it readies to pour, it also intensifies its qualities. The lead fills, and the shallow indents in the stone are coated with this pooling metal, subsiding from its viscous state quickly and entering its condition of diminishing shine and increasing heft. Able to breathe once again with the removal of the forms, it is a new, less silvery thing.

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29 Symmetrical archaeology provides one model, to my mind, for this kind of writing, its worthwhile aspects and its solipsistic dangers. Olsen 2012, 220: “To extend ethical concerns and notions of care to also embrace things is not a question about anthropomorphizing them, turning things into human, but rather to respect their otherness and integrity.” And as corrective: “Processes of embodiment may well have charged things with sociality and personality, but simultaneously silenced their own utterances. And if they speak, it is most likely our own voices that are heard.”
and it emerges as base, eldest of all (like Saturn, according to alchemists), hoary, heavy, hard, like that ancient god.

I raised and then deferred answering the questions of what is at stake in asking how it feels to traverse the states and senses of the viscous. Put succinctly, it is the nature of relationality manifest as feeling. "No-one has ever witnessed the great battle of simple entities," Michel Serres writes. "We only ever experience mixtures, we encounter only meetings." And here we are born, each time, to the world. Aristotle talked about a sixth sense, a kind of metasensum, that mediated and articulated the working of the first five senses. Michel Serres treats that sixth sense as the skin, and perhaps this feeling surface is what we might take as the great common sense we all share, with which we meet and mix with the world. And in this case, the "we" includes wax and molten lead, the self-surfacing, viscous muck that heat makes, the substances whose inside and outsides became evident only vicariously as they wait for the next move to melt. Serres talks also about the discovery of the soul on skin, when skin touches skin, in those converging, excursive, and recursive accidents of self-touch. Maybe most significantly for Serres, the skin is the place where all entities meet and mingle.

We are born, each time, to the world, but so are objects, things, however we call entities we consign to nonfeeling. Images in the Byzantine world and into the present in Orthodox churches received intense sensual attention: kissing, fondling, stroking, leaning, embracing, and so on. They are still the concentrated focus still compelling tactile piety. These things are not passive and are not without feeling, and they moreover create our place and time. According to Serres, if we tried to do without things, we would spin mindlessly and aimlessly; but things give us mind and a slower pace in which to have mind. Without their contingencies, our own are very difficult to recognize, or even to have.

The viscous is a difficult state. Thus, wax has long been a particularly threatening substance. It is unstable, too contingent, perhaps reminding us too much of flesh or too

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30 Serres 2008, 28, and also 80: “The skin is a variety of contingency; in, through it, with it, the world and my body touch each other, the feeling and the felt, it defines their common edge [...]. I do not wish to call the place in which I live a medium, I prefer to say that things mingle with each other and that I am no exception to that, I mix the world which mixes with me.” And Chrétien 2014, 85-86: “The most fundamental and universal of all the senses is the sense of touch. Coextensive for Aristotle with animal life, it appears and disappears with it [...]. Every animated body is tactile [...]. The first evidence of soul is the sense of touch [...]. Touch is not primarily and perhaps not even ultimately one of the five senses: for Aristotle, touch is the necessary and sufficient condition for the emergence of an animated body, the perpetual basis for the possibility of human life and therefore eventually also of additional senses, which will always belong as such to a tactile body. Moreover the sense of touch, far from making the living organism into a mere spectator, pledges it to the world through and through, exposes it to the world and protects it from it. Touch bears life to its fateful, or felicitous, day.”


32 Serres 1995b, 87: “The only assignable difference between animal societies and our own resides, as I have often said, in the emergence of the object. Our relationships, social bonds, would be as airy as clouds were there only contracts between subjects. In fact, the object, specific Hominidae, stabilizes our relationships, it slows down the time of our revolutions. For an unstable band of baboons, social changes are flaring up every minute. One could characterize their history as unbound, insanely so. The object, for us, makes our history slow.”
little of the metaphoric. According to Georges Didi-Huberman, that quality is what Jean-Paul Sartre must also have meant when he described the uncanniness of the viscous, that is, the ways it threatens and undermines. Perhaps it is the antivalue of the viscous, wax and lead, that allows it to disappear not only from theological writings, such as those of Theodore of Stoudios, but also from art-historical writings on sense and representation. Perhaps the viscous undermines safe categories of representation, and it also threatens the authority of the seal, the metal or stone impress that tries to make wax the world in its own image, even if he really is Christ.

That threat was felt from the beginning of this sort of metaphoric manipulation of wax, and in conclusion, two texts—one from the fourth century and another from the fourteenth—can show the resilience of it, but from different directions. In the first place, Gregory Nazianzenus initiated a line of theological approach that denigrated the material and its effects at the expense of the noetic form of the divine. The menace of the wax is strongly felt in this rhetoric, but this expression is disingenuous, too.

