Bios in the Prik of Conscience
The Apophatic Body and the Sensuous Soul

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I.

In his 1981–82 lectures entitled The Hermeneutics of the Subject, Michel Foucault formulates that in the process of the self coming to truth in spirituality, the subject must be “changed, transformed, shifted, and, become, to some extent and up to a certain point, other than himself.”¹ This paper thinks with the Prik of Conscience (c. 1400)² as it presents the reader and penitent with the problem of the self as it becomes “other than” itself. This process of becoming other than oneself is reflected in the idea of the penitent as a pilgrim passing through worlds. On the one hand, the unknown author of the Prik of Conscience is concerned with exploring “the more world,” or the macrocosm, and its connection with “the less world,” the microcosm. On the other hand,

² All citations from the Prik of Conscience, ed. James H. Morey (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2012). The Prik of Conscience is anonymous, therefore I use the designation “Conscience-author” following the pattern of other anonymous medieval works such as The Cloud of Unknowing and Cloud-author.
the Conscience-author is concerned with a kind of life, what the Greeks referred to as bios, linked with self-examination in the process of penitence. The penitential self-examination is linked to the relationship between macrocosm and microcosm. The penitent must find a way to unsay the self in order to become connected with these two iterations of cosmos.

As the Conscience-author formulates, in order to know of God: “hymselfe he mot know withinne” (Entre, 138). The Prik of Conscience is a document outlining a “technology of self”: in this case, Foucault’s formulation of an exomologesis, defined as “the dramatic recognition of one’s status as a penitent.” This dramatic recognition occurs in the Prik of Conscience within an apophaticism of the body. Unsaying the body undoes the “itself” in order to see the radical incompatibility in the self’s understanding of body as it works in only one aspect of the cosmos, the microcosm. This unsaying in turn dissolves the penitent’s false relation to a concept of world sensed through a body conditioned by economic and social structures while rethinking relations with the cosmos in which they travel. The Prik of Conscience suggests a penitential practice that finds God by exploring the body’s implication in the relationships to these worlds.

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II.

The penitent expresses a specific kind of project of individual religious life in the Middle Ages. This essay seeks to think about penitence as a way of life that challenged concepts of being-in-the-world that necessarily always eschew a singular world. Traditionally, the *Prik of Conscience* is categorized as a text in the *contemptus mundi* tradition. Yet, the *Conscience*-author was very concerned with linking the penitential body to wider and wider scales of the universe. It is difficult to take the *Conscience*-author at face-value in terms of contempt while they are exploring and, seemingly celebrating, the nature of the world, though they do denigrate particularly human failings in that world. The *Conscience*-author chides the penitent to do better by expanding the self beyond the body.

In order to move beyond the boundaries of the body, the penitent must unsay the self within two strains of discourse regarding Christian life. As mentioned, Michel Foucault identifies one of these as *exomologesis*. On the one hand the penitent strove to continually verbalize their thinking within confession (*exomologesis*), what Nikolas Rose calls rendering “oneself truthfully into discourse.” The other strain is *exoagouresis*. *Exagouresis* involves the role of the penitent as in exile from God. Thus, they also work to sacrifice that self. This purgatorial exile reflects what Foucault understood as the way the penitent must “sacrifice the self in order to discover the truth about selves, and have to discover the truth about selves in order to sacrifice selves.” This recursive relationship works to create a complex penitential identity that proves boundary-less in order to free itself to be more fully realized in the macrocosm.


This recursive relationship comes to fruition within the discourse of confession. As Andrew Galloway has written, the *Prik of Conscience* “stands squarely in the world of real confession that constituted so central a cultural concern in late medieval England.” The process of real confession in the *Prik of Conscience*, however, presents the reader with a language of unsaying the body as a move of penitence. To confess, to account for oneself, undoes the self, in this case a self that enacts sin, and also opens the body to other possibilities. The *Prik of Conscience* enacts an apophatic penitential process by contemplating the material body tracing, as the *Conscience*-author writes, “mon” to “un mon” (First Part, 536–537). Apophaticism, then, muddies the easy divide between *bios* and *thanatos* around the body-soul relationship in order to re-imagine being within this text. As John Caputo formulates it in terms of the doctrine of the risen body of Christ, “it is not exactly an affirmation of the body, but of life, and not exactly of life but of a certain life, that is, life without death [...] a simply impossible body.” Part of the *Prik of Conscience*’s appeal is the author’s ambivalent preference for continually returning to the tension between body and life, and thinking-through a *bios* of a sensuous soul, an impossible, porous thing, rather than meditating on an “external” divinity.

