Singulare Propositum: Hermits, Anchorites and Regulatory Writing in Late-Medieval England

DISSERTATION

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Abstract

My study explores the monastic and ecclesiastical traditions that inform late-medieval writings for or about ascetic solitude. In assessing the lives of hermits and anchorites, these traditions tended towards misrepresentation, construing asceticism in terms that were alien to solitaries. For example, the Church- and monastery-focused analyses of asceticism promoted strict rivalries: the behavior of solitaries is represented as necessarily either traditional or aberrant, and their theological notions are either “orthodox” or “heretical.” My study argues that this reductive opposition—a tendency seen on several levels, not simply on a theological one—is highly misleading and misrepresents the solitaries themselves. I therefore suggest a theoretical model, one that had already been developed by the late-antique author John Cassian, as a way of dismantling medieval misreadings of ascetic solitude. This model is replete with a lexicon centered on the term “singularity,” by which medieval texts acknowledge hermits’ and anchorites’ estrangement from Church and monastic traditions.

I also highlight, in a way not yet attempted, the tensions and intersections between Anglo-Latin texts and clerical authority, on the one hand, and the lay asceticism of hermits and anchorites, on the other. I focus chiefly on the categories of correction, control and reform as they were applied, and especially misapplied, to solitaries’ lives. While late-medieval solitaries were highly visible and well known participants within England’s religious and social landscape, their “singular” lives also remained
irreconcilable with orthodox and traditionally monastic notions of moral and theological reform, much to the frustration of hagiographers and the authors of ascetic “rules.”

Beyond the habits of regulated and unregulated solitaries, this study examines how the very category of regulation should be understood if the texts that describe, praise or condemn solitaries are to be adequately appreciated and discussed. My deeper interest lies with the relationship of ethical solitary living to the ethics of interpreting those lives.

In my analysis, local movements and personalities repeatedly assumed the priority of individual ascetic desires that were even then impossible to articulate in what we think of as traditionally monastic, “lay” or ecclesiastical terms. Still more, the eremitic and anchoritic movements in the north were profoundly indifferent and irreconcilable to the tendency, particularly in the south of England, to draw sharper distinctions between heretical and orthodox traditions. Despite their indeterminate nature within the theological, ascetic and social order, hermits and anchorites were no less interested in asserting what they considered their own intellectual authority. Neither heretical nor orthodox, the lives of solitary ascetics asked contemporaries to revise their notions of ascetic and theological traditions. As I argue, for solitaries even the category of authority, to say nothing of orthodoxy, was temporary and replaceable.
Dedication

R. R. gewidmet
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I am profoundly grateful to the members of the dissertation committee, Richard Green, Drew Jones, Karen Winstead, and in particular to my Doktorvater Ethan Knapp. Drew has been an especially interested reader whose input, generosity and resourcefulness have been wonderful and priceless. It is difficult to imagine a finer and more patient reader than Ethan, to say nothing of his many other brilliant qualities. A veritable Solomon in pedagogical wisdom! Thank you all.
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table of Contents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract...............................i-i iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedication...............................iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments...........................v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita........................................vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbreviations............................viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction..................................1-14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: Hermits, Anchorites and the Subject of Tradition..............15-64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: The Anglo-Latin Rule and Ascetic Reality in the Twelfth Century......65-117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: Authority, the Desert and the Monastic Lives of St. Robert of Knaresborough.................................118-186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4: The Abolition of the Rule: The Eremitic Imagination of Richard Rolle.........................................................187-259</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5: Involuntary Confinement as Anachoresis: A Latin Letter by Walter Hilton..........................................................260-310</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 6: Volition, Coercion and Anachoresis in Langland’s Piers Plowman.....311-350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography........................................351-366</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Abbreviations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AASS</td>
<td><em>Acta Sanctorum</em></td>
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<td>BHL</td>
<td><em>Bibliotheca Hagiographica Latina</em></td>
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<td>CCCM</td>
<td><em>Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis</em></td>
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<td>CCSL</td>
<td><em>Corpus Christianorum Series Latina</em></td>
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<td>CSEL</td>
<td><em>Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum</em></td>
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<td>Ep.</td>
<td><em>Epistola</em></td>
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<td>HTR</td>
<td><em>The Harvard Theological Review</em></td>
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<td>JMEMS</td>
<td>Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies</td>
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<td>NPNF</td>
<td>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church</td>
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<td>RES</td>
<td><em>The Review of English Studies</em></td>
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<td>SC</td>
<td><em>Sources Chrétiennes</em></td>
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<td>YLS</td>
<td><em>The Yearbook of Langland Studies</em></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

Officially, the medieval hermit lived in relative isolation (often in a cell), devoting himself to ascetic virtues like poverty, regular prayer and fasting. Recent literary analyses show that the life of solitaries like hermits and anchorites—the latter lived *exclusively* in a cell attached to a church or monastery—was a major theme in the textual tradition of medieval Europe¹ and post-Conquest England.² In general, two sorts of texts relate to ascetic solitude: hagiographical narratives that record hermits’ and anchorites’ lives, and “rules” that prescribed for them a particular ascetic thought and behavior. The Middle English and Anglo-Latin texts examined in this study richly explore the prayer, renunciations (poverty, chastity, etc.) and theological beliefs of solitaries.

For example, the twelfth-century hagiographer Reginald, monk of the Cistercian house in Durham, collected materials towards a saint’s life for a certain Godric of Finchale, a venerated contemporary and a hermit.³ Several of the brothers at Durham,

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² Particularly helpful for the earlier period have been the essays and recent book by Tom Licence, and for the later those by Edward Jones (see bibliography), who is also revising R. M. Clay’s *Hermits and Anchorites of England* (London: Methuen, 1914); and finally Mari Hughes-Edwards’ *The Ideology of English Anchoritism* (forthcoming). In addition to the studies just mentioned several anthologies have recently emerged—Liz Herbert McAvoy, ed., *Rhetoric of the Anchorhold* (Cardiff: Wales University Press, 2008); Dee Dyas *et al.*, ed., *Approaching Medieval English Anchoritic and Mystical Texts* (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005); and Liz Herbert McAvoy, ed., *Anchorites, Wombs and Tombs* (Cardiff: Wales University Press, 2005).

like Reginald, had apparently been quite fond of Godric. Of course, what a medieval solitary’s popularity among his neighbors shows is just how limited his isolation was. Hermits and anchorites were quite well known to those around them. Although their lives expressed some aversion to human society, most hermits like Godric still maintained social ties with their community.4

In part, a hermit’s fame among local monks was the result of the broadly common interests shared by different kinds of ascetics. The material, psychological and social circumstances that led individuals to the ascetic life also kept them closely associated, whether as solitaries or communal (coenobitic) monks. At the local level, the ascetically like-minded knew of each other and spoke together. Even while in isolation, hermits certainly knew of their coenobitic neighbors, and the spread of (mostly Cistercian) monasticism in the twelfth century, especially in northern England where Godric lived, made it nearly impossible for a hermit to ignore local monks. So close were the associations that a twelfth-century brother that was vowed to the community (coenobium) requested permission from his superior to pursue his ascetic life as a solitary.5 This arrangement was quite traditional. Even while social and financial ties led medieval subjects into the monastic community, at times mere chance informed the decision by some to pursue an ascetic life inside rather than outside of the monastery.

Moreover, since hermits’ lives were written by local monastic communities, the texts produced a version of that hermit consistent with the community’s institutional

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4 See, for example, ibid., ch. 2, 25.
5 See the Vita Bartholomaei, BHL 1015, ch. 1.9, which survives in Cistercian manuscripts. The practice of leaving the monastery for solitude was officially sanctioned by the Rule of St. Benedict (see below), the standard of monastic practice for the coenobium.
identity. The interest by monks like Reginald in such ascetics inevitably resulted in
hagiographies that textually harmonized the hermit with the values and goals of the
monastic community. The hermit was inescapably a textual product of the monastery,
and predictably, bore close resemblance to the monks reading that life. Thus if the local
prestige of a monastery was not sufficiently appealing for a would-be hermit, he could
later be drawn into the monastery, as it were, through the pages of a saint’s life meant to
edify the brothers. In the case of Godric, Reginald as a Cistercian has written an
especially Cistercian-like Godric who, the vita claims, even ended his life wearing the
habit of the brothers at Durham. This blend of eremitic and coenobitic features in a
single hagiography expresses the social proximity in which monks and hermits stood.

But social proximity does not entail identity; Reginald described the hermit in
communal terms rather than in terms that also accounted for the fact that Godric was not
a coenobitic monk. Nor indeed had Godric always been a solitary, a fact that might have
led Reginald to vexing questions about the hermit’s religious and social identity. Among
the most pressing of these is the question: how does a coenobitic hagiographer describe a
life that was lived in a manner quite distinct from that of the monastic community?
Reginald records a brief altercation between Godric and local monks concerning the work
of representing him in a hagiography. The hermit exclaims,

You are trying to write the life of a false Godric as even you well know. Godric is
backward, plump, unclean and foul, a fornicator and adulterer […]; a usurer in
trade, a forger and deceiver; like a lion on the hunt, a perjurer and flatterer; for the
gain of wealth I go to and fro wanton and luxurious; like a dead flea, a rotten and
recking dog, a base and horrid little worm; not a hermit, but a hypocrite; not a
solitary, but someone whose mind is scattered…I snore leisurely day and night,

seeking for the praise of others, yet living a luxurious life: with all things in name and work I live terribly. Write such things about Godric, indeed write even worse things! Set down for all mortals a vile image of me, not an example to follow.⁷

Some of his comments do not sound out-of-place when we consider that Godric had only lived as a hermit for part of his life.Formerly a merchant and traveler, Godric may mean here that he was still very much tied to his identity as a layman. He seems to insist here that his mind was still deeply attached to pursuing financial gain and to spending that gain on physical comforts; hence the terms “flatterer” (falsarius) and “usurer” (foenerator). If he calls himself a “usurer in trade,” he perhaps still thought of himself as someone involved “in trade.” After all, the description is made in the present tense. Reginald even tells us that Godric also worked as a steward and seemed as fond of tending crops as he was of traditional ascetic practices.⁸ Most remarkably, it is the hagiographer composing this text that implicitly asks us to note the disparity between a Cistercian Godric and one who cannot quite discard his earlier (and current!) sins.

The point requires some observations on the relationship between Godric’s life and its representation in hagiographical form. For one, his self-condemnation plays into the hands of a monastic community that wanted nothing more than to find its local hermits humble and self-effacing. A hermit who sees his own failings is no mere novice in discernment, but instead proves the point that the hagiographer has been making: Godric was holy enough to admit his own failings. Reginald reasons that no hermit can

⁷ Ibid., ch. 140, 269.
⁸ Ibid., ch. 6, 35; and ch. 26, 74-5.
at once be depraved and express his revulsion at depravity.⁹ Rather, Godric’s humility
must have been extreme indeed, if he is willing to condemn himself before the locals.

Conversely, since he did not spend his entire career as a hermit, his description of
himself in lay terms shows that just as local monks could not have been so profoundly
mistaken in seeing Godric’s virtues, they also could not have been wholly correct or
sincere in ignoring the extent to which the secular world still influenced him. To refer to
Godric as a “hermit” was to privilege a certain portion of his life—a tendency of almost
all such texts—even while Godric knew that his coenobitic neighbors knew better: “You
are trying to write the life of a false Godric as even you well know.” How hermits were
identified socially depended on patterns of representation that inevitably flattered the
monastic community composing that life. Insofar as such communities de-emphasized
non-ascetic behaviors, especially the behaviors that deviated from the ideals of the
community in question, a series of alternate identities that historically attached to the
“hermit” were occluded. The opening and closing of this rant is directed against the
tendency of his hagiographer to esteem Godric more highly than he perhaps deserves.
We might agree with Reginald that the hermit’s sins, however persistent, probably did
not warrant such language (“rotten and reeking dog”) as Godric applies to himself. But it
is less significant that he ridicules himself than that his language is so ridiculous. The
exaggeration of his negative qualities seems aimed at correcting the equally inaccurate
terms in which his friends are casting him. After declaring that others are composing a
false image of him as a wholly righteous person, he refers to his own errors as a way of

mocking the error of the hagiographical text (*exemplum*). Godric is not the problem; instead, this piece of hagiographical writing is inadequate to close the gap between a historical Godric and a coenobitic fantasy.

Perhaps Godric sincerely believed that the sins he lists accurately describe him, or conversely Reginald may in fact be right in thinking that Godric experienced a fit of humility and was groaning penitently over his sins. One fact, however, seems inescapable, namely that Godric’s humility is a *textual* artifact. Both Reginald and the hermit agree on this point, and the hagiographer even concludes the chapter by observing that he is determined to record Godric’s outburst. Such self-conscious moments of monastic textuality deserve closer attention for what they can tell us about interpreting a life that was always already filtered through the mediating monastic text.

The present study takes up Godric’s cautious attitude towards textually produced identities (i.e. “hermit”) that occlude the instabilities of a life lived historically. The hermit, we recall, had alternate identities (e.g. merchant or steward), even if hagiographical exempla associated with “hermit” a series of behaviors, expectations and ideals that had much more to do with the text and its operations than with a historical life. The hagiographer had created a dilemma by setting a historical person in necessary tension with his literary representation, a dilemma that derived chiefly from the external expectations placed on the hermit and which supplanted his historical life.

None of the hermits or anchorites presented in this study shows an undivided allegiance to models of ascetic conduct, or even a sense that their social identities were as stable as those ascetic ideals. Nonetheless, the expectations of ascetic excellence, as
understood by both monastic and ecclesiastical writers, were continually reproduced partly by ascetic “rules” (regulae) that hermits and anchorites were asked to follow, and partly by hagiographies that standardized behaviors as essentially virtuous or vicious.¹⁰ Both kinds of texts succeeded by manufacturing various forms of error (error) that were to be avoided by solitaries, and it is no accident that Godric himself appeals to the notion of falseness when referring to the ascetic ideal he knew was materializing on the hagiographical page. In an important sense, the errors of Godric’s life (for a monk would indeed understand them as errors) are inextricably bound with the textual errors of the hagiographer, his use of the vita to occlude the complex identities of the ascetic subject.

This study argues that these same texts—whether hagiography or rule—developed a lexicon that critiqued ecclesiastical and monastic textuality as it was extended to the life of the hermit or anchorite. The solitary’s estrangement from prescriptive ideologies was even given the name “singularity” (singularitas), a term that would come to mark an ecclesiastical and monastic culture’s inability to formulate the hermit’s or anchorite’s life in official terms. As a descriptor singularitas (or singulare/singulariter) was used sparingly by late-antique and medieval authors so as to avoid further developing the tension produced by a text’s inadequate grasp of the solitary’s thoughts, behaviors and intentions. If too singular, the solitary only frustrated

the efforts by monastic and clerical writers to disambiguate the moral or theological character of his life.

But the solitary’s life was singular in just this way; the hermit and anchorite hovered between separate identities—e.g. lay and monastic—and frustrated the attempts to find in them a single theology or standard of behavior. Hagiographies and rules used other terms than *singularitas* that encoded how inexplicable, troubling or profoundly untraditional solitaries seemed to official religious culture. For example, the term *secretum*, common in many *vitae*, did essentially the same work as the category of singularity, as did the association of solitaries with physical instability (*fuga*) and error. These terms all served to underscore a central point: since the solitary occupied a special place independent and outside of the doctrines of right “belief,” obedience and the monastic precept, his life remained unintelligible to clerical and monastic culture. My central thesis is that medieval religious texts developed a lexicon marking that intelligibility—in effect, marking solitaries as theologically and ascetically unintelligible.

The study begins to analyze the relationship between a vocabulary of difference, or *singularitas*, and one of tradition or exemplarity. Both types often inhabited the same text and together suggested that hermits and anchorites stood in an indeterminate space beyond what was recognizably “good” or “bad” ascetic behavior. To be in error was to depart or wander (Latin: *error/errare*) from a path of prescribed conduct.11 This was a

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11 My interest in a solitary’s “error” is anticipated by the recent work of medievalists on the interplay of authority and error. Seth Lerer’s *Error and the Academic Self* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002) and Alastair Minnis’ *Fallible Authors: Chaucer’s Pardoner and Wife of Bath* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008) are more conspicuous analogies to my study’s own preoccupations.
wandering, however, that did not allow others to locate just how far from common ascetic precepts that solitary strayed. There are essentially two sorts of error that are examined in this study: ideological/theological, and physical (e.g. flight). And the flight (*fuga*) of the solitary from a particular place also entailed his escape from (or objection to) the categories of orthodoxy or heresy. The movement of body and mind away from a path that religious texts prescribed for the solitary was the default behavior of solitaries.

Like *singularitas*, the themes of wandering and flight became confessions on the part of these authors that the lives of hermits and anchorites transcended the prescriptive and descriptive rhetoric of rules and hagiographies. These same texts that contain notions of ascetic and theological exemplarity also contain the terminology that shows that the solitary was only a “model” of himself: self-consistent, but consistent with no standard external to himself. And our texts contain yet another piece of the standard vocabulary that set solitaries against the literatures that described or prescribed their lives: the *propositum*. The hermit or anchorite’s intent was called his *propositum*. The fourteenth-century English hermit Richard Rolle was fond of the phrase *singulare propositum*, since while the hermit and anchorite seemed to have an ascetic intent, a *propositum*, the *singulare propositum* was an intent that was identical only with itself and with no external models of thought or behavior. I examine how through the veil of prescriptive and descriptive formulae medieval texts discuss the solitary’s *propositum* as an inescapable challenge to theological, ascetic and textual exemplarity.

The dissertation uncovers a theory of ascetic solitude that persisted from the late-antiquity to the later Middle Ages despite the tendency by monastic and clerical authors
to exert a tight, textual control over solitaries’ theological and ascetic lives. The first chapters offer some theoretical analysis and an intellectual history of Anglo-Latin and Middle English regulatory texts in England. These chapters describe the work of ecclesiastical officials and monastic authors as they wrote prototypical rules which asked solitaries to displace their own wills in favor of an external and textual authority. Despite attempts to make them obedient to others, hermits and anchorites always vibrated indeterminately between points of ideology (neither orthodox nor heretical) and conduct (neither stable nor unstable). This indeterminacy opposed the writing of codified rules for solitaries who were otherwise disinclined to heed ecclesiastical and monastic authority. I emphasize how authors used theological and ascetic standards to argue that hermits and anchorites had not advanced far enough along a path of ascetic conduct. Depending on arguments about progress and monastic maturity, authors of regulatory texts found this an effective means to justify and control ascetic lives that otherwise frustrated prescriptive or descriptive languages.

At the same time, writers like John Cassian and Goscelin of St. Bertin, sided with the solitary and his singulare authority. Indeed, at every point in medieval England authors were aware that the text—whether rules or other texts for and about hermits or anchorites—and the solitary competed with each other over the terms of religious authority. While clerical and monastic authors argued that only they understood how ascetic lives should begin and end—the rule thrived by insisting on this point—I argue that the hagiography, like the rule, was a response to the solitary, and such texts
presupposed the solitary’s life, not the other way around. Interestingly, rules and hagiographies finally show us how to dismantle those same demands on his obedience.

I further illustrate this in Chapter 3 by showing how the *vitae* of the twelfth-century English hermit Robert of Knaresborough dismantle *themselves* in exactly this way. Robert was *singulare* in the extreme. At different points in his career he appeared to be (but was never simply) a priest, hermit, layman and monk of different monastic houses. Robert was called a “hermit” only because his *singulare propositum* was too indeterminate for the needs of a coherent narrative about exemplary conduct, and indeed his hagiographers were aware of precisely this point. Like the *Vita* of Stephen (d. 1124), founder of Grandmont, the lives of Robert were written to suit the imaginations of more ideologically stabilized monastic communities. But just as Stephen’s singularity led him to refuse the label “monk,” “canon,” or “hermit,” Robert’s life likewise defied the descriptive and prescriptive terminologies of monastic tradition. Robert’s hagiographers present the stakes of Stephen’s argument in a highly intensified form.

The indeterminacies of Robert’s life were further exaggerated in the fourteenth century in the person of Richard Rolle, the subject of Chapter 4. Rolle is the first hermit of this study who acquires a voice by writing about his own *propositum*. Since he was himself a hermit his rejection of regulatory models is not surprising; he pushes ascetic *singularitas* to its limits when, for example, he destabilizes the regulatory requirements of liturgical prayer and physical stability. Eventually, he would transfer a regulatory discourse dominated by *singularitas* to his friend and fellow solitary Margaret of

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12 *Vita, BHL* 7910, ch. 3.18.
Kirkeby, an anchoress at East Layton in Richmondshire. His “regulatory” advice to her in the *Form of Living* was in fact an argument designed to exclude regulatory categories from her cell; instead, Margaret is advised to govern herself through a series of associations with the word “Jesus.” Rolle shows how a historically dominant monastic and ecclesiastical control could be dismembered by a discourse of *singularitas*.

I finally trace the attempts by William Langland and a letter by Walter Hilton (d. 1396) to reconstitute regulatory control over solitaries. What the texts by these two authors finally illustrate, however, is their desire *both* to guide the solitary along a strictly determined narrative *and* to grant that individual his own ascetic and theological authority. They wonderfully heighten a dilemma at a point in history when disputes over theological authority in particular were growing especially acute. Langland and Hilton were committed on the one hand to permitting the *singulare propositum* its authority independent of regulatory precepts, and on the other, to imposing those precepts in such a way as to make ascetic solitude the passive repository of external control.

Disagreements over solitaries’ authority implicated the matter of institutional authority more generally. My argument is that the physical and intellectual lives of solitaries were unavoidably and inherently irreconcilable with any prescriptive or descriptive model, whether theological or ascetic. This fact was even acknowledged by hagiographers, clerics and authors of *regulae*, however halting, uneasy and encoded that acknowledgment remained. To put matters another way, the *singulare propositum* is intelligible only as a negative epistemology, the ascetic version of the Neo-Platonic *via negativa*, or the apophatic search for God. And despite the popularity of the *via negativa*
in medieval contemplative theory, the fact that singularity was the single dominant principle in a solitary’s life was a largely unwelcome notion in those ages of theological controversy. Taken to their extreme, the arguments of our texts result in a highly corrosive intellectual skepticism. As the embodiments of such skepticism, hermits and anchorites pose new questions for medieval notions of monastic tradition, teaching and practical theology. Every aspect of ascetic authority—indeed, even the very notion of authority itself—is evitable and temporary.

In my study, hermits and anchorites mark anew the tensions and intersections between monastic and clerical authority, on the one hand, and heterodox practice, on the other. Still more, however, I suggest that this opposition—the opposition between virtue and error, heresy and orthodoxy—is collapsed in the minds and bodies of solitaries. While late-medieval solitaries were highly visible and well known participants within England’s religious and social landscape, their “singular” lives also remained irreconcilable with the traditional categories of heresy and orthodoxy, misrule and reform. The literature of singularity submits the very categories of reform and exemplarity to fresh and radical reexamination. Still more, the eremitic and anchoritic movements in the north, where the anchoritic and eremitic tradition is strongest, were profoundly indifferent and irreconcilable to the tendency, particularly in the south of England, to draw sharper distinctions between heretical and orthodox traditions. Hermits and anchorites were interested in asserting what they considered their own intellectual authority. Neither heretical nor orthodox, the lives of solitary ascetics asked contemporaries to revise their notions of ascetic and theological traditions.
The relevance of my argument to our understanding of late-medieval religious history in England is potentially far-reaching. In an important way, this study helps explain the success of various heretical schools, like vernacular Wycliffism, that took hold in England particularly during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. To solitary ascetics religious controversy would unquestionably have appeared intellectually over-determined; what we mean by religious “debate” in this period needs to acknowledge such local figures as well. Ascetic subjects who were indifferent to ecclesiastical authority were neither part of the “problem” of late-medieval heresy and ecclesiastical politics, nor part of the solution. My study cautions against writing histories of “heretical” hermits and anchorites, as if determinate notions of belief or practical morality were even applicable to them. The unease with unruly anchorites expressed by the author of the fifteenth-century *Dives and Pauper* ignores the fact that ascetic living, theological reasoning and the making of authority were interminable inquiries:

> For we sen þat whan men takyn hem to ben ankerys & incluhs, withynyn fewe ðerys commonly or þei fallyn in reueryys or heresyys or þey brekyn out for womanys loue or for orchod of her lyf or be som gyle of þe fend.\(^\text{13}\)

The author is at a loss to explain why these anchorites are misbehaving. In my analysis, the solitaries were no better equipped to explain the “misbehavior” simply because such actions appeared wholly consistent with their own claims to personal authority, claims that the very category of authority was never quite stable.

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Chapter 1: Hermits, Anchorites and the Subject of Tradition

Wie wenn im ‘Guten’ auch ein Rückgangssymptom läge, insgleichen eine Gefahr, eine Verführung, ein Gift, ein Narkotikum, durch das etwa die Gegenwart auf Kosten der Zukunft lebte?

—Nietzsche, Zur Genealogie der Moral

The Middle English and Anglo-Latin texts discussed in this study sought for a language that could adequately describe the very special lives led by hermits and anchorites. These efforts by medieval texts had been long anticipated by the late-antique monk and monastic theorist John Cassian (d. 435) whose writings will be of particular interest in this chapter less for their influence on medieval anchoritic and eremitic texts, than for how his monastic theory provides a critical way of reading those works. Cassian produced a model and terminology focused on the experience of monastic solitude, an experience that, to his mind, was closely tied to his own as a monk and companion to the great late-antique anchorites. It is with Cassian, then, that we begin.

Cassian and the Egyptian Anchorites

Around the year 400 Cassian was traveling on the Mediterranean with his companion Germanus. As Cassian later recalled, there was no guarantee that the two would reach their destination since travel on the unstable and violent seas entails considerable danger. The monks were leaving Egypt for Constantinople, and Cassian

1 Nietzsche, Zur Genealogie der Moral, ed. G. Colli and M. Montinari (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1886), Vorrede 6.24-7: “But what if the “good” were constituted by a symptom of return—that is simultaneously a danger, a seduction, a poison, a narcotic—by means of which the present subsists at the expense of the future?”
himself was sacrificing not only his safety but also his deep spiritual and personal attachment to the solitary Egyptian monks—the desert anchorites or “fathers”—who, in his view, practiced the most excellent form of monasticism around the Mediterranean. Much later, after further travel that brought him to Gaul, Cassian established two monastic communities, one for men and the other for women.

According to one of his modern biographers, Cassian’s “restlessness” and “uncertainty” made for this itinerant career. Born in modern-day Romania, he lived as a monk among different communities in the Eastern Empire with much of his early career spent in Bethlehem with Germanus, and later in Egypt with the great anchoritic teachers. Later, when Cassian and Germanus left Egypt, they spent some years in Constantinople with John Chrysostom (who ordained Cassian as a deacon). Cassian also lived for some time in Rome prior to settling in southern Gaul (Marseilles) where, writing for a western audience, he revisited his Egyptian years in two major monastic texts, the *Conferences* and *Institutes*. Yet early fifth-century Gaul, a place in civil and religious transition, did not likely lead to much more than mere physical stability. And Cassian’s texts, as he often reminds his Gallic readers, brought an eastern asceticism to a very different western tradition. His life, in other words, consisted of several periods of transition and rupture.

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2 P. Rousseau, *Ascetics, Authority, and the Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 172. His career and personality are famously elusive, and perhaps by design as A. M. C. Casiday, another biographer, suggests that he “would have been happy enough to disappear behind his writings,” *Tradition and Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 3.

3 For him, Egypt developed a different ascetic culture that was both superior and unknown to monastic life in Gaul. For summary see Richard J. Goodrich, *Contextualizing Cassian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 9 and 32-64. One significant difference was that his readers in Gaul were aristocratic.

To Cassian, after experiencing such displacements, it made great sense to write the *Conferences*, a text which theorizes the profoundly experimental life of anchoritic monasticism (or *anachoresis*); an anchorite’s behaviors and theological beliefs were as mutable and protean as the violent seas. At least, this is the comparison that occurred to Cassian. At the very end of the *Conferences* he addresses an anchorite, using the marine metaphor and conflating his own spiritual life with the caprice of a sea-tossed vessel: “it remains for the spiritual zephyr of your prayers to accompany me now, tossed about as I have been thus far by a most dangerous tempest, to the safe harbor of silence.” This safe harbor is a future contingency, for at the outset of his work Cassian establishes that the purpose (*propositum*) and ultimate goal (*finis*) a monk must pursue—subordinating all other concerns—is a sort of love, a “purity of heart.” This is the harbor of silence that manifests itself in ascetic and theological rest. But nothing, Cassian notes elsewhere, is stable except for God. For this reason, in the passage on purity of heart he uses the image of a soldier or merchant who endures stormy seas and bloody fields to attain their goals because, like them, the monk is also cast about on an uncertain venture:

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7 Cassian, *Conf.*, 23.3 [CSEL 643.22-3]: “Ergo quia nihil est persemetipsum stabile, nihil immutabile, nihil bonum nisi deitas sola.”
difficult and variable, bringing with it the danger of falling into some grievous sin, of subscribing to some false theological doctrine, or of forgetting the purpose of monastic practice. Like the sea-bound merchant, a monk might at times be forced off course and stray from virtue and orthodox belief.

It is an inextricable part of his theory that the solitary monk exposes himself to the dangers of ascetic and theological mistakes. His metaphor of marine instability is not limited to the above-mentioned passages. Just as he uses the image of seafaring merchants to describe the goal of the monk, he also associates straying and volatility with his work as a monastic theorist. In his prefaces to the first and second parts of the Conferences Cassian is especially interested in his act of writing. He writes,

> Now that I have settled in a harbor of silence, a vast sea lies before me, inasmuch as I am daring to commit to writing something on the institutes and teaching of such men. As the solitary life is greater and more sublime than that of the cenobia, and the contemplation of God—upon which those inestimable men were ever intent—than the active life that is led in communities, so must the bark of a limited understanding be tossed about amidst the dangers of deep waters.  

In both prefaces Cassian creates a link between narratio and navigatio, between the perils of writing (scribendi periculum) and the perils of the sea, of life as a monk (periculosae navigationis). That is, in articulating the theoretical principles of anachoresis Cassian collapses the work of the theorist into the above image of a voyaging, sea-tossed monk.

His reason for creating this link derives from his skepticism towards textuality. One of Cassian’s goals in the work is to prevent the abstract, de-contextualized and, above all, textual formulations of an ascetic theory from displacing the real, historical

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8 *Ibid.*, Preface [CSEL 4.2-9].
lives of Egyptian anchorites.⁹ The *Conferences* purport to be a record of the answers offered by experienced Egyptian monks to questions posed by Cassian and Germanus. Divided into twenty-four books, or conversations, it describes how young disciples learned from their teachers how to think and behave as mature monks. Cassian is the advocate for these monks and their tradition, the “traditions of the fathers” (*patrum instituta*). Acquisition of monastic experience within fourth-century Egypt and Palestine (although not only there) depended on special groups of believers, so-called *didaskaleia*, that were led by spiritual teachers.¹⁰ These groups transmitted ascetic principles including prayer, manual labor and abstinence from sexual intercourse,¹¹ as well as Christian theology. The conversations or dialogues in the *Conferences* are modeled on

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⁹ As a few examples show, Cassian was not the only author at this time in the West to discuss solitary asceticism. Jerome wrote letters to ascetics, more famously, his *Ad Eustochium* and *Ad Rusticum monachum* in *Epistolae*, ed. I. Hilberg, CSEL 54 and 56/1 (Vienna: VÖAW, 1910-18), 143-211 and 119-142 respectively. Bishop Ambrose wrote several works on virginity, *PL* 16 cols. 183-384B; also in *St. Ambrose: Select Works and Letters*, trans. P. Schaff and H. Wace, NPNF 10 (Oxford: Parker, 1896), 361-407. Ambrose also wrote a treatise on “flight” from the world, *De fuga saeculi*, ed. C. Schenkl, CSEL 32/2 (Vienna: VÖAW, 1897), 163-207. In his Gallic *Dialogues* Sulpicius Severus, a contemporary of Cassian, celebrates the Egyptian ascetics in a manner that recalls Cassian’s work and as a preface to the anchoritic periods of St. Martin’s life, in *Gallus*, ed. Jacques Fontaine SC 510 (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 2006), 100-365. Of final note is the very interesting piece by Eucherius of Lyon *De laude eremi*, ed. Karl Wotke, CSEL 31/1 (Vienna: VÖAW, 1894), 175-94; and the pseudo-Augustinian *Sermones ad Fratres in Eremo Commorantes*, *PL* 40, cols. 1235-1358.


¹¹ The list is not exhaustive, and exactly how the ascetic or monastic tradition actually arose is still to some measure uncertain (as much of the scholarship referenced below admits). Such practices as sharing of material wealth, tending to the poor, fasting, prayer and communal singing are all alluded to in the NT *Book of Acts* in chapters 2:45 and 4:32 (distribution of possessions, 24:17 (service to the poor), and 14:23 (prayer and fasting), and many ascetic virtues have foundation both in the Gospels and non-Christian traditions (i.e. Platonist, Jewish, etc.).
this tradition, even if Cassian’s text represents a stylized and elaborated version of historical interactions—*ideal* rather than *actual* conversations between monks.

He argues that the lives of the desert monks could give the West an ideal basis for a theory of monasticism, but a theory that integrated personal volatility and cultural rupture into each of its components, including its textual components. The emphasis on error derives from Cassian’s sense that an abstract theory runs the danger of occluding the historical subjects it seeks to describe. For him writing was a task that ultimately led to mistakes and mischaracterizations of one’s subject, much like one who travels on the sea might veer off course. The Egyptian anchorites who are set on their *propositum* and the author explaining their lives both risk wandering off course, of digressing in a way that prevents his arrival at a pre-established goal. For example, in his tenth conference he apologizes—as both monk and theorist—for the manner in which he is composing the work, this time explaining a specific error and contextualizing that error within this single conference. Here he says he is sorry that the topic to which he will now turn does not exactly fit into the orderly structure of his discussion (*narrationis*) whose parts have up to this point been divided into separate monastic topics, for example, on discretion (conference two), on vices (conference five) or on the soul (conference seven). Since the ninth conference addressed monastic prayer, Cassian notes the incongruity of devoting the upcoming discussion to the same topic of prayer rather than to some new subject.\(^\text{12}\)

The mistake was deliberate, and was designed to show both that the monastic text was limited in what it could tell about lives that were so deeply experimental, and that

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\(^{12}\) Cassian, *Conf.*, 10.1 [CSEL 286.9-13].
inasmuch as the monastic text did describe those lives, it should self-consciously link its structure and lexica back to that experimental life. The monastic text threatened to displace the historical life behind it through a kind of textual stability, while that historical life was in fact the image of displacement itself, not stability. To return to his prefaces in the *Conferences*, Cassian’s nervous preoccupation with the subject of writing leads him to observe that his discussion of anchorites is “inexpert” and hence flawed in some way.\textsuperscript{13} All the same, he feels compelled to write: “the virtue of love could not help but wring this [work] out of me, so that [...] I would not escape the difficult danger of writing.”\textsuperscript{14} The anchoritic lives he discusses are quite unlike the stable, unyielding text of a monastic rule, whose very essence as text radically limited and codified individual thought and conduct.

This chapter gives a theoretical account of *anachoresis* and argues that such an account provides the conceptual and linguistic framework for understanding medieval hermits, anchorites and the textual traditions that described them. As that tradition’s most articulate late-antique theorist, Cassian—whose writings the Benedictine *Rule* popularized for medieval monastic communities\textsuperscript{15}—submitted the practices, goals and theology of contemporary anchorites to a rigorously textual analysis while arguing that *lived* monastic solitude—in all its plasticity—should engender a theory that worked by dismantling the monastic text and its function to mediate stability in all its varieties. The

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item \textit{Ibid.}, Prefaces [CSEL 3-5, 311-2]: “rusticitas,” (4.13).
\item \textit{Ibid.}, [CSEL 311.15-8].
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\end{footnotesize}
monastic rule sought a kind of authority over the monk. It defined and codified monastic practices like fasting, prayer and physical labor, and formulated the ascetic and theological authority of the individual monk as a textual authority, an authority possessed by the text, rather than by the individual. Cassian reversed the relationship, noting that writing a prescriptive monastic text risked granting the rule priority over the monk. The text, he reasoned, should not displace the historical life, since it depended on that life.

Cassian’s hesitations about using a stable, written discourse to discuss changeable anchoritic monks register the fact that while both he and the “rules” of the monastic community created theories of monastic excellence, they differed radically in their attitudes towards textual exemplarity as a source of authority. The very textuality of the monastic tradition, its hagiographical narratives or codified “rules,” that, like the Rule, posited a single standard of ascetic living, argued for a kind of stability that was alien to the multiple varieties of anchoritic lives. These lives had no less theological and ascetic authority for being so variable. It was to challenge textual exemplarity and its authority that Cassian described anchorites as “beyond imitation.” The anchorite’s life could not quite be made into an exemplary text that called others to imitate its precepts, nor did that life respond to the strict terms of its textuality. Textuality itself underwent a rigorous critique in Cassian’s writings which located oral dialogue, rather than the monastic text, at the center of a theory for solitaries. For him, the recourse to a text for organizing the practices and theology of monastic solitude demanded a discursive form—the dialogue—which critiqued and pointed away from the linear and codifying energies of the

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16 Cassian, Inst., 3.1 [CSEL 33.23-4]: “[…] perfectionem Aegyptiorum, et inimitabilem disciplinae rigorem horum institutis moderantes.”
coenobitic tradition. The above-mentioned ascetic dialogues between living monks were the only discursive form which focused attention onto actual, speaking monks who pre-existed the text, and who did not model its stability, its rigid series of formulae.\textsuperscript{17} With Cassian, this chapter and those that follow argue that an anchoritic theory required a critique of the mechanism of textual stability, and one that would reposition the solitary as the site of ascetic and theological authority.

Cassian posits the dialogues and experiences of anchorites into the center of his theory. The category of monastic conversation or dialogue was not merely meant to describe how one monk was taught by another, thus establishing a historical tradition. Still more, to the extent that a theory required or implied a literary structure, that structure was the dialogue. \textit{Anachoresis} was only imaginable through constant negotiations—between an experienced monk and his disciple, between virtue and sin, orthodoxy and heresy. It was the structure of the dialogue, its insistence on repeated correction, that always reminded the monk of a certain flux, of the need to learn or unlearn some moral or theological principles as he wandered on the uncertain waters of moral and theological inquiry. The \textit{Conferences} repeatedly returns to variability as such, reminding readers that “error” of some sort would always accompany the monk in the form of dialogue which, rather than a prescriptive text, was the \textit{sine qua non} of monastic practice.

What Cassian finds so excellent about the Egyptian anchorites is not that they are morally or theologically “perfect,” but that they have undertaken a life that may well lead to theological, social and physical mistakes. In the second conference we learn,

\textsuperscript{17} For a brief and summarized genealogy of the coenobitic rule and its dominance see M. Dunn \textit{The Emergence of Monasticism} (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).
For there are some—and, more’s the pity, they are the majority—who have grown old in the lukewarmness and idleness that they learned in their youth and who claim authority for themselves based not on their mature behavior but on their many years. Therefore we should not follow in the footprints of all the elders […], nor should we accept their traditions and counsel. Instead we should follow those who we recognize have shaped their lives in a praiseworthy and upright manner as young men, and who have been instructed not in their own presumptions but in the traditions of their forebears.18

In his Lausiac History Palladius describes the dialogues between the ascetic teacher and his disciple. As in Cassian, that dialogue requires the master’s patience with the errors and weaknesses of the anchoritic disciple. Palladius writes of Abba Hellen,

Then, remaining with the brothers three days, teaching them precepts, he laid bare to each one the secrets of their minds: this one he said was troubled by the spirit of fornication, that one vainglory, the other by pleasures, another by wrath, and another one he pronounced merciful, another peace-loving. Thus he showed the virtues and vices of each of them, and when they had heard these things, they all marveled saying that all was indeed accurate that he said.19

Or again, in the first conference Abba Moses argues that monks sometimes accept ascetic and theological errors like those in secular culture accept counterfeit money. A theological doctrine, for example, may seem even to the most experienced monk to be orthodox and purified of error, like a coin that appears to be made of pure gold and with the proper inscription. Yet the same theology may contain some corrupting alloy that no monk, however virtuous or learned, will notice without the most piercing discernment.20

The relationship between navigatio and narratio—the risks and errors of anchoritic living and theoretical writing—has the profoundest theoretical importance for

18 Cassian, Conf., 2.13 [CSEL 53.6-15].
19 Palladius, Historia Lausiaca, PL 73, col. 1168B, ch. 59. The Historia is among the several late-antique sources describing the lives of desert solitaries with a sort of interest in human corruptibility lacking in so many contemporary and later disussions.
20 Cassian, Conf., 1.20 [CSEL 29.15ff.]. Moses then refers to Abba John who once fasted too much and in so doing weakened his spirit considerably. Since a monk cannot avoid practicing theology in some form, John’s over-taxed spirit in turn made him vulnerable to theological error.
Cassian. At the heart of Cassian’s “error” is his claim that all monks engage dialogically with the “traditions of the elders,” and monastic tradition acts upon the monk in much the same way that the monk acts upon and shapes tradition. On the one hand, tradition works by subordination: a monk has an obligation to follow his master and all teachers who have helped constitute tradition. At the same time, a monk also embodies tradition and is as much an author of that tradition as tradition was the father of that monk. Without the “traditions of the elders” no monk can exist, just as those traditions are useless if not practiced by living monks. Errors by individual monks are necessary and allowable. Happily, not all monks will err in the same manner and at the same time. As a result, monastic tradition will be spared the injury of ascetic or theological corruptions even while the individual monk remains an exemplum of variability.

Cassian argues that a monastic theory can only remain coherent when it refers textual representations of the monastic life back to the monk himself, and to do so such a theory requires the categories and vocabulary of “error.” As we will see, it was common for his contemporaries to treat historical anachoresis and the texts which described it—like rules of instruction, for example—as one and the same, effectively subsuming the historical life of the anchorite under the presumed perfections of the regulatory text. Cassian distinguished his analyses from others by showing that in failing to acknowledge that monastic, error-prone living preceded the regulatory text—which must acknowledge its powerlessness to correct that error—a monastic writer also failed to understand monasticism itself. The Conferences, and any other prescriptive or descriptive monastic text, needed to mark this distinction, or risk more profoundly mischaracterizing
anachoresis. Since a monastic writer himelf depends on textual representations, the best kind of monastic language is skepticismal of itsel, deriving from dialogues between living monks and refocusing attention on the historical undulations of the ascetic life.

Egypt, Error, and the Events of 399

For Cassian, because the Egyptian anchorites excelled western monks in spiritual maturity, they remained profoundly alien to the West, and hence they embodied the danger of inaccurately or erroneously describing their lives. It was critical not to misconstrue the anchoritic life as void of moral or theological error. The peril of accurately translating their true excellence was as real as that of glossing the Egyptian anchorite as a figure beyond reproach. The potential for error that writing and monasticism brought with them informs Cassian’s associations of narratio and navigatio, both of which confront us as we turn to the tenth conference.²¹ Just after Cassian apologise for beginning a conference whose subject is identical to the previous, he excuses the digression on the grounds that it addresses how in their manner of prayer the great Egyptian anchorites “wandere” (errare) from the orthodox beliefs defended by the Alexandrian bishop, Theophilus (d. 412).²² He insists that just as monks turn slightly off course, so too does his text in attempting to illustrate the anchorites’ excellence despite their errors. It is here that the tempting errors of theoretical description paralleled the anchorite’s risk of falling into some moral or theological error of his own.

²¹ See de Vogüé, “Pour Comprendre Cassien,” 259-60.
²² For discussion of error and orthodoxy in Egyptian Christianity see, for example, C. Griggs, Early Egyptian Christianity (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 45ff and 171ff. For extant writings by Theophilus see also Norman Russell, Theophilus of Alexandria (New York: Routledge, 2007) and introduction.
However lighthearted appears the bond he establishes between his own stylistics and theological error, Cassian was not suggesting that heresy was as harmless as his authorial mistakes. He begins instead by asserting,

I do not doubt that even here no little instruction may be gained by some rather simple persons with respect to the image of Almighty God which is read about in Genesis, especially when the basis for such an important dogma is considered. For there can be no ignorance of this without great blasphemy and detriment to the Catholic faith. 23

The anchorites’ heresy that he will now consider relates to the “image” of God, and he proceeds to describe the events surrounding the Origenist controversy at the close of the fourth century. To summarize, Origen (d. 254) had opposed the “heresy” of anthropomorphism: God was not to be imagined as having human features, and those who thought otherwise erroneously strayed from the orthodox tradition. The problem was that many Egyptian anchorites imagined God in physical terms while praying. 24

During the episcopate of bishop Theophilus of Alexandria, an Origenist, the Egyptian monks and the bishop clashed violently over the question of anthropomorphism. Cassian claims that the vast majority of Egyptian monks opposed Origen’s doctrine. 25

What happened exactly? It was an established custom, says Cassian, for the bishop of Alexandria to send out annual festal letters to all the churches and monasteries in Egypt. On the day of Epiphany in 399—the day of Christ’s birth and baptism—Theophilus took an obviously suitable occasion to condemn anthropomorphism in his letter. The monks, who found his pronouncements intolerable, stormed Alexandria, arguing that Holy

23 Cassian, Conf., 10.1 [CSEL 286.13-8].
24 Sulpicius Severus also takes an interest in this matter; Gallus, Bk. 1, chs. 6-7, 122-30.
25 Cassian, Conf., 10.2 [CSEL 287.10-1]: “ab universo propemodum generi monachorum, qui per totam provinciam Aegypti morabantur.”
Scripture had clearly given God a physical form. If it seems that the monks, who were after all in the theological majority, ought simply to have dismissed the bishop’s sentiments, we need to understand the larger design of such episcopal letters.

A generation earlier in Alexandria Theophilus’ predecessor Athanasius (d. 373) composed letters of instruction to anchorites and “virgins”: the First and Second Letters to Virgins, First and Second Letter to Monks, correspondence addressed to individual monks, and a work “on virginity.” Cassian would even have known the names of some of the individual monks to whom Athanasius wrote, among others, Amun, Piamun and Dracontius. Elsewhere around the Mediterranean Basil and John Chrysostom (d. 407) composed similar texts, but Athanasius in particular sought to exert considerable influence with such letters which described not only an orthodox theology, but a set of behaviors that those who lived virtuous monastic lives should follow. Writing both to men and women, Athanasius gave his letters an imperative tone and expected the allegiance of those over whom he, supported by custom, could claim some measure of official authority. Such bishops eroded the distinction between ascetic goals and ecclesiastical ones, making for individual ascetics a synthesis between orthodox catechesis, obedience to its enforcer (i.e. the bishop) and a rule of ascetic conduct.

Bishop Ignatius, for example, had argued that ascetic “purity of heart” was a function not only of the state of one’s conscience, but also of one’s obedience to a bishop; and Origen

26 For an assessment of Athanasius’ ascetic theory within the context of his contemporaries see D. Brakke, Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), 142-200. See Select Writings and Letters, ed. Archibald Robertson NPNF 4 (New York: Parker, 1892) and D. Brakke’s Appendix (272ff.) for most of the bishop’s relevant output on anachoresis. For a list of those ascetic precepts provided in the bishop’s letters see notes to Brakke, Athanasius, 34. See ibid., 274-309, where Brakke has translated the fragmentary remnants to the First Letter to Virgins, Second Letter to Virgins and On Virginity.

27 For example, for Basil we have the so-called Ascetica, PG 31, cols. 619-92.
likewise associated inner purity with one’s allegiance to Church doctrine. To this extent these authors were in league with Athanasius’ ascetic politics and its goal of providing a single orthodox-ascetic model to which the monk owed his allegiance. Athanasius opens one of his letters to monks by giving thanks to God that they “possess eternal life,” but at the same time he exhorts them to continued piety in avoiding communication with the Arians who live in great numbers nearby. John Chrysostom likewise argued in his writings that the asceticism of heretics was invalid, however sexually pure they lived. Indeed, the unbeliever is better off than a virgin heretic!

In 399 Theophilus followed these models. Most importantly, the angry and protesting monks in Cassian’s tenth conference were not objecting to the suggestion that monasticism might be theorized—that idea was hardly new—nor to the Origenist sympathies of Alexandrian bishops. They were protesting the implication of Theophilus’ letter that (1) monks ought to be universally allied under a particular theological doctrine, and (2) that they owed allegiance to the defender of orthodoxy—the bishop. In their very form the bishops’ letters to ascetics offered only a single perspective for an Egypt divided by different and developing ascetic and theological views. As Cassian says, the monks were in disagreement over anthropomorphism, and his faction in Egypt clearly was among the minority who supported Origen.

While both Cassian and Athanasius were aware that monks lived relatively autonomous lives, ascetically and theologically, Athanasius rejected the authority of the

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29 Athanasius, Epistola ad Monachos, PG 26, col. 1187. The letter is fragmentary.
30 Chrysostom, De virginitate, PG 48, col. 536, ch. 4: “haereticos virgines etiam gentibus miseriore esse.”
great monastic leaders, the *patrum instituta*, over monastic practices and theology.

Cassian adds to his opening discussion of the Origenist controversy,

To such an extent was this letter repudiated by those who dwelt in the desert of Skete and who in perfection and knowledge, surpassed all who lived in the monasteries of Egypt that […] none of the other priests who presided over the other three churches in that desert would allow it to be read at all, either privately or publically, in their communities.  

Meanwhile Athanasius had argued in his Easter letter that heretical monks kept the feast, but ignored the authority of the bishop who required their theological allegiance.  

Therefore, although wicked men press forward to keep the feast, and as at a feast praise God, and intrude into the church of the saints, yet God expostulates, saying to the sinner, “why dost thou talk of My ordinances?”

Some years later Athanasius identifies those whom he opposes as “Ario-maniacs” (i.e. Arians) who deny that Christ is coeternal with the God.  