Let us take two seal rings, one is gold, the other iron, which bears the same engraved imperial image [...]. Let us then impress these in the wax. What difference is there between the two seals? None. Look at the wax, and even if you are wise, can you tell me which form has been impressed with iron and which with gold? How then have these become the same? It is because the difference derives from the material and not the portrait.

Can it really be the case (to answer one hypothetical with another) that iron and gold hold form in the same way and thus transmit it equally well? Gold is a much finer, ductile material that takes detail more easily than iron can. One might not be able to tell absolutely that a seal was gold or iron from its impression in wax, but the clues would be there in most cases, even for the not wise. The impression became the same because it suited Gregory’s point. The textual quality of the metaphor gained the upper hand, and the wax continues to be silent. And yet the final sentence: the portrait or form does not differ from prototype to image, but differences do enter from choices in materials, that is, wax or something else changes form? So the material matrix is given its due indirectly. Here is the place, then, of metamorphosis, where form does change and Gregory’s portrait takes shape and qualities that only the viscous can sense.

Antivalues can characterize wax and lead, but also pitch, or resin, or petroleum, or mud, because all can be unrealized being, and all can participate in processes of making and feeling. So in the second place and at the other end of the period, the fourteenth-

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33 Gombrich 1960, 60: “Such a bust may even look to them unpleasantly lifelike, transcending, as it were, the symbolic sphere in which it was expected to dwell, although objectively it may still be very remote indeed from the proverbial wax image, which often causes us uneasiness because it oversteps the boundary of symbolism.”

34 Sartre 1943, 702–3, “Toucher du visqueux, c’est risquer de se diluer en viscosité [...]. L’horreur du visqueux c’est l’horreur que le temps devienne visqueux, que la facticité ne progresse continûment et insensiblement et n’aspire le Pour-soi qui “l’existe” [...]. [L]a viscosité se révèle soudain comme symbole d’une antivaleur, c’est-à-dire d’un type d’être non réalisé, mais menaçant, qui va hanter perpétuellement la conscience comme le danger constant qu’elle fuit et, de ce fait, transforme soudain le projet d’appropriation en projet de fuite.” See Didi-Huberman 2008, 154.

35 Patrologiae Graecae 36, 396C; Barber 2007, 137–38.
century theologian Neophytus Prodromenus, a continuator of iconophile theology, used the seal as a metaphor for the innocence of matter. The chain of models extends here from the emperor, his hand, wax, and so on, and participant matter strikingly expands to include several types of the viscous:

Consider the example of an image of the emperor engraved on a seal ring. This might now be impressed in wax, in pitch, or in mud. For while the seal [image] is one and invariable in them, the materials are different; hence the seal [image] also remains in the ring, separated from the [materials] in thought. It is the same for the likeness of Christ, since no matter which medium presents this, it has nothing to do with these materials, but remains in the person of Christ.36

The language has not clarified since the fourth century, but the use of pitch and mud as another kind of semiliquid/solid for sensing and showing relation with the divine reveals the ongoing usefulness of the viscous for these theologians.

Theologians believed that viscous matter was doing one thing, but really it was doing the other. It looked like it was passively receiving and like it could be tamed by this metaphor, but naturally, matter outside of text behaves like itself—because it feels like it. In this way, perhaps, the viscous approaches a place of antivalue from which consciousness flees and is haunted by it still, itself becoming a kind of uncanny wax, lead, mud, pitch. How each might feel about this accusation is a different subject from what the theologians are relating, but the seal needs to suppress such apparent gains of the liquid over the solid (to paraphrase Sartre). Nevertheless, the viscous here can feel its way to escape those confines and breathe and act beyond text and seal.

In the end, sight is a very unreliable way into the world.37 But art historians use it so often to think sense. At issue is perhaps the resistance to the viscous and messy that making partly serves; the wax, mud, pitch, and lead travelled that making path only to be made into something clean and clear for the eye to apprehend and master. If we allow ourselves to step back and see a common skin (or flesh) for the world, maybe the mutual materiality emerges in ways that allow self-knowing likewise to enter passages of solidity and melting.38 This claim to speak for those things is presumptuous, and it serves only us. But to locate our mutual, overlapping skins (and Serres’s souls) is a kind of victory, provisional, fragile, and forever too bound in speaking about it.

36 Barber 2015: 216 (Greek) and 222.
37 Again Serres 2008, 67: “Sight is pained by the sight of mixture. It prefers to distinguish, separate, judge distances; the eye would feel pain if it were touched. It protects itself and shies away. Our flexible skin adapts by remaining stable. It must be thought of as variety […]. It apprehends and comprehends, implicates and explicates, it tends towards the liquid and the fluid, and approximates mixture.”
38 Connor 2005, 168: “This intolerance of the exteriority represented by death and degradation makes for a certain paradoxical claustration in Serres’s work, makes it a monism of the manifold. There is nothing Serres can with do with it, because there is nothing anyone can do with it, this slow going, this ungraspable, unknowable, unignorable squandering of energy that in the end is what we will have amounted to. There is nothing we can do with it, though it has everything to do with us.”