The penitent, then, must see the body both as it has been conditioned by the anthropocentric but also how it is in relation to micro- and macro-worlds. As Moira Fitzgibbons and Howard Chickering note, the *Prik of Conscience* is “unalleviately tactile.” This tactility is related to seeing as a sensual method, a *technē* that the *Conscience*-author employs for ontological un-

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11 Moira Fitzgibbons, “Enabled and Disabled ‘Myndes’ in ‘The Prick of Conscience,’” in *Medieval Poetics and Social Practice: Responding to the Work of*
derstanding of that which transcends the finite self. To bring the body out, to “yeelde” it, this is the prick of conscience, “the deciphering of self.”\(^\text{12}\) This is also the shock of the sacred — that which resists assimilation to an everydayness.\(^\text{13}\) The scopic “processe” (Entre, 225) leads the penitent to a new kind of seeing. Bodily seeing is too myopic since the human “love nought bot that they se” (Entre, 285). As Eugene Thacker posits, however, “life is not itself contained with the set that it conditions.”\(^\text{14}\) How to see and love life beyond this anthropomorphic conditioning? The Conscience-author employs “seeing” in many registers. Seeing is understanding. Seeing is knowing. Seeing is truth — these are all examples of Foucault’s dramatic recognition. Mirrors, ironically, appear throughout the Prik of Conscience, not as symbols of vanity or narcissism, rather, they are used as a way to challenge the traditional scope of anthropomorphic seeing.

Mirrors provide an important scopic tool in the understanding of the nature of divine knowledge. For example, in the Seventh Part of the Conscience discussing the joys of heaven, the Conscience-author writes that the penitent will see God as one sees in a mirror. Seeing is linked with knowledge, as the penitent will learn how God is both divine and human; how the human fits with God’s divinity; and, finally, under the manner of being itself, “all men and thinges les and more” (Seventh Part, 657–660). This kind of knowledge is connected to the way the penitent looks in the mirror and sees themselves in the mirror. The perspective that the Conscience-author invites the penitent to entertain not only involves seeing the object of reflection itself — the mirror as object is agentially important in understanding knowledge. The penitent is to see their face and “lykenes” and, as well, that which is reflected besides the peni-

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\(^\text{14}\) Eugene Thacker, \textit{After Life} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 87.
tent themselves. The mirror is not merely a reflecting tool or an invitation to narcissistic admiration of the self; rather, the mirror becomes a figure of divine seeing. The connection between the penitent and the mirror allows the world that is reflected to become a part of the penitent’s being. The mirror’s scopic power arranges the penitent so that they see divinely, the reflection itself frees the penitent from anthropomorphic thinking into a wider world. The mirror is capable of “seeing” way more than the penitent can on their own. As well, penitential seeing mirrors Jesus’ judgmental gaze at the end of the world; that which is “inner”—the conscience, the soul, forgotten deeds—is no longer contained by the body, but stands before the penitent, making the account, the truth, undeniable. The penitent sees themselves at that moment as God would. It is this model of seeing that must be used in this world; the penitent becomes the image of Jesus.

As with the mirror, the Conscience-author experiments with non-human seeing to connect microcosm with macrocosm. Employing the figure of the lynx, an animal that “may se thorowe thicke ston walles” (First Part, 204), the Conscience-author argues that if the penitent could see inside of their bodies, or see it from below, or even take a birds-eye view of the body, that they would see the body as more than its “set.” As Jennie Friedlich indicates in this volume, the body becomes a site for “openness and violability.” By dismantling anthropomorphic seeing, the penitent recognizes the strangeness of the body and how the body supercedes the macrocosm.\textsuperscript{15} To see oneself as truth is seeing the body as world: as the Conscience-author describes, “askes, poudur, erthe, and clay” (First Part, 55)—these are the matter of the body as much as they are of the world. It is worth noting here, as well, that the body is linked to the four elements (ashes: fire, powder: air; earth: earth; clay: water). The body is porous, mediated by elements, implicated with matter.

As the Conscience-author indicates, “this worlde is way and passage / wherby we make oure pilgrimage / by this way mote we

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 87.
iwis” (Second Part, 449–451). The penitent is a pilgrim carefully picking their way through the world-as-bridge. Love, dread, and humility are the terms that the penitent must balance, but it is important to note that the Prik of Conscience does not fit neatly into the penitential genre; there are no recommendations for penance, just that one must be penitent. This technē of penitence is found within a love-dread-humility matrix in which the body must see itself for what it is: an apophatic body; a body that is not since it is always already undoing.