Like Theophilus, Athanasius is writing to Christians who have committed to a monastic life, but who make up a theologically diverse group. The bishop argued that monks who fell into some brand of error should be cast from “tradition” as heretics. He promoted the notion that monks owed obedience to ecclesiastical officials and that monastic behaviors (i.e. virginity, prayer, work and so on) were only valuable when in harmony with that leadership.  

Rather than the authority of tradition, it was the authority of the institutional Church that bishops like Athanasius, Chrysostom and Theophilus translated into ascetic theory: virtuous *ascesis* presupposed an orthodox theology. Error was intolerable.

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31 Cassian, *Conf.*, 10.2 [CSEL 287.18-24].
32 For fragments to other Festal Letters by Athanasius see D. Brakke, *Athanasius*, 320-34.
33 Athanasius, *Select Writings*, 524.
Yet Cassian’s point so far in the tenth conference is that monks commonly err in just the way these anchorites did during Theophilus’ episcopacy. We recall that Cassian compared the monk to a merchant at sea—or indeed to the travel-prone Cassian at sea!—whose intent upon some goal (navigatio) was subject to various dangers. The nautical metaphors in the *Conferences* serve to illustrate one central fact about monastic practice: the monk’s pursuit of his goal will not necessarily end successfully, and the journey will certainly not be as theologically linear as the episcopal letters from Theophilus and Athanasius supposed. Rather, error is inevitable since some monks departed from their proper course, a problem Cassian understood all too well since, as he admits at the start of the conference, his writing (narratio) does not proceed as linearly as he might wish.

After describing the monks who storm Theophilus’ Alexandria in 399, Cassian continues by discussing a highly experienced and virtuous anchorite named Serapion who was among the majority of monks in disagreement with Theophilus and Origen, maintaining that God, like humans, had both a physical and spiritual form. After speaking at length with Serapion about the matter, however, Cassian and his companions—including the priest and anchorite Abba Paphnutius—had won the great man over to the “faith of the Catholic tradition.” There was rejoicing all around.

When [Serapion] gave his unconditional assent in this regard, Abba Paphnutius and the rest of us were filled with joy that the Lord had not permitted a man so old and accomplished in so many virtues, who had gone astray merely on account of ignorance and rustic naiveté, to wander from the path of right faith up to the end.\(^\text{35}\)

The story does not end here, however. Cassian observes,

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\(^{35}\) Cassian, *Conf.*, 10.3 [CSEL 289.1-6].
But the old man got so confused in his mind during the prayers, when he realized that the anthropomorphic image of the Godhead which he had always pictured to himself while praying had been banished from his heart, that he suddenly broke into the bitterest tears and heavy sobbing and, throwing himself to the ground with a loud groan, cried out: “Woe is me, wretch that I am! They have taken my God from me, and I have no one to lay hold of, nor do I know whom I should adore or address.”

Cassian and others are deeply shaken by this last development. Serapion’s ready assent to the orthodox faith did not necessarily allow him to pursue his ascetic discipline (i.e. prayer) more effectively or virtuously. If anything, the anchorite’s prayer-life has become much more complicated and troubled; prayer is now an impediment, not a means, to Serapion’s goal of inner purity. The anchorite seems lost adrift at sea.

The scene is reminiscent of a story about the anchorite Agathon who, towards the end of his life, despaired of seeing God. His skepticism regarding a hoped-for union with God indicates that it was impossible for Agathon to construe the theological finis of his life as in any way inevitable. The point is connected to his conversations with some men who had come to his cell to test his emotional repose. They observed, “aren’t you that Agathon who is said to be a fornicator and a proud man?” To which the anchorite responded “Yes, it is very true.” They then asked, “Aren’t you that Agathon who is always talking nonsense?” Again, the answer was affirmative. Finally they asked him whether he was Agathon “the heretic.” This last charge he refuted, observing that to be a heretic was to be separated from God. This apparently was going too far. A desert hero might be sinful and a silly babbler, but a heretic he was not.

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36 Ibid., 10.3 [CSEL 289.7-14].
But how could Agathon justify the status of heretic as exceptional? Why does his identity as a “fornicator and a proud man” not constitute separation from God? Here an ecclesiastically supported theory of monasticism is being superimposed upon an ascetic life. It is otherwise impossible to justify the exceptional status given to heresy in this case. In effect, our author has Agathon randomly identify one error as distinct from others, because the text has conflated ascetic goals with ecclesiastical ones, suggesting that the two must always be unified. Virtuous monks simply were not heretics. If this were not the case, Agathon would be just as “heretical” as he is a talker of “nonsense,” since his heresy would be constituted if and insofar as he should dare to distinguish ascetic goals from ecclesiastical ones.

But by his own reasoning Agathon is in fact a potential heretic. His admission to the charge of “fornicator” and denial of the charge “heretic” indicate that he has made the very distinction that supporters of orthodox anachoresis refuse. As death approached, he did not know whether he would be separated from God, a separation that, we remember, was the heretic’s essential quality. I observe that Agathon had only the potential to be a heretic, not only because that separation is a future potential, but because these final observations indicate that the distinction he makes between ecclesiastical and ascetic goals is itself incomplete. We cannot know whether and in what ways the anchorite would have drawn such a distinction. The author of the Verba Seniorum, the text that records Agathon’s interactions, would have him express loyalty to the union of Church and desert. It is for this and no other reason that he denies the charge of heresy. But his final expressions of skepticism about his union with God illustrate not only that his status
as a heretic should remain pending, but that his willingness to concede the unity of ecclesiastical and ascetic goals was likewise pending.

While Cassian developed a theory of monastic virtue and obedience that was based on the experiences of individual anchorites, the above-mentioned bishops and others whose writings condemned, rather than tolerated, error had established a monastic theory whose effects on anchorites Cassian scrutinizes. The spiritual and social crisis that unfolded for the anchorite is not as significant as what Cassian thought was the deeper error by the bishops. While theological disagreements persisted in fourth-century Egypt, it was the letter that bishop Theophilus had issued to the monasteries that occasioned the monks’ protests. The letter made the implicit demand that the monks heed official, ecclesiastical authority in place of the authority of their traditions. Even though Cassian thought that the monks held to a false perception of God, it did not follow that episcopal authority was the appropriate means for correcting the error.

In both the *Conferences* and *Institutes* he insists that monastic authority presupposes experience; it could only have been through their long and varied experience that the Egyptian anchorites (*patres*) could speak with authority on prayer, sexual temptation, or on ascetic or theological matters. And by experience Cassian means the strict and complete devotion of one’s life to monastic excellence. He writes,

> If we wish in deed and in fact to attain to the true perfection of virtue, we must be at one with those teachers and leaders who did not engage in empty talk about it but who grasped it through direct experience and who are also able to teach us, to direct us to it, and to show us the surest way of arriving at it.  

The monk’s practical experience and the authority with which that experience invests him are noticeably not the only subjects under discussion here. Cassian indicates that monastic teachers who lacked genuine \( (\text{res}) \) experience relied instead on \textit{vaniloqua disputatio}, or “empty talk.” Any ascetic teacher who claimed to have authority to teach monks but who nevertheless lacked experience \textit{as} a monk merely used “empty talk,” by which Cassian means superficially attractive language that was divorced from the reality of monastic living. The opposition is common in his works. But if Cassian’s experienced monks like Moses, Piamun and the others were the teachers authorized to lead each of the twenty-four conferences, what sort of monastic teachers did he think lacked authority because they lacked real experience?

The answer to this question is tied to the nature and discursive form of the “empty” teaching. While Cassian did not categorically disapprove of rhetorical eloquence as such, he wished to distinguish textuality itself, which regrettably but necessarily displaced the lives of experienced monks through the written record, from the daily reality of those monks. He lamented the movement from physical and spiritual experience to spoken words, which were tenuously supported by experience, and thence to the written text, which in turn threatened to further occlude the immense importance of experience. So again in the \textit{Preface} to the first part of his \textit{Conferences} he observes that anyone who wants to assess the monastic theory \textit{(sententia)} of the anchoritic fathers should first undertake to live such a life in Egypt.\textsuperscript{40} Likewise, in the twenty-third

\textsuperscript{40} Cassian, \textit{Conf.}, Preface [CSEL 5.15-8]: “De quibus tamen si quis voluerit veram proferre sententiam, et utrum impleri queant, desiderat experiri, festinet prius eorum propositum simili studio et conversatione suscipere.”
conference Cassian describes how the Apostle Paul and others “taught religion more by the authority of their virtues than by that of their words.” And at its conclusion he again opposes “verbal explanation” to “action and experience.”

In criticizing rhetorical eloquence Cassian was establishing the link between written culture and the decline of genuine authority. As has been observed elsewhere, “the moment at which the ascetic tradition exchanged an oral for a written culture was precisely the moment at which it began to doubt its own insight and authority.” Cassian would have added to the contrast between “oral” and “written” culture an additional opposition between “experience” and “empty talk.” Thus in the Preface to the Institutes he again criticizes verbal teaching, which was only slightly better than his own writing, while praising action and experience. His point was that the very act of writing or speaking about monastic excellence entailed some danger: the use of language was a fundamentally separate art from the practice of monastic living, and yet it was possible to confuse the two. The underlying argument is that one who eloquently writes about monasticism implies that monastic excellence consists *in that eloquence*, rather in the experience it describes. A reader or author may potentially confuse text and *anachoresis* since spiritual authority was already being displaced onto the text. This is why Cassian is nervous about his own writing, and in both works he often emphasizes his lack of literary flair. A writer’s ineloquence serves as a sincere acknowledgment that authority was

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41 Ibid., 23.2 [CSEL 641.16-17].
42 Ibid., 23.21 [CSEL 671.9-10].
43 Goodrich, *Contextualizing Cassian*, 66-75.
45 Cassian, *Inst.*, Preface [CSEL 5.4-10].
diminished when physical and spiritual experience was displaced (as it was by the act of
writing). By this reasoning, the monastic theorist whose text stumbles somewhat—and
Cassian sees himself as writing a meandering, dialogical and error-filled narratio—
prevents the attractive exteriors of “empty talk” from undermining the authority of
monastic experience. The marred text points to a separate sort of error-prone excellence
(res) that rhetoric (verba) has obscured.

The objects of his protest in the Institutes and Conferences are almost certainly
the Christian leaders who, though not experienced monks, claimed the authority to teach
others on monastic excellence. Theophilos and Athanasius implied by the authority lent
by the episcopate that monastic authority and monastic experience were separable, an
argument that opposed Cassian’s claim that bishops like them or SS Basil and
Chrysostom were ill-qualified to advise ascetics since they themselves were not devoted
strictly (or at all) to ascetic excellence. Bishops who spoke words of instruction to monks
conflated an ecclesiastical office with monastic practice, and with no concern that the
experience of a bishop was critically different from that of a monk. Just as rhetoric and
monastic practice are two separate arts, so too are monasticism and the ecclesiastical
office. And again, the fact that such bishops primarily wrote, rather than spoke, their
words of instruction to monks illustrates the link that Cassian perceived between
eloquent, written instruction and the loss of genuine authority. When Cassian refers to
the eloquence of Basil and Jerome, both of whom wrote for men and women ascetics,46
he is observing that a self-celebrating eloquence effectively concealed the fact the

46 Cassian, Conf., Preface [CSEL 5.15-22].
monastic life was fraught with errors. For his part, Athanasius possibly received some ascetic training from his predecessor, Alexander, yet neither bishop could have devoted himself to monasticism to the degree that would, in Cassian’s eyes, legitimize their authority as monastic teachers. Athanasius’ recourse to textual instruction, rather than leading by example, was therefore only symptomatic of an attenuated authority.

The problem, Cassian implies, is with the festal letter, for it was in the wake of that letter that the pursuit of spiritual goals by mature and excellent monks was disrupted. Cassian’s argument and the aesthetic form in which he places that argument—the dialogue—mutually depended on the authority of ascetic experience, rather than on that of a bishop or a prescriptive text. Here we must underscore the difference between Cassian’s and the bishops’ approach to religious controversy, for their respective texts—the Conferences and the festal letters—contain distinct attitudes towards the questions of conflict and authority. And what were irreconcilably antagonistic arguments about monastic goals and practices entailed two equally antagonistic aesthetics for framing those arguments. There is a link in the tenth conference, as in the Conferences as a whole, between writing a monastic theory and monastic practice; both pursuits are bound by the risk of failure, or of making some mistake. Traditions would seem to be contested in Cassian’s world, but the solutions to this problem were not to be found in the written word of a bishop, or even a “rule.”

Here we revisit the connections between writing (narratio/navigatio), on the one hand, and monastic experience, on the other. Cassian’s text (narratio), we remember, is

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47 D. Brakke, Athanasius, 7.
intimately connected with risk, like the risk of traveling at sea or living the monastic life. He deliberately links the *Conferences*’ faulty architectonics and monastic error, mitigating the distance between a theoretical text about anchorites and the historical monks themselves. His point is that a prescriptive text, like Egyptian anchorites, will inevitably err in some way, and those regulatory precepts (*narratio*) erred most egregiously when they did not self-consciously inscribe onto themselves the monk’s error or wandering from some correct path. Yet the bishops’ letters presented themselves as inviolably and permanently stable, while the monastic life was far from stable.

Cassian’s dialogic model of regulation functions like an errant tradition. The errors condemned in the letter are comfortably welcomed into Cassian’s dialogues, for it is only through the interaction between experience and inexperience, error and virtue, that monastic excellence and authority can be realistically and historically modeled. For Cassian, the insistence on unwavering obedience to a single authority was possible only after monks and virgins were alienated from their own experience by the text itself. Monastic experience was a record of both excellence and error, success and failure. By contrast, a regulatory text often depended on an absolutist rhetoric—“the virtuous monk does not do X,” or “monks who behave in Y manner are heretics”—that comported well with its suggestion that only a single speaker stood behind the precepts. But the *Conferences*, we remember, is a set of dialogues, and the non-linear form of this text is meant to mirror—if imperfectly because rhetorically—the dialogical interactions between experienced monks and the less experienced, between error and virtue. A regulatory text that exploited the rhetorical flair of its speaker ultimately construed monastic excellence
in the single sense of “virtue” and “truth,” alienating itself from the fact that monastic experience necessarily involves repeated moral and theological failures. It is only by means of these failures that moral truth is learned, excellence is produced and authority obtained. An experienced authoritative monk is a monk who has failed repeatedly, not a monk who has unerringly heeded the dictates of a rule or an episcopal letter.

Unlike the intent and design of clerical texts, a model by which official Church leaders like priests, bishops and deacons took over the function of the ascetic guides, the monk-led dialogues of Cassian’s anchorites actually performed a strongly interpersonal and intellectually elastic theory of monasticism. Here it was through reading texts that ascetic men and women learned about the importance of virginity, fasting, theological matters and so on. Clerical texts, and even the codified “rules” and “precepts” of Pachomian monasticism, assumed a stable set of behaviors. Like Athanasius and Theophilus, the Pachomian tradition offered such precepts that failed to negotiate the errors of individual monks. They described monastic practices in linear terms, and from the perspective of a single authoritative speaker. Invariably, a regulatory text relied on a single argument and posited an author and his *verb*um as the antidote to inexperience: in the absence of experience the ascetic need only follow a set of standardized precepts, and all will be well, ascetically and theologically.

It is helpful to look briefly at the documents of another monastic movement in Egypt that sided rather with Athanasius than with Cassian’s anchorites. Associated with the *coenobia* of Abba Pachomius, these prescriptive texts refused to acknowledge both a monk’s wandering from tradition (*error*) and the dialogue that Cassian said constituted
that tradition. This can be illustrated by a vision that Pachomius was said to have had some decades prior to Cassian’s residence in Egypt.\footnote{Like the other documents associated with Pachomian monasticism, the vision survives in several forms and languages (although primarily Greek and Coptic); see James E. Goehring, 
\textit{Ascetics, Society, and the Desert} (Harrisburg: Trinity, 1999), 143ff. The Latin materials, including letters and rules from the Pachomian tradition come from Jerome and have been edited by Dom Amand Boon, \textit{Pachomiana Latina} (Louvain: Bureaux de la Revue, 1932), although this is but a fraction of the total written evidence that survives the communities; Goehring, \textit{Ascetics}, 137n.1.} He converted to Christianity at about age twenty when, as a Roman conscript (in 312/13), he chanced upon a group of Christians who proved charitable towards him and his companions. Pachomius then transitioned from soldier to anchorite, becoming a disciple of the famous Palamon, one of many Egyptian ascetics to which Pachomius might have attached himself. Leading the solitary monastic life, eventually he came to abandon \textit{anachoresis} in favor of a more communal monasticism.\footnote{\textit{Vita Sancti Pachomii}, PL 73, col. 231, chs. 1-2.} He presided over several \textit{coenobia} located in the Egyptian Thebaid and held together as a network by his own charismatic leadership.

Pachomius’ answer to the problem of error-prone spiritual guides is simple: monks who desire spiritual and theological truth should keep within the Pachomian monastery, resigning the life of the solitary. In the vision it is Pachomius’ \textit{coenobia} that stand before him as he watches “the entire congregation.”\footnote{There were seven Pachomian foundations; for analysis on the Pachomian network of \textit{coenobia} see P. Rousseau, \textit{Pachomius} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 57-104.}

One day it happened that the Lord revealed a vision to our father Pachomius. And when he looked he saw [men in the darkness] groping about because the darkness of that oppressive place was great. And it was very frightening. And again when they would hear “Behold, the light is with us,” they would run there searching for the light, hoping to see it. But as they ran ahead, they would hear another voice behind them, “Behold the light is here.” And they would turn back immediately because of the voices that they heard, searching for the light. And he also saw in the vision some in the darkness who were circling around a pillar, thinking that they were making progress and approaching the light, without realizing that they
were circling around a pillar. And he [...] saw the entire congregation of the community there, proceeding in single file and holding on to one another lest they become lost because of that great darkness. And those who led them had a small light to illumine their way, like the light of a lamp. And only four of the brothers could see the light, while all the others saw no light at all. Our father Pachomius watched how they proceeded. If one let go of the one in front of him, he would get lost in the darkness together with all those who were following him. And the man of God Pachomius cried out in ecstasy and said to one who had not yet let go saying, “Hold on to the one ahead of you lest you become lost.” And the small light that went before the brothers, went before them until they reached a great opening, above which was a great light. They proceeded up to the opening.\textsuperscript{51}

The logic of this vision is that all anchorites are hopelessly misguided. The vision is fascinatingly ignorant of non-Pachomian monastic traditions (which are shrouded in darkness), and its allegory of spiritual truth and falsehood is indifferent to temporality. Even its narrative of monks proceeding towards a light functions more as an image, a static sign. Most importantly, the message seems to be that if a monk keeps within this monastic community, his life will no longer be the site of theological controversies or the errors of ascetic leaders. To be within the community is tantamount to moving towards the “light” of truth. But of course when the vision claims that the monks “proceed” towards this light, its static and impressionistic allegory submits the attainment of truth in place of this process; to be a Pachomian monk was to have already attained truth, and hence to have left history far behind, along with its temporality and unpredictability.

Recent analyses of fourth-century Egyptian asceticism argue for a much more diverse and nuanced ascetic movement, and one in which members often broke off intellectual ties with their teachers.\textsuperscript{52} For example, asceticism had a strongly urban component that consisted of complex relationships, and these relationships seem to have

\textsuperscript{51} Quoted in Goehring, \textit{Ascetics}, 144. Four extant variants of the vision now survive. See \textit{ibid.}, 137ff.
\textsuperscript{52} See for example, Goehring, \textit{Ascetics}, 162-218.
been constituted rather by social mutuality and service, and not so much in terms of obedience. The value placed on mutual service, social welfare (e.g. care for others or for the sick) or manual labor derived from social necessities that did not presuppose the hierarchies of obedience that later became characteristic of monastic practice. The economic and social character of early ascetics’ lives tells a story of social difference, not unity. The social independence of those who never quite “renounced” the world or their fairly close connections with that world—e.g. their involvement in trade—show that the episcopate must have exerted very little control over the daily patterns of ascetic lives.\(^\text{53}\)

In the Middle Ages, the anchoritic movements were not nearly as central to the political, ecclesiastical and economic culture as were the churches and coenobitic networks, and the same was largely true of fourth-century Egypt with its patriarch in Alexandria and the *coenobia* of the Pachomians. Even if he lived in the relatively safer and urban setting, the social and economic vulnerability of an anchorite must have been a basic part of his identity as someone who “renounces” the world. In the seventh conference Abba Serenus, describing the instability of all things, observes that in particular the mind of one who renounces the world will often wander from prayer or contemplation to his lack of food and water, which is here today and gone tomorrow: “in everyone who is careful there is an abundance, for one who is carefree and without sorrow shall be in need.”\(^\text{54}\) At what point should the anchorite prioritize orthodox doctrines and a strict rule of behavior when his attention was drawn rather to the desires

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\(^{54}\) Cassian, *Conf.*, 7.6 [CSEL 188.21-3].
of the body and the soul’s desire for God? The concerns of economically and politically networked Christians were hardly those of the anchorites in the *Conferences*.

Even while Athanasius sought to politicize monasticism, often with much success, his career reflects at once his investment in ecclesiastical politics and the instabilities of his supposedly central position as the defender of orthodoxy. In requesting the allegiance of the anchorites his letters occlude the fact that in Athanasius’ own controversial career theology and the rhetoric of unity remained thoroughly contestable. Athanasius was an enemy to many, most prominently the Arians and Melitians, and was by no means universally acknowledged by monks as a legitimate authority. The fact that the bishop was exiled five times in his tenure as patriarch confirms that opponents to Alexandria were never in short supply. The rhetoric of theological and moral purity in his and Theophilus’ letters to monks was offset by the large number of monks, priests and bishops who were not among the bishop’s allies.

Cassian’s *Conferences* solved Athanasius’ problem by positing experience, not a prescriptive text, as the best model for monastic authority. And dialogue was the literary form that best illustrated the back-and-forth negotiation between error and virtue that constituted experience. As a literary text itself, the *Conferences* was a part of the problem only when its reader did not understand that he was in dialogue with the desert ascetics within the text. That is, Cassian’s reader must reproduce in his own life and reading the dialogues he witnesses between Cassian, Germanus and the Egyptian

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anchorites. Cassian understood the authority of monastic tradition as running parallel with the authority of the Church, and therefore in some theoretical competition with it. His notion of experience as authority existed in competition with the widespread sentiment that authority was bound instead with “truth,” understood as theological doctrine, a province that bishops thought should be fully under their control.

Since Cassian perceived the official Church and monasticism as two separate systems, his writings largely ignore episcopal demands that monastic and ecclesiastical goals be unified, demands that inevitably would be frustrated by independent-minded or slightly rebellious monks. Instead the *Conferences* and *Institutes* argue that monasticism is a self-regulating system; monks do not require aid or instruction from members of the official Church like bishops or priests. Evagrius Ponticus, one of Cassian’s teachers whose monastic theory much resembled his own, wrote that “if you are a theologian, you pray truly and if you pray truly, you are a theologian.”

Whereas Evagrius and Cassian argued that asceticism and theology were mutually constituted, Athanasius argued repeatedly that both were dependent on the authority of the bishop, the defender of orthodoxy, and not on monastic tradition. It is the link between spiritual or intellectual authority and autonomy from the official Church that Cassian’s project of a dialogical monastic theory fostered. In other words, the monastic tradition possesses a great deal of intellectual sovereignty within the Church. Of course, this last fact limits the degree of Christian unity. For teachings about the body, prayer and virginity also entailed a theological standpoint, and with a multitude of teachers and communities, Christians

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56 Evagrius Pronticus, *De oratione*, PG 79, col. 1179, ch. 60 (where the chapters on prayer are wrongly attributed to Nilus of Sinai): “si theologus es, vere orabis; sique vere oraveris, es theologus.”
formed several and conflicting theologies that derived from their equally conflicting notions about the spirit and body.

For Cassian, monasticism exists independent of and prior to the official Church. The theory of monasticism contained in a *regula, admonitio* or similar text depended on a single command-giving Church official with no allowance made for the error and questions of the conveniently passive and silenced reader. Admittedly, not every defender of orthodoxy in this period so decidedly rejected the heretical ascetic groups. As one bishop of Alexandria saw, there was no reason to exclude from the congregation of the Church those who “were reported as the regular pupils of some heterodox teacher.”  

And as noted recently of Christian ascetic movements, “heretical” conduct and notions of asceticism condemned by the Church were in fact “shared widely among Christian ascetics, including those who would be idealized as holy or orthodox as well as those who would be marginalized as extreme and heretical.”

Athanasius confronts “heresy” in monks only to ignore the fact that it would necessarily persist at both the local level and throughout history, however aggressively the defenders of orthodoxy would pursue theological unity. There was not a majority of Egyptian bishops loyal to Alexandria during the first part of the fourth century; “heretical” or theologically independent-minded monks were the rule, not the exception.

A major strength of Cassian’s theory is its argument that heresy remains a fact of history, however much bishops like Athanasius pointed to heresy as grounds for 

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excluding monks from tradition. Cassian insisted that tradition, with its strengths and weaknesses, its virtues and errors, could not be delimited ideologically after the fact. Heretical and failed monks—and indeed women ascetics—enter into tradition, because they enter into Christian monasticism, even if erroneously, as impatient, disobedient, ignorant of orthodox theology or heretical. To recognize error retrospectively is simultaneously to acknowledge the realities of history.

The remainder of the tenth conference and its commentary on the events of 399 model the internal unity of Cassian’s monastic theory, offsetting what he thinks to be the less unified and historically supported theory modeled in episcopal writings. To repeat, theological and ascetic errors were the inevitable results of inexperience, a condition familiar to every monk. Even when Serapion, however, became an experienced monk, the mere chances of history were enough to prevent him from moving closer to his finis: a sudden letter from the bishop disclosed a heresy that had long been lodged in Serapion’s spirit, and the letter’s heavy demand for reform only impeded what it sought to bring about. Cassian admits that although the anchorite’s intellectual simplicity had left him open to the heresy of anthropomorphism, the other monks who objected to the Origenist position were well advanced in knowledge. There is no definitive safeguard against error, and episcopal letters designed to regulate monks, while successfully defining orthodoxy, fail to understand that error would remain as continuous as history itself.

Shortly after recording Serapion’s spiritual crisis, the speaker of the conference, Abba Isaac, reaffirms the goal of the solitary in absolute terms.

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60 Cassian, *Conf.*, 10.2 [CSEL 287.18-20].
This, then, is the goal of the solitary, and this must be his whole intention—to deserve to possess the image of future blessedness in this body and as it were to begin to taste the pledge of that heavenly way of life and glory in this vessel [...]. And all the yearning of one’s heart [will] become a single and continuous prayer.61

Here again we find a gesture towards an ascetic and theological ideal, for this sort of continuous prayer will ideally be evacuated of anthropomorphism and any other attendant heresies. But these words sound so exalted to Germanus that he, like Serapion, is led into a spiritual crisis and despairs of ever achieving perfection. He exclaims,

We fall into greater despair the more our desire for perfect blessedness is inflamed by the stimulus of this teaching, since we do not know how we can strive for and acquire the discipline regarding something so sublime.62

The remainder of the conference essentially restates what Alexandrian letters ignored by setting up a single ascetic and theological ideal: the “sublime” goal of perfection stands at a great distance from the monk, and he will confront innumerable impediments to his goal throughout his life. He will therefore need to avoid fetishizing perfection, as if it were an eternally codified “rule,” and instead understand himself in dialogue with his goal just as Abba Isaac and Germanus are in dialogue with each other.

We are not to be surprised when the experienced anchorite praises Germanus for understanding the non-linear and wandering path of one who strives after perfection. The need to see virtue and error, finis and journey, as parts of a dynamic and irreducibly dialogical system is apparently precisely what Isaac was hoping to convey. “Your search,” he says, “so meticulous and careful, foreshadows that purity is near at hand.”63

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61 Ibid., 10.7 [CSEL 293.23-294.2].
62 Ibid., 10.8 [CSEL 294.5-8].
63 Ibid., 10.9 [CSEL 296.9-10].
This response seems curiously beside the point: it should matter little where the monk stands relative to purity, since he will always be able to note some error in his life that may be removed. For this reason, Abba Isaac offers a formulaic prayer that only the most exceptional monks have passed on to their equally exceptional disciples: “O God, incline unto my aid; O Lord, make haste to help me.” The formula is described as though it were a holy incantation that will shield the monk from every temptation. As Isaac guesses, Germanus and Cassian were expecting some more obviously profound teaching. The brief prayer sounds, moreover, as if its speaker is not highly advanced in excellence, but rather suffers great spiritual weakness. Indeed, what is special about this prayer, which is only one of many portions of the Psalter, and how does a single formula answer Cassian’s objections to Theophilus’ handling of the Origenist controversy?

First, in its formulaic quality the prayer resembles the non-negotiable teachings of episcopal letters, although in this case the “teaching” is derived neither from an ecclesiastical official, nor from the monk’s master, but rather from a spiritual tradition whose authority all monks recognize: the Psalter. Isaac’s further reasoning on the special qualities of this prayer, while important, need not distract us from a far more fundamental point: the prayer’s content forces every monk, regardless of his maturity, to confess his error and place himself on the same level with all other monks: “make haste to help me.” The remainder of the conference consists of Isaac’s meditation on spiritual failings and temptations, each mention of which is interrupted by a recitation of the prayer. In other words, the formula is used to establish a dialogue between the anchorite and his tradition.

64 As the editor M. Petschenig points out, this prayer is taken from the Psalter (69.2): “deus in adiutorium meum intende; domine ad adiuuandum mihi festina” [CSEL 297.23-5].
between his error and the possibility of perfection. The back-and-forth between virtue and error is precisely the recitation of the prayer and the moments of wandering silence in between. This dialogue between the monk’s error and the prayer that is designed to correct the error is regulated, as it were, by monasticism’s finis. For the prayer is sincerely meant: God guides the monk’s virtue, though its course may momentarily stray.

Concluding on this note, Cassian reminds us that Theophilus’ festal letter was part of the problem, not the solution. It was over-determined, and ignored the fact that the monk’s spiritual condition could only be assessed by a correspondingly immaterial judge. The letter that condemned anthropomorphism did not consistently acknowledge its reliance on an inescapably material mode of writing to critique other varieties of materiality. Cassian has taken to their extreme the arguments for an incorporeal God: how could such a God need episcopal letters, which only exaggerate the materiality of experience, when monastic lives were already regrettably historical and material? But he has also shown that since the anchorite is fundamentally both a spiritual and historical being, and since Christian doctrine derives as much from God as it does from history, a dialogical interaction between virtue and error is necessary and unavoidable.

Cassian ends his exploration of the Origenist controversy without mentioning the fact that bishop Theophilus was eventually convinced by the anti-Origenist monks and led a persecution against others, including perhaps Cassian’s circle.\textsuperscript{65} Indeed, this sudden turn of events, favoring as it did a position that Cassian opposed, may well have led to his flight from Egypt to Constantinople. In my reading, what appears to be a dishonest move

\textsuperscript{65} Harmless, Desert Christians, 37-38.
on Cassian’s part to suppress the conclusion of the controversy is in fact yet another self-reflective reminder that history does not contain linear and unbroken movements towards “truth.” Only the letters of bishops and the rules of the Pachomian coenobia produced a rhetoric of such absolutes. It would not have surprised Cassian to learn that a defender of “orthodoxy,” Bishop Cyril, again sat as patriarch in Alexandria after Theophilus, nor that Origen’s reputation was quickly declining (he would eventually be condemned in 553 by the council at Constantinople). Cassian’s omission recalls the fact that monastic tradition was not unified in every sense, and would never be so as long as the monk was tossed about on the uncertain waters of history.

The Vocabulary of Instability

The tenth conference is one of several other instances in the Conferences which show that behind the theoretical text was the enduring presence of moral and theological negotiation in the life of the anchorite. The error of the dialogue was its textuality, an error whose remedy came when the monk-author referred his text back to historical action in a back-and-forth vibration between authoritative, erring prescriptions and the equally authoritative and erring anchorite. Further still, in his analysis Cassian translated the anchorite’s dialogic movement between virtue and error into a dialogue of monastic lexica, placing terms like “stability,” “discretion,” and “obedience” alongside “error” and the language of ascetic and theological failure. A monastic dialogue on “humility” also invested that virtue with its opposite—“vainglory” or the like—and those same

terminologies became traceable to the historical life which could never fully extricate errors from its acts of virtue. All such vocabulary fundamentally allowed for a critique of the monastic text. The monastic vocabulary in Cassian is highly self-suspicious and aims to refocus attention back onto the monastic life it momentarily must displace.

In this spirit the penultimate conference takes up the subject of anchoritic “perfection.” We must of course first understand that Cassian was not calling on monks to be without error. Instead, the term “perfection” is a mechanism within his theory that illustrates, yet again, the enduring need for dialogue and the persistence of error. The rationale is familiar now: since the monk has only the potential to perfect himself, his life stands in dialogue with a separate state of being, namely perfection, which is never identical to his own. In the first conference perfection is always addressed in the context of a lack or absence. The monk is to move towards perfection by steps (istes gradibus), he is to maintain a desire for perfection (desiderium perfectionis), or perfection is associated with some negation as when Abba Moses says “bodily affliction produces some initial progress but not the perfection of love itself.” Elsewhere the work ruthlessly insists that a monk cannot possess perfection. In the twenty-third conference Abba Theonas says, “What a good of mercy it is, what perfection it is […] to be weak with the weak!” What Theonas means is not so much that perfection is weakness, but that it is the monk’s task to converse with perfection through the recognition of his own

67 Cassian, Conf., 1.7 [CSEL 13.11].
68 Ibid., 1.18 [CSEL 27.17].
69 Ibid., 1.10 [CSEL 17.11-13].
70 Ibid., 23.2 [CSEL 641.19-20].
faults. In this conference the “perfect” are the monks who readily acknowledge their imperfection, showing their “weaker” interlocutors how to be (im)perfect.

The postponement of monastic perfection, which is precisely what constitutes its excellence, stands as another reminder that all representations of the monastic life as in any way completed or perfected profoundly misrepresented that life, investing it with a finality and unity that it did not possess. The temptation for the monastic theorist is to exploit textual stability as a means of sublimating the presence of “error” in “perfection,” effectively situating error in strict opposition to perfection rather than in a partnership with it. Abba Theonas addresses those who think that their deeds and thoughts are immune from criticism and correction. Encouraged perhaps by their reliance on codified precepts, such thoughts often go ignored and are allowed to fester in their hearts. Mature monks, for example, often dwell on their past crimes while they are trying to pray.

What certainly causes us to fall into this error is the fact that we are utterly ignorant of the virtue of sinlessness, or impeccability, and we think that this is impossible for us to incur any guilt whatsoever from these careless and fleeting digressions of thought.\footnote{Ibid., 23.7 [CSEL 651.3-6].}

Theonas condemns the presumption of one’s own perfection as an “error,” but one that is different in kind from the error of shameless thoughts. The point is that distracting thoughts will always trouble the monk. He will never wholly make himself immune from error, or wandering, from his proper course of conduct. Those who think otherwise are sometimes found in monasteries (\textit{in monasteriis consistentes}) where they take communion only rarely on the assumption that a monk might make himself worthy or
sufficiently perfect once a year.\textsuperscript{72} The reference here to a stable monastic space may well refer to the naïve conflation (à la Pachomius) of textual stability with moral stability.

Another term that, like “error” or “perfection,” attached to solitaries and argued for the authority of anchoritic experience is \textit{singularitas}. Latin \textit{singulare/singularitas} was glossed in late-antique Christian texts as meaning, in some sense, “singleness” or oneness and, of course, had a political and theological backdrop. It was understood as synonymous with the oneness of unity (\textit{unitas}), that is, the theological and political unity of the Church. Yet as the uses of \textit{singularitas} and its related lexica multiplied throughout various texts of this period, so too did their meanings. However unassuming and simple the category appears, what was meant by oneness was both contestable and contested in the same way and for the same reason that political and moral authority was contested both within the Church and within monastic movements. As shown by early responses to the Arian heresy, the term was unavoidably pulled into theological controversies over the unity of the Godhead.\textsuperscript{73} Unity in one sense meant plurality in another, and \textit{singularitas} was interwoven into clerical contests over what constituted a unified deity.

Insofar as Christians disagreed with each other over theological matters, the questions of divine unity and the unity of God’s people went hand in hand. Jerome (d. 420) translates one of Origen’s homilies using \textit{singularitas} in the sense of (ecclesiastical) unity as opposed to the multiple forms of error (i.e. dissension, heresy, sin) that existed

\textsuperscript{72} \textit{Ibid.}, 23.21 [CSEL 670.22].
\textsuperscript{73} As the fourth-century response by Faustinus to the Arians argues (\textit{De trinitate sive de fide contra arianos}), the first two members of the Trinity are unified in divinity but separate in person: “pater et filius unum sunt secundum deitatem, non unus secundum personas et interpretatur unum ideo dictum, ut unus personae singularitas crederetur” (\textit{PL} 13, col. 45C).
within the Church. Here again, as God is one, so too is his Church. As with the above response to Arius, the unity of believers is taken to imply the unity of God since the homily also appeals to Christ’s language of unity (“I and the Father are one”). Yet here again it is suggested that unity or singularity within the Church was a construction that sought to offset the fact that the Church was often not unified theologically or morally (ubi peccata sunt, ibi est multitudo). Singularitas, then, is a polemical term meant to construct unity in the face of disagreement, dissention and contest.

It is not surprising therefore that the meaning of singularity shifts in response to sincere acknowledgments that Christians historically disagree with each other. In contrast to the above use of singularity in the sense of unity, in his de fide against the Arians Bishop Ambrose allows singularitas to express the fact that the first two members of the trinity are distinct in person (singularitas ad personam pertinet, unitas ad naturam). Here the term refers to oneness in the sense of uniqueness or distinction. Exceptional or “singular” in his divine humanity, Christ was of course the very problem for orthodox and Arian disagreements. While united with God in nature, says Ambrose, Christ is unique in person, and indeed a distinct specimen of humanity, a point that is repeated by Peter Chrysologus. The bishop imagines of course that Christ’s distinction

75 Jerome, Homélies, 296.40.
should unite, not divide, Christians, even if the very emphasis on unity brought the understanding that points of unity were also always points of division.

On the other hand, division or distinction was not always a bad thing, as those who recognized Christ’s exceptionality understood. Monks and “virgins” were not merely Christians; like Christ, they were the very special believers.78 A work by Pseudo-Cyprian takes singularity in exactly this sense of ascetic elitism.79 Applied to them, singularity argued the exceptional or unique qualities of believers who stood doubly separated first from non-believers and also from the Christian laity. The idea of monastic authority and of the obedience that the monk or “virgin” owed to superiors is contained within the very term “monk.” While “monk” meant “single” (“monas”), so too did the idea of singleness attach to the monk. The fact that singularitas could be used to normalize monasticism—as happened with etymologies of the word “monk”—did not wholly cover up the tension encoded in the term between behavioral and theoretical unity, on the one hand, and the type of behavior that tradition was by definition unable to account for, on the other.80

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80 See Isidore’s Etymology, wherein we find singularitas etymologized from Greek “monas” (i.e. monk), was reproduced, for example, in Rabanus Maurus’ De institutione clericorum, ed. Alois Knöpfler (Munich: Verlag der Lentnerschen Buchhandlung, 1900), Bk. 1, ch. 2; and Grimlaic’s Regula Solitariorum, PL 103, ch. 1, col. 577D; Etymologiarum sive Originum, ed. W. M. Lindsay (Oxford: Clarendon, 1911), Bk. 7, ch. 13, 302: “Μονάς enim Graece singularitas dicitur.” For discussion see J. Leclercq, “Études sur le vocabulaire monastique du moyen âge,” Studia Anselmiana 48 (1961): 7ff.
The term did not convey unequivocally either the notion of unity or disunity. On the other hand, one might take this distinction to its extreme, noting with Cassian that singularity suggests inimitability per se: as noted in an early episcopal sermon, “singularitas non admittit exemplum.” The observation implicates sin, heresy, or other “errors” that ecclesiastical or monastic authorities opposed. And Peter Chrysologus is just as clear elsewhere that God is opposed to singularity. Thus one of the most effective descriptors of solitary monks who do not fit neatly within a single ascetic-theological tradition is singularitas. This term described the fact that individual ascetics would always believe and behave in a manner that does not correspond to a reproducible “ideal” as described in a monastic rule, a letter from a bishop or even a hagiographical text. Interestingly, the earliest known use of “μοναχός” for an ascetic is famous not simply on account of its priority, but because in the letter where the term is used this “monk” was involved in a property dispute, not in prayer and fasting. “Monk,” then, encodes those same limits as “singularity” on the theory of a unified monastic tradition. The fact that men and women ascetics were always prone to some variety of error was modeled through the process of acquiring authority through experience, and the term that best described the condition of such an error-prone ascetic was singularitas. All monks, but especially anchorites, tended to be singulare. This meant as well that every attempt by a precept to define and explain the anchorite—e.g. “the monk must pray in X manner”—was doomed to misrepresent that individual. Only a dialogic model that

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confronted error and admitted that monastic authority was *singulare* and existed prior to every textual record would succeed as a theory of *anachoresis*.

Predictably, Cassian employs the term *singulare* in both a negative and positive sense.\(^{84}\) His Abba Heron, an anchorite who is said to have lived a half-century of ascetic strictness in the desert (*singulari distinctione*), fell suddenly to some demonic temptation on account of his lack of discretion.\(^{85}\) The same “error” on account of some illusion befalls Abba John in the first conference.\(^{86}\) Here too, then, singularity offsets the familiarity of tradition, insofar as singular ascetics stand in an indeterminate relationship with that tradition. *Singularitas* is not necessarily the site of error, heresy or sin, but it relates to such “problems” insofar as the singular hermit or anchorite cannot readily be considered worthy of censure or approval. As I will use it, the term translates monastic and ecclesiastical anxiety over solitaries’ indeterminate relationship with ascetic traditions. This indeterminacy, towards which error-prone and ill-instructed anchorites gestured, pointed to the need for dialogue and experience, the same qualities of the monastic life that clerical letters of instruction denied were important.

*Singularitas* is about the limits of exemplarity. The attempt to eliminate *singularitas* tended to throw into sharper focus just how an over-determined monasticism failed to honestly recognize the fractures within tradition. In Cassian we repeatedly read

\(^{84}\) For example, Abba Moses is positively described as “singularis” in *Conf.*, 7.27 [CSEL 206.21].

\(^{85}\) *Ibid.*, 2.5 [CSEL 44.14-21]: “Et ut hanc eadem definitionem antiquitus a S. Antonio et caeteris Patribus promulgatam, recens quoque, sicut promissimus, confirmet exemplum, recolite id quod nuper gestum oculorum vestrorum vidistis obtutibus, senem videcliet Heronem ante paucos admodum dies illusione diabolicata summis ad ima dejectum, quem quinquaginta annis in hac eremo commoratum, singulari distinctione rigorem continentiae tenuisse meminimus, et solitudinis secreta ultra omnes hic commorantes miro fervore sectatum.”

\(^{86}\) *Ibid.*, 1.21 [CSEL 32.24ff.].
of solitaries who only partially succeed at renouncing the world, and others whom the devil “deceives” into seeking out an ever more remote solitude. But Cassian imagined the necessity of pursuing such discussions indefinitely. For while a monk’s finis and the means for achieving it might be theoretically identified, that theory also demanded a persistent “error” that in turn guaranteed dialogues about the inimitability of perfection and the necessity of an individual’s uncertainty. The point is that an ascetic conclusion can also labor under the instability and uncertainty of an ascetic beginning. This was at least the necessary consequence of imposing a model of monastic tradition upon the lives of individuals who did not possess the benefits of a completed narrative. Above all else singularitas was a reminder that the anchorite’s error and his authority—an authority held by those anchorite’s “beyond imitation”—arose simultaneously and as necessary functions of a goal that was spiritually and historically, not textually, discernable.

Finally, given the above comments on “error” as navigatio, it will be clear that Cassian did not place much emphasis on the ideal of physical stability (stabilitas loci), the model of spiritual perfection that was growing more prominent during this period. This ideal was quickly making its way into rules and hagiographies, helping to stabilize these texts’ argument that monastic excellence was strictly linear and was never interrupted by moral or physical wandering. Such geographical stability is not central to the Conferences, in part because Cassian was concerned that too much emphasis was

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87 For example, Cassian, Conf., 4.20 and 24.19 [CSEL 115-6 and 695-6].
88 See introduction to D. Caner’s Wandering, Betting Monks (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002) who has provided a useful introduction to the monastic virtue of stabilitas loci.
89 The notion of finality rests ultimately on the carefully articulated virtue of stabilitas that monastic traditions inherited from their Greek and Latin philosophical traditions. The concept of stabilitas is presupposed in my discussion of the intellectual and behavioral constancy that was advocated in most discussions on ascetic life.
placed on (physical) perfection as a goal that had already been obtained. For his part, Athanasius could not afford such tolerance for movement of mind or body. In his Second Letter to Monks he enjoins orthodox anchorites to avoid communion with the Arians; monks who moved from one place to another and mingled with other, heterodox monks stood at risk of moral contamination. Ecclesiastical politics again prevent the understanding of instability as a historical constant. Physical roaming, like theological error, worked much like the heretical notions of monks like Serapion who illustrated by their flexible theologies that questions of authority and perfection were still unsettled.

The question itself produces yet another dialogue between the commands of a written rule, on the one hand, and the uncertainty of individual ascetics, on the other. This dialogue will persist throughout this study. The objective of rules remained to conceal the paradoxes that beleaguer the unity of ascetic tradition. Cassian, by contrast, noted the irony that a codified rule tended to obscure the uniquely monastic appeal to behavioral and theoretical alterity. It has been said that the essential quality of ascesis is its creation of a Sonderwelt, a world apart. For Cassian, the “inimitable Egyptians” were as much a challenge to tradition as they were its embodiment. To improve on Heussi’s term, the anchorite is a Sonderwelt sondergleichen, a figure beyond imitation.

Conclusion

My argument in this chapter has been that Cassian’s theory of anachoresis rested on two theses: first, that experience and authority were mutually dependent; and second,}

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90 Athanasius, Select Writings, Letter 53, 564.  
91 K. Heussi, Ursprung des Mönchtums, 53.
that both were achieved and best explained through dialogical media which in turn performed the imperfectability of both. These theses were bound by the idea of the monastic life as a kind of venture that entailed some danger both for the monk and the theorist (*narratio/navigatio*) who are guaranteed to err at some point in their pursuit. The arguments were also designed to correct two major misconceptions produced by the emergent regulatory letters and rules written for anchorites and cenobites alike. First, in a coenobitic or clerical rule or “precept” authority was confused and conflated with perfection and moral completion in the same way that the completed regulatory text was assumed to be identical with the historical anchorite that stood outside of it. Cassian’s point was that monastic experience could not possibly work like a regulatory text since even excellent monks would eventually commit some mistake, proving that the discourse of excellence implied a separate discourse of “error.” Excellence and error created the necessary dialogue between the monk and his goal. And second, even a theoretical text was by definition unequipped to examine the implications of this dialogue, namely that no monk’s position in his course to perfection could be determined with certainty. Any text that focuses on error and virtue as exclusive categories, rather than partners inextricably bound in a moral dialogue, ignored the fact that a monk could wander (*navigatio*) at some indeterminate point on a sea of heretical, but earnest prayer, maintaining his desire for a goal that was neither fully achieved nor fully understood.

Let us remember how itinerant Cassian’s career was—full of physical “wandering” (*error*). The metaphors of sea-travel, its dangers, and the possibility of sinking prior to reaching a harbor fill the *Conferences*. The errors of the spirit and body
are again facts of history that Cassian insists the monk must sincerely confront. Error cannot be prevented through a set of precepts that tie the monk to a specific place like a monastery, for one’s search for perfection is essentially a question of the ever-wandering and imperfect spirit. He realized that just as his work promoted continuous discussion on ascetic excellence, so too did it forestall fail-safe solutions to all sorts of error.

The social conditions of fifth-century Gaul and Cassian’s own experiences from 399 until he settled in Marseilles argue for tolerance of a monk’s singularitas as embodied in his “flight” and other errors. He may well have envisioned a longer stay with the Egyptian anchorites, but as Theophilus reformulated his episcopate as anti-Origenist, the monastic exodus out of Egypt that followed likely carried Cassian and Germanus with it. Whether Cassian, like Jerome, eventually acknowledged the errors of Origen is an interesting question, but somewhat beside the point; his fuga harmonizes with the unforeseeable transition in Alexandria and the reversion of the anchorites to “error.” What awaited Cassian after his Egyptian period was a succession of personal frustrations; for years he would remain tossed about on the waters of social and ecclesiastical duty where he neither abandoned nor fully devoted himself to the life he describes in the Conferences.

As observed above, when he arrived in Gaul by the second decade of the fifth century he found little there that resembled his Egypt. Jerome, Cassian and others knew well that parts of the West were still hostile to the kind of life advocated by the Egyptian anchorites. Since he wrote for an audience that did not yet think of monasticism’s “renunciations” as a form of moral excellence, it is easy to imagine why Cassian would
emphasize monastic error and imperfection. He had no reason to expect that his Gallic audience would understand the East, a fact that required numerous concessions to readers imperfectly prepared for the rigors of an eastern monasticism. It was not only his experience in the East and deep understanding of the western tradition that equipped him to place the two in dialogue with each other. His constant traveling—first to Palestine, then to Egypt and so on—comported well with an elastic, but rigorous monasticism that sincerely confronted error and integrated it into a coherent moral theory.

Monastic experience, then, explains why narratives telling of the pious course (narratio) to anchorites’ lives also contained the anti-historical argument that monastic lives inevitably proceeded in such a manner. Such texts incoherently ignored the future’s inherently tentative and unknowable character. From the standpoint of Cassianic tradition such regulatory texts as bishops and the coenobium produced were internally at odds with themselves when they both appealed to history and ignored its contingencies. A monastic theory about anachoresis was only internally coherent when the literary form transmitting that theory was in some way fragmentary and incomplete as it was in Cassian’s dialogues. For it was only in that form that the distance separating a theory, which was abstracted from history, and history’s material contingencies could be duly recognized and modeled. Only by means of a dialogue—a fragmented narratio—could the life of the individual monk be justifiably thought of as historical discourse. Insofar as the formal structure of the clerical letter or rule ignored the rupture created by the present moment of every life, dividing the coherence of the past and an inscrutable future, that

92 Goodrich, Contextualizing Cassian, 151-207
same structural predictability occluded the disunities of the monastic theory that it produced. We must now examine when and how medieval discourses took seriously Cassian’s point that a theory of rupture—“error,” “flight,” and “singularity”—and experience was needed to adequately account for history and individual monastic lives. Again, the same was true of the “Desert Mothers” as for the men.⁹³

As I will argue, the authors of Middle English and Anglo-Latin works for and about solitaries generally appeal to a kind of obedience that discounts and even precludes the authority of experience. However, reading these texts from the perspective of Cassian’s monastic theory resituates the solitary and his tradition as the focus of anachoresis. The discourse of “error” or “singularity” would transmit the experience and hence the authority of anachoresis as an experiment that led to monastic excellence. The Cassianic tradition would persist simply because medieval hermits and anchorites generally had not reason to deny the authority of their own experience. Wherever medieval hagiographies, admonitiones, regulae or similar texts demand solitaries’ obedience, they also reveal a conscious concern that solitaries had already created the link between authority and individual experience. A tension inevitably develops within such texts between the hermit or anchorite and the coenobium whose narrowly formulated attitudes towards monastic excellence produced the text. However, in our readings we will attend to a separate tension, or dialogue, that also informs such texts, but which they attempt to occlude: the dialogue between obedience to tradition, on the one hand, and singularitas or experience, on the other.

⁹³ Elm, Virgins of God, 253-82.
Chapter 2: The Anglo-Latin Rule and Ascetic Reality in the Twelfth Century

Nolo tibi venire superbiam de proposito, sed timorem [...] Disce in hac parte superbiam sanctam.

—Jerome

When worn out by vigils and prayers he would rest his head either to the left or to the right upon his collar; and so he slept, always sitting. Moreover, to vary this routine repose he kept in another place beneath the oratory a block of turf...on this he often sat and slept, and so effective was this commutative arrangement that by a secret regimen he could avoid acedia during his prayers.

—The Life and Miracles of Godric of Throckenhol

The ascetic theory transmitted by Middle English and Anglo-Latin works for and about solitaries would continue Cassian’s work of showing within a text that monastic textuality displaced anachoresis as a historical practice. By conflating the solitary life with textuality clerical and coenobitic writers would inevitably reproduce the lexica of singulare authority described in the last chapter. The central aim of this chapter is to show that with such lexica it remained possible for authors of regulatory and hagiographical literature to emphasize, rather than suppress, the unpredictability of eremitic and anchoritic lives, and to critically appreciate how those lives remained elusive to the texts that represented them. While the tenth through twelfth centuries in England produced coenobitic monks like Ælfric of Eynsham and Aelred of Rievaulx

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1 Jerome, Ad Eustochium, 22.3,16 [CSEL 146.11 and 163.16].
whose relationship with solitaries merely extended their support for episcopal and coenobitic authority, other figures like Goscelin of St. Bertin (d. 1099) and even Anselm of Canterbury wrote more tolerantly and favored a solitary’s own authority. A solitary’s individually conceived desire, his *singulare propositum*, neither made him necessarily the opponent nor ally of clerical or monastic leaders, provided the authority of anchoritic or eremitic practices and theologies was duly recognized. As Goscelin of St. Bertin looked back on anchoritic traditions, he privileged the ascetic authority of hermits and anchorites. Even while later writers of Anglo-Latin works of guidance would not follow Goscelin’s lead, they would depend on that vocabulary of error that had become necessary for describing profoundly un-coenobitic subjects.

**Dialogue and the Invention of Error: Goscelin of St. Bertin**

Like Cassian, Goscelin celebrated the Desert Fathers at a time when their memory was popular. If Cassian found in them reason to embrace a dialogical regulatory theory and ascetic “error,” so too did Goscelin who wrote an equally articulate text maintaining that commitment to dialogue and error. His *Liber Confortatorius* is a meditation on how well-meaning solitary ascetics can easily become distracted from their end. The point

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1 For a brief introduction to his life see Goscelin’s “The Liber Confortatorius,” ed. C. H. Talbot, *Studia Anselmiana* 37 (1955): 1-25. The hagiographical works by Goscelin, many of which center on or include holy recluse and hermits, have been edited; see *Goscelin, of Saint-Bertin: The hagiography of the female saints of Ely*, ed. Rosalind C. Love (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004); see also Love’s bibliography and my own for his extant hagiographical corpus. His residence at the abbey of St. Bertin whose founders were eremitic, may explain much of Goscelin’s fascination with solitaries; see the *Vita S. Bertini, Auctore Anonymo*, AASS, 5 September, cols. 586F-90A. I thank Drew Jones for reminding me of this detail.

honestly acknowledges the fact that, by design, a regulatory theory demanded the theorist’s engagement with error. Like other texts mentioned in this study, the Liber is regulatory: it tries to reconcile its reader with the challenges of anachoresis, and to do so with reference to monastic forms of excellence (stability, poverty, etc.). The fact that its immediate reader—a former nun named Eve who decided to become an anchoress—was acquainted with monastic regulation implies that for Goscelin, while his text expressed an anxiety about error, his audience was a source of ascetic authority. Like Cassian, Goscelin’s writing would lead him to set error in dialogue with virtue, at times surrendering the authority of the precept to that of the anchoress herself. He effaces himself with a sense that the incompleteness of the anchoritic life should inform his theoretical formulations. For him, since a regulatory theory necessitates ascetic error, the rule should make itself relevant to the solitary, not the other way around.

In writing the Liber Goscelin addressed the persistence of ascetic errors within a theory where such errors might be negotiated, even if not remedied. To this end he produced a meditation like that of Boethius’ Consolatio, which he quotes and whose structure he imitates. His work makes Eva into a Boethian hero whom he, though not imprisoned for the sake of virtue, is able to show consolando et exhortando the path to

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7 The elements of John Cassian’s career that led him to a tolerance for ascetic error were matched by similar moments in Goscelin’s life that likely encouraged his interest in hermits and anchorites. A monk of the Continent and England, Goscelin’s physical mobility was at times extreme; on his exiles and wandering from one monastery to another see Stephanie Hollis, “Strategies of Emplacement and Deplacement,” in A Place to Believe In: Locating Medieval Landscapes, eds. Clare A. Lees and Gillian R. Overing (University Park: PennState University Press, 2006), 150-69.  
8 At only a couple of points does Goscelin actually quote at length from the Consolation; Goscelin, Liber Confortatorius, Bk. 2 and 3 (48 and 73). However, the themes of captivity, loss and the goods of rational thought characterize much of the content of the first three books.
philosophical and ascetic perfection. Ambivalence towards the severity of isolation permeates the Liber as much as it did Boethius’ text. For one, Goscelin struggles with the anchoress’s otherwise laudable flight into solitude, which regrettably deprives him of her presence. Like Boethius, he has been deprived of spiritual comfort, but Goscelin generalizes the flight from the monastery (and the broken bond of mutual contact between him and Eve) as a far deeper loss, a loss of spiritual knowledge. In this framework he playfully mixes his role as guide with that of Boethius and Philosophy, the one lamenting and the one instructing. Much of Book 1 dramatizes this conflict, and his vacillation between comfort and despair punctuates much of the work as a whole.

The Liber is as much consolation for Goscelin as it is for Eve, and both stand as the unstable Boethian hero who may or may not find his/her way back to a competent understanding of God. Goscelin-as-Boethius is willing to confront the lack of certainty that may come upon the ascetic or philosophical subject, however painful or spiritually dangerous that uncertainty may be. The tendency to forget the good and excellent nature of one’s goal derives from challenges inherent to achieving that goal. As its readers well know, the Consolatio explores this problem incessantly. It is this last idea more than anything else that drives Goscelin’s Boethian persona. However, Goscelin’s ambivalence towards Eve is also a function of the authority with which his Liber both grants and begrudges the anchoress. Both participants are potentially uncertain philosophical subjects; the instable mind is the chief actor in the text’s performance of advice.

The Boethian philosophy of uncertainty and the presence of such ambivalence in the Liber strongly contribute to and intensify the indeterminateness of singularitas which

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9 Goscelin, Liber, Bk. 1, 36.20.
Cassian had negotiated. Goscelin’s vacillation between virtue and error, praise and blame, puts a Boethian dilemma in the framework of anchoritic singularitas and imitates the dialogical principles (if not the form) of the Conferences.\textsuperscript{10} And as the interaction between singularity and tradition in Cassian necessitated the individual’s ascetic authority, so too does Goscelin make of Eve far more than a Boethian or monastic hero. She is above all else erudita and agonista, a status that helps Goscelin transmit the demand for dialogue, since she becomes something of Goscelin’s monastic equal. His use of classical and Biblical references makes Eve an Old Testament and almost Homeric agonista. The Liber is motivated by its sense of the dangers impending upon solitaries, but gives a generous reading of tradition and of the various sort of intellectual armor at the anchoress’ disposal. By imagining the anchoress as involved in an agon, Goscelin draws material not only from the Verba Seniorum, but also Homer, Virgil, and Horace.\textsuperscript{11}

Goscelin achieves a dialogic ambivalence towards anachoresis, a dialogue that was highly emotive, since Eve’s reclusion, while ascetically justified, had robbed him of her company. As a consequence, he writes of virtuous and corrupt behavior as though the anchoress is always committing both at once. Punishment and forgiveness are highly malleable concepts in his Liber, and they must remain so as long as the advice-giver remains committed to the ascetic authority of the anchoress. Take, for example, his use of a passage from Isaiah that functions both to praise and reprimand the anchoress.

‘Because the daughters of Zion are haughty,’ he says, ‘and have walked around with their heads held high, and wanton glances in their eye, and clapped their

\textsuperscript{10} He frequently uses saintly exempla. As if a participant in the Conferences, Eve is supposed to see herself alongside Blandia, Sara (from the Verba Seniorum), Mary of Egypt and others. See Goscelin, Liber, 58, 72, 106.

\textsuperscript{11} E.g. Ibid., 47-49.
hands and walked with assured steps: the Lord will make bald the crown of the daughters of Zion, and the Lord will uncover their hair. On that day the Lord will take away the ornaments of their shoes and little moons and chains and necklaces and bracelets and bonnets, and bodkins, and ornaments of the legs, and sweet balls, and earrings, and rings and jewels hanging on the forehead, and changes of apparel, and short cloaks, and fine linen, [...] and instead of a sweet smell there shall be stanch, and instead of a girdle a cord, and instead of curled hair, baldness, and instead of a stomacher, hair cloth. And her gates shall lament and mourn, and she shall sit desolate on the ground.\textsuperscript{12}

Goscelin then quickly backtracks, declaring that the daughter of Zion is better off now that she has been punished by God, for in her newly acquired humility he will again love her. \textit{Anachoresis} is simultaneously her punishment and reward, just as Eve’s leaving Goscelin’s company for solitude had earned both his disappointment and praise, censure and encouragement. We find this instability around correction and excellence, praise and punishment, precisely because Goscelin had begun his work by acknowledging that Eve’s \textit{anachoresis} granted her an authority that rivaled and frustrated Goscelin’s own.

Surprisingly perhaps, he is willing to tolerate all of the errors that will necessarily help create her authority. Earlier in the text Goscelin had positively argued for the need for such a dialogic procedure that could as quickly promote as undermine the individual’s own ascetic authority. Moreover, the passage in which he says this appeals to Jerome, one of Goscelin’s key allies, as one who wrote tolerantly of error. He remarks,

That is the essence of the academic discipline of the philosophers, that they do not arrogate to themselves the authority to pronounce categorically, but relinquish their judgment to the judgment of the learned. Most of all, St. Jerome himself, because of his many adversaries who were more ready to condemn everything up front than to discuss or understand, proposes rather than announces most of his proofs, and works out the truth more by reasoning than by decree.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{12} Goscelin, \textit{Liber}, Bk. 4, 95.32-96.6. Translations are by Monika Otter, \textit{Goscelin of St. Bertin}.

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Ibid.}, Bk. 2, 58.38-59.5.
Just decades after Goscelin, the Cistercian writer Aelred of Rievaulx would reproduce in his letter to an anchoress a different Jerome, not one who works “more by reasoning rather than decree.” But here, by displacing certainty (“do not…pronounce categorically”) Goscelin’s commitment to inquiry rather than “decree” justifies a certain measure of skepticism in matters of “truth.”

It makes great sense, then, that Goscelin should elsewhere demand a subtle response to the questions of stability and instability.14 The value he places on instability specifically anticipates a point made by the author of the twelfth-century Libellus de diversis ordinibus who uses 2 Timothy 2:20 to support (against detractors) the great diversity of eremitic living, even if that living involves error. As the author observes of a passage from the New Testament, some of the furniture in God’s house is made not for honor, but for reproach.15 Not only is it impossible to consider contumelia a strictly negative attribute here; the passage suggests that solitaries may both be destined for reproach—due to the regulatory demands placed on them—and for a certain authority and autonomy. Both this text and Goscelin’s oppose the tendency in other regulatory theories to divest solitaries of their own authority. That Goscelin looked to punishment and reproach even while writing to someone he thinks should undertake anachoresis in the manner of her choosing is hardly a contradiction; it is an appeal to the mutually

14 Ibid., Bk. 1.41. Cf. a sermon on John the Baptist Peter Abelard that discusses desert tabernacles in a way that both appeals to and undermines the tradition of stability (PL 178, col. 583B-84A). His analysis uses the popular passage from Job to illustrate its dialogical approach to stability: “who set the donkey free, and who has loosened his bonds?” (Ibid., col. 582Bff., from Job 39:5).
15 Giles Constable, ed., Libellus de Diversis Ordinibus (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), 16: “Why did you make him or me like this? Because the maker has the power to make from the same material a vessel for honor, and another for dishonor; and in his house such vessels are made not merely of gold and silver, but of wood and clay, and both are useful to the work of the house” [Quare sic me vel illum fecisti? quia habet figulus potestatem facere ex eadem massa aliud vas in honorem, aliud in contumeliam, et in domo magna sunt vasa non solum aurea et argentea, sed et lignea et fictilia, et utraque ad opus domus utilia].
constituting virtues of authority and dialogue. The point is not that solitaries would always conduct their lives well or poorly in view of a regulatory ideal. Rather, Goscelin took anchoritic authority as a given and understood that as a consequence he legitimated *singularitas* and the dialogue it necessitates.\textsuperscript{16} If he sneaks into the *Liber* a brief explanation of redemption theology, theological concerns nevertheless remain subordinated to *anachoressis*.\textsuperscript{17} However present we find error in the text, his toleration of that error is a function of the assumption that Eve has an authority of her own.

Or again, Goscelin directs Eve’s attention to an exemplum that seems designed to produce scandal, but which illustrates the risks that Goscelin thinks the solitary should have the courage to tolerate. He tells of the holy hermit Alexander who murders a woman with whom he had slept and, after years of penance that had fallen to him miraculously, ascends to Heaven as unsoiled by his sins as his murder victim.\textsuperscript{18} An otherwise common and colorless exemplum becomes in the *Liber* quite interesting. For Goscelin seems here to be cynically uninterested in the pollution of moral corruption and the punishment that it is usually imagined to entail. In a text that is otherwise concerned with guidance and correction it is odd to find a hermit corrected by no human means. Might the hermit not at least be beaten by his monastic superior? But of course for Goscelin the solitary’s greatness comes from him not exactly having a superior. As

\textsuperscript{16} His intellectual generosity may have been informed by the variety of solitaries who appear in his hagiographies, like the herdsman (*armentarius*) “pie conversationis” named Alnoth and martyred by thieves (*Warburh*, ed. Rosalind Love, 7; 42-4). Note, however, that while Goscelin is not greatly troubled by what he tells us had been Seaxburh’s desire to retire, after years of experience as a nun at Ely, to the solitary life, he complains about the fact that Wihtburh had initially intended to found a monastery out of a desire to live as a solitary (*Wihtburh* 2; 56 and *In Festivitate Sancte Sexburge*, 8; 6-8).

\textsuperscript{17} Goscelin, *Liber*, Bk. 2, 52-5.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., Bk. 4, 104.8-105.29.
ambivalent towards punishment as his use of the passage from Isaiah, his narrating this tale of the hermit is exemplary of his attitude towards *singulare* authority.

His observations on humility and pride serve the same purpose. He praises the *crimina* of prostitutes, mingling the image of the Magdalene with that of John the Baptist.¹⁹ The virtues and vices of individuals can never be stably articulated as such: the sinner may always hope, and the virtuous may fear. Experienced nuns are by no means immune, Goscelin implies. He thus recognizes a critical problem that most Middle English and Anglo-Latin texts did not acknowledge: unless the *regula* should do all of the spiritual and intellectual work for the solitary—which would render the choice of solitude essentially meaningless—it is entirely possible even for those deeply committed to their final goal to forget, if only temporarily, the means for attaining that goal. The Boethian anchoress, the hero of the *Liber*, possesses authority precisely because the long pursuit of truth is not enough to spare her uncertainty about how to achieve a final end (*finis*). Consistent with a Boethian dialectic, that uncertainty does not lessen ascetic heroism. Finally, Eve’s consolation cannot be immediate; it must be deferred and apophatic like the stability she will finally experience in Heaven, but cannot have on earth.

**Ælfric, Anselm, and Aelred: From Dialogue to the Epistle**

By contrast, the analysis of *anachoresis* by many clerical and coenobitic writers succeeded only by prescribing the beginning, middle, and endpoint of the solitary’s life. Yet because it remained uncertain that ascetic solitude could successfully be made an extension of ecclesiastical and coenobitic power, these authors were forced both to posit

the possibility of consensus and to condemn the many instances of singular and error-prone solitaries. The tension between consensus and estrangement would be vividly and concisely illustrated by a letter from the Benedictine abbot of Eynsham, Ælfric (d. 1010), to an English magnate named Sygefyrd. Ælfric writes in vehement disagreement with Sygefyrd’s anchorite (“eower ancor æt ham”) who maintained and was teaching that mass-priests were permitted to marry. The abbot’s disagreement with the anchorite rests on two closely related points: the anchorite was (1) teaching about sexual conduct from a perspective outside of the tradition of the monastic community, and (2) such teaching alienated him from that tradition’s claim that those within ecclesiastical office were theoretically unified with the coenobium. The anchorite behaved at cross-currents with Ælfric’s ecclesiastical and monastic politics.

The abbot was admittedly anxious about the matter, noting his reluctance to criticize a “friend of God” (i.e. the anchorite). Yet for Ælfric it was both possible and advisable to write a letter upholding a particular construction of monasticism. As we have seen, centuries prior to the English Benedictine Reform anachoresis had been made the province of a theory that synthesized the ascetic goals of the coenobium with the catechetical goals of Church officials. It is unclear whether in the abbot’s view the anchorite was in error merely for uttering words of instruction to others. And the letter also leaves unstated whether the anchorite, however chaste himself or severe his bodily discipline, marred his own ascetic quality for holding such an erroneous position. But Ælfric participated in a tradition whose uniting of ascetic and ecclesiastical goals made it

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inhospitable to behaviors (including teaching) and beliefs that tended to characterize solitaries. That tradition was being reproduced in the letter.

It was crucial for the abbot to tell a narrative that could claim authority from those who lived in solitude. And the abbot, it seems, preferred that the anchorite learn a narrative, starting with Mary or Christ, that virginity (clœnnsse) has legitimized ascesis throughout monastic history. Indeed, he was historically justified in tracing the development of ascesis from Christ and the subsequent rise of Christians who were of a mind to live ascetically. Ælfric retells the story, effectively using Christ to justify a long theoretical genealogy of ascetic living. But the letter contains a very special genealogy—one that included such greats as Martin, Bede, and Gregory—that synthesized into a single model of monastic virginity ancient Egyptian solitaries, Benedictine coenobitism and the lives and teachings of bishops (“ungerim bisceopa”). So to be precise, if the anchorite should presume to teach others, this is the narrative the anchorite should know. Whatever erroneous notions about sexual conduct cast about in his head should be discarded. Still, this narrative, or genealogy, left the anchorite ideologically isolated, not unified with Benedictine monasticism.

As a student of the Benedictine Reform and Bishop Æðelwold, Ælfric defined the monastic and ecclesiastical terms by which the anchorite’s words and deeds gained legitimacy. If Sygefyre’s anchorite probably did not receive an episcopal a letter illustrating the error of his belief and teaching and summoning him back into this tradition, Ælfric offers one of his own. This letter is consistent with the experiments in

21 Ibid., l.13ff. He begins the narrative with Christ, mentioning however also OT examples, and then proceeds to such NT themes as the 144,000 virgins of the Apocalypse (l.116).
22 Ibid., l.200ff.
ascetic instruction by Alexandrian bishops, and the ascetic politics of Ælfric and Bishop Æðelwold merely continued this earlier tradition. While Ælfric was not writing to the anchorite himself, and was therefore not interested in advising and correcting as was Athanasius, his letter still effectively displayed the dilemma in which the abbot’s institutional assumptions stood. His reluctance to criticize “God’s friend” illustrates his inability to insist both on the virtue of an ideologically undefined anachoresis and the error of an anchorite who stood so decidedly outside of the tradition of tenth-century reform monasticism. Ælfric has created for himself the same tension that emerged from other criticisms of intransigent solitaries and the condemnation of all those who continued to live outside the confines of a cleric-centered ascetic theory. Ironically perhaps, the abbot has made his praise and condemnation of such anchorites the proof that reform monasticism was irrelevant to a theory of ascetic solitude.

By contrast, it was Cassian’s monastic theory that Bishop Anselm cited in his Tractatus Asceticus, which echoes much of the language and purpose of Cassian’s writing. The work begins like Cassian’s, namely with an exploration of the monk’s destinatio or finis which, like his predecessor, Anselm identifies as a purity of heart. We recall that this finis is, for Cassian, never identical with any single set of practices, and so the ascetic’s finis can never be predicted in the way that regulatory traditions often predicted it. It seems likely that such theory occurred to the bishop when writing to an

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23 Hence the later practice of appointing bishops from among monks, which would in its turn also become a popular practice in Ælfric’s period. For the Egyptian practice of appointing monastic bishops see D. Brakke, Athanasius, 99-110.


25 Anselm, PL 158, col. 1021, ch. 1, De monachi destinatione vel fine.
anchorite named Hugo who, as it turns out, had requested such teaching on the desire for God that he would find both in the letter and, if available to him, in Anselm’s other writings.\(^{26}\) Anselm’s understanding that love was a monk’s purpose and the goal to which all his attention should be directed, may well have been among his primary interests when writing to Hugo: *da ergo amorem, et accipe regnum.*\(^{27}\)

Despite his ecclesiastical office Anselm does not share Athanasius’ demands for allegiance and consensus.\(^{28}\) It is not easy to determine whether Hugo shared his friend’s sense of how he as an anchorite should govern his life with this conception of ascetic purpose. Of course, Cassian’s organization of such virtues and of the behaviors that conduce to love and a *puritas cordis* need not have been available to Hugo.\(^{29}\) Whatever his motivations and practices within the cell, it is noteworthy that Anselm attempts to close this space for potential disagreement over monastic practice by paraphrasing for the anchorite the Gospel’s doctrine that God’s “universal law” is the mutually dependent precepts to love God and one’s neighbor. Anselm goes on to say that love of poverty, work and subjection are the means for achieving this love.\(^{30}\) Hugo’s other practices are supplemented here by the virtues Anselm uses to create something of a *regula.*

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26 Anselm, PL158, cols. 1171A-73A, Ep. 22. At the letter’s conclusion Anselm refers Hugo to his *Prologium* for further reading.

27 Ibid., col. 1172A.

28 There also exist two letters by Anselm to secular women who were considering vows of chastity and who thus may very well have adopted some form of ascetic solitude, if not the convent; *Ad Ermengardam, PL* 158, cols. 1191B-92C, Ep. 40; and *Ad quamdam dominam*, cols. 189C-94A, Ep. 117. As was not the case with the anchorite addressed in Ælfric of Eynsham’s letter we know that Hugo had actually requested such guidance of Anselm.

29 If in fact Hugo observed those monastic practices and virtues as prescribed by either an immediate superior or some rule of living, such details are not provided in Anselm’s letter.

But how did God’s *unversa lex* constitute a rule of living? And what were the inner and outer habits which demand Hugo’s obedience? Anselm assumes that Hugo knows whether and how the Gospel’s summary of the “law and the prophets” should be lived out in daily behavior. However, to appeal to the love of poverty is to continue to abstract from the anchorite’s daily life a virtue either already exemplified in that life, or alien to it. Either the anchorite has concretely instituted and justified such virtues in a way that accords with his immediate circumstances (and this explains why Anselm does not bother to define further what *form* his love of poverty should take), or Hugo’s conception of such virtues were as yet too unstable to be compared with some external standard. In any case, the concrete expression to which Hugo gave *amor paupertatis* is not available to (and is thus disregarded by) Anselm’s own understanding of such love.

For this reason the apparent neutrality of *amor paupertatis* is useful for establishing the appearance of consensus between monastic contemporaries.\(^3^1\) But, I hasten to stress, we can only be certain here of an appearance of agreement about what the love of poverty means to Hugo. Given the multiple forms that such a valuing of poverty could take, we must conclude that the virtue of poverty to which Anselm appeals could only ever be of Hugo’s own making. At least for the purposes of the letter, the abstract notion of *amor paupertatis* somewhat conceals the fact that Hugo must alone formulate his own understanding of monastic virtues and write his own rule.\(^3^2\)

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\(^3^1\) For example, when concluding, Anselm suddenly defers to Hugo’s *prudentia* for providing further exposition on the subject of love—“Breviter vobis haec, charissime, sicut postulastis, dixi; sed in horum expositione prudentia vestra multo plura proferre poterit quam dixi”—making it likely that Anselm thought the potentially wide variety of conclusions about the process of attaining a more ardent desire for God would present no challenge to Hugo’s own understanding of how to achieve this end.

\(^3^2\) *Ibid.*, col. 1173A.
The point recalls the fact that Cassian’s *Conferences* and *Institutes* argued for a cooperation of various virtues—the virtue of discretion being among the most esteemed—which offsets the centralizing tendencies of other uses of *obedientia*.\textsuperscript{33} To the extent that he fulfills, or fails to fulfill, what he imagined to be God’s *universa lex*, we must ask to what end, in Cassian’s sense, Hugo negotiated his living in the anchorhold? For universality presupposes the sort of consensus between anchorite and author that Anselm knows does not exist. On closer examination, Anselm’s letter reveals the sort of uncertainty over knowledge and teaching that had earlier informed Ælfric’s letter.

Consider, for example, the opening:

> Two laymen have recently come to me saying that they were sent by your concern, and namely that they might receive from our judgment some sense of how they might be inflamed by love for their heavenly patria. As they say, it was through them that you thought you might receive something briefly written by me whereby you might inspire the minds of those secular persons who come to you with contempt for the world and a desire for the eternal kingdom.\textsuperscript{34}

The concern here is how Anselm is to instruct Hugo and how and whether Hugo is sufficiently competent to instruct others in a manner consistent with Anselm’s own notion of religious excellence. The crisis of teaching is here not unlike what we noticed in Ælfric’s letter, insofar as the absence of consensus between abbot and anchorite characterizes early English *anachoresis*. The difference between abbot and bishop lies in a willingness to accord the anchorite an ascetic authority of his own. Anselm’s anchorite

\textsuperscript{33} The *Conferences* may themselves be characterized as meditations on monastic discretion; see intro. to Boniface Ramsey’s translation (New York, 1997), 5ff. Cf. *Sermones ad fratres*, Sermo 7: “Obedientia igitur, fratres mei, tunc vera, tunc sancta, tunc meritoria est, quando ditata est discretione, honestate, justitia et humiliitate. Istae enim sunt sociae sanctae obedientiae, sine quibus omnis obedientia vana est est inutilis. Haec est illa obedientia quae concordiam conservat in Angelis, pacem nutrit in monachis.”

\textsuperscript{34} Anselm, *Ep.* 20, col. 1171B: “Duo viri laici nuper ad me venerunt dicentes se a vestra dilectione missos, quatenus ex nostra exactione aliquid assumerent, unde se ad patriae coelestis amorem ascenderent. Per quos etiam, ut referebant, postulastis ut aliquid a me breviter scriptum acciperetis, unde saecularium mentes hominum vos adeuntium ad hujus saeculi contemptum et aeterni regni desiderium incitaretis.”
may teach; Ælfric, by contrast, would not approve. Anselm would like to know that the anchorite agrees with him about the meaning of God’s *lex universa*; however, he is willing to tolerate the anchorite’s continual uncertainty about such matters.

Why should the anchorite appeal to an authority beyond himself, if he did not in some sense recognize this absence of ideological oneness with Anselm and that his own understanding of inner and outer excellence was inadequate for directing others whose goals were like his own? Hugo has already conceded that Anselm’s authority trumps his own. If the point is a matter of concern, it is perhaps because mutual consensus about how God’s *universa lex* could not practically be realized between Anselm and Hugo. At best the letter proves the necessity (but potential absence) of dialogue.

Eventually, the author of the rule or hagiographical text would struggle to negotiate, on the one hand, the predictability and stability of the ascetic precepts, while on the other hand, recognizing the inherent impossibility of applying these precepts to a solitary life that remained so unpredictable. Aelred of Rievaulx would foreclose the possibility of even developing such a dialogue. Throughout the eleventh and twelfth centuries, coenobitic reflections on the monastic life rested on one key assumption. Despite the need for financial and literary resources to create and support (reformed) coenobitism, its advocates argued that coenobitic prestige inevitably resulted from the inherent ascetic superiority of reformist doctrines; as a result it was made to appear that all other forms of ascetic conduct were inferior, inherently corrupt and untraditional, rather than ill-funded and lacking the cultural resources of Benedictine reformists.
Attending the rise of different forms of anachoresis were a number of texts for eleventh- and twelfth-century hermits and recluses whose highly irregular lives these texts sought to correct.\textsuperscript{35} As is well known, the explosion in ascetic fervor during this period meant a rise in solitaries. The hermitage gave way to the coenobium as many of these figures attracted followers, and those who would otherwise have become local hermits or anchorites either entered the new, largely Cistercian, foundations or were asked to do so. The precept-dictating epistle for solitaries was just one additional instance of this centralizing tendency.\textsuperscript{36} The rise of epistolary writing was possible only because the (reformed) coenobium had already acquired a social and financial power—often supported by a bishop—that underwrote its critique and polemic against solitaries. As a function of more centralized power, such literary attempts at guiding the lives of actual and potential recluses restricted the legitimate forms of ascetic conduct. The letter by the Cistercian abbot, Aelred of Rievaulx, to his sister is twelfth-century England’s most vivid case in point. It shows how prescriptive writing for an anchorite depended for

\textsuperscript{35} The very genre of the letter and its theoretically generalized and centralized tendency already presupposed the superiority of communal (i.e. coenobitic) conduct over conduct of a more individuated nature. The eleventh-century writings of the hermit and bishop Peter Damian (d. 1072) exemplify this trend. Damian wrote letters that were explicitly regulatory and address ascetic behavior with highly coenobitic assumptions about unity of purpose and design. Damian attempted to unify the origins of monasticism, minimize the variety of eremitic practices, and insist on a coenobitic authority that presupposes historical continuity. See, for example, Letters 165 (186-7; 207), 158 (88-9), 153 (36-7; 45-6; 68). Much of Damian’s disapproval centers around physical wandering (peregrinatio), although he is also readily troubled by hermits’ disobedience.

its intellectual content on the success of the new foundations at aligning local ascetic fervor with a specifically Cistercian conception of monastic excellence.

In composing a rule for his sister, the De Institutis, the twelfth-century Aelred of Rievaulx relied on the usual suspects: among others Benedict, Cassian, Augustine, and Jerome. Instead of transmitting the dialogic emphasis of Cassian’s work, or Goscelin’s mode of ambivalence towards anachoresis, he relied on a clerical and coenobitic politics de virginitate that, together with other ascetic precepts, meant to “rule” the anchoress. The rule for his sister was theoretically identical with the letters of Athanasius and Theophilus, successfully imitating the masculine control exercised by the bishops.

At the outset Aelred uses two forms of the term “institute,” though polemically.37 In the juxtaposition between the so-called “diverse institutes” and the more highly determined notion of a single institutio Aelred revisits what was at stake for churchmen in referring to the various lives (vitae patrum) of the Desert Fathers, rather than to their collective life (whatever that might have meant).38 So when Aelred opens, he observes that within the long anchoritic tradition many individuals had different reasons for desiring solitude. He cannot avoid addressing what for him are the less justifiable grounds for entering the anchorhold. Yet Aelred confronts the various motives for undertaking an ascetic life in such a way that his addressee could identify only with one of several competing justifications (ratio) for this way of life. More than anything else,

38 See Peter Jackson, “Ælfric and the ‘Vita Patrum’ in Catholic Homily I.36,” for a discussion of how Ælfric and his source texts force questions about tradition in their reference to the vitae or vita patrum (262ff). The language at times recalls moments from the Verba Seniorum and Grimlaic’s Regula Solitariorum (ch. 4), but Aelred is far more at home imitating a univocality he learned from Jerome.
he reveals that his *institutio* derives from several and competing self-justifying forms of living, and not just a single *ratio* that meets the Cistercian’s ideological needs:

So you should first know by what cause, or by what justification a life of this sort was instituted and translated from the ancients. There were certain ones for whom living among multitudes was dangerous. And others for whom, if it was not dangerous, yet it was grievous. For no few was none of this to be feared, but they still thought it rather more beneficial to live apart [*secretius*]. And thus, so that they might escape danger, or lest they suffer some expense, or so that they might pant and sigh in Christ’s embrace, the ancients elected to live singularly [*singulariter*]. Thus it is that many sat along in the desert, sustaining themselves with the work of their hands. But these elected something secure for themselves, and considered it better—because of the liberty of solitude and the potential for wandering—to be safely enclosed in a cell and to be kept from burdensome exercise. And this was understood by you when you committed yourself to *this institution*. But many are either ignorant of or care nothing for that which justifies this order [...] [emphasis added]

He then goes on to discuss what he considers the disagreeable habits of other recluses, including teaching. The possibility of dialogue will hereafter be foreclosed. To summarize, virginity, sexual danger and Cistercian affectivity will constitute the institution he has chosen for his sister. And here we have fully discarded the Cassianic soldier and merchant who escape no difficulties in acquiring the final good of their art. Aelred’s token homage to manual labor is just that. His narrowly conceived version of solitude will make no room for the dialogue and ascetic difference implicit in his language of absence (*secretius*) and singularity (*singulariter*).

In the interest of this single version that he has listed his sister’s choice as the culmination of various motives, thus allowing him to set her apart from the “many” who erroneously embark upon *anachoresis*. Most importantly, what both Aelred’s audience and those who are not committed to the institution’s *ratio* share is a certain passivity that

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39 Aelred, *De Institutis*, ch. 1.
his own ordering of motives has invented. It is that ordering that will also effectively
disassociate the anchoress’ goal from her active negotiation of behaviors that she might
use as steps towards that goal. Her beginning and ending are already accounted for, so
she need pose no questions about her own role within tradition or her own propositum.
Aelred minimizes his sister’s agency in choosing (voveres) to become an anchoress.

The De Institutis illegitimates versions of solitude that compete with Aelred’s
conception of monastic excellence. He reflects upon the socially active anchorite as a way of labeling as ascetically catastrophobic the person whose life does not conform to his version of anchoritic excellence. His panic over gossiping women, the theme which he addresses immediately after the passage quoted above, derives from his sense that such anchoresses threaten virginity and his Cistercian brand of contemplation. The anchoress’ propositum and the behaviors that were justifiable in view of that propositum are being effectively illegitimated and replaced by Aelred’s “institution.” So, ironically, such gossips needed pose no such threat to the anchoress reading Aelred’s text. Yet Aelred is teaching the anchoress his own ideological ambivalence towards anachoresis.\(^{40}\) And if she is wise, the anchoress will learn to be just as uneasy about her authority as is Aelred: “Sister, I want you never to be secure, but always to fear and to have mind of your fragility.”\(^{41}\) Like the image of the marching monks in Pachomius’ vision, the passive timidity to which Aelred appeals is simultaneously a negative argument that assumes the

\(^{40}\) For example, Aelred repeatedly uses the verb “cavere” as though the anchoress should persist in a state of anxiety. See chs. 4, 179.23; 7, 182.13; 8, 183.19; et passim.

\(^{41}\) Ibid., ch. 20, 193.6: “Te soror nunquam volo esse securam, sed timere semper, tuamque fragilitatem habere suspicatam.”
ascetic superiority of the coenobium. So Aelred himself, who perceives the potential for *singularitas* and authority, reestablishes her dependence on masculine power.

But what he means by those/that ancient institute(s) ironically isolates his reader from some of the same virtues such as patience and discretion that were so important to Cassian. In what ways Aelred actually sets aside Cassianic institutes relates to his highly selective and Cistercian sense of tradition. This selectivity in Aelred’s construction of the anchoritic “institution” is actually his most significant contribution to the tradition of regulatory texts for English solitaries. Aelred, however, must forego the convenience of a bishop and rely on the force of argument and his presumption that the Cistercian coenobium legitimates *anachoresis*. Here we find the tendency inherent in monastic narratives about tradition to represent a modern moment of reform—whether that moment is twelfth-century Cistercian or tenth-century Benedictine matters little—as the inevitable and unrivaled culmination of monastic history and one that embodies the supreme and centralized form of monastic excellence.

For example, at one point he suddenly observes that “no one can correct him whom God despises.” But whom does God despise, and why? Since the answer requires a conception of monastic tradition that rejects the alterity of some solitaries, the space within which Aelred might have legitimized solitaries’ lives vanishes. A text which was a major source for Anglo-Latin rules made itself irreconcilable with the lives of anchorites whose behavior lies outside of Aelred’s conception of history. He leaves unexpressed the grounds for divine rejection, because he has himself already determined that any form of error not consistent with the coenobitic (and more narrowly Cistercian)

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polemics of the *De Institulis* cannot possibly be worth integrating into its framework. Correction, he says, is impossible. And yet, this rejection of such solitaries “whom God despises,” only encouraged later rules to make themselves equally irrelevant to the lives of error-, sin- and heresy-prone hermits and anchorites. Like Æfric before him, Aelred only proves the limits of coenobitic control and the persistence of *singularitas*. Still, he is insistent that his sister can have nothing to do with such solitaries, whoever they are.

It is difficult to overestimate how profoundly Aelred sets himself against Goscelin’s conception of anchoritic excellence. Their texts call forth from their readers different versions of monastic virtues (competing models of humility, discretion and patience, for example) and different ways of interpreting their own behavior.\(^{43}\)

Predictably, the *De Institulis* repeatedly returns to virginity and its preservation, so much so that its anchoress is rendered far more passive than Goscelin’s Eve. For Aelred “conserving virginity” is principal, and the text’s primary interest lies with negotiating how coenobitic power should maintain its authority over those seeking a competing authority outside of coenobitic walls. Likewise, the virtue of discretion, indispensable to Cassian’s *Institutes* and the *Conferences*, is of little to no importance for Aelred. When, for example, he refers to Grimlaic’s sense that discretion precedes all virtues—*discretio namque est mater omnium virtutum*\(^ {44}\)—he declares that discretion essentially involves privileging spirit over the body.\(^ {45}\) Discretion should serve anchoritic passivity.

\(^{43}\) For example, *preservantia* and *constantia*, which do not appear in Aelred’s text, are the more active instruments of Goscelin’s philosophical subject that contrast with Aelred’s more passive versions of these virtues.\(^ {44}\) Grimlaic, *De Discretione*, ch. 60.\(^ {45}\) Aelred, *De Institulis*, 194, ch. 23.
The Epistle, Hypocrisy and the Suppression of Dialogue: Two Anglo-Latin Rules

Let us consider another Anglo-Latin letter that promotes the same rejection of anchoritic authority, the so-called *Roberti presbyteri ad Hugonem anachoritam admonitiones præsertim de eucharistia*. Robert, our author, observes that a certain anchorite named Hugo had inquired after a *regula* (*audivi te querere regulam anchoritalis vitae conscriptam*). This fact clearly relates to the work of providing and reconciling both personal and traditional justifications for *anachoressis*. But the priest is ideologically at one with Aelred’s presentation of anchoritic living, insofar as he exaggerates the discourse of error and minimizes the potential for dialogue. At one point, Robert gives a crucial warning to the anchorite.

You must take great care, brother, that you not imitate the bad examples of certain anchorites who are just beginning, who think that salvation lies in abstinence from food or in harsh clothing—without other goods. For these are good only if they are done for the love of Christ, but if not, they are rather vicious than virtuous. For certain of them keep every custom [*consuetudinem*] they had in the world, or even become worse. If they had been irascible, now they are even more so. If lustful, now even more so. If babblers, now even more so. If once greedy, now they are greedier, and if disobedient now more so. If stupid, now stupider.

It is important to note that Robert uses the term *consuetudo* to describe both a secular and religious custom. He certainly does not want to encourage a sense that the anchoritic and secular lives might resemble each other in any way. In fact, the possibility of such resemblance is precisely what troubles him. However, if such a resemblance between the two stations is persistent at least in England, Robert is not encouraged by this fact to consider the merits of a dialogical approach to *ascesis*. Some solitaries (*quidam*) do not

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46 P. Livarius Oliger, ed., “Regulae Tres,” *Antonianum* 3 (1928): 183-90. According to Oliger, the letter can be dated to 1140-1215 but no more precisely than that, 154.
have much of a rule to speak of, whatever regulatory text(s) they may or may not be asked to read. And at least to us, and perhaps Robert, the *propositum* of such solitaries remains similarly unknown. Still, the priest prefers to establish a single legitimate variety of *ascesis* despite the fact that such a type does not exist in England. There had been no correction available to the self-possessed recluse described in Peter the Venerable’s letter of guidance, the *Epistola ad Gilbertum.* ⁴⁹ Peter no doubt hoped that Gilbert, an anchorite, was wholly unlike the recluse whose self-celebrating pride is so beyond measure that all external attempts to correct him would be regarded not as salutary, but invasive. The autonomy offered by enclosure permitted such a recluse’s grand sense of his own authority and virtue. But it is also true that the potential for him to adopt a version of inner virtue recognizable as such by Peter is impossible because Peter’s own demands on the recluse made it so. ⁵⁰ Robert effectively puts himself in the same dilemma.

Here as elsewhere, the problem centers on judgment, authority, and the work of legitimating a certain regulatory theory. In the process of justifying the anchoritic life and prior to the above passage, Robert had noted that sound, reliable judgment in matters pertaining to *anachoresis* was difficult to come by. There are some whose praise or condemnation of other religious is equally unjustified, if either is unsupported by discrete judgment. Maybe so. But for Cassian discretion as a moral quality was both essential to and consistent with his dialogical model of ascetic behavior. Though Robert may wish otherwise, he must recognize that the potential of his own work to exercise some

⁴⁹ Peter the Venerable, Letter 20, 32: “Nunc sibi iudiciale tribunal magnus heremita usurpat.”
⁵⁰ As Ivo of Chartres claims, “vita vero solitaria ideo inferior est, quia voluntaria et importunis cogitationibus plena” (*PL* 162, col. 261C).
corrective authority over others is already quite diminished. In adopting an epistolary and univocal framework of guidance, however, he frustrates the potential for such recognition. Instead, the primary focus in the *Admonitiones* is on the competition that can ensue between the solitary’s authority and that of his ecclesiastical superiors. It is hardly surprising that Robert proceeds from here to a matter of theological import, thus making the possible tensions between different anchoritic lives all the more vivid.

Robert’s letter to Hugo forces a resolution to a problem that ignores its own deeper significance. After some brief instruction in penitential matters, Robert turns his discussion to the sacrament of the altar. Then, the remainder of the *admonitiones* focuses on this relationship between the solitary’s living and the penitential and Eucharistic theology that is now made to support it. At first glance, the emphasis in this text on such a deterministic justification for solitude as theology seems to suggest that it is with such justifications that Robert is exclusively concerned. But this is not so. He offers, rather, a narrative whose culmination may be identical with sacramental theology, but whose structure implies the other historical and lived narratives that Robert is quite willing to address (“Si edaces, *nunc* edaciores, si inobedientes, *nunc* inobedientiores”). The passage that immediately precedes his discussion on the sacrament of the altar addresses such matters as dishonesty, excessive eating and giving in to anger.51 These are all ascetic problems with which the anchorite may well have concerned himself.

And yet, the passage sets the anchorite up for failure. The errors are not discussed as they related to his future ascetic improvement. Such improvement is uncertain. What is certain is the place the Eucharist has as the culmination of a narrative of failure. Read

51 Oliger, “Regulae Tres,” 184-5.
as a narrative Robert’s description of the anchorite’s life shows an individual who is not
guided by virtues so much as by a series of faults that can only be corrected by
participation in an orthodox understanding of the Eucharist. Robert’s sources here draw
on an ecclesiastical genealogy that effectively obliterates the anchorite’s search for his
own authority. It is for this and no other reason that the text takes a sacramental turn,
justifying that interest in the sacrament with an emphasis on the anchorite’s faults (rather
than his successes). For Robert the Eucharistic ending had long determined the nature of
the anchorite’s life. Reformation is not a matter for the finis of love and purity of heart,
for the narrative of Hugo’s life has long been irrelevant to the Admonitiones.

Cassian’s point about positing an ascetic finis is precisely what the Admonitiones
recalls with its description of solitaries who move not towards, but away from virtue. But
insofar as the rule wishes to redirect this narrative it argues a point with which Cassian
would not be in agreement, namely that the regulatory text can and should have authority
over the solitary’s narrative. Such an argument risks replacing the solitary’s own finis
(his propositum) with a model of behavior that dispense with authority and puritas
cordis, but which defines itself as the finis of purification. The rules under discussion
reveal the theoretical complications in this suppression of the solitary’s own goal. Yet
they also more or less strategically conceal the fact that this theoretical imbalance had the
single benefit of rendering the solitary’s propositum irrelevant.

Specifically, the language of artifice, design and imagery was helpful for such
texts. With such language regulatory texts could exploit the notion of anchoritic or

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52 Gratian’s Decretum is among Robert’s chief source in the passages following the above, along with
Jerome, Ambrose and Augustine. See ibid., 157.
eremitic hypocrisy, concealing the kind of intellectual hypocrisy imbedded in a regulatory theory. The discussion depended on defining unseen virtue as visible, and a means to a theoretical end as the end of an ascetic life. It is this theoretical complication and its attendant language of artifice and disguise that are represented in rules when they describe “hypocrisy” as a vice characteristic of solitude. The category of hypocrisy happens to be one additional site at which the solitary’s propositum had become irrelevant to most of the Middle English and Anglo-Latin rules.

What the rules seems to mean by the term hypocrisy is the (deliberate) confusion on the solitary’s part of his inner excellence with the mere external appearance of such excellence. But beyond this, exteriority is a concern primarily because it launches a dialogue, which the rules are not able to control, between the solitary’s own negotiation of external signs of holiness with internal substances and their ends of “love” and “purity of heart.” And yet the rules are insistent upon their engagement with exteriority, because that is the only category open to regulatory control. In my reading, hypocrisy is the name given to the rules’ powerlessness to participate in this dialogue. But that powerlessness is also deflected onto the solitaries themselves in the form of a vice named “hypocrisy.” It is finally only the individual solitary who is capable of rendering judgments about means and ends, signs and substance. However, like the Admonitiones, other rules, when they attempt both to control this narrative and to conceal that same attempt, exploit a language of disguise and artifice to conceal their own theoretical hypocrisy.

So the emphasis placed on this vice comes at a price. Specifically, the rules are apt to place such a strong emphasis on external vehicles of control (like the cell, for
example, since it promotes *stabilitas loci*) that those external measures often take on the appearance of ends in themselves rather than means to a separate and strictly ascetic end. The confusion of means and ends is logic’s counterpart to the hypocrite’s deliberate blending of sign and substance. So it would seem that it was as much a theoretical problem for the rules to broach the matter of exteriority as it was an ethical problem for the solitary to consider why and for what ends he behaved as he did, or remained in his cell. It should be remembered that obedience to a monastic superior was something a solitary was often forced to forego. Yet it was not clear exactly how the cell or the rule should function as a substitute. (We recall that Cassian did not face this problem, since authority resided in the lived *anachoresis* of individuals whose narrative was incomplete). Moreover, the effort to correct for this absence encouraged in the rules an increasingly strong emphasis on exterior measures of control. Yet this was an emphasis that only further intensified the effects of the passivity they have imposed on the solitary, thus rendering the solitary’s *active intent* upon a specific goal increasingly less relevant. The theoretical contradictions that attended this situation were in fact inevitable.

The question of obedience becomes more difficult in light of this brand of exteriority, and even more so since the rules implicate themselves in the very kind of hypocrisy that they excoriate. For to reduce the solitary to a preoccupation with exteriority amounts to promoting, on the level of theory, the same confusion of means as ends in themselves to which solitaries may fall victim when equating their cells with their moral excellence. Such confusion threatens the theoretical coherence, for example, of the *Regula Reclusorum* (c. 1280).
The house of one who is truly a hypocrite is bound on all side by four walls. The eastern wall is his sluggishness of the body, the western wall his wandering mind, while the southern is his desire for human favor and the northern wall his contempt for God’s precepts. These walls support a roof from whose southerly side derives an immoderate love of one’s own will which leads to presumption, and from whose northerly side derives the continual abuse of a gnawing conscience that results in desperation.  