An apophatic body, however, is also an embodied identity. As Catherine Keller and Chris Boesel point out, “the traditional apophatic gesture negated our bodied finitude only inasmuch as finite forms are mistaken for the divine infinite.” The Pseudo-Dionysus warns against this mistake when he writes that The Mystical Theology is not for those who “imagine that there is nothing beyond instances of individual being.” The Conscience-author underscores this by equating soul with life and life with God. Sin is one kind of dying, since “the soule sleyn withinne” (Third Part, 47) and God refuses to dwell there. But, penance can make the soul “hole within” (Third Part, 60). If the body is always being unsaid in order to see its finitude, the soul is constantly resurrected to rethink its divine irreducibility.

By meditating on the body in its processes in his descriptions, the Conscience-author posits the body’s superabundance. The Conscience-author employs, as Thacker writes, an “overflowing negation that posits, in a contradictory way, the continuity that is also our own non-human limit. To exist as the world, we must cease existing in the world.” The Conscience-author directs us

16 For a discussion of penitentials and their connection to the institutionalization of penance see Talal Asad, Genealogies of Religion: Disciple and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).
19 Eugene Thacker, In the Dust of the Planet (Winchester: Zero, 2011), 149.
to look at this overflowing negation: “yif a mon myght se his synne / in kynde a lykenesse that he is inne / for fere he shulde sonner it fle” (Third Part, 626–628). The scopic process undoes the sin from the sinner; in its external embodiment it is recognized. A penitential *bios* returns an understanding of the body as cosmos by relegating sin to a being only bound to a world. Sin is far too human.

The *Conscience*-author’s conception of cosmos is anti-creation in so far as it is connected to the merely anthropocentric. Despite his devotion to hundreds of lines over the doomsday signs and the burning of the world, so that by the end of the Fifth Part the judged and renewed world “shineth as clear as is cristalle” (2212), Books One through Four continually wrestle with body and world. For example, during the discussion of the muck that is the body, the *Conscience*-author celebrates how herbs bring forth seeds and trees bring forth fruit, while the human body brings forth pests: “nytes, fleen, lyus, and vermy” (First Part, 274). By placing the body in this botanical taxonomy, the *Conscience*-author suggests that the body is merely an upside-down tree, or that instead of fruit, the human brings forth and is afflicted by innumerable diseases. By seeing self in humility as vegetable, the penitent sees themselves bound to the world, not apart from it. If olives bring olive oil, and grapes can produce wine, the human manufacturing of spit and vomit (First Part, 278) proves human effluvia as worthy of *humilitas*. Further, as the *Conscience*-author implores in his meditation on the heavenly bodies: “the bodyes therof in her kynde / us sh-ewen ensample to have in mynde / to serve God in our kynde here / As they doon there in her manere” (Second Part, 93–96). That is to implore, why can the penitent not be more like a star? There is a certain beauty in this observation; seeing themselves as plant or cosmic matter invites penitents to see themselves as *part* of creation, rather than apart from it.

The *Conscience*-author, then, explores the cosmos through penitential seeing and suggests that the world has been under-
stood only through the lens of “worldly men.” The Conscience-author then asks, “what myght men by worlde undurstond / Yif no mon were therin wonand?” (Second Part, 141–142). The problem of world is that the penitent sees it through the filter of those who love a certain configured world too much, and the reader has to parse the Conscience-author further: it’s this world (Second Part, 155) — it’s the impersonal pronoun that defines a world that “worldly men” have made out of whack with a larger cosmography. As well, the Conscience-author indicates that “als this worldes vanytee / They woold noon othur world se” (Second Part, 666–667). Here he separates the problem of “this” world as not the only world; however, it is the only world the sinful is able to comprehend or “se.”

It is also in this Part that the Conscience-author explains the problem of “the worldes mannere” (Second Part, 164). The Conscience-author spends over one hundred lines critiquing wealth and how the worldly celebrate being “over-bysy” (Second Part, 162). The problem ultimately is that humanity renders themselves as slaves to a world that they have exiled themselves within (Second Part, 222). By posing the question of a world without this kind of humanity, the Conscience-author asks the reader to then imagine the penitential self as a self in a perpetual state of becoming, never static, permeating ever new modes of being in a shifting world.