It is worth noting the ambiguous phrasing of “ypocrita verus,” since that ambiguity is consistent with the tensions present in the text’s regulatory theory. The allegory only throws into sharper focus the problem that the cell presents to the rule’s highly anxious discussion of hypocrisy, namely that its physical structure can account for and represent a virtue that might otherwise be lacking in the solitary. Since hypocrisy itself permits an external, public image to obscure an absence of actual virtue, it is possible that by its very materiality the cell, when invested with an intrinsic moral worth it cannot carry, would lead its resident to a hypocritical satisfaction with a merely external display of virtue.

The criteria by which the rule accuses its hypocritical contemporaries also implicate the rule in the same problem to which it points. No reader of the Ancrene Wisse can be in doubt about the extent to which a solitary might identify with his or her space.

The Regula Reclusorum presupposes a coenobitic notion of physical enclosure and ignores the patent artifice of its own allegory. The walls themselves guarantee or embody the solitary’s virtue, a notion that would have been intolerable to Cassian. The development of this brand of theoretical hypocrisy, if we might call it that, was illustrated by the Cistercian Caesarius of Heisterbach’s Dialogus Miraculorum in which he narrates

53 Oliger, “Regula,” ch. 8: “Fictus et inclusus et ypocrita verus parietum quatuor angitur ambitu. Paries orientalis est otiositas corporis, occidentalis vagatio mentis, australis humani favoris appetitus, aquilonaris preceptorum Dei contemptus. Hiis parietibus tectum supponitur, ex parte australis immoderatus amor proprie voluntatis que ducit ad praesumptionem; ex parte aquilonis conscientie mordacis continuum flagellum, que ducit ad desperationem.”
a sad and troubling story of a monk who had fled his monastery and is afterwards confronted by his superior who seeks to devise a way to keep the fugitive from any further lapses in stability. One recalls that even if the Rule allowed for the movement from coenobitism to anachoresis, Cistercian monasticism was rarely pleased to lose its members in this fashion. For the same text claims that a monk who wanted to become a hermit experienced this desire as a temptation suggested to him by his spiritual enemy, the devil. If the exemplum seems to fly in the face of even the Rule, which explicitly condones the desire to leave the coenobium for solitude, we should consider that the Dialogus itself controls the discourse of hypocrisy, not the solitary. And of course it uses the otherwise standard emphasis on stabilitas loci to support its claims against the potential solitary. So the fact that the motivations for fleeing a monastery could range anywhere from a rejection of monastic precepts to a desire for some form of solitary ascesis does not much concern this Cistercian construction of monastic vices. For Caesarius’s work is no more interested in attaching behaviors to the reasons justifying those behaviors than is the common hypocrite.

The narrative runs as follows. A fugitive monk is returned to his superior under whose authority he ought to suffer correction. Instead, his superior asks the monk to depart and return with an axe. Wanting to know the reason for this request, the fugitive hears that it would be better if he had no feet, with which to flee the monastery, than that he should commit the same error again. Remarkably, the exemplum not only misses the

55 Heisterbach, Distinctio 8, ch. 14.
point of monastic virtue, but does so triumphantly. True, a monk without feet no longer flees his vow. But neither is he an example of monastic excellence. He is no more capable of exercising the virtue of *stabilitas* as he is of fleeing. The exemplum likewise cannot examine the problem inherent in the solution its offers to instability, let alone the question of the *propositum*, its means and its ends. Heisterbach’s sole interest lies in eliminating the rivalry between two versions of monastic excellence to which the fleeing monk’s conduct was a witness. Like the imagery of the walls and roof in the *Regula Reclusorum*, the *Dialogus* superimposes coenobitic bonds upon *anachoresis*.

Whenever the Middle English and Anglo-Latin rules instruct solitaries on the monastic virtues, those solitaries are generally asked to legitimize that historical narrative—whether that history is merely monastic or more broadly ecclesiastical—which uses that solitary’s *propositum* to justify an externally imposed reading of history, rather than allowing his or her *propositum* to articulate the experiential and unfinished pursuit of monastic excellence. It is crucial, then, to recall that hypocrisy is only meaningful in our context as a matter of authority and of the possibility of investing the rule with the same sort of authority that the solitary seeks, thus displacing and discarding that individual’s authority. While in one sense merely a conflict between competing forms of authority, the tension on which the discourse of hypocrisy focuses would never arise without the solitary’s *singulare propositum*. As it turns out, the rule and the holy desire run at counter-purposes. They are inherently mismatched. The parallel authority with which solitary *ascesis* invests itself is of course imagined as a question of obedience, though it is an unavoidably provisional obedience.

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But to insist on obedience was to deny the possibility that texts could themselves become hypocritical. With its language of hypocrisy the coenobium would positively refuse to justify such flight. The distinction between the flight from persecution, flight from authority, the flight from the secular world could be sufficiently confused so as to legitimate behavior otherwise impossible to reconcile with the coenobium. It was far easier to essentialize physical movement as a sign of inner vice, even if the same rule criticized the same preoccupation with externality as hypocritical.

The first enclosure is not made of cement and rock, but rather of the mind’s virtue, covering about with four walls the anchorite or the devoutly enclosed. The one wall to the east is his mental continence, and the opposing—that is, western—wall is his corporeal continence. Then, the northern wall is his terror of Hell, while the southern wall is his desire for divine love.56

The use of allegory could not possibly be a mere cure-all for hypocrisy precisely because allegory could only ever be a means for inquiring into the relationship between form and substance. And since it is indeed that spiritual substance which the Regula will be wholly incapable of controlling or defining, its final appeal to external signs and forms stands to illustrate how allegory can be misapplied to actual spiritual substances. Ironically the Regula recurrently turns to themes of deception, artifice, and (of course, on the part of the solitaries) confused priorities. However, it is rather the Regula that is unconscious of its creation of artifice as the building-blocks, so to speak, of hypocritical error.

Beyond concealing its own failure to organize the means and ends of solitary ascesis, the rule detects in the cell of the “hypocrite” a social and monastic rival, and here

56 Oliger, “Regula,” ch. 3: “Prima inclusio non est cemento et lapide fabricata, sed animi virtute, ex parietibus quatuor et teeto, ambiens inclusum vel devotum claustralem. Una paries orientalis est continentia mentis; paries vero opposita, videlicet occidentalis, est continentia corporis; paries aquilonis est horror tartaree regionis; paries australis est fervor divini amoris.”
it is a rivalry not unlike that created by the “hypocrites and pseudo-monks” in fifth-century urban contexts.\(^{57}\) A passage in the *Regula* describes socially active recluses who very much recall the satire directed against urban ascetics in that far older context.\(^{58}\) The notion of anchoritic artifice or deception is never other than a creation on the part of those who would delimit the manner in which a solitary’s life proceeds and ends. It remains to conclude my argument that a regulatory framework, however self-consistent on its surface, contained a potential for revealing its own inadequacies and “hypocrisy.” It matters little whether we are discussing a prototypical rule or a hagiographical text: both were in a position to critique their own assumptions about solitary behavior and belief.

**The Solitary’s Virtues, the *Propositum* and the End of Coenobitic Control**

The regulatory materials produced in England need not have produced such a narrowing consistent with the monastic politics of an Egyptian bishop or an Ælfric. As we have seen in Goscelin’s *Liber*, even the form of the epistle did not demand the ideological narrowing. The other rules we have examined above, however, often created a highly narrow understanding of ascetic excellence. Sometimes that understanding was so narrow that it produced its own theoretical inconsistencies.

As if *anachoresis* had reflected since the first century a single model of *ascesis*, the author of the thirteenth-century *Ancrene Wisse* quotes a NT epistolary admonition

\(^{57}\) For discussion see Caner, *Wandering, Begging Monks* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).
\(^{58}\) Oliger, “Regula,” ch. 10: “Seculares vidiuosdam, qui indigebant alimentis, se includere ut sic eorum inopia mitigaretur, fingentes se religionis intuitu hoc fecisse. Horum aliquis, cum purgatione carnalis delicti refrigerii sic quesiti, in fine sic poterit salvari. Sed timeo ne huismodi spe venie plures moriantur decepti. Solent enim tales multa colligere, collecta servare et nequaquam ea misericorditer dispensare et habundantiam querent pecudum et frugum sibi et familie sue alimentum vel ad susceptionem hospitum vel forte sub tali occasione absque plurium hominum conscientia sibi possunt plurima reponere et cumulum iniquitatis amplificare.”
(Philemon 3:16), “Let us all remain with the same rule.”\textsuperscript{59} A roughly contemporary text, the Anglo-Latin \textit{Dublin Rule}, also supports the notion of a single rule (\textit{una regula omnibus christianis constituta}).\textsuperscript{60} The \textit{Dublin Rule} conflates regular (\textit{regulariter}) anchoritic living and a passage from the \textit{Athanasiani Symboli}, a catechetical text reaffirming orthodoxy.\textsuperscript{61} Earlier, the work had anticipated this link when paraphrasing the experience of the first Apostles at Pentecost (\textit{suis disciplulis in igneis linguis misit}).

So the Holy Spirit was universally kindled, not halting, but working good by correction and doctrine (\textit{doctrina}) in holy thoughts. It was always burning and did not obstruct, but continually illumined the believing (\textit{fidelem}) man.\textsuperscript{62}

Just as the Apostles gathered into a community, the \textit{Dublin Rule} implies that the \textit{vir fidelis} lives in an apostolic community, not alone.\textsuperscript{63} Here the assumption that communal behavior was superior to \textit{anachoresis} comports nicely with the demand for a \textit{una regula}.

We find the same pattern in the \textit{Ancrene Wisse}’s reading of the Egyptian solitaries as conforming to a single model determined by the coenobium. Its term “order” is deployed in the author’s rereading of the Desert Fathers tradition. The author asks, were not Antony, Paul the First Hermit, and Macarius all of the same order, the order of Saint James?\textsuperscript{64} The answer, of course, is no; however, the point of the preface is theological and monastic consensus, and the question had been answered in the affirmative before it

\textsuperscript{60} Oliger, “Regulae Tres,” 170. Cf. also ch. 14: “una enim regula est monachis et anachoritis.”
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., \textit{Dublin Rule}, ch. 6: “Si autem regulariter non vivit, absque dubio in eternum peribit,” and note.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 170-1.
\textsuperscript{63} The \textit{Dublin Rule} styles itself as a letter whose recipients are addressed (quite traditionally) as \textit{fratres karissimi}. Not unlike the \textit{Ancrene Wisse}, the text may have been designed to be read by several closely associated anchorites. But the anchorites would have been associated not merely by choice, but on account of the then centuries-old argument that community was preferable to solitude. As noted above, those \textit{fratres} were made to resemble the apostolic community at the first Pentecost, however \textit{individually} they were in fact pursuing their lives.
\textsuperscript{64} Millett, \textit{Ancrene Wisse}, Praef.: “Pawel, the earste ancre, Antonie ant Arsenie, Makarie ant te othre, neren ha religiuse ant of Sein James ordre?”
was even posed. Granted, our author must be aware of a multiplicity of rules and orders, but again, external variability is no match for the unity of this one “order” or institutio. The Ancrene Wisse likewise argues that a rule is by definition indifferent to the various forms adopted by solitaries so long as there remains a theoretical unity between the individual and a highly determined ecclesiastical tradition. This unity was clearly imposed by the text itself, and did not emerge organically in the Egyptian desert.

The question here is one of justifying anachoresis with reference to institutional and formalized demands on the individual, one the one hand, or by tolerating the individuated means chosen by this or that solitary for achieving a final goal, on the other. To turn to a later example, by all appearances the bulk of the Dublin Rule establishes its allegiance with the Athanasian model of regulation. And yet its opening reads like a meditation on Cassian’s monastic theory, for it observes that love is essentially what justifies and legitimates the anchorite’s living.\(^{65}\) Over the subsequent pages the rule experiences an ideological narrowing, but it was by no mean inevitable that the text should have developed like this. Likewise, in his preface the author of the Ancrene Wisse sways between advocating coenobitic supremacy against anchoritic authority, and ecclesiastical goals against puritas cordis. He is at pains not so much to explore the anchoress’ propositum as to explain to her just what constitutes holy living (religio). Further, if we look here for a Cassianic notion of the monk’s purity of heart, his final goal, we find it inextricably linked with this term religio.\(^{66}\) What does the author mean by this term? He explains at the outset: different rules apply to different disciplines such

\(^{66}\) Millett, Ancrene Wisse, Praef.: “quantum ad puritatem cordis, circa quam versatur tota religio.”
as grammar, geometry and theology, but right theology concerns instruction for the inner and outer person. The rule is right theology, and it is only the just who love God and who, by extension, practice religion recto theologico.\textsuperscript{67} It is little wonder, then, that in the Ancrene Wisse Antony, Paul and Macarius belong to the same “order.”

Thus it will not be in the anchoress’ power to determine how to arrive at her own purity of heart; still more, it will be important that she not reflect on the fact that one’s purity of heart may be achieved by means just as variable as her external practices, which the author declares to be negotiable and not as critical as her inner life.\textsuperscript{68} Consistent with this argument, our author determines that external behaviors are not really worth controlling when what is really at issue is ideological consensus. When quoting the prophet Micah, then, it is in the interest of “right theology” that he translates the terms of moral excellence, rendering it impossible for the anchoress to understand those terms as in any way independent of right theology. Thus, the OT terms “iudicium” and “iustitia” become “religiun” and “ordre.”\textsuperscript{69} And in fact the Desert Fathers turn up in a later Anglo-Latin rule, and are used to much the same effect.\textsuperscript{70}

\textsuperscript{67} \textit{Ibid.}: “Recti diligunt te (in Canticis, sponsa ad sponsum). Est rectum gramaticum, rectum geometricum, rectum theologicum. Et sunt differencie totidem regularum. De recto theologico sermo nobis est, cuitus regule due sunt: una circa cordis directionem. Altera versatur circa exteriorum rectificationem.” \textit{[God], the just love you. There is a right grammar, a right geometry, a right theology. Different rules apply to them, [but] our theme is of right theology of which there are two rules: one regarding instruction for the heart, and the other regarding proper exterior conduct.]

\textsuperscript{68} \textit{Ibid. et passim}. The anchoress is told here and elsewhere that she may adjust to her liking such exteriors.

\textsuperscript{69} \textit{Ibid.}: “Hercne Michee: Indicabo tibi, O homo, quid sit bonum et quid Deus requirat a te, utique facere judicium et justiciam et sollicite ambulare cum Domino Deo tuo. ‘Ich chulle schawi the, mon,’ seith the hali Michee, Godes prophete – ‘Ich chulle schawi the sothliche hwet is god, ant hwuch religiun, ant hwuch ordre, hwuch halinesse Godd easketh of the.’”

\textsuperscript{70} The fourteenth-century Cambridge Rule (Oliger, “Regulae Tres,” 160-1) justifies its subject with a genealogy—not the only genealogy available to the author—that extends from Christ and John the Baptist who “dedicated” and “sanctified” anachoresis. The possible singularity of such figures is already eliminated by the assumptions that a genealogy makes about continuity and exemplarity. The text cites Egyptian and Roman eremitic exemplars, including Mary of Egypt (\textit{Egiptiaca}) and Paul the Simple
Peter Cantor (d. 1197) had shown just how necessary dialogue and error would become to the solitary’s life. In a passage on the traditional category of *singularitas*, he reminds us just how implicated the question of tradition was in questions about singular hermits and anchorites. He notes the OT exemplars who seemed to be precursors to the later solitaries of the Christian tradition. When concluding his defense of eremitic *singularitas*, he notes that solitary *ascesis* belongs to a particular genealogy, although it is one whose line is fragmented and divided: “Quidam dicunt vitam istam initium habuisse a praecursore Domini, alii ab Elia, alii a Jonadab vel Rechabitis, qui vinum et siceram non bibeant.”

It is no accident that this passage contains an argument about both *singularitas* and beginnings. For an argument about beginnings that does not produce a coenobitic narrative about tradition is simultaneously an argument about the contestability of authority. The Cantor’s observation is sensitive to the potential of *singularitas* to multiply the forms of justification along with the Biblical authors of solitary *ascesis*. That is, singularity is traceable not to a single point of origin, but to points of multiple origins. Wittingly or otherwise, the Cantor has just forced a distinction between two understandings of singularity. By introducing two versions of singularity (*bona et mala*) he illustrates the variability and contestability of such definitions.

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(Prologus, 299ff.). Its analogue and closest descendent, the *Oxford Rule*, dispenses with the genealogy altogether. Cf. 312. Despite the diversity of purpose and practice that characterized the “many” hermits (*multi heremite*) within this tradition, the *Regula* strikes from its record the role that disparate and experimental impulses had in creating eremitic traditions.

71 Peter Cantor, *Verba Abbreviatum: Textus Conflatus*, ed. M. Boutry, CCCM 196 (Tournhout: Brepols, 2004), De mala singularitate, De bona singularitate, chs. 68-72. While Bernard in his *De gradibus humilitatis et superbiae* could isolate the monk whose behavior has distinguished him from the rest of the community and argue the demerits of singularity, so too could Peter Cantor write at far greater length of the good to which *singularitas* might be put, adding much less about its negative sides. Bernard, *De quinto gradu*, PL 182, col. 965B, ch. 14. Bernard describes the monk who *singulariter* “remains awake in bed, sleeps in chorus; and although all others are singing psalms through the night, he remains alone in the oratorium while others, after vigils, are at rest” [vigilat in lecto, dormit in choro: cunque aliis psallentibus ad vigilias tota nocte dormiet, post vigilias aliis in claustro quiescentibus solus in oratorio remanet].

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On the one hand, to be *singulare* is exactly what an ideologically unified narrative about alterity would claim about it. This is to be a particular sort of elite whose life captures as neatly as possible the ascetic excellence praised and translated from one context to another. This version of singularity is made possible by the Cantor’s genealogy. Yet, to what single origin does this genealogy point? To Jesus, Jonadab, and Elisha he might have added Moses, Anthony or John the Baptist. The genealogy, in other words, stops at single individuals whose position at different points on a historical timeline militates against the notion of a single origin. If it seems that only certain practices and certain solitaries existed within this tradition, such an argument presupposes that version of *singularitas* whose invention derived solely from anxieties about the continuity of authority and tradition. At which point would the Cantor distinguish a justifiable singularity from one that was simply a bad sort of singularity? As it happens, he tells us himself in his *De male singularitate* that the problem arises when one “presumptuously invents a new way of living.” But the multiple origins for singularity that he provides in the *De bona singularitate* already presuppose such inventions!

Moreover, he uses this invention to justify the famous OT warning (Eccles. 4:10), “woe to the solitary who, if he falls, has no one to raise him up again.” But the point is already clear. Invention is most often a vice, and *singularitas* derives from singular individuals. The Cantor is therefore dangerously close to illustrating two points he would perhaps rather conceal. First, that singularity cannot escape a certain sort of error definable as such on account of the uniqueness of the individual. He cannot quite suppress the point that their uniqueness is indeed a function of their error. And second, it

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would seem that error and individual origins are mutually constituted. Incipience and *singularitas mala* are interchangeable, and both describe a sort of *singularitas* that can never merit approval. The only framework that lends the Cantor’s argument the appearance of integrity is the sharpness of his *bona/mala* distinction. And yet, it is precisely the nature of that distinction that renders it unsustainable.

*Singularitas* can be represented as not only dangerous, but as a form of error simultaneously embraced and rejected by solitaries. It is therefore true to say that while solitaries “invented” themselves anew the regulatory imagination needed likewise to invent new forms of error that could be attached to them. In a sense, then, error helped preserve a certain kind of *singularitas*. Because of the existence of divergent narratives, whatever justifications hermits and anchorites might have had for their internal and external conduct were not likely to cohere with those justifications organized by a regulatory ideology. While this fact need not necessarily mean that a multiplicity of justifications for this life will necessarily promote multiple forms of error, it is instructive that Bernard of Clairvaux had placed far greater stress on singularity as a vice, making no effort to hide his suspicion of those ascetics who stood out too visibly. The intersection of regulatory theory, *singularitas* and tradition made the need to invent and continually overthrow new forms of eremitic and anchoritic error more, not less, acute.

But so too did the need to tolerate *singularitas* become more acute. Let us not forget that the Cantor wrote in praise of “good” singularity. Likewise, Peter Damian had in a *regula* for his own hermits used the image of fruit trees blasted by harsh weather to illustrate the superiority of the eremitic foundation at Fonte Avellani to the other corrupt
and fallen leaves of many monastic houses (*de fluente jam ex maxima parte monastico ordine*). The image is interesting for how it reflects eremitic anxieties about discipline than for what Peter Damian imagines is the problem with the *rest* of monasticism. And it is perhaps because he realizes that his own hermits hang on the same wind-tossed tree that he then observes that no leaf could in fact fall from this tree “unless divine authority intervenes.” In other words, what puts the reform back into the form of living at Fonte Avellani is something that Damian is willing to admit is not always subject the legislation of a rule. He therefore appeals to a passage from the Bible’s most skeptical analysis of reform, transgression and the knowledge of God—the Book of Job.

He understood the dangers inherent to any attempt to make a rule the sole necessary guide for a prospective solitary. When he observes that a layman who joins the hermitage should not be allowed to observe the most excellent practices, it is with an eye to the coenobium where so many monks had recently failed at their monastic venture. In other words, Damian may have refused to allow a prematurely constructed conclusion (*finis*) to displace the need for error. Elsewhere, he addresses that hypocritical essentializing of the cell which subsumes under the doctrine of stability the more immediate concerns of the *propositum*.

The cell itself and living here for any length of time are an efficacious instructor for one who preserves in this life, and in time clarifies situations which it is impossible to explain in words. Hence, out of many things I have selectively and briefly discussed only a few, for greater knowledge of this holy discipline I have

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74 *Ibid.*: “Quid autem intelligendum in hujus rei consideratione relinquitur, nisi quia nec arboris folium potest cadere, nisi divinum praesumat imperium?”
left to experience in the cell. If only a brother will persevere in his cell, it will more fully instruct him in our entire mode of living.\footnote{Damian, Letter 50, ch 51.}

Apparently, certain contingences have made it necessary not only to defer knowledge of the “holy discipline,” but even to displace that knowledge onto an experience, that by definition cannot possibly be wholly accounted for or controlled by a \textit{regula}. And insofar as it denies the possibility of knowing at the outset of \textit{ascesis} both the cell’s teachings and how the solitary might acquire that teaching, the passage is strongly opposed to the monastic narrative about tradition that reifies the solitary’s \textit{finis} even prior to his monastic experience. That is, the passage is very much about the fact that the solitary’s end necessarily escapes theoretical formulations precisely because it is opposed to the inevitability with which tradition invests itself in hindsight. Here Damian can see the point of Cassian’s emphases on an other-worldly goal.

To return to England, when the \textit{Ancrene Wisse} interrupts its harangue against gossip to address more generally the destructive potential of words, it suddenly explores the limits of its authority by declaring, “God be thanked, heresy does not thrive in England.”\footnote{Millett, \textit{Ancrene Wisse}, Part II, para 24-5: “Ful speche is as of leccherie, ant oðre fulðen þet unweschene muðes speokeð oðerhwiles. þeose beoð alle ischrapede ut of ancre riwle. þe swuch fulðe spit ut in eani ancre earen, me schulde dutten his muð nawt wið scharpe sneateres, ah wið hearde fustes. Attri speche is heresie, þwearþouer leasunge, bacbitunge, ant fikelunge; þeos beoð þe wurste heresie, Godd haue þon c, ne rixleð nawt in Englelond. Leasunge is se uuel þing þet Seint Austin seið þet forte schilde þi leader from deað ne schuldest tu nawt lihen.”}

For all the rule’s insistence on its authority over the anchoresses’ inner lives, it passively makes a key concession here: if the anchoresses were to find in their tendency to gossip a convenient means for talking and thinking about theological curiosities, the \textit{Ancrene Wisse} and its author would be powerless to correct them. The
anchoress would have no security against heresy. We have seen how historically naïve it was of the author to forget that he has himself reproduced the crisis that he bemoans. And the religious history of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century England will show just how misplaced was the author’s pious gratitude for an orthodox England.

The author’s observation, however, also indicates a self-conscious awareness that the anchoress needed to constitute her virtue outside of a pre-established narrative. The power of correction was coextensive with the success of that coenobitic-ecclesiastical narrative on proper thought and conduct. So we find another reluctant admission. Towards the end of its second part the Ancrene Wisse suggests that it is foolish for the anchoress to bring a secular desire for authority and prestige with her into the anchorhold. The warning underscores just how readily a perspective or current anchoress would do just that, assuming perhaps that what she took to be her virtues in secular estate were consistent with anachoresis. Unhappy as these circumstances may be for our author, his willingness to confront their persistence is matched by his fantasizing about forced correction. “God’s prison” is the other name he gives the anchorhold in this passage.

Our author is very near the hypocrisy of Heisterbach’s Dialogus or of the Regula

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78 The Cambridge Rule assumes a seamless consensus between the solitary and the text about monastic virtues; Olier, “Regulae Tres,” ch. 1: “Cum accidia deprimitur, cogitet quod Hodie operari licet, cras forte non licebit. Cum de inpatientia vexatur, cogitet quid pro se pertulit Christus. Cum vana Gloria pulsatur, consideret meliores. Cum tribulatur, cogitet quod non sunt condigne passiones his temporis ad futurum gloriem que revelabitur in nobis. Cum de lavicioribus cibis vel vestibus cura sollicitat, respondeat stulto iuxta stulticiaam suam, idest corpori corruptibili, quod vas stercorum est et esca vermis mox futura.” The Oxford Rule insists on the legitimacy of the “Roman church,” and hence theological orthodoxy; chs. 3 and 4. Noting, then, that a hermit makes his vow to God alone, it adds that he should also consider making the vow to a bishop. Likewise, the Cambridge Rule notes that in the absence of a bishop the solitary can show obedience to God alone (ch. 2). And the Responsio for the anchorite at Bury St. Edmunds twice reminds its reader of papal and councillary authority (466 n.2 and 467 n.4). The search for theoretical consensus actively produced dissent by strictly delimiting the terms by which solitaries merit approval.

79 Millett, Ancrene Wisse, Part II, para. 41.
Reclusorum. He hopes to suppress the fact that rampant heresy in England would neither prevent nor encourage the anchoress’s own virtues, singularitas and authority.

For the Ancrene Wisse to demand that an anchorite not associate his notion of virtue as a secular subject with that ecclesiastically controlled formulation of virtue ignored the fact that other texts of the period were doing just that. Henry d’Arci’s thirteenth-century Anglo-Norman translation of the Vitas Patrum was intended for laymen, and the late thirteenth-century Speculum Laicorum also refers lay readers to the Desert Fathers tradition. This overlap of lay and monastic interests indicates how inadequate it was to explain solitaries’ actual motivations and external behaviors with reference and a regulatory theory controlled strictly by a monastic narrative. The rule wished for control over a narrative that, as we can see from secular sources, was being controlled by solitaries themselves.

The texts considered so far have repeatedly set the language of the dominant clerical and coenobitic tradition—the language of “stability,” “obedience,” “poverty,” and so forth—against the lexica of disobedience and instability, but without actually adopting Cassian’s argument that these competing languages constituted a dialogue within which hermits and anchorites would never take on any single ascetical or theological identity. We now come to the ways in which the struggle between coenobitic or clerical power and a more dialogical approach manifested itself in medieval hagiographies on solitaries. These narratives expressed a realization that some solitaries’ behavior was not predictable in the way that the narrative too often made it seem.

Narrative movement towards the solitary’s praiseworthy death could not entirely cover a multitude of errors, not least of which is a reader’s ignorance of an ascetic’s future actions, or the posthumous state of his soul. At times, hagiographers acknowledged just how artificial their texts must become. In a late-medieval example, the demon that saw the great “constantia” of the Belgian recluse Ivetta attempted to destroy her *propositum*. Or rather, her constancy could only be ascribed to Ivetta in hindsight after a wavering and error-filled beginning could be disassociated from a recluse whose life must eventually be made consistent with a hagiographical project in league with Athanasius. “Even if [the demon] was unable to remove her *propositum* completely from her mind, yet he was able in some part to becloud the sincerity of her intention.”

Often, though, it was towards its endpoint that a narrative reconciled the tension it produced by its unqualified praise of the solitary and its awareness that he might always succumb to some error already invented for him by that praise and the over-determined precepts it presupposed. This reconciliation drew on the category of the secret (*secretum*) that was supposed to be characteristic of *anachoresis* for this reason. But this was “secret” as both hidden and removed. Hagiographers were quick to visit the supposedly secret knowledge of the solitary as a stand-in for its own narrative uncertainty about the status of his inner virtue vis-à-vis a formally determined narrative ending. The hermits and anchorites stood removed (“secretum”) from the hagiographical text. This is why towards the end of his life Henry of Coket tells his visitors their innermost secrets (*abdita sua et occulta*). The fact that a great many monastic lives include such moments should

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81 *Vita Ivetae Reclusae, BHL 4620*, ch. 7: “ut si a totali proposito mentis eam avellere non posset, tamen in aliqua sui parte sinceritatem eius intentionis posset offuscare.”
not lead us to dismiss them out of hand. For the solitary’s secret knowledge of future events is one means by which the hagiographical narrative invests the solitary with its own fictional knowledge. At the same time, however, hagiographies allow us to watch their desire for a future finis become secondary to (because dependent on) the solitary’s own hidden (abditæ et occulta) authority. These are the dual meanings by which such language of secrecy should be understood. The hermit Bartholomæus had been instructed in a dream to leave his coenobium, a desire that his hagiographer can only explain with the term interius. And although it is clear to his prior that the perspective hermit is not yet spiritually stable enough to pursue solitude, the hagiographer must qualify this skepticism (“ut putabat”). Even so, both the skepticism and its qualification only serve to illustrate universal uncertainty about Bartholomæus’ actual spiritual condition.82

And if we are tempted to see in the solitary’s prophetic powers an Athanasian certainty about ascetic endings, the hagiographies’ very emphasis on prophecy becomes an admission that the solitary’s own authority independent of narrative certainty remains abditæ et occulta. The lives of Agathon and others had perhaps more bluntly explored the solitary’s ignorance of his finis, but in their own way the medieval hagiographies invite similar re-readings of their narrative per se. Even so, Peter Damian elsewhere insists that to vacillate between physical stability and wandering was indefensible if for no other reason than that the hermit was tortuously dislodged from his sought-after repose. And yet the frustrations that accompany this unstable stability seem to have been precisely

82 Vita Bartholomaei, BHL 1015, para.9: “Priorem adiit, et quid interius haberet exposuit. Quo ille audito, laudat quidem petentis affectum, sed tamen ab his desistere monuit, eo quod nondum unius anni plantatio fuisset, nec in radice stabilitatis (ut putabat) animum fixisset.”
what one hermit, Robert of Knarresborough, sought out as an ascetic discipline. Transgressing a precept could be fostered as a discipline, a fact for which Damian’s regulatory narratives cannot quite account.

A moment from the Vita of the hermit Christina of Markyate meditates more directly on this point. In this text authority, transgression and the solitary’s knowledge of moral conduct are discussed in such a way as to prove just how persistently underarticulated those matters remained. The instance I refer to is less interesting for what it asserts than for what it leaves unasserted and unavailable to analysis. The language of secrecy, of removal, lies at the heart of the passage.

One of her maidens was thinking of doing something or other secretly: and the handmaid of God, seated in another house, saw it through the walls and forbade her saying: ‘Do it not, do it not.’ The girl said: ‘What, mistress?’ She said: ‘What you were thinking of then.’ ‘But I was not thinking of anything that is forbidden,’ said she. Then Christina called her to her and whispered in her ear what she had seen her thinking in her heart. On hearing it the girl blushed with shame, and proved that she spoke true.83

What Christina in fact proved by this incident is that the process by which she achieves excellence as a solitary subject was unique to herself. This process escapes theoretical formulations with the same ease by which the hermit looks through walls and flesh. The vibration between enclosure and disclosure, clairvoyance and rationality, secrecy and power, mirrors the essential moral indeterminateness that the passage wishes to conceal with its concluding appeal to “proof” and “truth.” But Christina’s famous clairvoyance is as essential to her propositum as her dogged resistance to episcopal consecration.

Interestingly, her hagiographers did not excise either habit from the narrative of her life.84

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84 For her resistance, but final acceptance of consecration, ibid., ch. 62.
Let us consider in this respect the *vita* of the mid-twelfth-century hermit Godric of Throckenholt recently edited by Tom Licence. We do not learn how long the interval was between Godric’s vision, which instructed him to make confession to Christ for his past faults (*negligentiis tuis*), and his adoption of a habit and rule. But he had already decided to forsake meat and all his possessions *prior* to tonsuring himself and adopting a humble garment. It is only after this that he is called Brother Godric and that his hagiographer observes that he had adopted a habit and rule (*ordo et habitus*). It is clear, then, that whatever constituted his “rule” was dependent on Godric’s sense of how best to achieve an end revealed to him in a vision, and not the other way around. And this is why his practices developed gradually and were subject to a high degree of negotiation. So when he is berated for such negotiations, it is only because the “rule” is being *prioritized* at the expense of the *propositum*.85

Godric shows us an elastic attitude towards his own promises, and the fact is that a number of his behaviors were subject to his shifting attitude towards promises previously uttered. If his own former declarations of intent were open to modification, then we can at best ascribe to him only an experimental (rather than ostensive) conception of what obedience, a stable liturgy, a restricted diet, etc. might or might not mean for his life. In fact, it is not clear that Godric’s eremitic experiment, reified as such in hindsight, was itself not merely one *potential* version of what was by definition the under-articulated search for perfection. His *propositum* still remains undefined because it is being contested. The fact that his text had to come down to us by means which

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85 For example, among his other *ad hoc* decisions, Godric refuses to forsake the *lorica* after he had promised that, once it falls from his body, he would consider his sins forgiven and cease from wearing it. He is accordingly chastised for this sudden change of mind (*Life*, 13).
corrected for these mistakes creates an additional problem: the image of an “unusual” Godric mis-identifies alterity, insofar as that alterity is not of Godric’s own making. His error, if it can be said to exist, lies in demanding the hagiographer’s work of correction, for Godric seems to have had little sense of monastic error. An ecclesiastical and monastic conception of error exists alongside of, but is ultimately inapplicable to, his life.

The failure on the part of our rules to observe that the solitary has never and can never arrive at his end has operated in tandem with their efforts to escape the fact that, if legitimated, the *propositum* has the final word not only on that individual’s ending, but on how monastic tradition is ultimately constituted. The writing of eremitic and anchoritic lives would create a space wherein a solitary’s various faults, struggles and reversals of purpose could become vivid enough to justify the narrative told by coenobitic culture of ideological stability. For that narrative insisted on just the opposite, namely that the versions of monastic excellence retrospectively labeled as unreformed could only be a defective preface to a centralized, coenobitic monasticism that was the necessary and inevitable culmination of earlier errors and imperfections.

Many of the hermits’ hagiographers wrote narratives in precisely this way, keeping details of those lives firmly within view of coenobitic authority, yet the life of Christina of Markyate marked the limits of even that authority. The energy with which she resisted consecration coupled with the circumstances of her first enclosure—the cell could not at first have meant to her what it meant to her friend and fellow hermit Roger—show a hermit as yet uninterested and even hostile to the coenobitic narrative that would eventually construct the memory of her life. Though it is tempting to conclude that this
fate could hardly have been avoided, and that the hagiographer’s ideology formed a seamless whole with Christina’s transition from solitary to the head of a community of nuns, we should remember that her narrative is unfinished. It remains fragmented, partial, and decidedly not inevitable. What secret recess, what inner and outer changes to her life she took to towards the end of her personal story remain un-narrated. Here the secretum that the hagiographical text would ideally keep hidden was its own lack of control over the hermit’s end.

One final example, from John of Ford’s Life of Wulfric of Haselbury, a twelfth-century anchorite and priest. While it is otherwise fairly easy to distinguish a Cistercian ideology in the text’s language, some moments allow us to divest the Wulfric of this language and see own independent authority. For the most part this work seems impossible since there is never a “Wulfric” who is not also a textual exemplum for a Cistercian politics. Yet at one point in the narrative the relationship between the Psalter, the Cistercian text, and anchoritic practice is almost playfully manipulated, so as both to disclose and conceal the work of constructing Wulfric’s authority. In ch. 19 John praises Wulfric’s disciplined recitation of the Psalter.\footnote{John of Ford, Wulfric of Haselbury, ed. Maurice Bell (London: Somerset Record Society, 1933), 36.} The narration is then immediately interrupted by John’s lengthy observations of his own personal neglect of the Psalter. In lamenting his shortcoming John berates himself in language from the Psalter, the language to which Wulfric supposedly commits himself faithfully. The identities of the Psalmist, the hagiographer and the anchorite are collapsed into each other.

The point is of interest because the hagiographer willingly displaces the text of his own narrative with the Psalter, recognizing that this text (like the anchoritic text
“Wulfric”) has an authority of its own that the hagiographer cannot quite master. Like the coenobitic anxiety revealed by Pachomius’ weeping disciple Theodore, John’s frustration at his own lack of mastery over the sacred text runs parallel with his awareness that Wulfric likewise escapes the coenobitic narrative. Moreover, if we seek for the anchorite’s own virtue we can begin by observing that John’s hyperbolic insistence that Wulfric mastered the Psalter was just another symptom of his lack of mastery over him. It would seem instead that as the Psalter remains the central text in this chapter, so too does its penitential, mournful but defiantly self-authorizing persona. Insofar as John calls attention to himself as a narrator whose own ascetic narrative is beleaguered by setbacks (i.e. a lax meditative life), he reflects on that Psalmist or anchorite who likewise may escape his narrative and whose authority may be burdened by such setbacks. On its own admission the hagiographer writes to set up a standard that both he and his narrative fail to meet. But in doing so, John forces the point that Wulfric is not and can never be merely a function of that narrative. The self-conscious narrative displays its own artifice, and so not only reinforces Wulfric’s authority but shows that the terms by which the narrative constructed that authority are necessarily in error.

The point is crucial for English anachoresis where we often see that the equation of inner virtues (e.g. patience) with external demands (e.g. of stability or orthodoxy) was untenable. Indeed, a solitary’s virtues and other behaviors were just another site at which those ruptures in tradition and narrative were revisited. As was the case with some northern hermits like Henry of Coket (d. 1120) who lived alongside another monk who
had taken the island in his charge ("monachus insuper insulæ curam habens"),\(^\text{87}\) the concerns of material space and of belonging to a certain tradition show how abuse by others may have little to do with the hermit’s personal moral failings, however fervently those detractors make appeal to such failings, and much more to do with a perception of one’s authority within an otherwise tightly controlled genealogy of island hermits.\(^\text{88}\) So too with St. Robert of Knaresborough, another hermit in that great northern tradition. Even if those hermits suffering such detractions required for their defense some virtue like *patientia*, one individual’s virtue can be construed as obstinacy from another perspective. As Aelred of Rievaulx understood, virtues are contests over tradition.

Conversely, “patience” may often work in the interests of a narrative that recognizes, but tries to conceal, the hermit’s non-conformity to a regulatory ideology which the writing of that individual’s narrative almost always advocates. The distance between the hermit and his narrative needed somehow to be closed. However, and because of this, we are scarcely able to access what solitary virtues would have meant to a Henry, Robert or indeed Richard Rolle. The search, whether medieval or modern, for a stability of eremitic virtues and behaviors across time and space is allied with the monastic ideology of *stabilitas*. At no point does the historical and literary genealogy of *ascesis* give place to the individual solitary for whom tradition is as adjustable and as subject to personal fiat as one of his temporary places of residence.

The absence of identifiable superiors is not merely a question of decentralizing authority, but also of the possibility of structuring a life in a determinate and predictable

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\(^{87}\) *S. Henrici Vita, BHL* 3806, ch. 4.

\(^{88}\) For discussion on other such tensions see Victoria Tudor, “Durham Priory and its Hermits,” in *Anglo-Norman Durham*, eds. D. Rollason *et al.* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1994), 67ff.
manner versus one that must develop by a process of various contingencies and trial-and-error. It is a life whose justifications proceed from a narrative authored by the solitary himself, rather than from a coenobitic narrative in league with its own assumptions about continuity and tradition. What unites the authors of lives as historically diverse as those of Cuthbert, Wulfric of Haselbury and even Richard Rolle was an authority more solidly committed to prescribing behavior that is, as a consequence, made retrospectively inevitable. But in another sense, the element of contingency inherent to narrative sequencing is deeply opposed to judicial and legislative structures, for these imply of behavioral stasis a necessary, natural and inevitable quality of the ascetic life.

It is perhaps ironic that at its conclusion the *Regula Reclusorum*, despite its anxiety about hypocrisy, creates opportunity for self-delusion and unquestioned hypocrisy insofar as it invites its reader to evaluate the quality of one’s living in the absence of independent standards: “if we judge ourselves, we will not be judged in future.”89 The appeal to deferred finality (*finis*) is the crucial element here and is inextricably connected to the fact that any aspect of the solitary’s life that, when construed in hindsight as inevitable, is at the same time a function of the larger historical narrative that the coenobium told of *anachoresis*. The determinate quality of a final end (in death) leads to misappropriating a narrowly legislative and judicial conception of authority.90 *If* we judge ourselves, we will *not* be judged. In neither clause is judgment

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89 Oliger, “Regula,” ch. 30: “Si nosmetipsum diiudicaremus non utique diiudicaremur.”
90 The *Regula Reclusorum* concludes with an emphasis on death that is meant to lead the reader to a contemplative consideration of his celestial goal as opposed to a strictly monastic goal (ch. 30). The *Ancrene Wisse*, although its penultimate part appropriately discusses “love,” ends rather differently by remarking on the anchoresses’ external practices. Just what the rule had insisted at the outset was of less importance than the inner life, namely the “outer rule,” receives pride of place at its conclusion. This is, however, hardly surprising in view of the rule’s rigid ecclesiastical allegiances. Interestingly, *Cambridge
actually undertaken or completed. On the other hand, the constant erasure of authority does not imply its absence. It merely implies its presence elsewhere.

Although sanctioning the desire to “renounce” the world or establish an independent authority, those who constructed a theory of solitude simply substituted one version of detachment and alienation (*singularitas*) for another (disobedience). When finally it was necessary to superimpose a narrative powerful enough to divest the venerated solitary of *singularitas*, it also became possible to re-read those narratives and dismantle their coenobitic assumptions of inevitability and stability. As we have seen in the *Life* of Christina of Markyate, where the narrative remains firmly in the control of the coenobium, it was still be possible to discover the singularity/authority of the individual hermit or anchorite. As her hagiographer confessed the need to cover over the multitude of her errors with a pious narrative—for she won some reproach from others during her life—so too did Robert of Knaresborough’s hagiographers.\(^9\) The next chapter’s analysis of Robert is about this very potential provided by narrative for interrupting itself and reconstituting a dialogue between the hermit and the self-celebrating tendencies by coenobitic writers of eremitic lives. It is the rule and its coenobitic ideology that gives the historical and individual narrative its end, for it was a function of an ecclesiastically centralized finis. The narrative of hermits and anchorites would finally and necessarily remain one of renunciation, abandonment, and *singularitas*. These were the characteristics of the Robert to whom we will now turn.

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*Rule* and the *Oxford Rule* end quite differently, the former making itself part of the debate over the lives of Mary and Martha (contemplation versus action), while the *Oxford Rule* offers no gesture to its subjects’ interests in love or contemplation. It ends by reminding the hermit’s responsibility to attend mass (ch. 22).\(^9\) C. H. Talbot, *Life*, ch. 76. 172.
Chapter 3: Authority, the Desert and the Monastic Lives of St. Robert of Knaresborough


—Verba Seniorum, 190

For many medieval monks the hermit was unstable, intransigent, unreformed—a figure who resisted culturally dominant notions of order. The desire for solitude, a desire that kept him outside of the monastic community, was also the hermit’s means of resisting the community’s sense of order and rule. In the Middle English Life of St. Robert of Knaresborough (d. 1218), a poetic narrative of just over 1000 lines, the hermit is a model of instability. At least several months prior to his first eremitic experiment, Robert decides to enter the priesthood. But he discards this initial plan and takes orders as a sub-deacon instead, only to change his mind again and enter the Cistercian

1 Verba Seniorum, PL 73, col. 801A: “Abba Arsenius, while he still led a secular life, prayed to the Lord saying: 'Lord, show me how I might be saved.' And he heard a voice saying, ‘Arsenius, flee mankind and you will be saved.’ So when he retired to solitude and made the same prayer, he again heard the voice saying to him: ‘Arsenius, flee, be silent and stay at peace. These are the first elements of salvation.’”


3 All reference will be made to the edition by Joyce Bazire, ed., The Metrical Life of St. Robert of Knaresborough Together with the Other Middle English Pieces in British Museum MS Egerton 3143, EETS 228 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953). The Middle English text is hereafter referred to as the Life. Here as elsewhere the author of the Life is likely drawing from the Latin life in Egerton 3143 or a similar exemplar. Though not the case throughout the Middle English text, these lines render the Latin nearly word-for-word (ll.87-96).
monastery at Newminster, which he leaves after only four months to return to some of his close relations.⁴ He later discovers a cave at Knaresborough—“Þan Robertt ranne hys saule to saue / And in a roche closed him in caue” (ll.167-8)—yet here he grows unsatisfied, leaving one cave for another, a chapel dedicated to St. Hilde.⁵

Later he again enters a monastery, the Benedictine house at Hedlay, which he again suddenly leaves.⁶ He also upsets a certain William of Stuteville, the lord upon whose property (and without whose permission) he settles. In an attempt to force Robert off his lands William calls him a “ypocrytte,”⁷ a label he may also have earned at the monasteries Robert enters and then flees. Towards the end of his life he becomes a contemplative and is variously engaged in caring for the poor; he is also the object of continuous persecution by thieves and demons. After acquiring a companion named Yve, Robert moves into a more prophetic phase, predicting a friend’s death and opposing attempts by the Cistercians at Fountains to acquire his body after he dies. Just before dying he enjoins the monks not to appropriate his body, but to let him lie at that place where he gives up the ghost: “I wyll be doluen wharso I deghe; / Beried my body þare...”

⁵ If measured by his change of residences, this instability in the *Life* finds Robert in his eremitic phase in at three different chapels, a cave, “Spofford towne,” and at least once somewhere on the property of William of Stuteville (illustrated by the following lines: 1.178, 1.201, 1.240, 1.371, 1.385, 1.509). He also made frequent journeys to York (l.561), perhaps simply as an ascetic exercise to induce his feet to bleed. As Bazire notes, however, it is not clear whether Robert found another cave or simply reinterpreted his first cave more strictly as an enclosure (“closed”). The fact of his several residences leaves open either reading for this line. It is also possible that the chapel of St. Hilde was identical with the cave at Knaresborough. All the same, his physical mobility makes a multiplicity of residences seem more characteristic of him.
⁶ Since Hedlay was a Benedictine monastery, the author’s remark that the monks gave him a “coulle of whytt” is misleading and seems rather to describe his experience at Newminster. Cf. Bazire’s note to l.222.
⁷ Harley 3775 uses the word “simulator.” William is for the moment justified for, whatever *reputation* Robert may have for holiness, his actions make him appear no different than the lawless “thieves” that William has presumably had to worry about prior to Robert’s arrival on his property.
sall ytt be” (ll.871-2). Robert emerges from the few surviving vitae as a figure almost obsessively unresponsive to all types of power and authority external to himself.

Although the narrative twists and turns of Robert’s career—his transition from layman, to Cistercian cenobite, back to layman, then to cave-, then chapel-dwelling hermit, back to cenobite, etc.—stand opposed to coenobitic notions of stability, his stability of mind and body is nonetheless doggedly emphasized throughout the Life. Moral superlatives that reconcile his instability with the doctrines and language of the coenobium describe his youth as a “meke” boy who already then “rewled” himself well, even while it consistently remains unclear at what points Robert considered himself a layperson who simply lived well, a monk of some sort, or even a hermit.

How was it possible to insist that Robert was a stable-minded “hermit” in the same text that records such an unstable life? For one, monastic communities—like the Cistercians at Fountains—loved a dead hermit, a hermit who finally allowed the hagiographer to reform him textually and retrospectively, to represent his life as governed, from start to finish, by a single monastic intent (propositum) together with his firm desire for obedience, stability, poverty, and so on. As the new monastic orders developed around hermits from the eleventh century onwards, hagiographical narratives provided a means for reconciling hermit-patrons with the new monastic model. On the Continent such solitaries as John Bonus (d. 1249) and William of Malavalle (d. 1157)⁸

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were “textually” reformed in this way. Robert, who was not officially canonized, was culted by the community of Holy Trinity which recorded the Latin and English texts—lives, prayers and poetry from MS Egerton 3143—examined below, including one Latin verse life (De nobilitate vite Sancti Roberti confessoris), a ME verse life (De vita et conversacione Sancti Roberti), and two Latin prose lives, one of which survives as a fragment. The Latin prose Vita in MS Egerton 3143 borrows liberally from the Vita of St. Norbert, the founder of Prémontré, showing that Robert was remembered by the monks at Holy Trinity much like others were by the new monastic communities: Grandmont’s Stephen, Prémontré’s Norbert, Gaucher of Aureil, Giraud de Sales and others. The final event of Robert’s life, the appropriation of his body—a victory denied to the Cistercian and Benedictine monasteries at Newminster and Hedlay which sought to

9 See Bazire, intro. and the De nobilitate vite, Appendix C, (37, 114). No extant source indicates that he was canonized. See the first few lines of the Middle English verse Life, the De vita et conversacione; Bazire, 42-4. The Chronicon de Lanercost, ed. Joseph Stevenson (Edinburgh: Bannatyne, 1839), provides the date of Robert’s death (27).