As Jeremy Carette writes, “the discourse of spirituality at least opens up the politics of continual transformation by holding up what we can be and what is not yet seen.” The scopic, for Carette, is implicit in new possibilities contained within the spiritual. The Conscience-author is pointing to the way the spiritual can unfold new possibilities, a way to unlock a new visual

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spectrum and see the human body in new ways. As others have argued, confession is a way to reveal oneself, but it is also a way to “unfold God in our bodies […] this is an ‘I’ precisely not as separate or autonomous ego but us as one among all the creatures participating at every moment in each other.” What is remarkable about the Conscience-author’s version of Purgatory is how porous it is with the living, revealing how it participates in life. Penitence and Purgatory touch the world in ways that the body affects and is affected by. Purgatory is a state and a place that affects the soul across time and space shaping a bios of the living and the dead. In other words, to use Giorgio Agamben’s formulation of monastic exile, this is a Purgatorial world, a non-monastic exile, shaping “a new community and a new public sphere.”

As Foucault formulates it, the penitent’s confession is akin to “the relation to the truth [as] established in the form of a face-to-face relationship with God and in a human confidence with corresponds to the effusion of divine love” that is indicative of the penitential tradition. In this forging of penitential identity, and in the demands of the face-to-face encounter, the Conscience-author is remapping a Christian body in terms of Foucault’s positive parrhésia. In turn, Adam Kotsko argues that we need to think about the human differently:

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22 See Talal Asad, “Pain and Truth in Medieval Christian Ritual,” especially the discussion of relation between penitence and purgatory in terms of medicine for the soul, 103.
Humanity stands at a nodal point in the universe, at a nexus of rich variety of relationships. This is true at the level of the individual, as the patristic authors attempted to indicate by their rejections of a monadic soul and their insistence that the human being is the relationship between body and soul — that is, even the individual is relational ‘all the way down.’ But my core principal means that the body and soul can’t be conceived as two inert things that happen to be in relationship to each other. Instead, they are themselves singularities emerging from a network of relationships.26

The Conscience-author unlocks scopic possibility in order to unlock Kotsko’s “network of relationships”: if we could see the body

fro above and fro bynethe
mich fylthe and styankyng brethe.
More stynek is non harden ny nessh
Then the filthe of monns flesshe
That may a mon both se and fele
Yif he beholde hymselven wele (Book One, 238–244)

The penitent is misled by not taking account of the whole body and the way it works in the microcosm.27 For the Conscience-author, the body is always framed by what the reader has been conditioned to see by the hermeneutic of the world’s vanities, not a realist ontology that reveals the greater worlds. In the case of the Prik of Conscience, in taking account of unsaying the body, the whole stinking, vermin-infested, and deconstructing biome leads the penitent to see the truth.

The Conscience-author’s world reveals how the worldly have twisted it through not seeing it. We can see the Conscience-au-

27 For an analysis of the corpse as a heterogeneous object, dead to itself, but food for others, see Karl Steel, “Abyss: Everything is Food,” postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies 4 (2013): 93–104.
the passenger

author’s exploration of life in the world when he critiques what we have made of the world. If God’s creation is “good,” and made for our profit, then what does profit even mean? Environments are twisted by the human: the sea is a symbol for changeability; the wilderness is full of animals that bite as do “tyrants and misdoers” (Second Part, 286); the forest is full of people who rob us; the field is a battle field; and the macrocosm has two hands holding happiness and woe, both of which are tied to wealth, again, which the human, in turn, has given a twisted shape. If the body is misunderstood then, fundamentally, so is this world. To die well, this kind of world must, too, be unsaid.

Parts One and Two reveal a body in the matrix of love, humility and dread which opens the penitent to, as Keller and Boesel write, “dimensions of embodiment that cannot be reduced to biological, sociological, or for that matter theological abstraction without again confusing the abstract with the concrete.”

The sinner dreads what they do not see; they do not see because we only see anthropomorphically. In this way, the Conscience-author has prepared the penitent to give an account of their life.

In giving an account, one must divide up life into categories: time, deeds, and behaviors are all necessary for the accounting. This making visible of ones’ life is clear in the Conscience-author’s discussion of the final judgment in which those things that are internal, such as conscience or sins that have not been repented enough, stand and accuse — again, an example of Foucault’s dramatic recognition. The penitent sees themselves projected before their eyes. In the Conscience-author’s language one must “streyte acounte yelde” (Fifth Part, 1577) of various aspects of life. This “yelde” is a giving over. Or, as Jean-Luc Nancy formulates, faith’s ability to “open the world in itself to its own outside.”