10 The last two are found in Appendices A and B (Bazire, 213ff.). The second of the two Latin prose lives is found in British Museum MS Harley 3775. The documents of course became part of the daily office of the community that culted Robert, but exactly how much time elapsed between his death and the development of his liturgical cult is unclear. The house of Holy Trinity at Knaresborough was a functioning priory by 1255, predating the manuscript, including its narrative of the order’s founding in England. See her Introduction where Bazire dates the manuscript’s contents to the second half of the fourteenth century, or the first half of the fifteenth (15-20). The poem De initio creationis ordinis sancte trinitatis begins at l.1011 (72). Interestingly, the texts in Egerton closely link the Trinitarian cell with Robert, its “patrone,” though the foundation narrative specifically dissociates him from the order’s founding. Instead, two later hermits, with papal permission, developed the eremitic establishment into a coenobium; Life, ll.1081ff.

11 Norbert of Xanten’s Vita, BHL 6249, was not recognized by Bazire as one of the author’s sources. It should be noted that the passages below which derive from Norbert’s Vita do not exhaust the extent of our author’s borrowing.

absorb Robert into their company—is replicated textually as the Trinitarian *vitae* reshape and displace an eremitic life through a coenobitic narrative and its lexica.\(^\text{13}\)

Yet, as the course of his life shows, at many points the hagiographies on Robert fail—and fail exquisitely—to reform his life in this way. For example, Robert slights both the king and a local lord (William of Stuteville); but he also has a persistent contempt for local monastic houses. If the mutual peace and cooperation that underlies the great monastic virtues of obedience and charity held any interest for those venerating his memory, the monks at Holy Trinity had certainly chosen the wrong hermit. The *Life* insists that Robert’s principal motivations were socially caritative—

> How Sayntt Robertt rewled hys lyffe;  
> To begge an brynge pore men of baile,  
> Pis was hys purpose principale. (*Life*, ll.294-6)

—but integrates into its memory of Robert how he forgot to ask King John, who had come to visit him, to provide alms for his poor neighbors. He is scolded for this by a companion, but the awkwardness towards authority and his so-called primary purpose are plain enough. Equally unappealing to a coenobitic tradition are his many lapses in judgment. How exactly does it seem worth venerating, let alone imitating, this hermit?

If according to the poverty-conscious Trinitarian text Robert wished to “brynge pore men of baile,” such observations are in fact instances of coenobitic re-writing that nonetheless fails to disguise how unappealing Robert was as an exemplum of monastic virtue.

\(^{13}\) As with the two greatest early English hermits Cuthbert and Guthlac before him, since the memory of Robert was produced by a monastic imagination of living *regulariter*, he marks the inescapable link between a hermit and his hagiography’s commitment to the monastic politics of what is imagined to be the tradition-approved conduct. For a sense of this interaction between community and solitude within hagiographical narratives, and of the its polemical stakes see Christopher A. Jones “Envisioning the *Cenobium* in the Old English *Guthlac A*,” *Mediaeval Studies* 57 (1995): 259ff.
The challenge of understanding his motives and desires makes Robert, much more so than other twelfth- and thirteenth-century solitaries, an interesting case-study for eremitic and coenobitic traditions, and their interactions. His repeated acts of self-enclosure imply a negotiation between monastic stability and eremitic independence. Exemplary from a lay perspective perhaps, he was condemned by his monastic brothers as unstable, and indeed would remain extremely protean long into his eremitic life. Despite the textual reconstruction of his life in coenobitic terms, these same texts foreclose the possibility of seeing him either as a “monastic,” “lay” or “eremitic” subject.

The hagiographies of Continental hermits celebrated eremitic death in more than one sense. The dead hermit no longer lived out an ascetic life that challenged the coenobitic notions of continuity and stability, thus creating a discursive opening for the monastic community to write those notions onto the eremitic body (or physically appropriate that body). But our narratives about Robert often omit his personal motivations along with his sense of how a monastic subject understands his committed profession. In coenobitic terms, his textual resurrection seems as aimless as his life had been—all the more so since his life is that monastic text. A life that ignored monastic tradition and was marked by disunities and lacunae thus becomes a self-conscious narrative written by the brothers at Holy Trinity. Through Robert’s recurrent misrule and even extreme antagonism to the monastic community coenobitic textuality embarks upon a self-critique. Since they record his misrule, the hagiographies’ obsession with death is less an instrument of monastic discursive authority; it becomes an opportunity to mark an “end” of a different sort—the end of coenobitic authority over the hermit.
This ending is inextricably bound with the course of the hagiographical narrative, in particular with its vagrant beginnings. What becomes transparent in his *vitae* is the hermit as a textual construction, the *reconstruction* of a coenobitic community that must stabilize its present by inserting a set of ascetic motivations into an otherwise devastatingly un-eremitic past. The inescapable lens of coenobitic monasticism through which hermits’ lives are refracted required a narrative whose textual transitions from error to monastic virtue depended on the definable motives of a monastic subject. Robert’s physical instability and recurrently shifting identities—layman, cenobite, hermit—resists the reconstructions by our hagiographers of his motives. By their very function as linear narratives of a non-linear, conflicted and incoherent ascetic *propositum*, the hagiographies of Holy Trinity confess the inadequacies of a retrospectively constructed hermit’s life. Our authors invite speculation on the identities and motivations of a historical Robert, and do so by indicating the constructedness of narrative itself, the failures of a retrospectively constituted “hermit.” Robert was never *exactly* what the present study must, as a matter of convenience, be content to call him. And we will see below, his beginnings were rhetorically disastrous, so much so that the narratives that attach to his life and construct a hermit of inevitable sanctity cannot conceal the fact that his concluded and “perfected” living as a hermit was as “faulty” as were his beginnings.

“Als solitary dose day and houre”: Robert’s Beginnings

This analysis of Robert’s life as monastic tradition and exemplarity addresses both those faulty beginnings and his “flight” or movement from one physical location and
social/monastic identity to another. Before its narrative proper, the *Life* insists that Robert behaved “als solitary dose day and houre” (l.24). The indeterminate resonance of the phrase “as a solitary” is doubly appropriate for a life whose volatility and variability recalled the solitaries of the Egyptian desert tradition as well as the incompleteness that that tradition, as a beginning, represents. What did it mean for Robert to persist in the ascetic life despite the personal error, uncertainty, misjudgment and repeated behavioral shortcomings—his “trispas” (l.71)—that characterized his beginnings? It is less important that Robert is recognized as a holy hermit despite a few mistakes than that he achieves this end despite an apparent and persistent misdirection that stood at odds with the traditional meaning of the *propositum*—a stable desire for monastic perfection. As we have seen, unstable beginnings are precisely what force a coenobitic tradition to conceal the multiplicity of forms that an individual’s desire for perfection might take. Robert’s “trispas” consists both of an uncertain and unstable beginning and this beginning’s capacity to forestall the predetermined (stable, obedient, silent, abstinent, etc.) “death” that served the coenobium. It is not obvious from his *vitae* that Robert examined his own designs with an eye to monastic excellence traditionally construed.

The key term in the *Life*, Robert’s “trispas,” records the rupture between himself and monastic tradition. Still more, although “trispas” bespeaks a kind of rupture, the term also evokes the continuities between Robert and the Desert Fathers who figured as great images of an incipient, inchoate, unreformed monasticism. As we will see, the monastic experiments and *pericula* in the Egyptian desert are revisited by Robert’s hagiographers. Since Robert’s life both recalled the Desert Fathers literature even while
he was also officially once a Cistercian monk, it is helpful consider an observation made by Benedicta Ward on Cistercian appropriations of Egyptians to support a very different twelfth-century monasticism. The early Cistercians’ use of the Desert Fathers to narrate monastic tradition and the place of hermits within that tradition is particularly relevant to Robert. As Ward points out, “the phrase *vir eximiae sanitatis, nobilis quidem genere sed morum nobilior fuit* occurs again and again in descriptions of the early Cistercians [and yet] could never have been used of Macarius the smuggler, Moses the highwayman, or Pachomius, Antony or Amoun.”

Robert himself would leave the “security” of the Cistercian house at Newminster to lead an ascetic career in a cave, taming wild animals and accompanied by men whose poverty had driven to adopt a life as thieves.

An analysis of Robert requires us to see that the tensions Ward locates within Cistercian uses of monastic history were being replicated in twelfth-century England. His frequently shifting identities make Robert the site of an inquiry into the construction of monastic tradition, and more narrowly, how the memory of the Desert Fathers might help underscore the importance of this inquiry.

The fact that the author of the *Life* was so committed to eliding that image of the Egyptian desert with his order’s own conception of poverty within a thief-ridden landscape further underscores the tensions and interactions between traditions and the

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14 Ward “The Desert Myth,” in *Signs and Wonders* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1992), 188. Robert obviously continues a long eremitic tradition in the north of England, but that same tradition at times deliberately took its inspiration from the Desert Fathers. Cf. the *Vita* of the English hermit Bartholomaeus, whose dress is said to resemble that of the *antiquii patres* (*BHL* 1015, ch. 2, para. 12).

15 Like the area in which Robert lives “all places of the Thebaid are teeming with robbers” (*omnia illarum partium loca latronibus incursentur*), *Historia Monachorum, Epilogus*, *PL* 73, col. 460C. Cf. col. 421A, ch. 8; 436A, ch. 16. Or again, thieves attack Hilarion at one point (*Jerome’s Vita*, ch. 12), and make frequent appearance in the *Verba Seniorum* and other texts associated with the Egyptian tradition. Robert’s is but one of several medieval hermit’s lives that exploits the motif of associating with thieves, or suffering martyrdom at their hands.
narratives that they try to tell. The proximity both of Robert and of the several figures in the Egyptian tradition to “trispas” is central to an appreciation of how he relates to monastic narratives about tradition. While it is difficult to find in Robert’s eremitic career consistent details about daily behaviors (i.e. diet\textsuperscript{16}, dress\textsuperscript{17}, preaching,\textsuperscript{18} or the regularity of his devotions) that might help qualify his \textit{conversatio}, he is still represented as an exemplary cave-dwelling ascetic in the tradition of Antony, and for no other reason than that this tradition helps create a coherent narrative wherein the ambiguities of his status “als solitary” might be erased. Such ambiguities, however, tenaciously remain and underscore the volatility of identity, tradition and hagiographical narrative.

The interaction between his own eremitic subjectivity and the tradition(s) that either did or did not sanction his particular understanding of ascetic perfection runs tacitly throughout his life and is indeed constitutive of that life, however ignorant Robert personally may have been about the traditions into which he entered. Whatever the nature of such interactions, they registered significant changes to his mental condition, liturgical life and physical behaviors. As a consequence, we find highly variant models of exemplarity interacting and critiquing each other in ways that both Robert’s hagiographers and Cistercian neighbors sought to minimize. The life of a single monk, whether led in the coenobium or in solitude, may be thought to have the sort of internal

\textsuperscript{16} The information in the \textit{Life} on Robert’s dietary arrangements is unclear. For the poor and “theffys” that he first summons to him he acquires “fode of fysshe and flesshe” (\textit{Life}, l.248). Though Robert may also have eaten fish and meat (for he later pleas successfully to secular magnates for both), the author says that he is uncertain whether Robert indeed included them in his diet: “Fisshe or flesshe whedir he toke / Fynd I nathing in my boke.” However, Egerton’s Latin prose \textit{Vita} and that in Harley 3775 (edited in the same volume) both tell us that Robert refused meat.

\textsuperscript{17} We hear of no clothing such as a hairshirt (\textit{cilicium}) or hauberk (\textit{lorica}) that, beyond illustrating how successfully he had conquered the flesh, would describe what attire he felt suited a hermit.

\textsuperscript{18} On preaching see the \textit{Life}, ll.390-4.
coherence and inevitable trajectory that is often imagined to be constitutive of a single narrative. But it is not to sacrifice completely the notion of monastic exemplarity to note that Robert was as much entering a monastic tradition as he was creating it. As already noted, given his tempestuous beginnings, the success of his monastic venture was by no means predictable. To read Robert’s life as a series of justifications for his life’s end (his death) redeploy a rigid approach to monastic prescriptions, even while the contingencies of his daily living reflect an individuated, heuristic approach to monastic perfection.

In my reading of Robert’s life as a whole, the rhetoric of spiritual error, “trispas,” and the need for reform show how a textual and narrative model of eremitic excellence can critique itself, its hermit and tradition. In exploring the interaction between rival conceptions of monastic exemplarity this study asks to what extent Robert’s possible justifications for undertaking monastic perfection inform and complicate the justifications for recording such a seemingly unexemplary life. Monastic tradition remains a viable category only because the forms of living for which it argues not only can, but should be imitated and integrated into its tradition. In the case of Robert the search for tradition is precisely that which threatens to dissolve and overthrow those sought-after justifications.

Reform Reformulated: Coenobitic Monk and Apostate

Prior to considering the Life’s action proper we should emphasize once more that the text does not specify why and when Robert conceived a desire to pursue spiritual matters, and to continually re-conceive of himself as a priest, deacon, Cistercian brother, and then as a hermit. To that extent it is unclear how he understands his obligations in
pursuing monastic excellence, and there is little way of knowing that he even sees himself under any such obligations whatsoever. Traditionally, all changes by the “monk” as just described were thought justifiable only with reference a certain set of ideals (stability, prayer, etc.). The self-authorizing tendencies in Robert not only do away with a sequence of justifications made to fit these ideals; they begin also to disassociate him from that conceptual framework particular to monasticism.

His initial experiences in the coenobium ask us to reconcile the praise he receives in one version for his “perfect living” (perfectissimam conversacionem) while at Newminster, with the observation in another vita that the monks of the same monastery despised his “better life” and disparaged his “foreign perfection” (aliene perfectioni).\(^{19}\) In each text our hermit quite visibly stands out, but the difference in tone from one life to another is arresting. He may be readily noticed by his Cistercian brothers, but according to the hagiographies, there is no single consensus regarding the quality of his difference.

“Having heard these salutary injunctions, Robert was accepted by the abbot and brothers of that monastery. Then, seeing his most perfect living and the miracles that the Lord deigned to display through him, the abbot cried, ‘O brothers, look how the birds of the sky obey him, and how Robert subdues his flesh, rejecting all the world’s pleasures.’”\(^{20}\)

We know that Robert eventually flees the monastery. So in Harley 3775 observations about his perfection come right alongside of claims made by the monks that Robert was “apostate” and subject to flight (fugitivum), and that in addition to his different attire he

\(^{19}\) The two Latin lives at issue are found in Harley 3775 and Egerton. See note above. While I here translate the term aliene as “foreign,” I am aware that it might be rendered less polemically as simply “other.” However, at stake is the deeper question of monastic perfection that frustrates both our author and Robert’s communities.

\(^{20}\) Egerton, 2.9-14.
was in external respects quite ill-conformed to the house at Newminster. Since it is vividly clear that his departure owed much to his different manner of living while at Newminster, the alternative suggestion in Egerton that Robert learned the “spiritual rules and institutes of the saints” (regulas spirituales et sanctorum sancciones) provides us with our first hint that two different conceptions of perfection may be at issue, and that a wilderness-bound monk may indeed be the bearer of a “foreign” perfection.

While both versions underscore Robert’s alterity when at Newminster, we find that the uniqueness construed by a hagiographer as positive was for a community accustomed to a specific rule of living Robert’s intransigence and resistance to patterned, regular conduct. In short, though he was certainly taught the monastery’s “regulas,” he would not successfully imitate them. Or again, when much later he leaves Hedlay it is in part at the instigation of its monks who exclaim, “It is such a burden for us to see a man so singular [singularis], because he lives so contrary to our works [operibus] and in all matters of clothing and food he is completely unlike us.” Whether the Latin term opus here refers to the liturgy at Hedlay or Robert’s aversion to manual labor really makes little difference, for the point is clear. If his “perfection” rested in his practices, it is still

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21 Harley, 3.4-5: “quorum erat studium detestandum meliorem vitam.”
22 Such tensions as implied by the term “foreign perfection” developed partly from the common interest by Cistercian houses in acquiring hermits into their ranks. Henrietta Leyser’s account of this trend gives a sense of what this pattern meant for eremitism more broadly; Hermit, 87ff. Cistercian self-imagining (e.g., in the Exordium Magnum) presents a similar picture as do the quasi-Cistercian hermits Bartholomew and Godric of Finchale. See Constance Berman, The Cistercian Evolution (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 99; and Newman, Boundaries of Charity (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 123. For other such examples, and for England, see esp. Knowles, Monastic Order, 159ff.; Tudor, “Durham Priory and its Hermits,” 70; Burton, Monastic Order in Yorkshire, 23ff. and 98ff..
23 Harley, 5.59-61: “Gravis est nobis ad videndum homo iste singularis, quia contraries est operibus nostris et nobis in habitu et victu omnino dissimilis.”
attended by his failure to conceive of a form of regular conduct recognizable as such by
the same monastic tradition with which he so identified.

At stake is the work of defining the relationship between Robert’s “perfection”
and the behavior and desires which the coenobium could sanction. Beyond this remains
the question of how to construct his memory: by appeal to what notions of exemplarity is
Robert either an exemplary monk or one that tends toward recalcitrance? The Life offers
a moment just slightly prior to his stay at Newminster that helps illustrate how the
language used to describe monastic routines depends on the authorial desire to promote
one version, or reading, of regularity over another. The language used to describe Robert
required both a vocabulary of regulation and a transparent ideological control supported
by coenobitic readings of his life.

The contestability of monastic vocabulary is illustrated by an initial description of
Robert’s ascetic practices in the Life that is followed only a few dozen lines later by
another such description rendered in language strikingly similar to that of the first
passage. The difference is that while the second passage characterizes his behavior
during his residence at Newminster, the first described his manner of living prior to
taking orders as sub-deacon and even when still a youth. The resemblance in his
behavior during two ostensibly very different stages in his religious maturity suggests
that Robert did not alter his practices across time. Still more, these two passages conflate
his early career into a single, temporally static portrait of physical and spiritual discipline,
thus essentially removing the purpose behind his entrance into Newminster, namely the
adoption of a rule of living. At Newminster he
Haunt and hoge hegyhe halynesse,  
Ferently fretand hys fleshe,  
In praers bath and in pennaunce  
Abydand, and in perseueraunce;  (Life, ll.115-8)

even if prior to this he had already

[…] dressed hym wyth deuocioune,  
Hauntand hynmpne and orysoune,  
Vsand abstinence ay fere,  
Fretand hys fleshe wyth fastyngys sere.  (Life, ll.67-70)

The verbal echoes are unmistakable. Both passages simultaneously describe Robert’s liturgical routine and physical disciplines. The observations imply much continuity between two temporally separate, but devotionally identical, states of self-governance. When thus placed alongside each other, these passages from the *Life* put two forms of Robert’s discipline in such relation that what would have appeared irregular living to the residents of Newminster was precisely the same sort of living that Robert adopted within the monastery. By thus obviating the regulatory ideology produced by the coenobium, Robert’s conduct undermines anew the notion of regular living that was produced by a community or group of communities. While the resemblance between his devotions at Newminster and his life prior to this point suggests a sense of coenobitic stability in Robert’s life, the link also implies that the authority to define and control eremitic discipline does not necessarily rest upon the power of the coenobium. The regularity imposed by a rule seems redundant in view of the virtues initially acquired *in deserto*.

Of course, to speak of a “desert” at this point requires reading his eremitism back into an early stage at which he may or may not have intended to live in ascetic solitude,

24 See Bazire’s reading, consistent with the points made here, of the slightly confusing sense in this passage (l.113n).
just as the author of the *Life* read his “hymne and orysoune” at Newmister retrospectively in order to sanctify Robert’s pre-monastic life of “trispas.” To the extent that the coenobium construes Robert’s entry into Newminster as *narrative progression* the *Life* calls attention to and detracts from such a reading. As a result, at this point in the narrative any understanding of Robert’s eremitic customs must betray its ideological commitments. For a reading of his rule must here imagine his later practices *in eremo* (prayers, acts of penance, etc.) as developed by the coenobium, or conversely, developed quite independent of coenobitic guidance. The text forces the recognition that Robert’s life might be variously narrated to conform with two ideologically separate and rival justifications of monastic authority. Moreover, the meaning of “praers” and “orysoune” will show that the vocabulary of the “ryghtwyse reule” (1.876) can function to limit the claims to authority by the same coenobitic institution that relies on such vocabulary for its cultural power. The use of regulatory language to gloss Robert’s *conversatio* forces those same terms into a dialogue between different forms of monastic power, authority and the grounds for their justification.

Let us return, then, to the narrative of Robert’s early monastic career and to the vocabulary used to constitute the “hermit.” The point made in Egerton’s Latin prose life that Robert frequented other monasteries prior to his brief period at Newminster is not reproduced in the *Life.*

25 As we have just seen, the generalized lexica of virtuous customs and learning (*in oracionibus ac in omnibus aliis sanctitatis studiis*) indeed appear in the *Life* in specific terms of regular discipline. Rather than conclude that he has adopted a self-sufficient *conversatio* even at this early stage, we must note that the *Life* has not yet

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mentioned his desire to enter upon a monastic career, let alone the specific life of a
hermit. It seems hardly appropriate to treat Robert as *heremita conversus*, and to elide
his moral excellence with the regular discipline which that designation implies. And yet,
this is precisely the conclusion to which the *Life* compels us: the text obviates, to an
astonishing degree, the work of supplementing the character of his discipline by further
discussion of his monastic associations and his other regular practices.

In the Latin, his visit to Newminster reads as part of a natural progression from
his earlier visits to monasteries, thereby highlighting the contrast in the *Life* between his
life prior to and during his four months at Newminster. If “ay wyth resone he rewled
hym ryght” (l.87) and “yemed hys yeres well in hys youth by clargy,” (l.83) details not at
home in the Latin’s more strongly coenobitic imagination, then his later residence in a
monastery seems more redundant than the necessary and official preparation that it is in
the Latin. Further, after considering Robert’s “perfectissima conversatio,” the abbot of
Newminster not only declares him an exemplar for the community, but suggests that just
as the community maintains obedience towards its rule and abbot, so too do birds obey
(\textit{obediunt}) Robert.\footnote{\textit{Egerton}, 2.13.} Insofar as Egerton’s Robert resembles an abbot, albeit of birds, he is
being made as much an exemplar for a specific community as for coenobitic monasticism
as such. What these texts dispute is the precise degree to which coenobitic and controlled
regulatory preparation is necessary for Robert’s eremitic future.

The deeper problem with his flight from Newminster (and later from Hedlay),
even though undertaken in search of the wilderness, is that such conduct exhibits an
instability that for the coenobium signaled an uncommitted desire for perfection, rather
than an inquiry into what form those desires should take. If one version indicates that Robert initially visited several monasteries (though that is not necessarily praiseworthy conduct), his return to his “frendys” after four months at Newminster gives the appearance that he was not committed to the monastic way of life, that he was indeed apostata. An instructive comparison is afforded by the life of Antony who, we are told explicitly, did not return to his secular relations despite obvious motivations to do so.\footnote{Vita Antonii, BHL 609, ch. 3: “Tali ibidem institutus exordio, cum per dies singulos ita animum roboraret, ut nec opum paternarum, nec suorum meminisset affinium, omne etiam desiderium et sollicitudinem erga id quod coeperat exerceret.”}

The passage in the Life reads almost as though deliberately recalling, but turning on its head, that particular detail of Antony’s behavior.

> And than his man, myldest of mode,  
> To Yorke again full myldly yode,  
> To hys frenshepe and hys frendys,  
> Bott lytell while wyth thaym he lendys. (Life, ll.127-30)

In their contemporary literature Cistercians knew how common fugitives and apostates like Robert were.\footnote{For discussion of twelfth- and thirteenth-century English Cistercian houses and their fugitives see Megan Cassidy-Welch, Monastic Spaces and their Meanings: Thirteenth-Century English Cistercian Monasteries (Turnhout: Brepols, 2001), esp. 195ff. See also her article “Incarceration and Liberation: Prisons in the Cistercian Monastery,” Viator 32 (2001): 23-42. It should be noted that whether Robert was a monk or merely a lay brother, though not directly stated in our sources, is important. However, the descriptions in Egerton and Harley indicate that Robert did indeed make a formal profession at Newminster as a monk.}

When Bartholomew informs his prior of his wish to relocate as a solitary to Farne, he speaks to Cistercian concerns over the sanctity of their monastic space.\footnote{For a sense of how Cistercian space was thus read see Cassidy-Welch, Monastic Spaces, 47ff. Vita, BHL 1015, ch. 1.9. However, Martha G. Newman sees “a continuous tension between the ideal of withdrawal and the monks’ social involvement,” a tension she pursues throughout her study; Boundaries of Charity, 5.}

Since Bartholomew has not yet lived a year within the abbey, and thus may not be prepared for the wilderness, he is asked to reconsider his intent upon anachoresis.\footnote{As in Benedict, Regula, ch. 1 [CSEL 18]: “non conversationis fervore novicio.” Likewise, Grimlaic had advised at least a year, so that the prospective hermit’s voluntas vel stabilitas could be adequately tested; Regula Solitariorum, ch. 15.}
It is worth underscoring that the Latin verse life—*De nobilitate vite Sancti Roberti confessoris*—gives an account of his four months at Newminster that differs considerably from the above accounts of Robert’s early coenobitic period. From the above passages his “foreign” perfection highlights both that Robert could not imitate monastic customs, but also (and quite inconsistent with the first point) that he left Newminster precisely because he became exemplary for the community, rather than they for him. It is important to consider whose version of monastic exemplarity can claim greater legitimacy, but the radically condensed account in the *De nobilitate vite* severely limits both the nature of this tension and its ideological stakes.

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Approbavit hic beatus
Meros mores monachatus,
Quibus fuit informatus
Sequi solitaria.  (Stanza 19)
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Here the novice is unacquainted with the community’s “meros mores,” let alone an asceticism that the community would want to imitate (cf. “all meruailed off hys modynesse”). No fellow brothers concede to Robert the spiritual authority he has in Egerton or the *Life*. A comparison between the Latin verses and these other two versions shows a set of two different levels of facility with the regular life: in the former he is more at home in the novitiate than is the abbot-like Robert in Egerton’s prose *Vita*. This difference importantly implies multiple ways of relating to regular discipline. If the *De nobilitate vite* says nothing specific to erase the suspicion that he left the monastery in “conversationis fervore novicio,” its point that Robert learned to follow monastic customs seems designed to refer us to what the *Rule* prescribes for the pre-eremitical life.
It is the *Life* which proves most irregular in this respect when, as noted above, it creates a strong sense of continuity between the form of his discipline prior to and subsequent of his visit to Newminster. That is, the very purpose of a probationary period stipulated by the *Rule* is lost on the *Life*, whereas this is not the case in the *Vita* or even the Latin verse life. The three versions encourage as many perspectives on the question of preparation for an eremitic career addressed by the *Rule*. As will become clear, Robert’s later eremitic period and his first temptations while living alongside a companion hermit have everything to do with the *Rule*’s stipulating the probationary period: his later panic at the temptations of the devil would, to the mind of the coenobium, only further justify the warning that one should not be allowed to expose himself to such harsh temptations prior to an extensive training in the coenobium. On this score, these texts are so varied in their accounts that Robert’s eremitic discipline cannot be linked to any model in particular. These above texts reflect the impulse to negotiate how a regulatory ideology (as manifested, for example, in the *Rule*) relates to those individuals who actually comprise the monastic tradition.

The ideology of stability and its argument that Robert is unfit for the wilderness are inextricably tied to his life as an alternative to coenobitic notions of monastic excellence. The above narratives distinguish themselves by the degree to which Robert’s behavior was justified by various arguments deeply incompatible with each other, arguments modeled in a dialogue between competing narratives. It is here that we return to the polemical stakes of naming the hermit’s perfection “foreign.” Insofar as the author of the Latin life in Harley implies that the essential quality to his perfection is its alterity,

31 Benedict, *Regula*, ch. 1 [CSEL 19]: “contra diabulum multorum solacio iam docti pugnare.”
the text *intentionally* estranges Robert’s life from that of his monastic neighbors. Moreover, in the course emphasizing Robert’s alterity our author had adduced the same language of misrule that presumably had been used against the hermit by the community he just left. Robert is granted immunity from those same external evaluations whose appeal to monastic tradition illegitimate Robert’s life, a life for an excellence that was not readily approved by his monastic family. Most importantly, given the widespread disagreements between the Latin and Middle English lives about a matter so critical as the nature of Robert’s goal and the justifications for his own behavior, it is as impossible for us as it was for his hagiographers to know the content of Robert’s *propositum*. That he pursued a desire, albeit incoherently articulated, for *some* type of heroic *anachoresis* is clear. Nonetheless, the content of this desire is absent from the texts, however intently they attempt to invest that life with the continuities of narrative and tradition.

**Flight and the *Propositum***

In discussing a monk’s flight from persecution the pseudo-Augustinian *Sermones ad fratres* addresses the complexities of identity for someone who does not formally hold to the life of a monk: “if you have sinned, bound as you are to the life of a monk, then be penitent as a monk—not as a layman, but as a monk.”32 As the next few lines in the sermon note, since it is the *propositum* that determines the significance of a monk’s subsequent behavior, the contest between lay and monastic identities is scarcely resolvable. As noted above, after departing from Newminster Robert first returns to his

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32 Ps-Augustine, *Sermones, Sermo 60*: “Si peccasti in vita monachi constitutus, esto poenitens quasi monachus: non quasi saecularis, sed quasi monachus.”
relations in secular society and as a result is called “apostate” by his former Cistercian
brothers. However, the questions of monastic identity raised by this behavior are
multiplied when Robert enters the cave at Knaresborough and finds a knight-hermit
living there already. I will first address the version offered by the Life, whose language
of companionship, at first, makes it difficult to maintain the distinction between the two
hermits that, as we will see, the Latin prose text insists upon.

The knight-hermit whom Robert finds in the cave calls him “my fair felawe.”
Immediately, a demonic temptation descends upon the knight and Robert. The author
uses language (“bath” and “tway”) that illustrates their common identity and purpose.

    Thare bath they wouned in wyldernes
    And haunted full hegh halynesse.
    Bot þe fend, þat ys oure fell enmy,
    To þir tway had great invy; (Life, ll.151-4)

As a consequence of this temptation, the lives of both hermits are changed, and while the
knight returns to the world and his secular occupations, Robert flees into another cave
presumably to escape the plight of spiritual weakness to which he apparently believes
himself just as susceptible as was the knight. This version of Robert’s first eremitic
experiment implies that his living approximates that of any other layperson no more
familiar with the imperatives of regular living than a knight. Interestingly, the Latin
verse life leaves out the account entirely. There it is as if such a period of spiritual trial
illustrating his preparedness for the rigors of eremitic living had never occurred. He
simply moves from his residence in Newminster immediately to the chapel of St. Hilde.  

However, given the history of Robert’s behavior what is clearly at stake here is the

33 Bazire, Appendix C, stanza 20.
possibility of certainty regarding one’s own *propositum*. For the *Vita* in Egerton, the knight is very much the foil that allows our author to underscore the fact that, however parallel their lives in the cave, only Robert’s strange conduct and residence there in the wilderness can be explained and defended by a strictly monastic framework.

Here it helps, once again, to recall contemporary and ancient discussions of physical instability. At one point, the *Vita* in Harley observes of the knight-hermit that he returned to his wife and children because “sedere solitarius et tacere nondum didicerat.”

The “sit and keep silent” motif in the literature on the Desert Fathers is unmistakable, as is its verbal balance (“sedere…tacere…”). And in case we have missed the irony of this hermit’s flight from the desert, the author uses the term (“fugam”), a verb that describes the usually positive ascetic behavior of seeking ever more remote desert recesses.

Presumably Robert is stable, but not according to Ives of Chartres who, in his famous letter on the problem of eremitic self-governance, addresses specifically the matter of physical instability. If the ends of monastic behavior can be justified by flight, then it is essential, he notes, to maintain the difference between fleeing from vice and fleeing merely from a location. And yet Ives’ respondent will end his arguments with a quotation from Cassian that Ives had himself used and wished, no doubt, to see used in a way consistent with his own argument. There a certain Joseph had insisted that “he remains more faithful to his profession who betakes himself to that place where he is

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34 Harley 5, 2: “he had not yet learned to sit as a solitary and be silent.”
more able to fulfill God’s precepts.” 

Likewise, when one night Abbas Zenon left his cell to walk about the desert for three days and nights, the fact that he continuously prayed was far more relevant to his spiritual life than that he wandered aimlessly. His monastic “aim” had nothing to do with his feet, however prone they were to flight or stability. Just prior to this exemplum in the Verba Seniorum Abbas Joannes observes that the solitary should remain in his cell and flee by prayer (confugiat per orationem) those temptations he finds assaulting his mind. Here physical stability is an expedient, not an end in itself. That fact is illustrated by the tradition’s redeployment of the language of “flight” to pursue the question of how inner stability could be effected through prayer.

These matters return us to the uses of the term flight (fuga) and the observation in Harley that the residents of Robert’s monasteries had reason to think him “apostata” or “fugitivum.” While either term underscores Robert’s lacks the inner stabilitas mentis that ought to be cultivated prior to his flight into the wilderness, the text also implies that such terms may as much express a disfavor towards Robert’s rejection of the Cistercian ordo as it does the hermit’s unstable propositum. The text illustrates these conflicting justifications for the label “apostate” when it observes that while Robert’s critics seek public favor from their external appearance as Cistercians (“ab hominibus sibi vendicarent favorem”), Robert nonetheless is said to stand “supra firmam petram.” The supremely unstable approval by others is never a justifiable raison d’être for monasticism

36 Ibid., 103-4: “ille plenius professionis suae fidem servat, qui se ad locum illum contulerit, ubi plenius precepta dominica adimplerit, ubi promptius creditur, ubi facilius invenitur.” Cf. Eucherius, De laude eremi, 4: “Nec immerito ibi esse promptius creditur, ubi facilius invenitur.”
38 Ibid., 208.
39 So too the Sermones ad fratres argue that because God may be found everywhere, those in eremo should pray always and everywhere ut salvemini, Sermon 20: “Non est igitur locus in quo orare non debeat; quia Deus ubique est, ubique nos exaudire dignatur. Orate igitur semper, et in omni loco, ut salvemini.”
that the text suggests it has become for this group. But how can a fleeing Robert be said to stand upon a firm stone? Why does our text become so cynically indifferent to Robert’s flight as to insist that it is he, and not his accusers, that remains stable?

The answer has partly to do with the hermit-knight whose resemblance to Robert is really the central point of the comparison. In the late twelfth-century *Tractatus de Purgatorio Sanctorum Patricii* by the Cistercian abbot Henry of Sawtry one hermit resists the devices of the devil, while the other succumbs to them, forsaking his calling. Yet neither one seems to have lived in close contact with coenobitic houses, or made a vow of obedience to a superior.40 The hermit-knight frustrates the distinctions that the lives make between him and Robert. For as already noted, the *Life* is more comfortable with the pairing than are the Latin texts. Robert does not even stay in his cave after having fled to his family and friends; he will again move to another residence. His later visits to York where his “frenshipe and hys frendys” live indicate just how strangely disassociated from his actual life was the term “supra firmam petram.”

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Tyll on a tyme Robertt gan hy
Unto a widow þat wouned þareby.
‘Dam,’ he sayd, ‘to gyff me this day
off thi almose I the pray.’
Than sayd þat wyff, mody and myld,
‘Þe chapel I graunte þe of Sayntt Hylde. (Life, ll.173-8)
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The flight from Newminster and Hedlay, which was also an attempt to flee the *impediments* to perfection, only led him into another context where eremitic flight was

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still necessary, albeit through both prayer and physical movement. For Robert the exemplarity of those proscriptions against apostasy and instability were alone insufficient to discourage fleeing from the spiritual mediocrity (mediocris) of the Cistercians, even if that act put a yet spiritually naïve Robert in even greater danger. The flight to the desert and the flight through prayer show how those precepts for the body might be appropriated so as to eliminate competing readings of them. The idea of flight is of itself able to connote positive behavior that derives from exemplarily ascetic motivations.

The eremitic insistence on both the discourse of stability and of flight captures how an eremitic propositum requires a textual gloss that is appropriate to anachoresis. And of course such a gloss need not be consistent with the strictly defined precept. As concisely expressed by one of the Desert Fathers, “you will see that what you wish to flee goes before you.” This observation, while a means of justifying physical stability, is also a reminder to the solitary that concentrating on being stable in his propositum avoids misidentifying individual behaviors as a primary, rather than a mere secondary concern. The newly acquired locum in the desert is as much the false finis as the precept on physical stability. Both were mere means mistaken as ends. But the maxim also significantly reveals where control over the vocabulary of movement and stability is being (temporarily) located. That is, it is a question of submitting the doctrine of stability to an argument already in the hermit’s favor or disfavor, for that Desert Father was forced to recognize a competing notion of monastic excellence that was both incommensurable

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41 For the use of prayer as a version of, or metaphor for, physical flight one might look to the Gospels (e.g. Luc. 5:16). Cf. also Verba Seniorum, PL 73 col. 806C. Or again, reading the passage from Luke, Eucherius observes “atque ipse illic orando cum peteret, demonstravit ubi orare nos vellet, cum peteretur,” De laude eremi, 26.

42 Quoted in P. Rousseau, Ascetics, 49.
with his own, and yet compelling enough for some to warrant this precept on physical movement. For neither the one uttering this statement nor him on whose behalf it is made does mobility of itself represent the chief and primary concern.

When his flight from thieves is justified by the Gospel command “si vos persecuti fuerint in una civitate, fugite in aliam,” there is no reason that the justification cannot apply to his flight from the monastery at Hedlay. And while his persecution justifies his flight, it also helps define a vocabulary opposed to his way of life (“inobedientia,” “apostata,” “fugitivus,” “instabilis”) and articulate a justification for the ideology that attached to such vocabulary. The narrative of Robert’s life forms part of an examination of a vocabulary whose ambiguity is rather more a matter of competing ideologies than of any ambiguity inherent to the language itself.

Thus we come to the next complication posed by the doctrine of obedience. If the Life observes “howe byrddys and bestys to Robert bouse” when he was at Newminster, another major addition by the author significantly alters the stakes of obedience. We are told that Robert’s obedience to God more or less exhausts his sense of the specific forms of daily living to which he might be bound. That is, here the traditions that enjoined a subject’s obedience to a set of precepts contract around the “lawe” of God, and do so in a way that displaces the specific precepts that Robert was asked to learn during his residence in Hedley and Newminster.

Wyth the Haly Gast this man inspired
_Nathyng bott God in erth desyred._
Wythowten counsayll of his kynne,
Vnwettand all bath mare and mynne
_Bott God, patt wyssed hym by and thrugh,_
He kayred and com to Knaresburgh;
All thynge forsakand þat he saw,
Nathyng hym liked bott Goddys lawe. (Life, ll.130-8) [emphasis added]

The final lines are especially striking in their juxtaposition of God’s law and “all things,” for the contrast strongly implies that his monastic neighbors and their customs of discipline are among those items forsaken in favor of a “law” that lies beyond earthly authority. It is this law, rather than that of the monasteries he has recently left, that now has claim on his obedience. And as if to extend the distance between his regular life in the coenobium and his (highly irregular?) residence with a cave-dwelling knight immediately afterwards, the *Life* underscores how profoundly Robert and the knight identify with each other. From Egerton we learn of the knight only that he gave thanks to God for sending him such a pious roommate.

But when Robert was seen by a hermit and received with appropriate dignity, the latter said, “I give thanks to almighty God who has seen fit to send me a companion so disciplined and devoted.” Now a short time after this, when the hermit-knight, at the devil’s suggestion, returned to his wife and children—as a dog to his vomit—Robert remained alone, deprived of all human solace, where he wore away his flesh with great feats of abstinence.43

In representing Robert and the knight as highly dissimilar—insisting that the latter was nowhere near as spiritually excellent as Robert who recently and “spiritu sancto revelante” departed from Newminster—the Latin emphasizes his stability (both physical and internal) at an ideal moment. Yet it is precisely at this moment at which the *Life* which uses the resemblance between Robert and the hermit-knight to further underscore the distinction between “Goddys lawe” and the customs at Newminster or Hedlay.

Robert’s rejection of all things “bott Goddys lawe” implies the argument that, however its means are organized, eremitic life is inherently justifiable. We do indeed

43 Egerton, 3.5-11.
find in Robert the disciplined understanding that any single legislating structure (whether in a coenobitic context or elsewhere) may or may not encourage behavior by which he can more readily achieve the ultimate ends of ascetic living. This requires that all the practices captured by the regulatory vocabulary (prayers, vigils, silence, abstinence, etc.) are subject to a certain instability so long as “Goddys lawe” is able to justify that movement. Is the Life arguing that for Robert the search for perfection cannot contradict any set of precepts so long as it is justifiable as an interpretation of “Goddys lawe”?

Since his interpretation of his propositum immediately after leaving a coenobitic house is construed as a rejection of the exclusivity of monastic customs (“Nathyng hym liked bott Goddys lawe”), it makes sense that he submits all objects of obedience to the single goal of perfection, reading the spiritual value of all such matters in light of his propositum. We are not directly told whether what is meant by “Goddys lawe” is the set of precepts and religious observances that Robert had just learned at Newminster, or alternatively, the final end to his propositum for the sake of which he had just refused the “lawe” of that monastery. But in either case, what constitutes “lawe” is for Robert to determine. It is from this perspective that both the authority of regulatory vocabulary as well as the justification of its uses are transferred to the hermit. So the Life makes it possible to evaluate and critique the discourse by which a broader monastic context and tradition decided what could be meant by “lawe” or a “ryghtwyse reule.”

If we take the hermit’s “foreign” perfection to mean that it is inappropriately unrecognizable, then that “perfection” is paradoxically divested of its authority. Foreignness should instead be read as emphasizing a sort of perfection of ascetic
independence. This notion of a “foreign perfection” is being polemically used to create the sense that those who malign the hermit’s alterity have thereby disqualified themselves as judges of a disciplina and of a tradition from which they have already ideologically removed themselves. Any appeal to stabilitas by the hermit’s detractors will simultaneously underscore the distance between the propositum (as under the hermit’s authority) and the precept, which the hermit has already made dependent on his own indeterminate and interminable reading of his own propositum. But this propositum will only be able to assert itself by remaining hidden from external examination.

Flight and the Contestability of Authority

A cave-dwelling hermit such as Robert may readily have recalled to the minds of his hagiographers the literature on the Desert Fathers. What this meant for the author of the Egerton prose Vita has much to do with how he read Robert alongside the frequent references in his source, St. Norbert’s Vita, to the exempla, institutes and virtues of the “sanctorum patrum.” Our author would reproduce his source’s observation that it is remarkable to find such a hermit (patre) living so excellently in “these modern times” (temporibus modernis), implying of course that the author is almost tempted to imagine Robert in a historically distant setting, and that a hermit of such ascetic excellence is indeed at home in that monastic past. And even the trope of the mountain residence (super montem positus) used in the same passage belongs as much to that literature as
does the author’s comment in the same chapter that it was through instruction by the Holy Spirit that Robert was able to withstand the visits to his cave by demons.\(^4^4\)

However, whereas his hagiographer uses such references to the desert hermits to support the authority of Norbert’s life, so too does he thereby enlist them in support of a narrative whose conclusion is marked by the new monastic (and coenobitic) foundation at Prémontré, its sister houses and the new customs instituted to legitimate the order.\(^4^5\) The author of Egerton’s *Vita*, by contrast, knew that Robert intended no such coenobitic development, had actually rejected associations with communal monasticism, and was in no way instrumental in establishing the later so-named Trinitarian cell at Knaresborough. Whatever rhetoric surfaces elsewhere in the manuscript in support of the later quasi-coenobitic development is not a result of Robert’s own initiatives. Instead, the contrast encouraged by our author’s use of Norbert’s life is between an eremitism of the ancient desert that is displaced by a modern monastic order, on the one hand, and on the other, one that avoids the centripetal forces of the coenobium by continuing the desert tradition as a tradition already legitimated and into which Robert has stepped.

Let us take, for example, the attempts made in the *Life* to justify Robert’s living. One such attempt comes in the sudden visit to his cave by Robert’s brother Walter.

‘Brother,’ he sayd, ‘me rewes sare
Pat thou beldes in thes *buskes bare*,
And specially in this *spelunke*
*In wyldernes als dyd a monke.*

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\(^{44}\) Egerton, 9.6-11: “Multa de tanto patre narrari possunt, sed tamen plurima pretermittuntur...Erat enim vera lucerna ardens satis temporibus modernis spectabilis, lumen non sub modio sed *super montem positum*, ut qui ingreduntur lumen veritatis pallam queant intueri.” Derived from *Vita S. Norberti*, ch. 33, para.74.

\(^{45}\) Most of this information is, of course, concentrated in the latter part of the *Vita* (after ch. 14) subsequent of Norbert’s having acquired his first companion Hugo.
Like William de Stuteville, Walter cannot reconcile Robert’s eremitism with the model of regular living provided by his wider monastic context. The significance of their interaction centers on Walter’s observation that Robert dwells “in wyldernes als dyd a monke.” The line combines a memory of the great desert-dwelling hermits with both Walter’s ambivalence towards such exemplary asceticism (“me rewes sare”) and his suggestion that Robert’s life, however modern, is strangely identical to that of the ancient hermits. Then, his brother’s impulse to associate Robert with some recognizable form of regular living leads to a series of speculations about how Robert ought to live. Implying a good deal of uncertainty about Robert’s conversatio, Walter imagines him in a confusing succession of locations: “in wyldernes,” “where þat þi liste ys best to be,” and “in couent, closter or company.” While Walter finally decides to have a chapel built for his brother, even that gesture implies continued misgivings about how Robert’s living could be justified to the monastic traditions from which he departs.

Moreover, though Walter has implied his disapproval of how Robert lives, this catalogue also illustrates the multiple different forms of monastic living that Robert might choose. The Vita even more vividly shows this tension, for it sets alongside Walter’s invitation that Robert live regularly (regulariter vivencium) the narrator’s observation that Robert remained constantissimus in propositio incepto: how could Robert further maximize the quality of his living (regulariter) if he is already eminently stable in his conversatio? In short, which conception of stability is more readily justifiable, and why?
For to recognize with Walter the resemblance between Robert’s life and that either of the Desert Fathers or of coenobitic monasticism is simultaneously to examine the grounds on which Robert’s life might claim or lose authority. But the text insists not only that we ask on what grounds is a change in Robert’s discipline advocated here, but further whether Robert has given his living a sort of discipline that is recognizable to others as such. Is his *conversatio* in need of supplementation by a specifiable rule of living, or not? And in support of whose authority would such a claim be made?

In the passage alluded to above and which derives from Norbert’s *Vita* Robert is characterized as insufficiently prepared for the wilderness when, one night, he is overcome by both the flesh and the devil during an attempt to complete his vigils. Unable to remain awake, Robert hears a demon berate him and, one suspects, tempt him to quit the desert and return to a monastery: “you have intended much [proposuisti], but to what end do you expect to come, if you cannot even keep your rule [proposito] one night?” Here the demon uses our hermit’s failure at one night of vigil to imply a failed *propositum* more generally. Still, these complaints conspire with those of Walter who wants to see Robert live “regulariter” and “sekerly.” Had Robert not intentionally avoided the coenobium and fled its confines twice, this passage may seem like an otherwise uninspired borrowing from Norbert’s hagiographer. The demon and Walter are desperately arguing on behalf of the coenobium the demerits, dangers and temptations of the desert, even while such temptations and assaults on his mental stability are precisely what had traditionally exemplified a true desert hermit. Thus, even if these assaults

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parody the discourse of stability, the temptations are as much a part of the desert as they are a justification for keeping the hermit within the community.

Perhaps Walter had been troubled by the unsubordinated authority presented by Robert’s imitation of the Desert Fathers and of the resultant element of inquiry and heuristic development that such a life acquired. *Stabilitas loci* had, of course, been a chief concern since monasticism’s inception. And when the coenobium identified the *propositum* with geographic stability, it was easy to consider wandering hermits as deplorably uncertain regarding their initial commitment. Hence the above observation that Robert is not living *regulariter*, even if *constantissimus in proposito*. Yet it was clearly the case that for many, including Robert, physical *instability* was precisely one of the better modes for reaffirming their *propositum* and expressing their refusal to yield to temptations. If *instabilitas* underscored a flagging resolution, yet so too did the hermit understand it as a means for remaining *constant* in his profession. Another moment in the *Life* that may have reminded its readers of the *Vitae Patrum* reads,

Roberd keped a ryghtwyse reule  
All tym þat he couth crepe or creule,  
In crage, in creues, or in caue,  
Sway sadde he was hys saule to saue.  
Fray sted to sted he stepped and stode  
Þar nay myscheffe merred hys mode; (Life, ll.876-82)

The lines suggest that Robert was able to keep a “righteous rule” *insofar* as was able to move about from one place to another, and not *despite the fact* that he did so. But the coenobium was more interested in keeping this alternative and competing hermeneutics on *stabilitas* firmly associated with a rhetoric of monastic weakness that could easily attach itself to the complementary notion that the wilderness was full of dangers
(pericula) too great to risk. If this tension could demonstrate the coenobium’s anxiety over the extent of its control, so too did it illustrate how central to the eremitic rule of the desert its own ideological sovereignty could be.

Since Robert, Norbert and others took their cues from the fleeing and persecuted figures of the Egyptian desert, we return to the stakes of Robert’s residence and flight from Newminster and Hedlay. Just as his monastic beginnings blurred the distinction between master and novice he returns us to those figures like Arsenius from the *Verba Seniorum* and their appeal to divine teaching and the simplicity of virtue it enjoins (“Fuge homines, et salvaberis”). The predicament caused in his case is illustrated by the view, concisely expressed in Jerome’s letter *Ad Rusticum*, that “no art [ars] is acquired without a master.” 47 Arsenius’ story offsets the attempts by Jerome and others to illegitimate it as a narrative about how monastic perfection may be realized. 48 For the primitive instruction to Arsenius to flee from human society as a precept for fleeing occasions for sin would seem, if not to obviate the coenobium, at least to challenge its claim to preeminence over anachoresis. On suspects that the view expressed by Jerome merely serves the interests of the authority of the coenobium rather than the interests of monastic excellence *per se*. At some points in the *vita*, Robert seems to have reduced his eremitic calling to that single notion of “flight,” and it is not difficult to see a connection between such behavior and the distance he deliberately keeps from the coenobium in specific.

With the legitimacy of the desert at stake, flight is not solely a matter of sin!

47 Jerome, *Ad Rusticum*, 125.15 [CSEL 133.10]: “Nulla ars absque magistro discitur.”
48 *Verba Seniorum*, *PL* 73.190. As is well known, the letter is offered to dissuade Jerome’s addressee from entering the solitary life prior to the coenobium. Of course, it should be mentioned that Jerome, who certainly knew of and discussed the lives of SS Paul and Antony, could write quite sympathetically about hermits. Cf. *Ad Eustochium*, 22.34 [CSEL 196.10-197.13].
Of course, the wilderness as place could function in the hermit’s favor, usually with the effect of further promoting eremitic authority. A passage from the life of St. Gerlac speaks directly both to Robert’s “angelic” life in a spelunke (speluncis etin cauernis terrae latitabant...vitam duceret angelicam) and the problem of authority bought on by this particular insistence on imitating the Desert Fathers. Like Robert, Gerlac is asked not to imitate the way of the “fathers” (patres praecendentes), but to submit himself in obedience to a monastic superior, in this case to the house at Mersen.49 Because Gerlac’s life does not conform to the customs of the moderns (modernorum consuetudini), it must be corrected, and this claim is made without any sense of the deep irony implicit in such a categorical rejection of tradition. But since the matter at hand really concerns coenobitic power, the narrative told by tradition and continued by Gerlac must be replaced by an alternative narrative that culminates with “modern” customs, thus removing the competition between a dominant and a “foreign” monasticism.

While Walter wishes to see Robert established in a monastery, the instability of his location and of his liturgical customs shows that such matters were not identical with Robert’s propositum, despite the fact that his resemblance to the desert hermits could encourage this conflation—as when Walter uses the term “sekerly.” For Cistercian polemic against fugitives and apostasy closed the distance between the propositum and one’s relationship with a particular order’s practices still further.50 One can wax quite legal-minded over the question of apostasy as Caesarius of Heisterbach does in his

49 Vita Gerlaci, BHL 3449, 7.18.
50 One is reminded of the circumstances that led to the foundation of Fountains Abbey. See Burton, Monastic Order, 291.
Dialogus Miraculorum. But as Cassidy-Welch shows, Stephen of Sawley’s Speculum Novitii offsets Caesarius’ arguments with a stronger focus on a monk’s clarity and unity of purpose than on legislated demands on his behavior. The difference between one’s stability in obedience to monastic regulation and stability in one’s propositum, though the two are related, illuminates such arguments made either in the Dialogus, the Speculum or by the Cistercian community that Robert abandoned.

Our problem centers on two competing readings of stability and flight that parallel the distinction between regulatory stability and the stable propositum. The Cistercian polemic against such figures as Robert depended, in large part, on a confusion or conflation of these two versions of stability. At the same time, Cistercian interest in the desert also manifested itself by a desire to integrate into a narrative about Cistercian monasticism itself that same Egyptian tradition exemplified by the desert hermits and by the strikingly parallel lives of Gerlac and Robert who also faced similar kinds of resistance when attempting to imitate that tradition. If the famous image of the “locus horridus et vastae solitudinis” used in the Dialogus Miraculorum merely hints at that tradition, the Exordium Magnum much more directly looks to that tradition at the outset of its account of the greatness of the Cistercian monasticism. The Exordium attempts to justify a certain narrative, and specifically its culmination with the Rule. More directly relevant to Robert’s experiences at Newminster, moreover, is the advice given in Stephen Sawley’s Speculum Novitii that novices acquiring their new Cistercian identity should

51 Heisterbach, Distinctio 1, ch. 15.
52 Cassidy-Welch, Monastic Spaces, 203ff.
53 Heisterbach, Distinctio 1, ch. 3.
54 It is therefore appropriate that the next two chapters are devoted to St. Benedict.
read the *Vitae Patrum* and Cassian’s writings.\(^{55}\) Indeed, if what the *Exordium* means by exempla “both recent and ancient,” is the literature on the Desert Fathers, then such was fairly common reading for novices.\(^{56}\) It is difficult to believe, then, that Robert could have avoided both the myth of the desert and the Cistercian readings of it. Overall a Robert who at the prompting of the Holy Spirit prematurely abandons his Cistercian community to seek out, of all places, a cave in which to continue his monastic *ascesis* is certainly most likely to have been inspired by that ancient tradition that so interested Cistercians. It is at least with reference to that tradition that *Life* asks us to synthesize his behavior, dwelling, demonic temptations, and communion with thieves and animals.

It is therefore plausible that Robert’s reading while a novice at Newminster offered him two different and competing ways of imagining how his monastic identity might be constructed: on the one hand, the narratives about the desert saints as told by Cistercians was made to serve a separate narrative that culminated with that particular order while, conversely, such reading may encourage in someone such as Robert a view of that desert as a tradition in itself is worth imitating, even in the face of a separate Cistercian narrative about monastic tradition and excellence. That is, what both Robert and his fellow monks at Newminster know of their monastic ancestors is the site at which they become committed to different understandings of how monastic excellence might be achieved and justified. For Grimlaic in his *Regula Solitiorum* the living of the Desert Fathers was still quite “inchoata,” but no less perfect on that score. Conversely, the


\(^{56}\) Heisterbach, *Distinctio 3*, ch. 20: “exemplis etiam, tam veteribus quam recentioribus, adversus vitia cautiore reddibus[...].” These exempla are noted as part of Achard’s instruction to novices. As such they address the problem of apostasy; the relevance to Robert’s circumstances should not be overlooked.
Cistercians who name Robert a fugitive and apostate would prefer to suppress the fact that he may actually be attempting traditional justifications for his behavior and his intent upon monastic excellence (*propositum*). As we will see, in the same way that apostasy can only be used for legitimating a coenobitic conception of stability, rather than an eremitic one, all elements of Robert’s life derive from the sort of authority that the Egyptian desert is permitted to impart to its inheritors. What is produced as a result is the continued erasure of the instability of both sorts of hermits—Robert and his Egyptian forbears. At lines 727-34 of the *Life* his success at resisting demonic temptations overshadows their earlier power to send him fleeing. The persistence of such temptations does not become an argument in favor of his detractors, nor an illustration that demonic distractions were signs of an imperfectly conceived *propositum*.

As I have argued, it is no mere literary adornment that our texts recall through Robert the Egyptian monasticism. It is necessary at this point to explore the implications of Walter’s comment that his brother would seem to resemble an ancient desert hermit, and set that observation alongside two additional measurements, one provided by Cassian and the other by the author(s) of our texts, to illustrate just how the memory of Egyptian eremitism functions in the hagiography on our hermit. And while that ancient model can only provide analogies to Robert’s eremitism, insofar as that tradition illustrated the contestability of beginnings, a workable understanding of Robert’s behavior will remain elusive without a sense of his resemblances with that tradition.

*Authority and Narrative: From Flight to Stability (and Back)*
For about a year Robert becomes the center of an economy of alms-giving, and one whereby the practice of charity at once stabilizes his life temporarily and leads him again to flee his cell when thieves have noticed that he gives to the poor.\(^57\) This period comes at ll.185-200 of the *Life*. Perhaps the model for this segment of his life is the Desert Father Theon who did *not* flee when visited by thieves one night and whose prayers fixed them to the entry of his cell so that eventually they might repent, be converted, and enter upon a reformed life.\(^58\) Interestingly, charity and flight are closely united in Robert, as are his temporary stability and his unwillingness to suffer excessively from thieves. The same is true of the incidents that follow: because many people come to visit him, Robert again flees, but this time out of a desire to avoid the feelings of vainglory welling up inside himself.

They caried fra countres to hym þanne
To honore hym als ay haly mane;
Þai rosed hym doand reuerence
And peirles prayed hym in presence.
Bott when that Robertt vndyrstode
Vaynglory þat ay es noght gode,
He purpost priuely forto passe
Away whar þat hys wounyng was. (*Life*, ll.207-14)

How does he know to avoid vainglory as a vice? It is immediately after this that he comes to the Benedictine house at Hedlay where, as noted above, he is accused of being too *singulare* and in turn (vaingloriously?) spurns the monks for what he takes to be their spiritual laxness. Vainglory is certainly a problem for the monk who has too

\(^{57}\) *Life*, ll.173-84. Egerton, 3.17-18: “ibidem Robertus fere per annum carm suam continua pena affligens solus remanebat.” Bazire’s observation that these “poralles” were guests rather than Robert’s permanent companions seems plausible despite the suggestion in the *Life* (“wyth hys poralles in prayer”) that his interactions with the poor were more than causal. Neither of the prose lives in Egerton and Harley indicates otherwise.

\(^{58}\) Rufinus, *Historia Monachorum*, ch. 6.
precipitously sought out solitude, so it is understandable that Robert has fallen into this
spiritual trap. But surely it is rather the monks of Hedlay and Newminster that his
hagiographers mean to accuse of vainglory? Even if our narrators insist on Robert’s
superiority in this respect, here it is nearly impossible to determine exactly who warrants
the accusation of spiritual weakness, the hermit or the cenobites.

The Life is attempting to slow down a vibration between justified and unjustified
conduct, and to use the assumptions about progress that are easily mapped onto a
narrative to generate a Robertus heremita beati conversationis. It is important, then, that
after some disagreements with the Benedictine monks at Hedlay, Robert again seeks out
the cell where he had often been visited by thieves. The move is narrated without any
remark about what his conflicting aims (stability or flight) or conflicting motives (about
which we can still only speculate). The exemplarity of the textual narrative is more
clearly at stake here; Robert’s intentions are made to fit the needs of his hagiographers.

Than Robertt rewed and sair repentt
And to Saynt Hylde chapel he wentt,
Wele leuer to dwell wyth theffys mekyll
Pan wyth felaghys fals and fekyll,
Better to beld wyth bestys wyld
Pan wyth merred men and vnmyld. (Life, ll.239-44)

What follows this attempt to formulate Robert’s motivations is a long passage (the
longest in the Life) concerning Robert’s alms-giving. In fact, the 50 lines or so that
constitute the poem’s explanation of his support for the local poor are added by our
author, for these details are not explored at such length in any of the Latin lives. As
already observed, one must conclude that the passage is a self-celebrating digression by
the Trinitarian order and of its interest in apostolic poverty. Scarcely surprising therefore
is the passage’s conclusion, which aligns Robert’s “purpose” with his assistance to “hys poralles.” The *Life* has heretofore offered no evidence justifying the claim that in keeping with his *propositum* Robert’s chief motivation lay in providing alms to the poor.

> How Sayntt Robertt rewled hys lyffe;  
> To begge an brynge pore men of baile,  
> Þis was hys purpose principale. (*Life*, ll.294-6)

If it was his “principal” design, Robert had indeed adopted a most circuitous means for expressing so single-minded and determined a purpose as is here attributed to him. At no point before or after this moment would it be at all obvious that Robert chiefly sought to disburden the poor. Our author’s need to synthesize Robert’s behavior with reference to a specifiable *propositum* reveals, by default, a textual narrative inadequately equipped to capture the motivations and justifications of a historical Robert.

I am suggesting that since his expulsion from Hedlay represents a narrative and moral dead-end, Robert’s supposed monastic maturity and alms-giving is inserted back into his life, concealing how impossible it remains to account for its vagrant purpose, its *propositum*. Without the stability implicit in a patron’s purpose, the narrative by which the coenobium at Holy Trinity justified its existence and reading of Robert would likewise be threatened. The artificial conclusions that the passage on his almsgiving provide are motivated by the fact that Robert did not represent to his successors an ascetic image fully compatible with an Egyptian or Trinitarian monasticism. Later a Robert preoccupied with contemplation will forget his material and socially charitative concerns to ask King John for alms to relieve his “poremen.” If that behavior reflects an underlying contemplative aim, this “purpose principale” was quite incompatible with a
Trinitarian ethic. As a matter of narrative and institutional necessity, then, the *Life* anticipates and starts to eliminate this tension by telescoping Robert’s *propositum*.

Our texts insist on a narrative and coenobitic unity at the expense of the behavioral and psychological independence of Robert’s career. The need on the part of Robert’s hagiographers to imagine his life in terms of a specific model works in tandem with their understanding of narrative as a series of potential justifications for that model’s vision of monastic excellence in general. The borrowing in Egerton’s prose *Vita* of details from Norbert of Xanten’s *Vita* shows that our hagiographer was invited to think of his own textual constructions, specifically those describing Robert’s acquisition and training of his companion Yve.

The coenobitic vocabulary of Norbert’s and Robert’s hagiographers claims pride of place in the Latin version, but not in the vernacular *Life*.\(^59\) We hear of Robert’s “many stories of the saints” perhaps because of what our author would have read in the preface to Norbert’s *Vita*, namely clear references to the *sanctorum virorum exempla* of the ancient monasticism.\(^60\) But quite apart from the reference to ancient saintly lives, the monastic vocabulary used in ch. 12 of the *Vita* sets itself up in competition with that controlled by the coenobitic houses discussed above. Yve does not spend his monastic novitiate with anyone besides another solitary (albeit a more senior one). This contrasts with the lives of Norbert and his trainee Hugo. And since neither Robert nor Yve finally seek out the coenobitic life, the vocabulary in our text cannot fully co-opt that eremitic

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\(^59\) Again, the *Vita* of St. Gerlac shows some relevance to Robert’s own life (*Vita*, 5.12).

\(^60\) *Vita Norberti*, *Prologus*, col. 1253B-C: “sanctorum virorum exempla; quorum vestigia sequentes, aeternae beatitudinis gaudia et avidius quaereremus et certius caperemus. Horum nimirum quaedam sunt quae praeterita et abaliis conscripta legitimus; quaedam vero quae ipsi quoque ex magna jam parte vidimus et videmus.”
monasticism in order to restrict the legitimacy of that vocabulary to the institution it simultaneously justifies. The rule that Yve acquired from Robert must have derived in first respect from the hermit, rather than to a specific brand (e.g. Cistercian, Premonstratensian) of monastic living that alienates other traditions.

For both Robert and Norbert’s identity as hermits the oral, gradual (*multociens de die in diem*), and narrative (*multa sanctorum exempla*) aspects of this rule are significant insofar as such qualities promote a heuristic element to the rule that offsets the regulatory isolation that could develop by rendering the *Rule* and especially, for Cistercians, the *Carta Caritatis* as the *sine qua non* of monastic excellence. When we are told of Robert’s regulatory program for Yve, we can only guess what Robert means by “humilitas,” “simplicitas,” “obediencia” etc. Whatever else such terms may have suggested to him, the meaning with which he invested them likely had less to do with the *Rule* than with the version of poverty for which Robert left Hedlay, the lesson about vainglory that he learned only after leaving Newminster, or the suspicion towards unqualified obedience that Robert must have acquired after his coenobitic phases.

While a somewhat naïve, thief-fleeing Robert lacks the competence to instruct a companion, the above passage nonetheless illustrates that Robert’s more developed eremitism was the result of a highly heuristic process. And it is *this* monasticism that here both becomes identical with eremitic reform and decidedly unlike anything Norbert’s hagiographers had in mind. Robert’s prayers (“orysoune”) and varied experience give reason to conclude that his understanding of a liturgy in one context was not necessarily translated into another. His prayers, as we have seen, were relativized
over time. The analogy with Norbert’s life has a mitigating effect on what must have occurred to Robert’s hagiographers as a life without the promise of definite progression from seemingly constant flight to a form of monasticism available for emulation.

Norbert offers yet another premature conclusion that conceals narrative failure. And so, to submit him to the narrative provided by the coenobitic imagination assumed as normative throughout Egerton 3143 and in Norbert’s *Vita*—and with both models the implied sense of necessary and inevitable progress—necessarily anticipates and eliminates the authority that Robert’s flight and his heuristic approach to monastic excellence may otherwise have in our texts. In this sense, a certain understanding of narrative and historical progression struggles to edit flight itself out of the hermit’s life. We recall that the Cistercian rule rejected by Robert led him to establish a competing form of living, but one that was, in significant part, evocative of the ancient *eremus*.

While that early period in Robert’s eremitism established an inquiry into the forms of monastic authority, the narration of his period as Yve’s monastic superior had not only further developed these matters, but had done so in a manner that directly challenged the models of authority to which Robert has been asked to submit. But the *Vita*, much more than the *Life*, reverses this effect considerably. In other words, the development from eremitic to coenobitic monasticism, while not only *not* undertaken by Robert but positively rejected by him, is taken up by his hagiographers’ theory that monastic excellence as such necessarily implies a narrative structure and vocabulary that rejects any form of excellence that competes with the coenobium. And yet, it is precisely such a challenge that Robert so vividly poses despite his authors’ editing.
Finally, it is in this context that we begin to confront the texts’ need to conclude Robert’s life in a way consistent with what its narrative logic has been so far. The *Life* even preempts Robert’s death with a different sort of conclusion, and one that emphasizes his “ryghtwyse reule” some lines prior to a narration of his actual death. Though quoted in part above, I would here call attention to the author’s willful submission of Robert’s flight to his inner stability (“noght change”), his protean behavior to a virtuous “reule,” and his talent for displeasing others to his great miracle working (“miracles sway many”). Behavioral and narrative error here undergoes textual correction.

Roberd kep a ryghtwyse reule
All tym þat he couth crepe or creule,
In crage, in creues, or in caue,
Sway sadde he was hys saule to saue.
Fray sted to sted he stepped and stode
þar nay myscheffe merred hys mode;
Comforth ne care, baile ne blysse,
Myght noght change hys chere a rysshe;
Durese, dishese, dere ne dred,
Well ne wyrschipe, als I red,
Myght stire hym halffe a stryde;
All bytternes he couth abyde;
Forthi our Lord to lerred and lewed
Many ferly for hym schewed,
Hys godnes bath to gloryfy
And vther men to edyfy,
And als to men hys mekyll might
Fortho mostre day and nyght,
Miracles sway many wythouten maike
Our Sauiour schewed has for hys saike,
Bath efter ded and in hys lyffe—
The halff þat I kane noght discryffe.
Thus in romaunce haue I herd
That Roberd rouled hys lyffe in werlde.
To hym be louynge lastand ay
þat hym gaffe power forto pray,
And forto saue oure saules syne
In blysse bringand fra bitter pyne. (*Life*, ll.877-904)
The last four lines drift into that devotional voice found elsewhere in Egerton 3143, and in a sense they provide an appropriate (because redundant) conclusion to the premature conclusion that the whole passage already models. *Robertus heremita* is here still being made an argument for how the hagiographic text, monastic excellence, and a hermit’s place within history should form a predetermined conclusion sufficiently redundant to obviate all monastic inquiry.

Only with attention to the textual gestures *away* from flight and error do we see that the project of writing an exemplary Robert unraveled every step of the way. What was the alternative for those whose task it was to invent a *Robertus heremita* that had to remain, almost by definition, a confusing blend between a highly independent solitary and the product of a specific monastic ideology in its historical and textual tradition? Cassian’s *Conferences*, to which I will now briefly turn, offer more than a merely partial answer that puts into perspective the historically and ideologically naïve mechanisms of the lives. So before attending to their final treatment of Robert and his death we will consider how Cassian’s argument about monastic excellence obviates the above narrative and ideological disunities. The resolutions I seek from Cassian will be double-edged, for his work stresses the fact that the conclusion to a narrative, if consistent with his monastic theory, must retain a degree of indeterminateness.

“*In wyldernes als dyd a monke*”: John Cassian on Tradition and Monastic Excellence

As observed in Chapter 2, “rules” were not suited to examine the solitary’s perfection-directed *propositum* as productive of and working in step with multiple and
unexpected practices, often some type of misbehavior or error. But in his *Conferences* Cassian inquired into the relationship between an ascetic’s *desire* for perfection and the physical and mental behaviors regimented by precepts. Cassian opens his work by illustrating how one may justifiably subordinate precept-giving *formulae* to judgments made by the individual on how best to achieve his final ends.61 Thus, what takes precedence is in fact a re-reading of the precept and its relationship to the perfected goal of the *propositum*, making any rigid determinant of daily behavior secondary in importance to the central goal of ascetic perfection. The purpose is to avoid conceptual and moral contradictions that endanger the theoretical integrity of the monastic endeavor. The monk must come to understand that his *propositum* is part of a broader narrative wherein the monastic *finis* claims primary importance over specific means that must not be misapprehended as goals in themselves.62 Cassian notes in the first conference,

> It behooves us, then, to carry out the things that are secondary—namely, fasts, vigils, the solitary life, and meditation on Scripture—for the sake of the principal *scopos*, which is purity of heart or love, rather than for their sake to neglect this principal virtue which, as long as it remains integral and intact, will prevent anything bad from happening to us whenever one of the things that are secondary has to be omitted out of necessity.63

What should be readily apparent by now is that none of Robert’s narratives in the least implies that he rigidly kept to any one of these secondary forms of devotion. Moreover, prior to this passage Cassian had identified the final end (*telos* or *finis*) of the monastic *ars* as distinct from the multiple trials (the means) that had to be borne for achieving that end: not unlike the risks faced by the farmer or soldier, the monk endures dangers

61 As noted above, the *Conferences* are an extended inquiry into the virtue of monastic discretion. The definition of a monastic *propositum* as a discipline with a specific *finis* is found at the very opening (I.2).
(pericula) or disappointments such as a temporary inability to meditate on Scripture—the same activity that Moses in ch. 2 says should be pursued tirelessly. Such works, however salutary, are not significant in themselves, but only in view of one’s final love for God, the height of caritas. Thus a certain practice or set of practices is subject to a means-ends relationship that in turn allows a shift in attention from the precept to the monk’s propositum. The individual’s propositum is not such that a text or precept—mere secondary matters!—can adequately record.

Therefore, let us note as well that the Cassianic propositum is not identical to eremitism itself, for as Cassian observes, the solitary life should be numbered among these “secondary” matters. That is, should the solitary need to abandon this specific form of ascetic pursuit, he may do so with the same blessing with which he would renegotiate his other behaviors. On the other hand, as the Preface informs us, the discussions comprising the first ten Conferences are led by anchorites. And what if solitude is chosen as one of the most effective means for achieving this end? After all, anachoresis offers a critique of the more strictly coenobitic concerns as physical stability or obedience, putting Cassian’s confidence in anchorites to the test. Could not anchorites merely exploit Cassian’s leniency, construing “secondary” as “irrelevant”?

Of course, Cassian does not explicitly say in the above passage that there is any specific end (whether coenobitic or eremitic) of the religious life other than caritas. However, it is important to note that this passage, like many others in the work, assumes the primacy of the coenobium over anachoresis and thus reflects Cassian’s somewhat

64 Cassian cites 1 Cor. 13—the Pauline doctrine on works without charity—to support these conclusions.
65 Cassian, Conf., Preface.
Janus-faced commitment both to an increasingly alien wilderness and the increasingly prominent coenobium.\textsuperscript{66} Indeed, this sort of bias is articulated fully in the eighteenth conference where the prospective solitary is assigned a training period in the coenobium. The preface to the last argument, which comes in the eighteenth conference, is worth quoting in full since it importantly continues the discussion of the monastic \textit{ars} or \textit{disciplina} that was begun in the first conference. It is noteworthy also that the speaker here is Piamun, the “elder of all the anchorites.” (I emphasize the moments in the text that closely reflect Robert’s situation.)

\begin{quote}
My sons, whenever a person wishes to acquire skill in some art, he must give himself over with all his care and attentiveness to the study of the discipline that he wants to grasp and must observe the precepts and institutes of the most accomplished teachers in that area of work or knowledge […]. \textit{For we have known some people who have come to this place from your region in order to go around to the monasteries of the brothers merely for the sake of getting acquainted with them, but not in order to receive the rules and institutes for which they came here or, while sitting apart in their cells, to attempt to put into practice what they had seen or been told}. Holding on to the behavior and concerns to which they were accustomed, they were thought to have changed provinces not for the sake of their own progress but out of a need to escape poverty, and many people reproach them for this. \textit{Not only were they unable to acquire any instruction but they could not even stay longer in these parts, due to the obstinacy of their stubborn minds}. \textit{For they changed neither their way of fasting nor their manner of psalmody nor even the clothes that they wore}.\textsuperscript{67} [emphasis added]
\end{quote}

This diatribe identifies behaviors for which Robert’s coenobitic neighbors could and did readily condemn him, and in like terms. Piamun’s sentiments could not have been other than the above, had he discussed Robert’s haphazard visit to monasteries and his final visit to Hedlay, the circumstances of which apply to the objections expressed here. He is the model for those who “changes provinces not for the sake of their own progress.”

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{66} For an introduction into Cassian’s anxieties about \textit{anachoresis} see P. Rousseau, \textit{Ascetics}, 183ff.
\item \textsuperscript{67} Cassian, \textit{Conf.}, 18.2 [CSEL 507.17-508.9].
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
But what is Piamun’s point exactly? He seems to conceal a tension inherent in his response to these foreign monks. On the one hand, a hierarchy of monastic practices is, though unstated, clearly presupposed both in this passage and later. His discussion will very quickly turn to the relationship between anchorites and the coenobitic life which, as in the Rule, is named the sine qua non for prospective solitaries. Such a cautious portrait of solitude only encourages the suspicion that the faults of those uncommitted to monasticism are here being used to justify the primacy of the coenobium and to further an argument about the dangers of solitude. Be certain not to venture outside of the community too hastily! However, Piamun’s thoughts seem also to indicate his impatience with any such privileging of one set of practices over another. Those visiting foreign monasteries should have put in practice what they learned there, rather than prematurely concluding their search for excellence. In other words, the fault of these visiting monks was to use their prior experience with certain monastic customs (whether derived from communal living or not) to illegitimate traditions that they ought to have recognized as contributing to their excellence. In other words, and not unlike the narrative tendency of the Life, the monks in this passage had prematurely narrated a conclusion to their own lives, and had therefore stopped desiring monastic excellence. Since, in a way abhorrent to Cassian, monastic means had become identical with their end, that end became as uninteresting and irrelevant as the variety of practices those monks might otherwise have adopted.

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68 Thus, the very next conference discusses monks who are said to leave the coenobium prematurely and ill-prepared for the rigors of the desert. Ibid., 19.11 [CSEL 544.27-545.14].
These two readings of Piamun’s discourse are mutually incompatible to the extent that, in the one version, he sets up a hierarchy of excellence intrinsic to monasticism, and in the other, he argues that the use of such preconceived hierarchies contribute to the failings of many monks. Both arguments recognize the fact that institutional hierarchies have a firm hold on those who seek monastic excellence. The extent to which this bias sets up theoretical impediments to Cassianic monasticism is precisely the point he wished to make in this passage. We recall that the monastic *ars* or *disciplina* defined in the first conference examines monasticism *qua* its *finis*, rather than *qua* coenobitism or eremitism. The solitaries who appear in these dialogues are illustration enough that the monasticism of solitude is not “secondary,” if and when that term is used to illegitimate the monk’s use of heroic *anachoresis* as an effective means to his *finis*.

Moreover, the regulatory model provided in the eighteenth Conference is not the only one that the *Conferences* offer, and after all, the work meditates on how the determinateness of the precept is insufficient and requires an inquiry into the virtue of discretion. So just as the first book submits a variety of monastic practices to the judgment of the monk who heuristically discovers perfection, the second turns to the logical “next step” in this process by addressing *discretio*. And the figure who takes the lead in this discussion is none other than Antony, the hermit whose life required no coenobitic preface. In other words, Cassian is partly acknowledging that monastic behavior has its origin in the excellence of *individual* Fathers and *prior* to the establishment of a single standard. However, the standard offered in a coenobium is not necessarily consonant with the life of Antony, or of Paul for that matter.
One can overstate the extent to which Cassian’s anxieties about human frailty—and the resultant favor he shows to the coenobium—define monasticism as a practice consisting of those skills acquired first in the community. His text solves the problem, rather than simply sets it up. To this end he desires anchorites to proceed at the “leading” of the Holy Spirit (sancto spiritu suggerente), and not in presumptuous dismal of the traditions. Obviously, not only was the solitary life abused by others, but to all practical appearances, divine guidance and incautious presumption closely resembled each other. For this reason the propositum cannot be further specified than by the term “purity of heart,” and the monk’s finis (“love”) is not identifiable with the cell or the monastic house. If anchoritic presumption leads one to insist on coenobitic authority, he immediately risks fetishizing secondary (sequentia) matters—a coenobitic house.

Robert’s hagiographers are just as deeply concerned with these matters, and even permit us to find solutions that not only reflect Cassian’s concerns, but are also compatible with them. And in light of his monastic theory, the failures of his hagiographers become even clearer. To start, Cassian’s caution regarding secondary matters (sequentia) relates as well to the insistence in the lives on a particular type of narrative sequence, or progression, that had (1) rendered those narratives powerless to effectively demonstrate the viability of Robert’s life, and (2) prevented those internally inconsistent statements in the Life about what the character of Robert’s propositum might have been at a particular point in his life.

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69 Cassian, Conf. Preface [CSEL 3.21-4.2]: “anachoretarum instituta sublimia, non, ut quidam, propria aggressus est praesumptione sectari, sed legitimum doctrinae tramitem sancto Spiritu suggerente, pene antequam disceret, apprehendens, non tam suis adinventionibus quam illorum traditionibus maluit erudiri.”
Beyond this, Cassian also helps show that the monastic ideology of Robert’s neighbors was in tension with that offered in the *Conferences* and for the same reason that Robert’s own understanding of ascetic excellence was as well. To the extent that his hagiographers and the residents of Newminster, Hedlay and, as we shall see, Fountains sought to justify their conception of monastic excellence by the good the thought they saw in their order, they thereby discarded an ideal of monasticism *qua* its single end, and instead attempted to develop a narrative about Robert whose end (*finis*) would have less to do with a search for the good of monastic perfection than with using monastic virtues to justify a search for institutional power. The critical point here is that either precepts or narratives about individual points of monastic behavior (such as physical or liturgical stability) are constituted by the other, more general concern for a self-consistent *propositum* that both more clearly reflects the subject’s *finis* and prevents secondary matters from being isolated and treated as wholly legitimating or illegitimating one’s entire *propositum*. A single, narrow, and polemically constructed variety of monasticism should not assume prominence at the expense of tradition itself, but Cassian’s monastic theory depends of course on the sort of narrative that is told throughout this period about eremitism, the coenobium, and monastic excellence generally.

Robert’s flight is central in this context. For what we are told of his long-suffering and “myld” character is not consistent with the will to flee locations of discomfort, and yet it is his flight and proneness to such errors that permits the behavioral dialogue equally available to him in the coenobium and in solitude. He has a means of knowing “trispas” to the extent that he is so eminently prone to it! The form of living
that both coenobitic and eremitic living are so apt to promote, is a narrative and historical finis that is acquired at the expense of, and by conceptually overthrowing, the propositum. What our hagiographies cannot articulate is that flight is not narrative movement towards a good end, an end that would ultimately become confused with physical stability as it does at the very conclusion of the Life; rather, flight is the recognition that ends are legitimated only when continually deferred and only insofar as they are not confused with their means. Thus Robert can consistently be long-suffering, gyrovagus, and prone to “trispas” in a way that does not at all threaten his propositum or his awareness of a finis that continually escapes him. The search for solitude qua solitude is irrelevant, but so too is the insistence on physical stability qua stability, and for the same reason. Both are means equally subject to being confused with and undermining the logic of a propositum consistent with itself.

A narrative is constituted by movement, and as Cassian would say, what good is a narrative that has stopped moving? So even the vocabulary of monastic virtues cannot then have that same importance that it had prior to the state of spiritualized, detached contemplation of God, or any other form of living for that matter. Nor will separate practices remain in that same relationship with narrative and history by which it was previously easy to characterize them. For insofar as the monk grows more “pure of heart” those practices and their capacity for determining a narrative trajectory become increasingly less relevant to the monk whose aim is, by definition, a departure from history thus conceived. Robert’s error is his persistence in this experimental pursuit that preserves an end by deferring it.
Prophecy and Flight: The Hermit’s Narrative as Tradition

The replacing of means for ends was as polemically motivated in the case of Newminster as for the hagiographers at Holy Trinity, and the process implicated within it a whole range of monastic lexica. What should now be apparent is the extent to which the use of St. Norbert’s *Vita* in Egerton’s Latin prose text at that point where Robert is teaching Yve monastic practices and virtues is inspired by the need to identify the hermit with a particular vocabulary that allies Robert with the “ryghtwyse reule” and “purpose principale” mentioned in the *Life*. That is, Robert continually escapes and must be reunited with a monastic ideology that was powerless to account for his *propositum*, since that ideology required the narrative and theoretical endpoint that Cassian would have denied it. Cassian, we are told, considered “the average monk to be too concerned with material observances, and not interested enough in the meaning and purpose of those observances.”70 Such a concern by Cassian certainly squares with the emphasis he places on keeping secondary concerns appropriately subordinated to the monastic *finis*, but it is also one that is modeled for us in the *Life*. There at precisely that point when Robert behaves like a monk before setting foot into a single monastery, the text uses the monastic vocabulary of “observances” to underscore both the significance of his *propositum* and the related need to distinguish between one’s principal end (*principalis*) and those secondary matters (*sequentia*).

Also the above-mentioned night of demonic disturbance that is recorded in ch. 17 of the Egerton prose life allowed us to see how the passage’s use of monastic vocabulary...
like *oratio* and *psalmodium* might be used to displace anxiety about Robert’s proximity to irregular, undisciplined conduct. The language of prayer as a regulatory commonplace was entirely absent from the *Life*; we learn merely that the “fend” attempted to disturb Robert’s “deuociouns.” But if St. Norbert’s *Vita* did not find its way into the *Life*, the coenobitic politics at the priory of Holy Trinity nevertheless did. And so rather than concentrating on Robert’s night as a liturgical event, the Middle English version, somewhat amusingly, focused on the demon’s work of soiling the hermit’s kitchenware with his hands.\textsuperscript{71} Further, the vocabulary of regular, liturgical practices in the Latin prose also indicates that a disruption of such devotions marks a significant lapse, a period of irregularity. For the *Life*, on the other hand, since Robert’s stability lies more squarely with his *propositum*, even if the text cannot characterize that *propositum*, the absence of language reflecting a structured liturgy reflects a parallel lack of concern that somehow his liturgical lapses presented a greater danger to his monastic profession.

I am not suggesting that Robert felt he could arbitrarily dispense with his contemplative routine; rather, since Robert observes a rule characterized by its alterity, and one that is designed to frustrate appropriation by those who refused to grant the desert its ideological and material sovereignty, that rule is not surprisingly constituted by Robert’s protest. Surely, the hermit’s teaching of Yve is offered up as the *regula* that competes with (and therefore circumscribes the authority of) the monasticism of Newminster or Hedlay. That protest is aimed at the coenobitic claim no *legitimate* rule for a hermit is so indifferent to coenobitic power. Little wonder that the desert is characterized only by a “foreign” and therefore illegitimate perfection. Robert’s

\textsuperscript{71} *Life*, ll.681-90.
accomplishment here is to point up the incoherence of a desire to appropriate a desert already illegitimated, and to do so by refusing to distinguish between monastic excellence and the various models within which that excellence might be pursued. The monks’ “hypocrisy” is fundamentally not a matter of their mis-reading the precept (on silence or abstinence, for example), but of failing to read in the precept the difference between its exemplarity and the perfection, the finis, that the precept momentarily displaces. And this displacement occurs for the sake of the dialogic inquiry (eremitic/coenobitic, stability/flight, precept/discretion, etc.) that is alone committed to preserving for the desert an ideological sovereignty that would otherwise be relegated to the distant and practically irrelevant pages on the Egyptian saints. At stake are tradition’s legitimacy and its capacity to reproduce theoretical inquiry into the monastic finis.

In response to these points, the final arguments to my analysis will turn to the concerns of narrative more broadly, both for what it implies about ends and about tradition as a structure that attempts to meet concerns about the end of monastic life. Robert, who had changed residences with some frequency, somehow finds it important towards the end of his life to insist that wherever he dies there should his corpse remain perpetually. “Here wyll I leynd, her wyll I ly / In this place perpetuely” (ll.875-6). Given Robert’s history of physical flight, this final and uncharacteristic appeal to stabilitas rings odd, but perhaps it should not come any more unexpectedly than the knowledge that two hermits have confronted the same value on physical stability quite differently.

Moreover, beyond illustrating the above points on precepts and hermeneutic authority, this comparison helps underscore the extent to which monastic power and an
ideology of reform were matters inextricably linked to the regulatory vocabulary already discussed. Specifically, Robert was responding to the fact that, after his death, his body would be appropriated by the neighboring Cistercian community at Fountains. What I have called his confusing insistence on physical stability is, in fact, quite consonant with his living, since that living and the regulatory language attending it cannot exist independently of how Robert would represent through his own life the competition between the demands of spiritual authority and monastic institutions such as the house at Fountains. If we read on, it becomes clear that his appeal to stability responded to his posthumous regularization by the Cistercian monks. As Robert understood, that effort to rewrite his very body would in fact be an attempt to overthrow not only a competing conception of the rule, but one that resisted the purposes for which the coenobium adapted the rule. Thus while dependent on a concrete vocabulary, the body’s stable resting “perpetuely” and what Robert has considered to be coenobitic hypocrisy, in turn, both submits that vocabulary to readings with as much potential for shifting as Robert’s own physical behavior had been. The passage’s larger context reads,

‘Wythouten end here wyll I rest;  
Here my wounyng chese I fyrste,  
Here wyll I leynd, her wyll I ly  
In this place perpetuely.’  
Roberd keped a ryghtwyse reule  
All tym þat he couth crepe or creule,  
In crage, in creues, or in caue,  
Sway sadde he was hys saule to saue.  
Fray sted to sted he stepped and stode  
Þar nay myscheffe merred hys mode; (Life, ll.873-82)

For if a past wilderness is to have value for those burning with the ardor of reform, then that value lies in its capacity to express misgivings about the authority of coenobitic
reform, and to do so without in turn relying on coenobitic appeals to regular living. The wilderness is permitted its, in coenobitic eyes, indeterminateness and forms of irregular living as antidotes to discussions on eremitism which had so often assumed the preeminence of a narrowly conceived sense of exemplarity. Still, Robert’s “aliene perfectione” goes even further than this. The centripetal pull of those conceptions is now offset by an eremitism that displays the limits to the discourse of exemplarity. Robert’s rule escapes consistent articulation because just as his material living space marked the boundaries of monastic power, the ideology of the desert is now in turn empowered to delimit the authority of a discourse not enough acquainted with the *propositum* of the desert to offer a meaningful hermeneutics of its rule.

Far from traducing the authority of a long coenobitic and eremitic tradition, to acknowledge and champion the alterity of the wilderness enriches and refines that tradition, for it makes possible a reformist perspective that is empowered to re-examine the precept and the authority with which it might all too prematurely invest itself. The difficult task of matching Robert with a regimented observance of monastic prescriptions reflects a commitment to that element of indeterminateness in the relationship between eremitic practice and the legislative force of the precept. For as Cassian asserted in the opening to his *Conferences* the monk’s *propositum* is a *disciplina* (like farming or military service) identifiable with its *finis*, and indeed intelligible only with reference to those ends, rather than to the means that may or may not conduce to those ends. Since this is the case, the precept is at the service of both that *finis* as well as a hermeneutics on the precept that subordinates its authority to the hermit’s judgment on how best to
conduct his *disciplina* to its appropriate end. Far from having any importance of themselves, eremitic ends return us to a narrative whose very structure permits an inquiry into the solitary’s intent upon perfection, and how a life as a whole may be justified.

Not at first sight critical in this respect are Robert’s prophetic utterances. Insofar as a prophecy is both an expression of absolute and stable certainty, as well as a projection into an uncertain and deferred end (*finis*), it is important to note that Robert develops in his later years a talent for anticipating a friend’s death (ll.845-50) and the designs by the monks at Fountains to obtain his body after death. How are these details relevant to his identity, monastic end and their contestability? The hagiographies uniformly mistake the prophecies, as they do Robert’s oft-repeated and oft-reinterpreted interest in keeping a stable residence, as indications of a sort of permanent certainty suffusing his entire career. The prophecies also serve as stand-in endpoints that mimic the premature narrative conclusions and regulatory stability (“ryghtwyse reule”) that the forms of his living resisted. There is no way for the hagiographies to come to terms with the fact that two of his prophecies are mutually incompatible, and that Robert was in error about his own end: that Cistercian monks would seize his body, and conversely, that he would be buried at the place of his death. Cassian would have understood and smiled at the disparity, while our texts were not in a position to so much as recognize, let alone make sense of, the implications of future’s uncertainty. It is not unimportant that implicit in Robert’s own utterance that his body would be buried wherever it died is the recognition that he might die in any number of places. A stable locality, if in one sense important, was in another sense not the point at all.
The final section of this chapter will, therefore, also look to the significance of a narrative’s use of transgression to put the “holy” back into reform. In identification with Job, a “solitary” whose narrative was marked by an intense dialogue on transgression, punishment and divine justice, Robert appeals to God to justify him despite those maligning and attacking him (nocentes me et….impugnantes mihi...).\footnote{Harley 7, 41ff.} And it is here that Cassian’s \textit{finis} works in tandem with narrative’s insistence that a host of human contingencies (whether virtues or vices) do not undermine the conclusion to which that life may be brought. Instead, fault, inquiry and the dialogic character of narrative are mutually interdependent components of the monastic \textit{finis}. And this dynamic explains and justifies eremitic behavior in the same way that such behavior merely serves as a secondary means to that end. However, undermining that end is what I have earlier argued was the essence of hypocrisy, namely the work of substituting means as ends in themselves for the sake of a wholesale abolition of fault and transgression. With these, moreover, is abolished a capacity for determining whether those means become identified as a particular order (i.e. Cistercian) or specific form of monasticism (i.e. coenobitism) where narrative ends are, quite paradoxically, already spoken for.

\textit{“In wyldernes als dyd a monke”: Narrative Hypocrisy and the Monastic \textit{Finis}}

Cassian’s penultimate conference aggressively argues that “nothing is stable of itself, nothing immutable, nothing good but the godhead alone.”\footnote{Cassian, \textit{Conf.}, 23.3 [CSEL 643.22-3]: “nihil est persemetipsum stabile, nihil immutabile, nihil bonum nisi deitas sola.”} The very problem of achieving the monastic \textit{finis} was addressed towards the close of his discussion, since here
as elsewhere Cassian recognizes the temptation to conflate a pursuit for excellence with the ultimately destructive misconception that he condemns, namely identifying a finalized perfection in this present and mutable life. The admission of sin (“orans peccatorum quasi universalium inmunditiam confitetur”) is an inextricable part of the monastic theory that Cassian has promoted as it is of his sense that the monastic life is a narrative whose finis has meaning only because continually deferred.74 As it happens, Robert was wrong on both scores, since he was buried first at the chapel of Holy Rood, and then at the Trinitarian priory. Like the conflation of Robert’s propositum with his Cistercian identity, linking caritas with Cistercian reform amounted to discarding narrative itself, and along with it, the possibility of reform. If Cistercian conceptions of monastic excellence were open to external attacks, it is because of their tendency to conflate the pursuit of perfection with its attainment, and excellence with exclusivity.

Robert’s hagiography asks the ideology of stability to recognize in narratives the element of variation and contingency inherent both to tradition and to the life of the single individual. In this light that we should read William of Stuteville’s term “ypocrytte” alongside a moment earlier in the Life that asks for a nuanced view of how monastic sin relates to virtue’s finis. Right after those descriptions of Robert’s early years of “abstinence” and “fastyngys sere” the author enigmatically observes, “that tyme nane toke hym wyth trispas.” The observation seems to be a clear reference to Robert’s hypocrisy and other mistakes. But the function of “tyme” here is interesting since the very observation that Robert would later be accused of faults represents an untimely interruption to the narrative sequencing and to an otherwise morally excellent youth. The

74 Ibid., 23.17 [CSEL 666.6].
“trispas” is as much a narrative interruption as a monastic and moral one. It is precisely that relationship that connects the finis back to an earlier period of transgression; the connection does not only make the finis and sin meaningful but also prevents the misrepresentation of monastic virtue by a non-dialogic emphasis on stabilitas.

It is by no means clear whether Robert is only accused of having trespassed (“toke”), or that he actually mis-governed himself somehow. The ambivalence is critical. We recall that the community that accused Robert of “trispas” is likewise maligned by our hagiographer as hypocritical Pharisees. The only viable reading of such a line is one that divests the notion of hypocrisy of its polemical and institutional (i.e. coenobitic vs. eremitic) uses, and refers this particular sin instead to the more rigorous critique of how the monastic finis can and does justify behavior that may appear, at once, both a transgression and a potential means to perfection. Robert is as vulnerable to criticism as the monks at Newminster, but it is only the behavior of the latter that is so unavoidably difficult to justify as a means-to-finis. Richard Rolle would come to understand and respond to this issue brilliantly. But both Robert and Richard (the latter far more vividly) allow us to see how “trispas,” narrative and the finis inextricably interrelate, and do so in a way that takes sin and virtue more seriously than could doctrines of stability alone.

For these reasons the end of Robert’s life becomes doubly significant as narrative, for it is with a white habit that the Cistercians at Fountains approach the dying hermit, offering him an alternate narrative, an alternate finis contiguous with the Cistercian order.

Than monkes of Fountaunce come full tyte
And wyth þaim broght an habytt whytt,
And sayd, ‘Robertt, this sall þou haue
Wyth the when thou gase to thi graffe.’
Roberd sayd, ‘Sirres, when I deghe
My aghen clethyng suffice to me.’ (*Life*, II.931-6)

This aspect of Robert’s life, again, bears comparison with St. Gerlac’s *Vita*, and in both cases the rule of monastic attire informs the work of justifying the hermits’ lives. It is also important that here as elsewhere the *Life* uses such tensions to deny the monastic polemics undermining the hermit’s *propositum* the internal coherence necessary to justify that negative assessment of the hermit. We find in this passage that the language of approval and correction could be mutually supportive in a campaign to obviate the spiritual value of eremitism. We recall that the very attempt to establish Robert within the monastery walls was already a rejection not only of the hermit’s *propositum*, but also of the specific precepts that he observed in attaining his ends.

All approued hym als perfytte
And cled hym in a coule of whytt. (*Life*, II.221-2)

As in his experience with the monks of Fountains Abbey, the appeal to perfection is here paradoxically said to require a change of clothing. Here correction and approval in fact cooperate to the detriment of the hermit’s perspective on his *propositum*. This passage actually closes the distance between arriving at *finis* of perfected living and a specific conduct-oriented injunction (in this case, one’s style of dress). Indeed, the monks of Hedlay aim to make the former dependent on the latter, thus wholly overthrewing any competing notions about the means and ends of ascetic living. The very possibility of articulating an eremitic *propositum* is foreclosed, and with it the attainment of perfection. True, Robert himself agreed to enter the monastery. But his decision to leave can be

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75 Gerlac appears long after his death in a white Premonstratensian habit (ch. 28).
called unstable or disobedient only at the cost of invalidating his recognition of a better means for attaining perfection.

It is therefore essential to return to the language of reform that has informed this discussion. And here again, the hagiographer’s awareness of his subject’s short-comings is the means essential for leading that inquiry into reform. While Godric of Throckenholt’s excellence is never in doubt, his hagiographer nonetheless can observe that “he was mindful, clearly, of having perpetrated some trivial misdeeds [levibus peccatis perpetrates] after his hauberk had fallen apart, for it is written: ‘seven times a day stumbleth the just.’” The failings of Robert’s contemporary Ivetta, a Belgian recluse, warranted the same reference to the Biblical verse. And there, the humility that her fall to sin produced suggests to her hagiographer just how effective transgressions could be in affording her religious authority. Comparisons with the sins committed by David, Peter, and Mary Magdalene follow fast and thick. Such contingencies as were offered by human fragility prevent the hermit’s life from taking on a form proleptically construed as necessary and inevitable only because the doctrine of stability had already answered for and displaced a real and actual moral inquiry.

The connection of means to ends relates not only to monastic reform imagined institutionally (e.g. whether the center of reform should lie with the community or the hermit, with the center or the periphery), but to a monastic vocabulary that produced a more fundamental inquiry into the relationship between language and the holy. It is an

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76 Licence, Life, 20: “[…] videlicet pro levibus peccatis perpetrates post fractionem lorice, sicut scriptum est; ‘septies in die cadit iustus.’”

77 Vita, BHL 4620, esp. 28-30. Or again, we are told that the ninth-century hermit Meginrad prayed ceaselessly and fasted wonderfully, but did both only “quantum humana fragilitas permisit,” Vita Sancti Meginradi (BHL 5878), 7.
examination of how that vocabulary may be detached from a spiritual authority for which the monastic tradition had developed that vocabulary in the first place. For it remains possible that such vocabulary will be misunderstood as itself the moral content of holy living, an effect that will bring moral inquiry to a halt and displace that content. This latter process, moreover, occurs only by emphasizing that vocabulary, for its role as the requisite linguistic material of reform is only then able to stand in for reform itself. The importance placed on linguistic means is instrumental in disrupting the ends of reform, and the same lexical basis for moral inquiry is easily deployed and redeployed for mutually antagonistic ends. Robert’s “reule” should be articulated as the linguistic sign whose identity as such is significant for its ability to register and develop the traditions of reformist inquiry and of hypocritical occlusions.