30 Jean-Luc Nancy, Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity, trans. Bettina Bergo, Gabriel Malenant, and Michael B. Smith (New York: Ford-
allow the human to see its exteriors which are normally hidden from them.

Revealing the hidden is an important aspect of accounting for a capacious, ultimately, and admittedly, only partial self. As Judith Butler writes, “my account of myself is partial, haunted by that for which I can devise no definitive story.”31 The ghosts of Purgatory haunt our account of ourselves—as in the medieval Purgatory poem, *Gast of Gy*, what the penitent cannot, will not, or is unable to account for comes back to them. Purgatory is a haunting: it is within the earth (common) and above the earth someplace (special).32 The body forgets, the soul remembers. The first pains of Purgatory have to do with the dread over the soul and body’s separation and the judgment of the soul. These two haunting anxieties mimic concerns over the living’s death. Even after one has died, the soul is still worried about these same problems. The *Conscience*-author’s worry may be tagged as “have I represented myself fully?” There will be resolution only in the final judgment. Perhaps, realizing this, the *Conscience*-author recommends methods of living that will help both the living and those in Purgatory. There is nothing one can do for those in Heaven or Hell. Prayers to those who are damned help lessen the numbers in Hell, and in Heaven bring some extra joy (maybe), but in Purgatory prayer assists those to proceed through their Purgatory quicker, in lessening their pain. The efficacy of prayer is mostly for those who are alive in the world and the Purgatorial appointed.

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III.

The ethic that the *Conscience*-author is concerned with is how the penitent undoes the self and is ethically obligated to help the souls in other worlds. The soul’s body is full of affect, but there is a gravity to the soul, dragging it down. Penitence allows the penitent to levitate, to be more like stars. But, Purgatory is also a state, it touches the earth after all. It is a ghost of the world; the seventh pain of Purgatory, in fact, is being exposed to the wilderness. In order to circumnavigate the wilderness and the pain, both for oneself and for the dead, is to enact certain behaviors, to overcome sin: the use of holy water, alms, fasting, taking Communion, praying the Our Father, confession, blessings by the authorities, knocking of the breast, and anointing of the sick. These various *technai* reveal the capabilities of the penitential body and help it disrupt venial sins, *this* world. This is making the body a body that touches the divine; it is a making of the body to live “in this world and equally as physically in the world to come.”

For the *Conscience*-author venial sin is social sin; his accounting of venial sins reveal Foucault’s evolving body. Do not drink or eat too much, do not speak sharply to the poor, do not eat when one is already full and should be fasting, do not sleep too late and miss church, do not pray half-heartedly, do not have sex without intending procreation, do not, do not, do not. This ever-evolving penitential body will assist in skipping the pains of Purgatory so the accounting at the Day of Judgment will be more fluid. But it also suggests a way to *live* well—to be concerned with oneself as it is stretched across multiverses.

As the *Conscience*-author concludes, in an overly-positive register considering where we have been in previous chapters, God will “bring hitte to that blysful place / where joy evere is and eke solace, / to the whiche place he is alle bryng” (Seventh

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Part, 1942–1944). Considering the imagined rendering of those who are damned and saved, the “all” underscores the forgiveness which the sinner makes through the continual undoing of self in this ever evolving account.

The practice of Penitence and its vibrations found in the touch of Purgatory, then, manage bios. The body is unsaid: it decays and disperses, yet its relationship with the sensuous soul is managed through purgatorial practice. Hell and Heaven are here in terms of punishment and reward, but those are less complex in terms of guiding the penitence in ethical living. It is the Purgatorial body, the body in process that reveals life to be one of a duty to worlds. The enactment of various technai forces the penitent to acknowledge the dust of the cosmos in themselves, as well as the way that the inability to fully account for the self is a way to mark the ways that the self is part of bigger and bigger spheres of worlds. In Judith Butler’s phrasing “the failure to narrate fully may well indicate the way in which we are from the start, ethically implicated in the lives of others.”34 Purgatorial space exists as a palimpsest, a bare membrane, in which the constantly unsaying body touches the sensuous soul. The penitent lives in fluid membranes, ever-stretching, as they work to move the body and soul beyond its capabilities into overflowing and boundless worlds.

34 Butler, Giving an Account of Oneself, 64.