In this respect the prayers that attend our hagiographies in Egerton 3143 are critical components to the memory of Robertus heremita. There Robert is imagined by as posthumously greeting his devotee with “well have you ruled yourself” but only after the speaker has stressed his regulatory shortcomings. It is with the understanding that future emendations to the latter’s life will have already occurred by the time his “rule” will have any meaning. For it is no accident that at that moment the language of regulation is, like all the language of correction used in the manuscript’s prayers to Robert, deployed with sensitivity to the absence both of the hermit and of his holy living. In short, the condition of having already attained reform endangers the desire for reform. Correction is therefore deferred and projected into the future by a search for a type of reform that by its very
nature voids the content of spiritual excellence, for such content would misuse the language in place of the condition of reform.

Hence in these prayers to him, appeals to his perfection and power to keep the speaker “abstinett at borde” occur right alongside of confessions that sin still haunts both the monastic body and mind (ll.1129ff.). Such prayers replace the annexing of reformist language (by Robert’s monastic neighbors, for example) with a reform whose legitimacy is assured by an admission of sin (“trispas, wickednes I am in”). If these words by Robert’s anonymous venerator owe something to our hermit’s own “trispas,” then we are asked to consider that the speaker’s instabilitas and Robert’s exemplarity converge to displace, even more markedly, the authority that prescriptive stabilitas never had in the hermit’s life. Our speaker here insists on simultaneously emphasizing either a perfect hermit’s absent reform or the presence of reform in a hermit of “trispas.” In either case, displacing the holy is essential to its eventual (finis) realization, even if (or indeed because) that final event must follow death.

The relevance of all this for twelfth-century England is considerable indeed; the texts on Robert are not alone among the Anglo-Latin hagiographies in which hermits had the potential for generating reformist inquiries along precisely these lines. The lives of Christina of Markyate and Godric of Finchale are no less significant here. In the former’s case, the hermit who refused to head up monasteries at the expense of her anachoresis also had initially undertaken strict enclosure prior to any “official” monastic training. It is here imagined that her monastic development means greater proximity to the coenobium rather than increased solitude (as is conventional). But her life also shows

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that it is indeed difficult to imagine what sort of practices (and in what way, if at all, they resembled a rule of living) attended her initial enclosure. The instance of reform is shown as distinct from the traditional monastic means for excellence, lest it become impossible to distinguish the two. If Christina really desires perfection over marriage to Burhtred, she will surely know as much after a session of self-denials that can hardly be confused with the desire for mere means as ends, a desire for a “habitum religionis.”

Likewise, when Godric submits to the patronage of Durham Priory, he has already led a long eremitic career and probably accepts obedientia out of necessity rather than because he shares his neighbors’ notion of monastic virtues. Interestingly, this is not how Godric’s move is construed in another recension of his life, where his obedience to a monastic superior is made a matter of avoiding “hypocrisy.” Such differing perspectives on Godric’s eremitism are hardly surprising. But neither text nor the more exclusively regulatory texts offer the only space for inquiries into such matters; we shall see what becomes of these matters elsewhere. For the fourteenth-century hermit, Richard Rolle, whose writings are not hagiographical and who did not write a rule, will take this critique of monastic language and ideologies much further. It is to him I turn next.

79 Ibid., 174.
80 Reginald of Durham, Libellus, ch. 58, 135-6.
81 Ibid.
Chapter 4: The Abolition of the Rule: The Eremitic Imagination of Richard Rolle

Than Robertt, blessed in his brest,
Purpost hym to be a prest,
And to a byshope mayde hym bouned
And was subdiakenn with phannoune;
And whi nay may orders he toke
Fynd I noght brefed in my boke,
Ne ȝytt the cause whi waytt I noght.
He waytt þat waytt all þatt ys wroght!

— *The Metrical Life of St. Robert of Knaresborough* (ll. 89-96)

The previous chapter argued that a hermit’s mistakes, his “trispas,” showed him and tradition itself as fractured. While the codified traditions of poverty, silence and stability gave hagiographical narratives a formal and predictable exemplarity, for its part the hermit’s *singularitas* resisted the textual and institutional dominion that the coenobium sought over him. His stubborn unpredictability and uncertainty offset the simplistic labeling of him as either essentially venerable or vicious by his coenobitic neighbors, rivals and venerators. Still more, the hermit’s *propositum*, though described with terms like “humility” or “obedience,” invested that same lexicon with connotations of extreme instability. The hagiography of ascetic continuity and consensus ultimately revealed its own lack of control over the hermit’s life, as well as the failure of monastic terminologies to define that life in traditional terms.

A later hermit, Richard Rolle (d. 1349), richly explores eremitic *singularitas* as a critique of that tradition’s social and linguistic power, using his own life and his close ties to clerical and coenobitic culture to do so. As we have seen, solitaries countered a
tradition whose historical and cultural integrity depended in turn on its narratives of the virtuous—obedient, poor, silent—monastic mind and body. So too did Rolle whose life and writings on *anachoresis* challenge the categories of tradition and continuity considerably.\(^1\) The narrative of his conversion—contained in the *Officium*, a posthumous and partly bio- and hagiographical document—shows a fracturing of whatever relationship obtained between Rolle and monastic tradition. The rupture between the hermit and tradition is, at its root, a *narrative* fracturing. Rolle suddenly leaves Oxford at the age of 19, dressing and appointing himself as a “hermit.”\(^2\) But the *Officium* omits from its account any clear and rational reasons he had for doing so.\(^3\) The story jettisons those explanations and justifications by which (monastic) narratives cohere; why he chose *anachoresis*, with whom he spoke about the decision, or what other options (e.g. the priesthood) he rejected for the cell. Nor is it only this narrative that lacks the discursive continuities central to the tradition recording his life. Rolle himself stretches the limits of intelligibility as he describes his conversion.

Then the living spirit of the Father of virtue came upon me, and it suddenly caught me up so that in solitude I separated myself from secular comforts. Then he marvelously transformed my mind from grief into song […] But then with this

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3 Woolley, *Officium*, 23-4. The text narrates Rolle’s use of his sister’s clothing as a hermit’s habit. Her response to this—“frater meus insanit”—indicates that her brother also neglected or refused to give her an explanation for his behavior.
there appeared before me others in the habit of those observing monastic obedience, [making] arguments that they love more ardently than those who had not been gathered into their numbers.  

Without providing the interconnecting rationale, the narrative transitions from Rolle’s divine inspiration to his decision to become a hermit. There is no story to piece together; there are only separate, paratactic occurrences (“then…suddenly…then…”) that mirror the separatedness of solitude.

The description is central to Rolle’s notion of himself as a hermit. For Rolle, ascetic solitude can be explored solely through a discourse that itself works through separation, or fragments. To start, he probably never took monastic orders, was never officially consecrated by a bishop, and never wrote a formal rule for hermits. It is unclear whether he applied regulatory texts to himself, since no doctrine of obedience, or none that is recognizably traditional, to official ecclesiastical superiors appears in his writings. And while addressing monasticism generally and anachoresis in particular, his works carry only the linguistic fragments of a tradition without quite translating its institutional categories. His extensive writings on anachoresis show deep, but elusive intellectual contacts to official orthodox culture from the early doctors, to Anselm,

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4 Rolle, Melos Amoris, ed. E. J. F. Arnould (Oxford: Blackwell, 1957), 4.3-6. All translations of Rollean texts are my own unless otherwise noted.
5 See, Nicholas Watson Richard Rolle and the Invention of Authority (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), still the most thorough study of his thought, 42. Though the comparison Watson draws between Rolle and some of his English eremitic forbears—like Christina of Markyate, Wulfric of Hazelbury, and Robert of Knaresborough—is instructive, Rolle is rather more exceptional than Watson implies. For he incorrectly observes that Christina never underwent episcopal consecration; see C. H. Talbot, Life, 147. And before becoming hermits both Wulfric and Robert intended to be priests (the latter eventually becoming sub-deacon); see Chapter. 2.
6 On the false ascription to him of the Regula Heremitarum see Allen, Writings, 324. As I show below, the rhetoric and content of his Form of Living at times resembles those in other Middle English rules, more notably Walter Hilton’s Scale of Perfection and the Ancrene Wisse.
7 Watson, Invention, 38.
Bernard, William of St. Thierry and others. For one, he addresses the observance of monastic silence, the avoidance of sins, stabilitas loci, contact with the opposite sex, poverty and penitential hardships. But monastic virtues, the rule and its liturgy all appear in his writings, but in no form that locates him within the tradition.

These ruptures between Rolle and coenobitic tradition were the hallmarks of his eremitism. If he had been asked to justify his conversion to live as a hermit, he would have replied that God’s love of him had done the justifying already. As he well knew, this response can only disrupt any attempt to set him in relation to the more or less formal rules claiming a solitary’s obedience, to the various eremitic traditions in England and on the Continent, and to their roots in the Benedictine Rule and early Egyptian monasticism. But he consistently directed questions about formal ascetic living not to a tradition which narrated the ascetic’s movement from error to regular conduct, but rather to his own highly self-referential relationship with God. This move established a dialogical relationship between Rolle and God, thus refusing a dialogue with other monks that effectively defined an individual as a participant within monastic tradition.

As an Oxford man, he had ample opportunities to participate in those monastic dialogues that had been common in England and on the Continent over the previous centuries: does the contemplative life or active life earn greater merit before God? is the

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8 For the more recent work on Rolle’s connection with these and other twelfth- and thirteenth-century mystical writers see Denis Renevey, Language, Self and Love (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2001).
9 See Chapter 1. While the extent of his knowledge of these traditions is uncertain, his Super Novem Lectiones Mortuorum, ed. M. R. Moyes (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 1988), indicates that he read the Vitae Patrum or related texts; 196.19-20: “Sed querite de hac materia in libello de vita heremitarum et etiam in libro de perfeccione et gloria sanctorum, quia ibi invenietis de eminencia sanctitatis.”
10 His penitential imagination is illustrated in ibid., 127.12-5: “Sed o bone Ihesu, hic secma me, ure me, flagella me, castiga me, ut parcas in futuro; hic secma putridum, ure scabidum, flagella peccantem, castiga negligentem, & parce in future.”

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ideal life that of the priest, canon or monk? ascetic liberty or obedience? diversity or conformity?\textsuperscript{11} Quite familiar with these questions, Rolle develops and manipulates the dual potential of monastic dialogue, its potential to establish both consensus and dissent, to define a monastic “voice” as ascetically and theologically acceptable or erroneous. His purpose was to establish a challenging point about dialogue itself, a point that Cassian saw in the constant shifting afforded by dialogue from one ascetic and theological position to another. Such shifting reveals that a dialogue, even if uninterrupted, effectively demonstrated the discontinuities of tradition. Rolle went even further, using his works to interrupt a monastic dialogue that sought to absorb the hermit into its system of praise and blame, to stabilize the mobile, shifting and unstable life of the hermit. Here we again return to the fractures we noted above.

His writings repeatedly address, then undermine, the work of imitating monastic tradition, of making its historical narrative his own. In the \textit{Melos Amoris, Incendium Amoris} and the \textit{Super Novem Lec
tiones} he speaks of the disagreements between himself and monastic neighbors in such a way as to reveal the inconclusive, rather than inevitable, formulations of \textit{anachoresis}. What he actually records in these texts is \textit{one side} of a dialogue—and hence a kind of fragmentary dialogue—between himself and various monks and clerics. Rolle’s dialogue was \textit{about} fragmentation since it refused contiguity with monastic tradition. He was actually asked by others (among them monks), “what do you mean when you say X about your eremitic living?” and “why do you conduct yourself in this or that manner?” In the above texts we do not hear all of

\textsuperscript{11}This tradition has been excellently discussed by Giles Constable, \textit{The Reformation of the Twelfth Century} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
these questions, but we do hear Rolle’s responses which were singular enough to confuse his questioners and to warrant the further question, “why are your responses so singular?” He either did not respond to these questions, or responded in such a way as to further disrupt the coherence of the dialogue. It was Rolle himself as an incoherent participant in a monastic dialogue who rendered these interactions fragmentary and abortive. When others criticized his life, the incomplete responses he provided formed part of a dialogue that was necessarily ruptured and unclear. It is in this sort of discourse that Rolle embedded his theory of eremitic singularity. He asked and answered a question about the limits of singularitas: what if an eremitic life and theory of living were consistent with themselves but with no models external to themselves? Rolle felt the need to show monastic tradition as ruptured, since that rupture would (he thought) legitimize singularitas. It is this anachoresis that prevents us from situating him in any determinate relationship with monks he knew, monastic texts he read, and the practices of tradition.

By What Doctor Have You Been Taught?: Fragmented and Aborted Dialogues

Like his literary output, Rolle’s learning in official ecclesiastical and monastic culture was extensive. Only rarely does he cite his sources, but his reading was standard monastic fare: hagiographies (e.g. on SS Cuthbert and Maglorius), the Continental mystics like Bernard and others, the Psalter, Anselm, Augustine, catechetical texts (he commented, for example, on the Athanasii Symbolum), and the sacred page. Yet Rolle was still able to make his relationship to ecclesiastical and monastic tradition—his
theological and intellectual debts generally—fragmentary, obscure, and difficult to characterize just as he thought anachoresis should look like in the terms of that tradition.

As has been said, his means for accomplishing this was to disrupt the potential for dialogue between himself and the representatives of monastic and ecclesiastical tradition. In his Incendium Amoris, a text that contains autobiography, mysticism and a few theological points, he describes a confrontation he had with learned men. He opposes their suggestion that whatever knowledge he thinks he possesses rests on no official source. “Where has he been taught, and by what doctor?,” they ask. Rolle does not respond to this question exactly because he rejects the terms of the question; doctors and their learning have influenced his writings, but they do not interest him much. What doctor? Rolle’s answer was “the Holy Spirit,” a response that refuses to describe his formal learning, even while we can see the influences of Augustine, Gregory and others in his texts. While traces from the works of the great twelfth- and thirteenth-century mystics and theologians in his texts are perceptible, he refused to formulate his position towards his intellectual acquaintances (whether dead or alive) in academic dialogues where his intellectual and theological status could be determined with reference to theirs. His learning was not the problem; it was the fact that he did not disclose to others his interactions with ecclesiastical tradition, interactions that would allow his interlocutors to legitimate his ascetic living on their terms. As we have seen, the highly forgiving monastic theory of Cassian still insisted that monks talk about ascetic excellence in order

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[12]{Rolle, Incendium Amoris, ed. Margaret Deanesly (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1915), 240.24.}
\footnotetext[13]{Such readings of his orthodoxy as provided by J. P. H. Clark, “Richard Rolle: A Theological Re-Assessment,” The Downside Review 101 (1983): 108-39, show similarities between Rolle’s thought and that of these doctors.}
\end{footnotes}
to justify tradition and its dialogical diversity. It is tempting indeed to see in Rolle a reader of Cassian who discarded the dialogic tradition because he could no longer converse with its monks—just as he left Oxford and remained quiet about his learning.

His response to the above question “what doctor?” is representative of his notion of living a regular life and addresses that life, if just obliquely. Rolle not only invokes the Holy Spirit, thus effectively evading the question, but the ancient hermits as well. The solitaries he has in mind are almost certainly the Desert Fathers who have now suddenly become relevant in a discussion of Rolle’s learning. His turn to the Desert Fathers abandons the question about formal learning so that he is now free to elide the question of holiness (which necessarily involves one’s manner of living) with that of “inspired learning” (where the question of living is less relevant). More significantly, to invoke such great saints is to conceal the depth of Rolle’s distaste for giving justifications for himself at all, whether for his knowledge or for his eremitism. He thinks that inspired knowledge is immune from all such inquiries. And what better than inspired knowledge to punctuate those dialogues in which neither part quite understands the terms of the other? The Holy Spirit will do just fine (whatever that means!).

In a certain way the disputes and dialogues in his work reflect a willingness to quarrel with fellow religious on those questions mentioned above. We can somewhat piece together parts of his conversations with monks. As we will see, they claimed at least that (1) monks who make a vow of obedience are superior to those who do not; (2) *stabilitas loci* is important for maintaining an internal *stabilitas mentis*; (3) solitude can be dangerous; (4) community breeds virtues better than solitude; and (5) monastic
excellence does not require extreme poverty. Quite traditionally, he defined two components of his life—his theology and monasticism—as interconnected even while he proceeded to obscure exactly how that connection was constituted. It was a theoretical gesture to refuse a determinate relationship with any other theory, thus divesting of clear and transparent content any dialogue with monastic virtue or error, heresy or theology.\textsuperscript{14}

He would make the point several times in his commentaries, the site of his theological and ascetic project.\textsuperscript{15} Lectio VI of his Super Novem Lectiones provides one of the clearest instances of Biblical imitatio in which his learning in theological and monastic matters was unregulated by the kind of dialogue that would show Rolle as either an exemplary hermit or potential heretic. The passage sounds like a fragmentary account of an interrogation that he underwent before his critics (perhaps local monks).

You call me, that is, you call me to give before you a reasoned account for my life, of all that I have done: what I have said, what I have thought, by what means, merit, and intention I have done so; to which station or place in the Church I have come, how I have obtained that status, how I have persevered and lived, what I have learned and taught and what sort of doctrine I have maintained.\textsuperscript{16}

Here Rolle is commenting on a reading from Job 14: 15-16 that allows him to pursue a number of theological points, reasons for his eremitic living and his own practice of monastic lectio. The figures of Job, the Psalmist and the OT prophets were the stand-bys of monastic theology: they showed the continuity of monastic thought and practice.\textsuperscript{17} But

\textsuperscript{14} Rolle’s analysis of eremitic affectivity in terms of regulated monastic living derives from the reformist impulses of the eleventh- and twelfth-century affectivity in which hermits, like Peter Damian, and cenobites figured prominently. See Giles Constable, The Reformation, esp. 257ff., and Ineke van’t Spijker, Fictions of the Inner Life (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004) esp. ch. 2; and Henrietta Leyser’s Hermits. On trends in England see D. Knowles, The Monastic Order, esp. chs. 9-11.

\textsuperscript{15} See Bryan, Looking Inward (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 2008), 75-104.

\textsuperscript{16} Rolle, Super Novem Lectiones, 233.18-234.2.

\textsuperscript{17} See J. Alford, “Biblical Imitatio in the Writings of Richard Rolle,” ELH 40 (1973): 1-23. For the complex, and partly Lollard, reception of Rolle’s imitation of the speaker in the Psalter a more recent study
in this commentary Rolle has also embedded a dialogue between himself and those who were questioning his learning, teaching and ascetic behavior. The questions are asked of course by God as he addresses Job, but as they are also addressed to Rolle himself we hear his contemporaries speaking, and speaking rather critically. It may not sound as though he were addressing anyone other than the divine “te,” but Rolle had a number of opponents and detractors who would challenge exactly those elements in his life for which he was here giving account to God: how he taught, what he learned and just whether he was a heretic (*in quali doctrina*). Rolle was being asked to account for his ascetic living and theology (*ab hac vita ad redendum racionem coram te de omnibus que egi*). The answer to all of these questions, when posed by contemporaries, would situate Rolle in some determinate relationship with monastic and ecclesiastical tradition.

But the answers he gives here, as elsewhere, showed some intransigence on his part. His response is densely packed as he brilliantly escapes both the claims that he has maintained foreign doctrines and the notion that his doctrines were in any way clear. First, he claims that he will not answer these questions, because he does not “dare” (*audebo*) answer a great God. This response is already incoherent, for elsewhere he uses the term *audax* in a highly positive way, repeatedly calling himself *heremita audax*. Rolle can produce and pursue the contradiction because he is answering both God (before whom he remains humble) and man (before whom he is *audax*). That is, he divests his discourse of coherence by maintaining very different interlocutors. So when questioned by man he refuses to answer as if in an effort to remain humble. But all the while this

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reticence is extremely *audax* since his refusal to answer is in fact a dismissal of those who wanted him to account for his allegiance to monastic and ecclesiastical traditions. After all, if Job were to answer God, what language could he speak? If Job keeps quiet, so too does Rolle, but only because this self-positioning allows him to remain in an unstable relationship with tradition and to sabotage a dialogue with religious detractors.

So he then says that he will not flee (*fugiam*) the above questions, even though he does precisely that. Elsewhere and repeatedly Rolle characterizes himself as *vagus et profugus*, so he is essentially pursing the same tactics of escape from dialogue that he refuses. The answers wisely imitate the error/wandering of Job, for it is in Biblical *imitatio* that he is pursuing theology. On the one hand, Job is famous for failing to understand the ways of God. If anyone were in danger of spreading error about God it was Job. Is Rolle in the same position? If he is in error like Job, is he not therefore a heretic with every reason to keep silent about “what I have learned and taught”? The matter is central to the questions of theology and ascetic practice. But again, Rolle grows all the more silent and resistant to a dialogic interaction that would entrap him either within or outside of monastic theology. Just like the instabilities of his spirit (neither *audax* nor *humilis*) and the instabilities of his behavior (neither stable nor flighty) he leaves us to wonder how and why his monastic *lectio* is neither in error nor orthodox. He simply refuses dialogue and its capacity for defining moral and theological standpoints.

Admittedly, he did understand the need to prevent an unfortunate amount of gossip that might earn him the dangerous label of heretic. The prologue to his *English* 

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18 He uses some form of this term three times in the prologue to the *Melos* alone, and it makes a relatively frequent appearance throughout the work (e.g. 124.31, 54.4, 16.22, 146.13, 126.26).
Psalter, for example, follows Peter Lombard and Augustine.\(^\text{19}\) He specifically observes that “in expounynge I fologh haly doctours,” so that he can avoid dangerous accusations.\(^\text{20}\) In ch. 6 of the Incendium Amoris he condemns a heresy—as it happens, that the Son is not coeternal with the Father, the heresy of Athanasius’ enemy Arius. Yet he is clearly having a bit of fun with his reader, for he writes this standard line of orthodoxy just after he had chided the learned for showing off their theological sophistication.\(^\text{21}\) His orthodox posturing in the English Psalter along with later Wycliffite appropriations of his English Psalter equally tend towards mischaracterization. Neither Wycliffite readers nor defenders of orthodoxy would get it quite right if they sought in Rolle a certain and unambiguous ally.

Fragilis Homo Sum: Theology, Dialogue and Eremitic Practice

In the text from Lectio VI Rolle gives only one unequivocal response to questions of his doctrine and monastic living: fragilis homo sum.\(^\text{22}\) As he will give no coherent response to any matter about his life and doctrine, his texts will insist on remaining fragmented (fragilis) by questions that are not afforded answers. Rolle left—or perhaps we should say “fled” (fugiam)—Oxford at the age of 19, though he must have familiarized himself with a variety theological matters and disputes. The influence of the Franciscans at Oxford in the early fourteenth century when Rolle would have been


\(^{21}\) Rolle, Incendium Amoris, chs. 5, 160 and 6.

\(^{22}\) Rolle, Super Novem Lectiones, 234.19.
studying is well known, and he could hardly have avoided close contact with the academic theology there. Indeed, Bonaventure, Bernard, Hugh of St. Victor and others influenced his thought and writings to some degree. He avoided quoting from them, producing with this absence the one recurrent theme of fragmentation in his ascetic and theological discussions. Here and elsewhere Rolle remains *fragilis*.

More polemically still, in *Lectio IV* of his *Super Novem Lectiones* Rolle criticizes those “heretics” and “envious” religious who have insisted that his reading of the sacred page is in error (*errasse*) and that he does not render its meaning appropriately (*congruenter non tractasse*).\(^{23}\) It is unclear which interpretations of which texts gave rise to this argument, but Rolle believes that he can identify the source of these objections: his opponents have assumed that because he does not hold an official ecclesiastical office he is therefore ill-equipped for the expository work with which he is engaged. But then Rolle considers that such opponents have also called into question the excellence of his eremitic vocation. Not only this, he adds, there are some who claim that the coenobitic life is superior to that of hermits.\(^ {24}\) If perhaps the object of such contending interpretations was that set of readings from Job within which Rolle was paraphrasing these criticisms, Rolle’s reply would make great sense. As we have seen, the *Super Novem Lectiones* developed a hermeneutics on *both* the sacred page and his own eremitism, reading the one in terms of the other. Thus he advises his readers (secular clergy in this case) not to scorn his words simply because he is lowly (i.e. a hermit). It is perhaps a subtle point, but one that was designed to demolish the arguments of anyone

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\(^{24}\) *Ibid.* What this last claim in particular has to do with his reading practices I explore more directly below, and indeed Rolle is himself elsewhere more explicit.
who should disagree with him on all matters hermeneutic, monastic and theological. One
notices, moreover, that the above accusation of hermeneutic error receives no firm
explanation by Rolle of his theology.

His reading of asceticism was also strikingly at variance with traditional
interpretations. In the *Incendium Amoris* he follows readings common from the
Egyptian tradition when he relates a passage from the Book of Lamentations specifically
to his eremitism (*a solitaria conversatione*): “it will be good for that man who has born
the yoke of the Lord from his youth; the solitary will sit and be silent and raise himself
above himself.” This sitting and remaining silent—conduct enjoined by rules on
physical stability and silence—here both culminate in and serve contemplative bliss.

Afar different end is served by a similar collocation from the *Verba Seniorum* and the
twelfth-century *Life* of Christina of Markyate echoing that work. In the latter text, the
trials of seclusion in Roger’s cell are described as a special training for the rigors of
solitude that Christina desired since her youth. The verbal collocation in the Rollean text
(*sedebit...tacebit...levabit*) both recalls but radically alters the trial of suffering referred
to in the *Life*, the *Verba Seniorum* and elsewhere: “sedere, torqueri et tacere.”

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25 Just prior to his use of Jeremiah he mentions John the Baptist, both of whom had long served early
imaginations of desert *ascesis*. See J. Leclercq (“Eremus et Eremita”) who discusses the uses of Elijah and
John the Baptist. The Old Testament prophets, and quotation from their texts, offered the exemplarity
sought by early eremitism (e.g. in Cassian’s *Conferences* and the *Verba Seniorum*).

dicit: *Bonum est viro cum portaverit iugum Domini ab adolescencia sua. Sedebit solitarius et tacebit et*
*levabit se supra se.*”

27 This point is made clear by the context within which he places the passage. The reference is immediately
prefaced by appeals to *fervor* and *dulcor*, and then immediately followed by a reading that “levabit se supra
se” is identifiable with affective contemplation (“sicilicet per desiderium et contemplacionem eternorum”).

28 C. H. Talbot, *Life*, 104. In the *Verba Seniorum*, PL 73, we find such moments of penitential endurance
that combine silence and physical stability: “Oportet fugere homines, et sedere in cella, et pro peccatis
iugiter lamentari; et quod super omnes virtutes est, tam linguam coercere quam ventrem” (801A). And
The relationship between the quality of a hermit’s *conversatio* and his willingness to endure God’s yoke (*iugum*) is fundamental in the discourse of eremitic self-governance. For the author of the *Life*, Christina was to imitate the rule of the desert and endure torturous pains, since what was at stake was her willingness to conform to monastic customs, most notably that of obedience (in this case to Roger). This is also how Peter Damian would have understood the text from Lamentations. But the passage from Rolle’s work is cut off from a traditional discussion of monastic obedience. Indeed the absence of ecclesiastical superiors from his own life conditions his approach to the conversations on discipline and obedience that preceded him. In Rolle’s use of this passage, a prescribed set of behaviors is enjoined on no one, nor can he set Jeremiah’s precepts in relation with a human authority to which he might be answerable.

We find here a significantly different understanding of the means-end relationship with respect to the behaviors enjoined on hermits: his use of the passage from Lamentations argues that rules governing silence and physical immobility are the means to an end that could not be anticipated by any ideas offered by monastic tradition. But it would be a serious misrepresentation of the eremitism of Christina and the Egyptian hermits to suggest that identical arguments justified their behavior. With them the

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Aelred writes, “Tu sede, tu tace, tu sustine” (*De Institutis*, 179.36). As she sits in Roger’s cell “twisted” and without the possibility of escape, Christina must out-match the discipline and obedience of the desert. Damian reads “levabit se super se” with the same attention to mystical contemplation that Rolle exhibited; see his letter to the hermit Leo of Sitria, Letter 28. Elsewhere his vitriolic attacks on monastic corruption (*Letter* 165, 188-9) reemphasize the idea of burden from Lamentations where the recalcitrant, corrupt soul cannot ascend contemplative heights. For example, he writes against some urban hermits who deplore the practice of flagellation (*Letter* 45). Rolle’s works offer no such contrast, for the idea of correction is notably absent in many of his constructions of eremitic living.

Cf. Oliger, “Regulae Tres,” where the *Dublin Rule* uses the same passage from Lamentations and nearly ignores the phrase “levabit se supra se” with a curt “meditando” (177). The emphasis here is on discipline, particularly on strict silence, and not on affectivity. In the *Regula Reclusorum* only the first part (“portavit *iugum Domini*) is used; Oliger, “Regula,” 60.
regular conduct to which Rolle alludes is an end in itself, and a highly corporeal end at
that.\(^{31}\) Even so, he manages to smuggle in an association between himself and his
forbears without overtly subscribing to the traditional link between any sort of conduct,
discipline or obedience. He is committed to evoking eremitic exemplarity while
preventing traditional notions about the body and interiority from disrupting the
relationship he wishes to establish between himself and tradition.

The conclusion to the passage (*levabit se supra se*) is lexically traditional, but
Rolle makes this contemplative and de-contextualized self-raising the essential
component to such passages, and he finds in the self-enclosed and self-sustaining
pronouns a defense for *singularitas* and his rupture with tradition. The passage’s chief
import lies in the hermeneutic and behavioral singularity it affords him.\(^{32}\) Neither the
raising (*levabit*) nor the yoke of discipline (*iugum*) compares with a reflexivity that
bespeaks both the coherence of self-identity (*se…se…*) and the fractures of misreading.
Compared with standard readings of the Egyptian monasticism with which he associated
himself, Rolle’s “suffering” was hardly in imitation of that tradition. He was never seen
observing the exaggerated austerities of a Heinrich Suso or a Christina Mirabilis, to say
the least. His thinking about desert *anachoresis* was complex, and irreducible to any one
of the traditions to which he refers.

\(^{31}\) The body is very much at the center of the Egyptian tradition. Cassian’s *Conferences* use the same
passage with “quia” rather than “et:” “because he has taken it upon himself,” (18.6 [CSEL 512.25-513.1]).
In general, the passage is quite common in readings of monastic solitude; e.g. Peter the Venerable’s *Ad
Gislebertum*, Letter 20.29; and Peter Cantor’s *Commendatio solitudinis loci* in the *Verba Abbreviatum*, ch.
72.

\(^{32}\) I do not concur with Ralph Hanna’s analysis that for Rolle the “divine presence […] sanctions anything,”
in his paper “Will’s Work,” in *Written Work: Langland, Labor, and Authorship*, ed.Steven Justice and
Kathryn Kerby-Fulton (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 44. His use of traditions
bespeaks a more complex regulatory thought that takes intelligibility itself as its object of analysis.
Why Don’t You Sing?: Canor, Fractured Narratives and Dialogues

The one category by which Rolle justifies his interpretation of eremitic singularity is music. In a scene described in the *Incendium*, Rolle finds himself at Mass where he defiantly refuses to sing, because singing would offer evidence that, as a hermit, he was fulfilling his liturgical responsibilities. This was the site of yet another confrontation with detractors, for Rolle answers the question posed to him “why don’t you sing?” with a gesture to a kind of inner music, claiming that he has no need of material, corporeal music. He calls this music *canor*. The result was his silence in choir, just as he had been silent and resistant about so many other matters. *Canor* is yet another means for Rolle to multiply the ruptures between himself and ecclesiastical and monastic tradition. So in the autobiographical passage from the *Incendium* his liturgical vocal singing of psalms is interrupted by a heavenly singing that Rolle would eventually internalize: “For while I was sitting in the same chapel, I tried as I was able to sing my nightly psalms before eating, I felt a ringing of psalms, or rather of singing, come over me.” As we have seen in Rolle’s auto-biographical sketches of his conversion, this description is as fragmentary as that in the *Officium*. To repeat,

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34 The record of *canor* on the Latin page is not merely a linguistic sign reflective of divine love, but also constitutive of that love. Cf. Watson’s discussion, *Invention*, 171ff. and Rita Copeland’s conclusions in “Rolle and Rhetorical Theory,” 76.
35 The importance of liturgical behavior here draws upon but significantly alters an injunction from, for example, the rule of Augustine that the song in one’s mouth should be recorded on the heart: *Praeceptum* 7, in George Lawless, *Augustine of Hippo and His Monastic Rule* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).
Then the living spirit of the Father of virtue came upon me, and it suddenly caught me up so that in solitude I separated myself from secular comforts. Then he marvelously transformed my mind from grief into song.37

Rolle ends his confusing narrative with “song” because he will suggest everywhere in his writings that anachoresis is constituted through inner music.38

We must consider just what this last point means and how it relates with the first, just how music, the hermit’s life and a fragmentary narrative interconnect. Canor is his term that names song or music in general. Anything musical, like for example his lyric poetry, was canor. So too was the liturgical singing in which he may or may not have engaged as a hermit. But there was still more music or canor. For since his prose compositions, written in a highly alliterative Latin, had a musical quality to them, such texts bespoke canor. The above explanation, if one can call it so, is an instance of canor.

Yet canor was not exactly any of these. It was a function of his eremitism that had at least three additional meanings beyond simply music. First, it is no coincidence that his Psalter, lyrics, prose and discussions about hearing music all refer to the practice of making music. Nevertheless, it is also important that we cannot determine just what role liturgical music, or any other kind of musical texts or sounds, played in his life. Canor was music, but more importantly it was the fact that music has neither an exclusively

37 Rolle, Melos Amoris, 3.19-22.
38 The Ancrene Wisse and Aelred of Rievaulx’s De Institunis are the more obvious examples among the several extant rules for solitaries in England that reproduce this traditional monastic association between inner and outer governance. The association is standard in the Vitae Patrum, the writings of John Cassian and beyond. As discussed below, some of Rolle’s own writings, notably the Form of Living, pay superficial homage to this tradition.
physical and measurable element, nor an *exclusively* indeterminate and ineffable element to it. *Canor* was his refusal to define music by a particular category like liturgy or poetry. Second, in its function as music that was also no particular category of music, *canor* was also Rolle’s word for untranslatability itself: the claim that his interpretation of ascetic virtue could not finally be translated by the terminologies of monastic tradition. For example, as *canor* was both a music he heard from heaven and liturgical singing, it was not quite definable even though both kinds of music have everything to do with his eremitism. Since it was and was not the hermit’s liturgical singing (i.e. of the Psalter), it stood as a kind of proof that just as he could not translate his musical experience in specific terms, so too his eremitism likewise could not be specifically translated.

This brings us to the third and most difficult component of *canor*. While Cassian valued dialogues between ascetics who did not necessarily understand each other, *canor* marked the end of Rolle’s dialogue with monastic tradition. This is not because for Rolle such dialogue was tedious, but because *singularitas* precluded it. Most importantly, it was Rolle’s means for legitimating inimitability *per se*. It was *singularitas* in a different, intensified form. *Canor* was his practice of reaffirming the hermit’s intent. But it shows that the dialogue between a coenobitic monk who lives by *stabilitas* and the hermit who legitimizes *singularitas* cannot take place because it cannot be imagined. Like others before him, Rolle could be expected to explain his monastic vocation by interpreting traditions in a way consistent with the final ends (both behavioral and spiritual) at which those traditions aimed. In the name of *canor* Rolle refused to do so in any determinable manner. Others cannot hear Rolle’s music like he can. Here again we return to the
fragmented dialogue that Rolle’s regulatory theory posited, for the subject of his ascetic writings is that the individual solitary and monastic traditions are mutually unintelligible.

Liturgical music was displaced by its being inscribed on the alliterative page of the *Melos*, where it was neither strictly material nor spiritual, neither audible nor internal. *Canor* was a version of his appeal to tradition and to condemn it, thus making his relationship to tradition effectively invisible. The contradiction formed the core of his work, as does every attempt in the *Melos* to define *anachoresis*. What interests us here is the alliterative, and hence musical quality of its prose. Exactly how he understands the (apparently) inherent associations between writing, music and the reading of the desert (*desertum*) or Egyptian tradition is fundamentally unclear. In *canor* we find a positive effort to avoid translating a tradition into words familiar to that tradition.

> hunc heremitam vocabitis…qui longe recessit ab humano aspectu interius intentus, desertum expeciit quod caro non colit nec in quo bestia balat, manens in melos, sine socio solus in monte mirando.\(^3^9\)

The musical alliteration (*humano aspect interius intentus*…*manens in melos, sine socio solus*…) is central to Rolle’s point, and hints at some liturgical relevance. But how does he understand the relationship between the various elements (liturgical, authorial, monastic, Egyptian) by which this passage is constituted? If he intends something like Egyptian monasticism, he might have said so in terms far more immediately intelligible.\(^4^0\)

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\(^4^0\) It is important to distinguish between an “inner desert” that is further removed from centers of community (and therefore more geographically internal to the desert), as against the spiritual desert existing
So again, intelligibility itself is his theme, and his so-called “rhapsodic” alliterations lie at the heart of the matter. And it is important to notice that his musical texts are without narrative structure and set themselves against both the hagiographical narratives we have seen imposed on Robert of Knaresborough, as well as the narrative which the idea of tradition presupposes. As its readers know, one might add to or rearrange parts of the *Melos* without altering its function. His appeal to eremitic tradition in the above passage is designed to show how alliterative music as *canor* and his inheritance of monastic traditions cannot possibly interact in any coherent way.\(^{41}\)

When describing his mystical experience of inner music (*canor*) as continual,\(^ {42}\) for example, he justifies that music with reference to monastic stability, but also forces new questions of just what he means by stability. Far from being an empty analogy, this association forms part of his inquiries on discipline and aim at directing traditional discussions of such discipline in ways that make those discussions more rather than less meaningful both for his mysticism and for his eremitism. His inquiries into a discipline conceived mystically were, like Augustine’s projects, about the ethics of reading whereby “a form of discourse and a form of life had to make a harmonious whole.”\(^ {43}\) Precisely this would be the essence of ascetic living, of singular love. For Rolle, eremitic

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\(^{41}\) *Judica Me*, ed. John Philip Daly (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 1984), provides an illustration of this point. There Rolle repeats the traditional truism that *anchoresis* is difficult at the outset. He then defines its qualities at midpoint and at its conclusion. The narrative structure of ascent is obvious. However, Rolle was not at an endpoint when writing the text, nor does he consistently keep to the narrative of initial hardship that is later displaced by pleasure. For example, at the outset of the *Melos* when narrating his calling to the solitary life, he does not clearly constitute a period of difficulty (*labor*) like we found in the *Judica Me*, but instead halts that narrative movement which presupposes progress, error and correction.

\(^{42}\) Rolle, *Incendium Amoris*, 182.8: “Constantissima.”

*singularitas* was fragmentation itself and music—neither discursive nor formless—was its means of expression. *Canor* becomes for him as much a guiding and directing form of living (understood liturgically and mystically) as were the demands of discipline. This pattern is also directly relevant to, because replicated in, his formulations of *canor*, particularly in its role as alliterative Latin and in his refusal to sing at choir. In fact, this episode in choir returns us to the connections between music, affectivity and eremitic *conversatio*. His incorporeal song is a version of the monastic structures of liturgical singing, solitude, and obedience that he is simultaneously critiquing, imitating and displacing. *Canor* is both an analogy to liturgical tradition and a protest against that tradition, because the struggle with coherence implied by that position was a question asked and answered by music itself.

Rolle knows of his responsibilities to his community at Mass and to those precepts that regulate the inner and outer character of hermits’ lives, precepts which provided regulatory structure just as communal singing at Mass submitted the hermit to a formal liturgy. But as the form of his *Melos* makes abundantly clear, imbedding a carefully patterned music into his prose was a way for Rolle to appeal to “structure” itself—and hence its monastic form as obedience, silence, poverty and so on—while

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44 Again, Rolle is reimagining the work of his intellectual forbears such as Bernard and William of St. Thierry, both of whom developed the great monument of mysticism in the twelfth century and belonged to monastic communities just as ardently devoted to the ideology of the regular life. The form of conduct that could unify these two structures was song—whether read, sung or heard—made available in the liturgy of daily worship and in the performance of the mystical text, which often took as its object the Song of Songs. What the Psalter, the Song of Songs along with whatever other music Rolle used during his liturgical day all have in common is that they permit his theory of *canor* understood in terms of performance. He would reproduce these commitments in his English Psalter for Margaret Kirkeby for whom the Psalter would be an important part of her daily liturgy. See also Bruce Holsinger, *Music, Body, and Desire in Medieval Culture* (Stanford: University Press, 2001), esp. 61-136; and I. Spijker, *Fictions of the Inner Life*, 59-231.

45 In his English meditations where we see him observing the offices and where it is strongly suggested that he composed some of his own material for his liturgical day.
cutting ties with that same framework. What his behavior in choir suggests is that he finds incorporeal canor to be just as viable a response to the injunction to sing to God in a determinate, structured manner as the liturgy itself. The radical suggestion here is that his form of living contains no clear connections to exterior structures of regulation.

The justification for his daily living is that same daily experience, but one that is now identified with a participation in music and his failed conversations with opponents. Rolle’s regula radically rewrites the ideology of writing rules. And it is clear why it makes sense for Rolle to initiate a discussion of canor in his Melos with a description of his conversio and a quarrel with monks about eremitism. What links the form and content here is a music of text, body and spirit. The arguments of spiritual superiority by the monks are analogous with communal liturgical singing (like the Mass liturgy) insofar as both are exposed to the danger of misrecognizing external forms as necessarily identifiable with a spiritual essence. Canor is both Rolle’s antidote for this mistake and an argument that the true liturgy of a rule is a music that displaces such contingencies.

The Melos, Canor, and Monastic Debate

The prologue of the Melos Amoris, a postil on the Song of Songs, begins the work of using canor as a rejection of monastic debate and its narrative of continuity. To repeat, we only half-hear his dialogues with monks and clerics because his own indeterminate relationship to theological and monastic traditions meant that such dialogues with others would be only partly constituted. But why should a solitary converse, let alone debate, with others at all? The chief function of the Melos is to make
an appeal to *debate as monastic tradition*, and then to cut the line of communication that links Rolle to both. He concludes about all questions on monastic excellence that the righteous ascetic is led by God *ad claram quietem* (a parody of monastic silence). As Cassian said, the monk’s goal is not physical. He therefore need not seek out a desert as if a place of residence were at all relevant to spiritual *ascesis*. Rolle derives the corollary: residence in a monastery, monastic dialogue (or debate), and monastic tradition are also dispensable means to ascetic perfection.

In the *Melos* his claims for *canor* as a reading of tradition are critically at stake. 46 Continuing the tradition that compared the relative merits of the solitary and coenobitic lives, the prologue necessarily voices the old argument that hermits live better lives than those in a monastery. Rolle clearly adopted this (thoroughly traditional) argument when conferring with monks who could eloquently make a case for the superiority of coenobitic life by reference to its neatly articulated system of obedience. Rolle’s response to this confrontation with the monks may have been to point out, as he does later in the *Melos*, that monastic obedience to abbatial authority is not necessarily superior to obedience to God. 47 He writes, “But Augustine did not say that those who have monastic superiors are the best, but rather that he had not found anyone better than those who lived in monasteries.” 48 He might also have noted his identity as a *pauper Christi*—an otherwise favorite term of his and one that is common to eremitical polemic—that as part of their self-governance hermits submit to a Christ-imitating ideal

46 The text is from his later period; for the chronology on Rolle’s major works see Watson, *Invention*, 278.
47 Rolle, *Melos Amoris*, 147.27ff.
of poverty more perfectly than their coenobitic brothers “in habitu obedienciariorum.”

But since Rolle was arguing with monks who made the same appeal to a standard of poverty, he grows flustered and, impatient with them, breaking off the dialogue.

As a consequence, his descriptions of the solitary life, with which he flanks this paraphrase of the coenobitic stance, combine to make all monastic discourse of formal regulation almost wholly irrelevant, dismissing much more than just those monks who have confronted him about his living. His method is to limit the relevance of his solitary experience, a move that is assisted by the esoteric quality of alliterative canor. While recording his dialogues with monks he also speaks in that music whose very existence argued against dialogue.

Then the living spirit of the Father of virtue came upon me, and it suddenly caught me up so that in solitude I separated myself from secular comforts (in solitudinem me separarem a solacio seculari). Then he marvelously transformed my mind from grief into song (mirifice mutavit a merore in melos), the magnificence of which gift I feared to make known, lest speaking about it should bring me down again. But then with this there appeared before me others in the habit of those observing monastic obedience, [making] arguments that they love more ardently than those who had not been gathered into their numbers, and that they offer before God a sacrifice of greater merit.

He had a debate on how ascetic status related to ascetic merit. This much is clear.

Although the specifics of the argument need not detain us here, I suspect that most of the above-listed points of contention between him and his monastic neighbors formed the subject of this particular interaction. The essence of this passage, however, is what cannot be translated either for us or for the monks: in solitudinem me separarem a solacio seculari. That is, he still has something left to say. In fact, his most important

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49 Appeals of this sort are ubiquitous and are found in many discussions of reformist thought. So too, Rolle frequently characterizes himself as “pauper” (e.g. 41.6, 180.7).

50 Rolle, Melos Amoris, 4.3-6.
argument in support of the eremitic position was never expressed; Rolle can only gesture towards an argument for the terms of his victory necessitate that he not be able to express it in dialogical form. He must silence, truncate and fracture the dialogue because divine silence (*canor et quies*) and its capacity for interrupting language with apophatic music (the alliteration is extreme!) forms part of his formal argument.

This discussion is not two-sided, but truncated. The musical continuity of the above Latin stands in contrast to the now voiceless voices of his monastic opponents. Whatever the nature of their initial conversation, Rolle shows the few vital elements supporting the claims of his interlocutors: the monks’ *conversatio* (their membership within *this* community rather than another) and the obedience informing it is inextricably yoked to their spiritual excellence (*ardencius*) by which they win more merit before God than do hermits. This response is consistent with prior discussions on the relative merits of the eremitic and coenobitic lives. Centrally at stake when earlier writers and communities addressed an individual’s transition from the coenobitic life to the eremitic, or vice versa, was the question of discipline and obedience.⁵¹

As this last question both necessitated and produced a dialogue, Rolle gives a highly idiosyncratic sublimation of that dialogue. The inevitable outcome to such a dialogue between *anachoresis* and the coenobium need not have been the victory of one over the other. By its very structure that dialogue stood to correct naïve claims to the traditional and narrative-based superiority of coenobitic monasticism over all other varieties. The continuities of song (*canor*) were also a fragmented polemic. Like the

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⁵¹ Arguments about the superiority of the contemplative life often depended on the notion that the active life provided the discipline necessary for spiritual advancement. See Constable, *Three Studies in Medieval Religious and Social Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), esp. pt. 1.
Officium, he reflects on his calling by God to the eremitical life in an apologetic, metacritical mode that sets the hermit against the coenobitic monk (i.e. the representative of tradition’s ideologically consistent narrative). In his own text, Rolle is engaged in a dialogue with monastic opponents whose structure he has made fragmentary. Insofar as Rolle both supports and overturns the ideology of stability he controls and disables the objections made by those monks, rendering an otherwise coherently dialogic engagement with coenobitic monasticism a fragmentary critique of continuity itself.

In the opening passages of the Melos, Rolle emphasizes the limited, secretive and above all personal character of his eremitic vocation. As noted above, the prologue excludes those coenobitic detractors by defining a tightly circumscribed area of experience with God. As such his argument rejected the stable and determinate regulation as conceived by that coenobitic body. However, the passage’s final slight of hand is to make this secrecy an essential feature of solitary living so that the mysterious and personalized quality to his description of solitary living appears less polemical than fundamental. Such maneuvers allow Rolle to disassociate others from his personal brand of solitude, for the secret of his inner desert is that it is immanently secret, and thus unavailable to critique or examination by the traditional monasticism of those “in habitu obedientiariorum.” While saturating the prologue with the language of concealment, each new utterance seems also to work cumulatively, creating an ever narrower sense of what is understood by inner love, virtue and the solitary life.

Then the living spirit of the Father of virtue came upon me, and it suddenly caught me up so that in solitude I separated myself from secular comforts. Then he marvelously transformed my mind from grief into song, the magnificence of which gift I feared to make known, lest speaking about it should bring me down
again. [...] Of course, [the monks] did not consider the ways I went and how I kept silent among the contentious assembly, desiring to be kept by that with which the Creator has united me to himself. Let no one deny, unless it be the serpent that aims to devour the weak, that I continue for the sake of love to sit in solitude, rapt in song, though not in body, but instead truly by a spirit more lovely than I am able to say. He who dwells among the many is without this, as are certainly all who have not determined to flee the world. It is, then, plain that solitaries are more honorably elected, for they do not have partisans among the argumentative, and since they burn more ardently with love and sing the sweetest song in their heart.\textsuperscript{52}

The passage illustrates further the interaction between his linguistic and theoretical formulations, when Rolle looks to articulate the dialogue and community from which he is absent, he resorts to the alliterations of \textit{canor}: “cum non \textit{habeant} applaudentes eis \textit{inter argumentantes}.” To the extent that such Latin is meant to communicate a set of arguments it lies in tension with itself, being both self-referential and a form of discourse (i.e. speaking) which Rolle has already foresworn: “which gift I feared to make known, lest speaking about it should bring me down again” (\textit{quod metuo monstrare munus et multiplicare magnificenciam, ne multiloquium me minuerit}). Since his gift is replicated by a Latin discourse which is intelligible to those same \textit{argumentantes}, the attempt at concealment has utterly failed. Still, it is not wholly clear what part of monastic theory and culture Rolle has displaced, since \textit{canor} both appeals to and rejects the same

\textsuperscript{52} Rolle, \textit{Melos Amoris}, 3.19-4-17: “Siquidem supervenit spiritus spirans a Patre pietatis, et subito submisit ut in solitudinem me separarem a solacio seculari. Deinde mentem tam mirifice mutavit a merore in melos, quod metuo monstrare munus et multiplicare magnificenciam, ne multiloquium me minuerit. Attamen inter hec alii in habitu obedienciariorum michi apparuerunt in argumentis quod ardencius amant quam aliquis inter eos non assumptus, et maiors meriti coram Maiestate mittunt munificenciam. Quippe non cognoverunt quomodo curcurri et a contenciosa conticui collocucione, contineri cupiens in hoc quod Conditor michi copulavit. Non contradicat quis, nisi sit draco qui debiles devorare desudat, quod continuans propter charitatem in solitudine sedere capietur in cantacionem, non corporalem, sed profectoquis spiritu pulcriorem quam potero predicare; qua carere constat cum multis morantes, imo utique omnes qui non habent animum ut ab universis abcedant. Ergo hoc aspicitur quod anachorite honorifice assumentur, cum non habeant applaudentes eis inter argumentantes, quia amplius uruntur igne amoris et carmen charissimum canunt in corde.”
discourse that constitutes that culture. The alliterations are the site at which it is no longer possible to pursue dialogues with coenobitic monks.

If his constructions of musical secrecy and discipline seem antagonistic to that task of managing monastic tradition, it is because the coherence of tradition and the possibility of dialogue are at issue. Any exploration of how hermits should be judged cannot now be conducted from the standpoint of official regulation, for that position is both overshadowed by the sheer force of Rolle’s language of divine love and made redundant by the authority with which he invests that love. Note that it is not on account of their excellent living (i.e. the form of their living) that anachorite are welcomed into the presence of God; rather, their internal burning for God has already justified both them, and therefore, the manner in which they conduct their lives. We encounter essentially the same argument (structured even in the same manner) in his Judica Me where the emphasis on concealed joy (gaudium) has the same cumulative effect we see in Melos of sidestepping the very terms of exteriority, discipline and behavior.53

He then claims that those who argue with him about the merits of the coenobitic life simply fail to understand God’s favor towards hermits. Completely ignoring the question of monastic obedience, he refuses to offer assurances that his own life accords with traditional standards of behavior and regulation applied to hermits. To offset the

53 Rolle, Judica Me, 15.22-16.3: “Therefore if the desert delights you such that you should live in solitude or if you firmly hold to that singulare propositum, you should know that you will have, at first, some difficult work. But gradually you will grow in the love of Christ and will find unspeakable joy. Thus because of the difficult beginning no wise person will leave the wide and pleasurable path. At the outset we are grievously beset, but at the middle and end we deeply enjoy the comfort of heaven” [Quamobrem si vos delectat heremus ut in solitudine habitetis, vel saltem si singulare propositum teneatis iugiter, scitote quod in principio durum laborem habebitis. Sed paulatim in amore Christi crescentes ineffabile gaudium invenietis. Verumptamen propter asperum introitum, nullus sapiens spaciosam et delectabilem derelinquet viam. In inicio graviter pungimur, sed in medio et in fine celestii suavitate delectamur].
warnings that the solitary has no one to help him up (\textit{sublevo}) should he fall, Rolle is fond of observing how God in his mercy supports and raises him up continually.\textsuperscript{54} So while he certainly understood the necessity to address these problems, he decided to minimize the authority of his detractors by maximizing his appeal to God’s favor. This move suggests that he has decidedly shifted his attention away from the very notion of disciplined living as understood by his official religious culture.

\textit{Ius, Iudicium, Iustitia: The End of Episcopal and Monastic Judgment}

Sometime around the close of the fourteenth century the hermit Thomas Basset made a profoundly felt \textit{Defense} of Rolle whose writings were being criticized. A certain Carthusian reader, the impetus for Basset’s writing such a defense, had repudiated Rolle’s work on the grounds that Rolle had sought to make men judges of themselves (“\textit{videlicet quod videre tuo facit homines iudices sui}”).\textsuperscript{55} A reading of his major Latin works certainly lends the sense that readers are being invited to privilege their own subjective judgments over those of the Church in spiritual matters pertaining to them. It is nearer the point and less speculative to conclude that, being his own initial reader, Rolle primarily wanted to make himself his own judge. And yet we must understand that he did not want to produce even that effect in his writings: he continually tries to create the impression that he obediently falls in line with what he imagines to be God’s supreme

\textsuperscript{54} A common warning derived from a reading of Solomon (Eccles. 4:10); e.g. \textit{Ancrene Wisse} (pt. IV.1043) and the \textit{Regula Reclusorum} (prologus).

judgment (*iudicium*). This obedience parodies the monastic discourse about and valuing of *obediencia* to abbatial authority, and therefore, to externally authorized judgment. It is obvious why Rolle must do this: the *Rule* notes that disobedience hamstrings humility, the virtue at the center of discipline itself.\(^\text{56}\) He explicitly recognized that the distinction between divine and ecclesiastical authority may indeed be made ambiguous, and that he can subordinate the latter to the former without implying an outright rejection of ecclesiastical authority. It is easy to see why his comments on God’s role as his supreme judge could raise precisely those questions that likely occurred to that Carthusian so upset by Rolle’s writings.\(^\text{57}\)

Take, for example, a moment in his *Judica Me*—text written to a clerical friend whose judgment was required when hearing confession—where he provides the most specific and thorough defense of his change of cells. As we know, rules for hermits generally transmit in some form the traditional monastic value of *stabilitas*, which in Rolle’s day was perhaps more important than any jurisdictional concerns by the episcopate about hermits moving from one cell to another. His descriptions suggest that a combination of intransigence on his part, a search for silence, and perhaps some unfortunate conduct towards women prompted his move.\(^\text{58}\) Strangely, he is anxious about his change of cell even while insisting that he is under no obligation to remain in the same location. If the latter were true according to all standards of obligation, his

\(^\text{56}\) On the degrees of humility see ch. 7 of Benedict’s *Rule* [CSEL 43-57].

\(^\text{57}\) It is worth considering in light of Kathryn Kerby-Fulton’s recent study whether Rolle’s works received the sort of inspection at Carthusian hands as other texts of the period: *Books Under Suspicion* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2006), xlv, n.134. Both Walter Hilton and the *Cloud*-author are traditionally read as correcting the brand of affectivity they see in Rolle, though these writers to my knowledge do not raise questions of discipline in this connection.

anxiety and the consequent defense of his behavior would be unnecessary. (But note that the several causes for his move would frustrate rather than facilitate criticisms of his behavior that Rolle would find difficult to defend himself against). Still, his appeal to God’s *iudicium* conceals just how significant his behavior is for discussions of eremitic governance external to this text. The contention, which concludes his discussion, that his life will necessarily be guided by God’s will essentially releases him of agency, and hence also of culpability, in his actions. His patrons, the Church and even he himself are ultimately disqualified as judges of his life. Was it this sort of self-justification that his Carthusian reader felt was dangerously transferable from Rolle to his readers, and perhaps to Basset himself?  

Rolle deploys the language of personal devotion to God’s judgment as a way to force an end to a discussion he had initiated, a discussion of rule-oriented matters that had as much claim on his obedience as his notion of God’s judgment. *Judica Me* begins its polemical project with the support of the Psalter, the work at the center of monastic customs especially in the *Rule.*

> Judge me, God, and set my cause apart from an unholy people. I want to be judged by the God who examines my heart, and not by the man whose manner of seeing is limited to what appears externally. For he who presumes to pass judgment on the secrets of the heart, may he know that without a doubt he will be in error." 

Written as a postil on Psalm 42:1, Rolle’s commentary warns against a cleric’s passing superficial judgment on the people whose confession he is hearing. One cannot rely on

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59 Indeed, Thomas Basset himself (*ibid.*, 190) would discuss the extent to which he can be held answerable to God’s *iudicium* and that of his reader.  
60 Rolle, *Judica Me*, 1.1-5: “Judica me deus et discerne causam meam de gente non sancta. A deo qui scrutatur cor et renes volo iudicari, non ab homine qui solummodo videt ea que exterius apparent, quoniam qui de alienis cordibus iudicare presumit, indubitanter sciatur quod in errorem cadit.”
outward appearances when judging on serious matters of sin, a problem rooted deep in the heart. Clearly the “I” of these lines is also Rolle himself, who hereby rejects those passing judgment on him solely in the light of exterior (exterius) considerations. By nearly equating the ideas of humanness, exteriority and error (“homine… exterius… errorem”), not only do such analogies mischaracterize how the Church thought of the exteriority of confession, but they also constitute an eccentric dismissal of the fact that hermits are subject to external judgment by the Church, and on the basis of exteriors (i.e. their verbal and physical behaviors). Rolle here refuses the monastic tradition of discipline that insisted on the association. The distinction between iudicium as correction and iudicium as approval helps his refusal to associate outer with inner concerns. While an outside authority need not be identical or even compatible with humans and their judgments, both rely on the human proneness to error, and it is precisely this sort of judgment that he impugns. Whether or not he is officially bound by the authority of his bishop, he has already established the arguments about judgment necessary to curtail that authority.  

His success at resituating iudicium in his own terms renders his movement from one cell to another the inconsequential matter that he wishes to make it, but not because physical movement was of any interest to him to begin with. Indeed, if my argument is correct, Rolle recognized that it is the notion of judgment that relates to both his defense of himself and to the ideology of controlling the inner and outer lives of solitaries. He brilliantly exploits the traditional pairing of regulation and judgment in ways that provide

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61 It is interesting to note that Rolle and his bishop may have been united by their disinterest in the issue of traveling hermits as a problem, but certainly not for the same reasons. See Watson, *Invention*, 42-3.
him with more elastic formulations of eremitic living than he encountered in his reading. Paradoxically, when Rolle then uses the notion of judgment to juxtapose human and divine judicial structures, using his submission to the latter to justify displacing the former, he also implies just how compelled he is by the need to obey human judgment. The absence of external human judgment in Rolle’s writings is an absence that he felt and to which he needed to respond. On the one hand, whatever his detractors have argued, for Rolle the iudicium of God is supreme. And yet since this divine judgment also implied the presence of a standard to which Rolle must hold himself, the language he uses to discuss that standard significantly puts itself in dialogue with the standard of obedience observed by Rolle’s challengers.

Peter Damian’s anxiety about his adoption of the contemplative life over the active one offers an instructive analogy, for as he did, one must consider how the choice of a spiritual vocation prevents one from cultivating and performing certain virtues. For Rolle this was clearly the virtue of obedience. And it was perhaps because of this difficulty that he would address Jesus as his guardian (custos), for this term in its nominal and verbal forms is made to do the work in his Super Novem Lectiones that it performed in traditional monastic contexts. So Rolle does have some investment in the terms of obedience and guardianship dictated by his coenobitic interlocutors. For him, however, nothing other than canor afforded that guidance, and the alliterative Latin had the same authority to break off his dialogues with tradition while maintaining ties to the notion of coherence and continuity.

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62 Damian, Letter 8, 100ff.
63 See esp. 146-7, in commentary on Job 7.20.
As readers we are provided with mere fragments of a dialogue, or with the potential of one that is fully constituted. At the heart of the matter lies the inexpressibility of canor; terms highly sonorous and non-conceptual (rather than genuinely discursive) promise the breakdown of dialogues and the eventual dominance of conversations only partially constituted, conversations only half-finished and half-heard. Rolle embraced injunctions on a hermit’s governance in ways that neither wholly reject nor cohere with traditional commitments to discipline qua discipline. Discussions on hermits’ meditative freedom did not generally permit the issue of discipline to go unmentioned, or become so thoroughly subsumed under assumptions about the preeminence of affectivity. But we not only see precisely this to be the case in Rolle, but also that he has made it more difficult for others to evaluate how precisely he proposes eremitic discipline should be understood. A highly similar pattern is also found in his *Judica Me* where the languages of physical and spiritual experience interact in a manner difficult to define. There he writes freely of the desert (heremus), flight (fugere) and the work (durus labor) that hints at ascetic extremes (asperus introitus). However, to the extent that his affective experience of God’s love determines the semantic value of these terms Rolle has suggested an indeterminate reading of aspects (flight, the desert, ascetic suffering) ostensibly so central to anachoresis.

The fact of his *peregrinatio* left him open to a couple of initial reproaches whose authority rested on a long tradition: namely that he may belong among those false hermits

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64 Rolle, *Judica Me*, 15.20ff. He describes, quite traditionally, that the hermit’s life is initially characterized by difficulty. “Durus labor” gestures to the physical work prescribed in regulatory discourse and elsewhere, although Rolle does not advance the ideal of or participated in physical labor, to say nothing of his expressed dismissal of bodily matters.
so identified in the Rule as gyrovagi, or that he is like the hypocritae who have become solitaries out of a desire for fame rather than out of devotion to God. These hermits are famously ill-governed by either personal or textual authority, and his frequent defensiveness at times makes clear that others did in fact lodge accusations at him illustrating that some details of his particular vita solitaria were difficult to justify. Large sections of his Melos and Incendium ask how hermits in general are to govern themselves with an independence that does not wholly sever ties with tradition. His loose, fragmented, and tentative associations with coenobitic communities rendered the risk of being associated with such forms of misrule particularly. But then again, the potential for an indeterminate relationship with tradition was higher still.

Rolle writes of God’s judgment only to insist that God’s approval of him is never in question. Precisely for this reason adverse judgment was also serviceable to a perhaps more polemical purpose. Far from simply forcing him on the defensive, the persecution by others reformulates his position as the object of abuse rather than the subject of some transgressing behavior for which he would otherwise need to provide a convincing defense and which would expose his lack of a human superior. Let us take again the reproach that he has moved from one place to another and that such conduct is not appropriate for a good hermit. In ch. 15 of the Incendium he makes reference both to his change of cells and the attacks he suffered as a result. In the chapter just previous he had distinguished himself from gyrovagi (of whom both he and the Rule disapprove),

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65 Benedict Rule, ch. 1 [CSEL 20.10]. Of course, as Rolle’s own distinctions make clear, not every traveling solitary is a gyrovagus.
66 The regular conduct of medieval hermits was often evaluated by the more or less official sanction supplied to those hermits by coenobitic communities. See Giles Constable, Eremitical Forms, esp. 251ff.
decrying them as a “scandalum heremitarum.” In just a few paragraphs, however, he approaches the issue rather differently.

For I would seek out quiet, yet only by moving from one location to another. For it is not bad for a hermit to change cells on reasonable grounds, and then, when it seems fitting, to return to the first; for certain of the holy Fathers did likewise, and yet also suffered for it the abuse of others, though virtuous persons said nothing. For the evil speak evil […] But I know that the more my detractors rise up against me, the stronger I grow in spiritual excellence. Those I now have as the worst sort of detractors I once thought were my true friends. So I have not discarded those things which have proven useful to me on account of their words. Indeed I have persevered with zeal and have found that God was always approving. I have recalled what is written: they have cursed, but you have blessed.68

It is unclear in what sense gyrovagi are scandalous for Rolle since he is here able to justify the change of cells by adducing the example of the Desert Fathers. He even observes that the desert hermits suffered others’ disapproval. One must wonder whether this was the same disapproval that Rolle himself voiced a chapter earlier, and that here is silenced to protect a self-serving defense of his own practice.

But the second half of the passage is rather more revealing. He deploys his favorite voice, that of the Psalmist, whose style suited him superbly. The wicked are identified along with the actors in a scene of persecution, and God’s favor (faventem) towards the persecuted party is finally acknowledged, accepted and enjoyed. This structure can be mapped onto many passages, like this one, in Rolle’s writings and in the Psalter. And so we might have guessed that he would enlist a (now redundant) passage from Psalm 108 in support of his argument. For him, as well as for the Psalmist, both God and the cause of the persecuted righteous stand against the consilium impiorum. But what matters in the conflict between the just and the wicked is God’s judgment in favor

67 Rolle, Incendium Amoris, 183.16.  
68 Ibid., 188.6-22.
of the just. It is this argument by which he intends both to defend irregular behavior and to make irregularity irrelevant. Taking the Desert Fathers as a model deflects from himself criticisms difficult to counter, since even those desert saints were criticized for the same conduct. But then, God’s continual approval resolves all matters yet again.

So what sort of an argument is this actually? To start with, the problem is not merely or principally the act of seeking out a new cell (it is in the interest of greater silence, after all). This was no egregious fault, even if the act encountered disapproval. In fact, his statements just after the passage from ch. 15 include unambiguous language of physical *stabilitas* and his otherwise very common use of the term “sitting” (“*sedebam quippe in quadam capella…..dum enim in eadem capella sederem…*”) to suggest regular conduct on this score.69 But the language most characteristic of the following passages relates to his inner stability, namely the continuous experience of song in his spiritual intercourse with God. This continuous thought of God makes up some of the ground lost to his physical instability. For the monastic tradition, just as problematic as physical instability was spiritual instability, the condition of a mind inconsistently disciplined by holy thinking. *This* sort of instability is, on his testimony, not really a problem for Rolle and should therefore make his physical instability of little consequence.

What is perhaps more significant about his argument is that it ultimately removes any need for him to make an argument at all. We have already seen in the *Melos* the sort of logic that threatens the authority of such standards of living as rules produced. Here in the *Incendium* Rolle is growing more dismissive without discriminating between what he ought to dismiss and what not. Since, as he says, he always (*semper*) finds God’s favor,

there can be no disfavor important enough to determine how he should regard the
traditional injunction to stay in one cell. So the fact that divine approval needs no basis
also makes it unnecessary to create a synthesis between his own particular circumstances
and traditional precepts, even if one has the sense that it is precisely such a synthesis that
he would want. Does he even need an argument about inner stability, if God’s approval
is already certain? What has been created by force is an understanding that God’s
judgment has in all instances already been passed. That judgment is neither contingent
nor passed in response to contingencies. From this perspective it is even nonsensical for
Rolle to claim that he grows stronger in spiritual perfection in the face of each detracting
comment he encounters. By his own admission, these comments do not change anything
about God’s constant, timeless approval of him. Put another way, God’s judgment is
Rolle’s new *stabilitas*, a troubling but powerful parody of its monastic ancestor.

Since his use of divine *iudicium* is designed to displace questions of conduct, it
should not be a surprise to find him canceling the relevance of such questions to *his*
actual behavior, even if the prescriptions of the eremitic tradition would have him do
otherwise. We might look, for example, to his use of Cain as a figure of wandering. The
*audacitas* he displays in comparing himself to Cain is now rather redundant and
unsurprising. In the *Melos* he writes,

> In fact, in such a way was Cain made a vagrant and fugitive upon the earth
> because of the murder of his brother; and thus I too have become, in this exile,
> uncertain of my abode: I move from one place to another because the Almighty
> has deigned to direct his servant so that in a time to come he will have no need to
> wander about.\(^70\)

\(^70\) Rolle, *Melos Amoris*, 11.29-34: “Quemadmodum quippe Caym vagus et profugus factus fuit super terram
pro facinore fraticidii, ita et ego in hoc exilio incerte sedis fio: de loco ad locum transeo, donec
Omnipotens dignetur servum suum dirigere ut deinceps iam non indigeam circumquaque transmigrare.”
Like Cain, Rolle was forced to consider that the cause of his initial change of residence was occasioned by his own behavior, however ardently he would eventually resist a narrative that put him in the wrong. Rolle portrays himself as a wandering perpetrator, so to speak, because the comparison allows him to underscore God’s putting a merciful end to both Cain’s and Rolle’s weary journey. Consolation is the point, not wandering as a punishment, or (in the hermit’s case) wandering as a transgression. Either of these notions would isolate Rolle in an unfavorable relationship to God’s judgment. (Thus he also forgets, if only for the moment, that the hermit is supposed to be penitential). Furthermore, the comparison with Cain allows the perspective that, even though the wandering eventually comes to an end, in both cases its beginning and ending have been divinely decreed and determined. The logical conclusion to this is unavoidable: who is so morally intransigent as to resist God’s decrees? Or indeed powerful enough to do so? Not Cain, and certainly not Rolle, God’s “servus.” He will therefore obediently wander. And here again, behavioral matters are thus addressed until their importance can be overshadowed by the great force of affective devotion.

Both the Melos and the Regula Heremitarum participate in a tradition discussing Cain’s significance as a wanderer, and both relate the traditional emphases on silence, stability and avoiding spiritual danger. Inherent to the judgment that the rule establishes is that physical peace and stability mitigates spiritual danger, while physical instability in turn frustrates spiritual excellence.  


Pax est in cella nil exterius ubi bella
Si pacem quieres tunc rarius egredieris

226
is that the terrestrial residences of God’s lovers are secondary to their heavenly residence. If constancy is to be found in divine judgment, Rolle’s permanent *locum heremitarum* is of course in heaven. As one of his lyrics so delightfully expresses, “in loue be our lyuynge, I wote no bettyre wone.” Explicitly declaring the mind’s constant striving for heavenly joys to be the true stability,

But indeed they [i.e. the wicked and the elect] are entirely different in this matter: because Christ’s elect, however much they might move about in body, do not cease to hold the mind’s striving for the overflowing joys of heaven.

he has wholly altered the stakes of the argument on regular conduct. The dismissive reference to the hermit’s movement “whithersoever” (*quocumque*) betrays a profound disinterest in the matter of bodily wandering, whether that of Cain or of the hermit. The adverb functions alongside a passive construction (*moveantur*) that quite displaces Rolle, so to speak, as an agent of movement *in corpore*, and therefore as a subject responsible for his movement. After all, was not Cain *forced* into exile? So we return for the moment to a penitential notion like exile. However, the passage makes a second, more polemical shift by juxtaposing bodily movement and spiritual stability. It is less important for the argument that the mind exercise sufficient *constantia* in its striving for God. Rather, truly relevant here is the association of the body with a form of disapproval (i.e. irregular wandering), an association that occasions a rejection of bodily matters *per se*. Crucial to this shift is the presence of “celestial joys” as the hermit’s new support

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74 Similar such arguments appear in chs. 39 and 40 (122.34 and 124.34).
where his body has been displaced. Again, the form of the *Melos* makes it difficult to avoid the point that as surely as music is divinely ordained, *canor* is true stability. And the payoff of all this is partly its designed effect on detractors: any accusations claiming that his mind is undisciplined by monastic traditions no longer have any true authority.

Whether or not he was aware of it, Rolle’s attitude towards scriptural interpretation, judgment and episcopal authority are particularly relevant to Bishop Athanasius’ constructions of asceticism. Interpreting the sacred page and asceticism had been just as tightly linked in the mind of the bishop as they were in Rolle’s. In particular, Athanasius’ thinking about a bishop’s authority over ascetics—for him this was the chief benefit of fusing the active (clerical) and contemplative (monastic) lives—stands in starkest opposition to Rolle’s own understanding of the episcopate.\(^{75}\) In ch. 47 of the *Melos*, Rolle writes in disagreement with Bishop Anselm. Understandably, the discussion is over the relative merits of the eremitic and coenobitic lives, authority and the interpretation of scripture. As the argument concludes, he triumphantly proclaims that the youth (i.e. Rolle) has vindicated himself against the *senex* (i.e. Anselm), the “hermit against the bishop” (*heremita contra episcopum*). Of course this vindication came fairly quickly for Rolle since prior to this moment he had construed the solitary life by the terms of *canor*, thus insulating it from external attack.\(^{76}\) But his self-defense began its climax with an appeal, once again, to the ancient saints.

\(^{75}\) For discussion see D. Brakke, *Athanasius*, 80ff.
\(^{76}\) For example, Rolle, *Melos Amoris*, 146.38-147.1-4: “Hinc liquet summus gradus amoris Dei, nam pre nimio ardore et dulcore divinitus dato sanctissimus amator in canticum confluit et iam quasi in cello positus undique ineffabili armonia et laude ludiflua cum tatu tinnulo septum se sentit.”
Thus also the ancient and more perfect were accustomed to leave their monasteries to some place of solitude, so that they would be able more freely to experience the *canor* of contemplation.\(^{77}\)

He addresses the (quite legitimate) practice by the Desert Fathers of fleeing the coenobium for solitude. But the following *ut*-clause represents the Egyptian desert to accord with specifically Rollean terms: the desert hermits seek solitude *so that* they can more freely experience *canor*.

This reading of ancient eremitism is interesting for two reasons. First, Rolle will very shortly address the problem of eremitic obedience—whether obedience is due to anyone besides God—but the exemplarity of ancient hermits here lacks mention of regulatory concerns whatsoever. The controls implied by a monastery’s borders are lifted in preference for an unconstrained (*liberius*) musical experience whose virtue is defined by that same experience. E. J. F. Arnould argues correctly that at least in outline Rolle’s argument does not relate to a “matter of discipline,”\(^{78}\) but such a statement overlooks how Rolle conceals the significance of his choice *not* to address matters of discipline while enforcing his personal reading of the ancient *vita solitaria*. Indeed, to address matters of discipline would certainly not work to Rolle’s advantage at this point, and yet to describe the transition from a monastery to solitude is to be concerned about the discipline enjoined on the regular life. Indeed, Rolle had just a few paragraphs earlier already acknowledged that the question of moral virtue is made to relate centrally to one’s discipline *sub abbate*. Of course, even though Rolle *does* lead some version of a regular life of discipline that is *not* his reason for defending eremitism.

\(^{77}\) *Ibid.*, 147.7-9: “Unde et antiquitus solebant plurique perfecciores a monasteriis exire in aliquem locum solitudinis, ut liberius vacarent canori contemplacionis.”

\(^{78}\) *Ibid.*, 199.
The above passage is one of many telling omissions by Rolle and is of immediate consequence for my second point. What to Rolle’s mind provides the most powerful defense for both him and the ancient hermits (for he has long established this link between the *moderni* and *antiqui*) is that both seek out solitude “so that” they might participate in a version of contemplation that is both Rollean and that he has understood to be a controlling and guiding force in his life.\(^79\) *Canor* looks suspiciously as though it would take over for the rule and discipline of the monastery the power of guiding the hermits. Or as the *Officium* would observe: *abbas amor*.\(^80\) This very much complies with his own understanding of the authority of divine guidance in his own life. And he here seeks to transfer this understanding to the desert in a way that associates him with that venerable tradition and helps him re-imagine the self-governance characteristic of the Egyptian hermits.

Just a few sentences after this we come to his imagined triumph over Anselm, a moment that is then followed, not coincidentally, by the argument that hermits owe their obedience solely to God. It is clear that the whole passage was not, as was once thought, the result of an actual conflict between Rolle and a contemporary bishop. However,

\(^{79}\) As an instructive contrast, though the recluse at Bury St. Edmunds (Gransden, 1960) is encouraged to read hagiography on the Desert Fathers ("de vitis sanctorum patrum vel de institutis eorum"), he is reminded that it is on account of contemporary laxity rather than in imitation of ancient devotion that this short rule was written ("non pro antiquitatis fervore sed pro huius moderni temporis tepore"), 466-7. Rolle repeatedly collapses this distinction.

\(^{80}\) *Officium*, 24: “The holy hermit fled into solitude, entering into a celestial order; and seeking there the sweetness of holy living he held to a perfect rule. Love was the abbot that gave a formulary of customs for saintly living.”

Sanctus fugit ad solitudinem
intrap ibi celestem ordinem
Sancte vite querens dulcedinem.
Illuc tenet perfectam regulam
abbas amor dat morum formulam
Sancte vite.

230
eremitic opposition to a bishop and the consequent claim that obedience is due to God alone help Rolle conflate the *eremum* and *canor* on the alliterative page. He moves from the monastery-fleeing hermits of Egypt, confounds the arguments of a bishop and finally asserts his duty of obedience to no superior (*superioribus*) but God alone. This last point definitively shapes his claims as relating centrally to the question of discipline, for it is the object of a hermit’s obedience that is at issue. The fact that Rolle voices no explicit opposition to a contemporary bishop does not explain why he supplemented his comment “heremita contra episcopum” with the more polemical remark that he also writes “against all of them who assert that the height of sanctity is to be found in exterior acts.”

To my knowledge, no serious medieval religious text had suggested that exterior behaviors can make inner excellence irrelevant. It hardly needs mention that the assumptions shared by both bishops and abbots (as well as rules for solitaries) is that inner spiritual excellence is wholly consistent with a prescribed set of exterior behaviors, and that they indeed partially constitute that inner excellence. Moreover, Rolle’s otherwise ubiquitous discussions of a person’s exterior and interior qualities do not relate so much to the relative merits of the *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*, but rather to exteriority and interiority as such. That is, the traditional debate on the lives of Mary and Martha is no more at issue here than it was at in the opening of the *Melos*; instead, his juxtaposition of these two lives is the site of his now thoroughly redundant argument that the body and its concerns necessarily militate against the goals of the spirit. Rolle has made such masterful use of the term *exterior* that it is difficult to notice that his argument has

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everything to do with his eremitism, and almost nothing to do with those leading the active life.

But since even Rolle does not claim that exterior actions have absolutely no relevance for one’s inner excellence (for this idea amounts to behavioral anarchy), what he opposes here is an understanding episcopal and abbatial authority in relation to hermits. This is essentially the same argument made about Cuthbert, bishop turned hermit, in the *Incendium*, where the context was likewise about eremitic conduct. We recall that the saints and bishops Cuthbert and Maglorius, the only ecclesiastical persons mentioned in the *Incendium*, exemplified for Rolle the dependence of episcopal authority on a particularly eremitic excellence. In like fashion, Rolle sought his own means for removing such authority to the periphery. That hermits were historically often very closely associated with coenobitic and episcopal power is precisely the tradition he is reacting against. John the Baptist and certain of the Desert Fathers belong to the tradition he is trying to construct here, not the great twelfth-century hermits who were often closely associated with coenobitic monasticism. He is therefore implying that such ecclesiastical superiors preside over Church traditions and structures from which hermits are excluded and with reference to which they may not be justified. Put another way, hermits are exempted from the terms by which such superiors as bishops and abbots rule and judge their dependents.

These arguments are constructed as part of what I above call an imaginary desert. (As far as is known, Rolle never interacted with a contemporary bishop on any terms.)

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82 Cf. his argument in this same chapter (145.9-10) against those “qui ideo volunt monachos maximi meriti dignos esse et Deum preciue diligere quia vivunt sub abbate” [who likewise think they are worthy monks of highest merit and love God excellently because they live under an abbot].
whatever). He embeds the notion of obedience in exteriors within the frame of canor which is both conveniently removed from contemporary history but simultaneously creates that bond Rolle seeks with the Egyptian hermits. This is the case with an analogy he sets up in the Incendium between spiritually perfected hermits and costly gems like topaz. At the close of ch. 14 divine approval has so fashioned hermits that they become immaculate gems, which never require polish; God has already polished them, making them so resplendent that the addition of some human polishing agent (such as accepting an ecclesiastical office) will make them dull again. The chapter deals with anachoresis, and although Rolle does not explicitly connect the function of a rule to his points here, all rules were so centrally concerned with correcting hermits; they are a form of “polish,” as it were. Moreover, the notion of polishing (like judgment) implies an evaluation of the item polished. We therefore need to acknowledge that Rolle’s analogy has the imaginative power to impugn the immanently human aspect of regulatory correction, the same element of humanness that he wants excised from any evaluation of the elect. With remarkable audacitas this passage implies that God’s act of judging and perfecting his eremitic servants is inherently inconsistent with human forms of correction. For elect hermits who, as polished gems that could not possibly be made more perfect by human means, radically limit the corrections of tradition. “If anyone attempts to polish him, he is made less bright,” he writes.  

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83 If my reading is correct, then his argument about owing obedience solely to God bears only the most superficial resemblance to the passage in the Regula Heremitarum explaining that outside of the monastery a hermit has only God to rely on as his superior. Indeed, the passage in question (Regula Heremitarum, 304-5) commits the hermit to some form of obedience to some superior, emphasizing that his virtue is measured by such willing obedience.

84 Rolle, Melos Amoris, 186.30-1.
So it is not surprising that he continues the gem analogy in the *Melos* in that passage concerning hermits and Anselm. The connection here to his quarrel with Anselm is justified, because the specific form of false polish he has in mind is not only a hermit’s assumption of a Church office, but his material relationship with that office. He has already argued that Cuthbert exemplifies the hermit’s ideal rejection of ecclesiastical office (in his case the episcopate). Anselm’s mistake? He did not renounce the episcopate like Cuthbert and Maglorius. Thus, ideally, the hermit should be immune from the centralizing tendencies of the Church. And the success of those tendencies in a hermit’s life divides a hermit’s allegiance to God with an allegiance to exteriors (“officiis vel prelacionibus *exterioribus*”). But now the meaning of exteriors threatens to include all external claims to a hermit’s allegiance, for the *conversatio celestis* is by definition in no need of correction. Thus the hermit is “against” the bishop in the sense that the latter is powerless to offer correction. What good is a bishop’s *iudicium*, when he has marred himself by assuming an office that serves exteriors? And why should Rolle submit to a bishop’s judgment about the quality of his *conversatio*, when that bishop has already failed to accurately evaluate the virtue inherent in eremitism *per se*?

If this sounds slightly too extreme even for Rolle, let us consider how he concludes ch. 47 in the *Melos*. What has been said up to this point has centrally been about *iudicium* and the justification of Rolle’s assertions that the hermit’s life ought not

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85 *Ibid.*, 146.3-9: “The holy solitary, because he has endured sitting in solitude for his Savior, will receive a golden and excellent seat on high among the angelic orders. And because for the love of God he was invested with lowly clothing, he will put on a long and eternal tunic, one made in the brilliance of God, as well as a mantle beautifully laden with precious stones, and will wear these perpetually among the celestial powers” [Sanctus solitarius, quia pro Salvatore suo sedere sustinuit in solitudine, sedem in celestibus accipiet auream et excellenthem inter ordinex angelorum. Et quia viilibus vestibus pro amore Authoris induebatur, tunicam talarem et eternam in claritate Conditoris confectam iuduet, pallium quoque pulcherrimum lapidibus preciosius intextum inter paradiisicas potestates portabit in perpetuum].

234
to be absorbed by episcopal authority. The final paragraph of the chapter makes obsessive reference to God’s *iudicium*, placing Rolle securely under divine jurisdiction, as it were. Divine discernment is at least in part what justifies divine rule; the contrast with a bishop’s discernment is clear. The point is made slightly more immediate if seen structurally, for his argument has moved from monastic tensions (coenobitic – eremitic) to interpersonal and ecclesiastical tensions (eremitic – episcopal), and all has been resolved on a human-divine axis (Rolle – God) that has everything to do with the question of who may justifiably govern the hermit. We are very far indeed from what the *Regula Heremitarum* says about local obedience, and unlike that document Rolle has offered a rational justification for the position that traditional versions of obedience need not be any more closely connected with one’s actual virtue. This is not how the hermit Godric is said to have thought about how episcopal and divine authority relate to the lives of hermits.\footnote{86}{86 Before taking residence at Finchale by permission of Bishop Flambard, Godric understood that he was able to make his hermitage “absque licentia domini cuius iuris erat,” but that it was important to defer to the bishop’s authority; as his hagiographer notes, the bishop has his power from God, and one must render honor to whom honor is due (*Libellus*, ch. 19 and 60-1). All the same, it is worth noting (and unsurprising) that both his mother and sister came to reside next to his cell without episcopal permission.\footnote{87}{87 Perhaps the most striking example is her confrontation with Bishop Robert and Burthred regarding her betrothal. After she had obstinately opposed the judgment of two bishops—she had long before secretly made her vow to Christ (*Life*, 41)—Burthred refuses to tolerate her further opposition to a third bishop to whose judgment, we may guess, Christina had no intentions of acceding. But just prior to their conversation, Christina had observed to Bishop Robert, “Cuius consilium salubrius michi quam Dei et tuum sanctissime pater?” Believing that the bishop would decide in support of her virginity, Christina has unintentionally shown that God’s *iudicium* and the bishop’s do not necessarily serve identical ends. The outcome of her ordeal itself answers the question, *Cuius iudicium?*\footnote{235}
In replacing the judicial demands of a rule Rolle adduced no *iudicium* capable of reconciling these difficulties other than the circular and appropriately unyielding pronouncement by God that the hermit is already justified. For if Rolle had been able to reply to the Carthusian claim that he makes men their own judges, he surely would have answered that no human device can rule men better than the ruler and judge of heaven. Divine judgment requires no external justification and is uniquely incomprehensible to all other judgments. So he feels ultimately vindicated by the permanence of divine judgment that not even his own eccentricities can impair. The question to which we must now turn concerns his ability to adjust his discussion of regulation to fit the needs of an anchoritic audience, Margaret Kirkeby, whose relationship with Church authorities did not mirror Rolle’s own. The continuities he saw between the lives of hermits and anchorites deemphasized the different possibilities available to them for relating to personal and textual authority. Although the circumstances of Margaret’s enclosure are not well known, episcopal involvement in the enclosure of anchorites makes Rolle’s letter to her of particular interest to his critique of episcopal authority in general. Those differences which informed the lives of hermits and anchorites were not enough to render his reading of regulatory ideologies as wholly inapplicable to Margaret.

“*Eremita Contra Episcopum*”: A Rule for Margaret Kirkeby

The challenges Rolle faced in formulating *anachoresis* in his Latin texts became somewhat more complex when he turned to an anchoritic audience. Writing for an anchoress afforded him the ideal opportunity to explore the ideological challenges of his
insistence on self-governance for solitaries without monastic superiors. His *Form of Living* praises anchoritic living as virtuous in “form.” But anchoritic virtue was not a function of the physical enclosure, since in itself the cell offered nothing praiseworthy. Rolle was as indifferent to its walls as he was to his own cell which neither augmented nor impaired *anachoresis* in any way. “Form” was his term for what remains imperceptible to others who can only judge virtue by externals. The virtuous form of living was neither the anchoritic cell nor the anchoritic body. Both were external forms that one should not confuse with an internal, moral form of living.

Rolle’s addressee was Margaret Kirkeby, formerly nun at Hampole and, at the time of Rolle’s writing, anchoress at East Layton. Not unlike Goscelin’s *Liber Confortatorius*, the *Form* records an interaction between two solitaries governed by two significantly different notions of the *vita solitaria*; it is Rolle’s sense of the continuities between anchoritic and eremitic lives that regulatory writing allows him to examine more carefully. As its title implies, there must be some connection between what Rolle thinks he is telling Margaret about solitude and the specific form of solitude (i.e. *anachoresis*) that now orders her life. Further, the *Form* offers itself as a rule for

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88 The *Melos Amoris* (4.14) illustrates his notion of continuity rather than difference between these two forms of solitude. That this association was not necessarily the norm by the late Middle Ages see, for example, E. A. Jones, “Langland and Hermits,” *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 11 (1997): 71-2. The evidence Jones adduces, from *Friar Daw’s Reply* (ll.290-7), ed. P. L. Heyworth (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), postdates Rolle.

89 Allen discusses Margaret’s movement as a recluse from East Layton, Richmondshire, to Anderby and perhaps back to Hampole where she had been a nun (*Writings*, 36; see also 267).

90 This is one important distinction between this text and his other “epistles,” both (allegedly) written for nuns, not anchoresses: *Ego Dormio* and *The Commandment*. See Allen, *Writings*, 247-68; Watson, *Invention*, 34; and Ogilvie-Thomson’s introduction to her edition of the three works. The below observations in no way draw on those epistles, however relevant their content may be for qualifying or expanding the argument. For some recent and interesting suggestions on Rolle’s connections with anchoritic culture see Denis Renevey, “Looking for a Context,” in *Medieval Texts in Context*, eds. G. D. Cae and D. Renevey (New York: Routledge, 2008), 192-210.
anchorites; some of its passages read like the Ancrene Wisse, sharing its overall purpose in reforming the life of its reader, and its categorical and formulaic structure—by which, for example, sins and their remedies are listed and individually discussed—convey Rolle’s familiarity with the discourse that attempted to govern anchoresses’ inner and outer lives. As such, it fits within an ideological genealogy that extended back beyond texts like the Ancrene Wisse and forward to Walter Hilton’s revision of the goals of that work for the needs of a late-fourteenth-century anchoress in the Scale of Perfection.

But like Hilton’s work, the Form focuses on some matters of advanced spirituality, thus distinguishing it slightly from the commitments of some other rules for solitaries. Whatever the nature of the interaction between Rolle and Margaret Kirkeby that led to his writing the Form for her, it is likely that her monastic training had already provided her with a map for spiritual excellence. And not only did her entrance into the anchoritic life itself mark an inner maturity, but she would also have entered her cell outfitted with the liturgical and meditative resources necessary, in Rolle’s words, to “be wel with God, and haue grace to reul þi lif right.” Rolle, Form, l.610. This is to say nothing of her reading of other texts that the Form tries further to supplement. So, the text is very much a supplement, for though quite similar to a rule, much of the text is nevertheless nonessential for a former nun who already knows much about governing her life. If we wonder what sort of problem Rolle is trying to solve and for which he believes the Form is an answer, his own response—that Margaret wanted “to hyre sum special poyn of þe loue of Ihesu Criste”—suggests that much of its content on temptations, purity, sins, and

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91 Rolle, Form, l.610.
so on was neither necessary for nor requested by her. On the one hand, the letter just adds to her already excellent desire for purity, while on the other it seeks to function like a rule and seize wholesale the responsibility for guiding her to spiritual purity. If the Ancrene Wisse builds its doctrine of governance by imagining a “divided, self-conscious, and unsure” anchoress, the Form’s commitment to the discourse of anchoritic regulation does not alter the fact that Margaret is repeatedly invited to consult her own desires and to respect her own capacity for sound “goostly” judgment. This purpose is one characteristic distinguishing the Form from the Ancrene Wisse and the works of both Hilton and Goscelin.

Because of the work’s very different commitments, it is insufficient and reductive to approach the Form exclusively either as a mirror of Rolle’s self-regulating imagination or as an essentially conventional inner rule with a few Rollean qualities scattered here and there. Rather, at its core the text explores the limits both of official regulation and of Rolle’s own teaching, which tends to disregard the notions of structure, boundary or control as they relate to the anchoritic life. Rolle makes this work a site for reevaluating the degree to which two very different perspectives on solitary form will need to compete for authority over those solitaries: the traditions embodying Church power in all of its legislative and judicial force, and the Rollean theory of solitude that tries to subordinate Church structures to a personal desire for holiness. That is, Rolle conducts in the Form the same task he was engaged upon in his Latin writings. But here, Margaret’s monastic history and the institution of anachoresis practically guaranteed that Rolle could not so

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92 Ibid., ll.486-7.
93 Bryan, Looking Inward, 47.
thoroughly hamstring the ideology of ecclesiastical control as he had in Latin. However, if nothing else, his tendency to associate the lives of hermits and anchorites as solitaries of a unified type forces a new exploration of his earlier polemic, and one conducted with just as much *audacitas* as ever.

The *Form of Living* acquires its title from Rolle’s use of this phrase twice to characterize both what he thinks he is writing and what effect he feels this writing ought to have. The term describes Margaret’s *anachoresis*, but the letter also presumes to *form* that living so that she “may cum to perfeccioun.” Rolle realizes the extent to which he may actively formulate Margaret’s anchoritic life for her, and do so from the perspective of his notion of perfection. Like Goscelin, Rolle has mutual friendship to recommend his authority, and on this basis displaces the authority of others over Margaret’s life.

Now maist þou see þat many ben wors þan þei semen, and many ben better þan þei semen, and namely amonge thaym þat haue þe habite of holynesse. And þerfor enforce þe al þat þou may, þat þou be nat wors þan þou semest. And if þou wilt do as I teche the in þis short fourme of lyuynge, I hope þrogh þe grace of God þat, if men hold þe good, þou shalt be wel better.\(^94\)

And then at the text’s conclusion:

Lo, Margaret, I haue shortly seid þe fourme of lyuynge, and how þou may cum to perfeccioun, and to loue hym þat þou hast taken þe to.\(^95\)

\(^{94}\) Rolle, *Form*, ll.261-6.

\(^{95}\) Ibid., ll.894-6. The term “fourme of lyuynge” may very well have suggested itself to Rolle translating the Latin *formula morum*, that is, the same construction we saw in the *Officium’s* narration of his conversion to the hermit’s life. Cf. also the conclusion to the Middle English version of Aelred’s *De Institutiis* where the author of the Vernon manuscript, like Rolle, calls the text a “maner forme” (l.1421). In defining the triple purpose of the text—the other two being a rule for the “owtward man” and a “maner of meditacioun”—the author characterizes the “form,” the text’s second purpose, as the purging the “inward man” of vices. Note that this purpose is only an ancillary goal for Rolle’s largely authority-oriented concerns. *Aelred of Rievaulx’s De Institutione Inclusarum: Two English Versions*, ed. John Ayto and Alexandra Barratt, EETS 287 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).
Since Rolle has juxtaposed in the first passage those of a truly blessed *conversatio* and those who merely seem virtuous on account of their outer appearances, then his understanding of this term is that *form* does not relate even primarily to the external qualities to Margaret’s anchoritic living. His choice of *form* as a governing idea for his teaching suggests that it should function as a model regulating Margaret’s life much like the *Ancrene Wisse* aimed to do. However, “form” establishes Rolle’s agency in determining those notions of spiritual excellence that will constitute Margaret’s *conversatio*. Rolle sees himself as constructing a better version of spiritual *anachoresis* than medieval culture initially provided him with.

For example, at one point he observes that he had read of a good anchoress who was visited by a demon disguised as an angel and telling her that he would bring her to heaven. Excited, the anchoress tells her confessor who wisely counsels her to test the spirit by requesting that the angel show her St. Mary. The strategy works, and when the anchoress prays before the image the demon flees. When Rolle applies this story to Margaret, he characterizes her as more independent than the other anchoress, saying “I wol þat þou be warre…that þou trow nat ouer sone til þou knowe þe soth.” This statement makes an important omission: in Margaret’s case, the circumstances of such temptation apparently do not necessitate the counsel of her confessor, or that of another superior (except perhaps Rolle himself). To elide the confessor’s authority out of the analogy does not alone really indicate much. But this passage is preceded by several and various comments designed to erode the links between external signs and internal essence, between body and spirit. Again, Rolle does not merely distinguish between the
two; he removes those grounds for making judgments about the one relevant to the other. The story rests on the thesis that exteriority is evacuated of spiritual content, both in the case of official religious\textsuperscript{96} and of unconsecrated solitaries like Rolle.\textsuperscript{97} The argument peaks with the exemplum of St. John, dwelling alone on Patmos and receiving visions from the Holy Spirit. While the topics under discussion relate immediately to matters of the body, he uses the body to argue the irrelevance of such matters to one’s spiritual existence. Although the \textit{Ancrene Wisse} and the \textit{Form} are superficially bound by their mention of exteriority, it is treated by the former text in very different terms and for different purposes. As the readers of that text knew, thinking about the body should be continuous, and the black cloth of the anchoress’ window had everything to do with their souls.

To contrast, the \textit{Form} establishes the sense that religious clothing is not a bearer of spiritual meaning, but rather a parody of holiness, a suggestion that could never have wielded the same power in the thirteenth-century text as it does here. After repeatedly employing the phrase “habite of holynesse” to illustrate a perspective to be rejected, in a characteristic move he redefines the sort of clothing that should concern Margaret:

\begin{quote}
We shal afforce vs to cloth vs in loue, as þe iren or þe cole doth þe fyre, as þe aire doth þe son, and þe wol doth þe hewe. Þe cool so cloth hit in fyre þat al is fyre; þe aire so cloth hit in þe son þat al is light; and þe wol doþe so substantiali taketh þe hewe þat hit is al like hit.\textsuperscript{98}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{96} Rolle, \textit{Form}, ll.18-20: “These wretchednes þat I of told ben nat only in worldissche men and wommen…bot þei ben also in sum men þat semen in penance and in good lif.”

\textsuperscript{97} Ibid., ll.130-2: “Men weneth þat we haue peyn and penaunce, bot we haue more ioy and verray delite in oon day þan þei haue in þe world al har lyfe.”

\textsuperscript{98} Ibid., ll.670-3.
Rolle’s strategy is to single out for criticism not so much those wearing the habit of holiness as the habit itself, for only thus is he able to re-read the meanings attached to habits as meanings that relate more to materiality than to spirituality. He confines the meaning of the habit to its exterior substance and essentializes it as a sort of allegory for exteriority per se. It then requires little effort on his part to establish a notion of exterior dress—part of the customs, he must know, that were sanctioned by ecclesiastical traditions—as evacuated of all valuable spiritual content. For unlike the Ancrene Wisse, the Form wants to prevent the arguments that become possible with the claim that exterior signs can carry spiritual content. Therefore, his analogies using coal, air and wool imply that whatever “clothes” these substances has the added effect of dissolving the distinction between clothing and essence. In time “al is fyre,” a burning love that consumes, as it were, the “habite” of exterior distractions.

All of this is profoundly relevant to Margaret’s status as a regulated anchoress under clerical authority. Rolle’s investment in centralizing the bond among solitaries, hermits and anchorites alike, leads him to argue rather more from his standpoint than from that position which respects the materiality of Margaret’s enclosure. To draw a solitary’s attention to the problem of exterior show is simultaneously to reinforce traditional emphases on that solitary’s status as a social figure. If Rolle mentions the religious habit as a means for critiquing a reading of that habit, he thereby allegorizes precisely that which rules for solitaries railed against: the vice of hypocrisy. To quote, “Now maist þou see þat many ben wors þan þei semen, and many ben better þan þei semen, and namely amonge theym þat haue þe habite of holynesse.” How, then, is
Margaret to judge herself without being a hypocrite? And whose *iudicium* is a viable measure of her spiritual condition? Not surprisingly, Rolle’s judgment comes to the rescue here. “And if thou wilt do as I teche the in his short fourme of lyvynge, I hope þrogh þe grace of God þat, if men hold þe good, þou shalt be wel better.” Notice that Rolle remains consistent: if men consider her good (i.e. as an enclosed religious), she may actually be rather better. The contingent circumstance of public praise for enclosed religious—a very important element of the community’s participation in *anachoresis*—need not have any relation to her actual excellence.

Margaret is reminded that some may come to praise her because they see her status as an *inclusa* and her *ascesis*. But within a few lines, Rolle makes a double movement by which the form of the solitary life as such is simultaneously both inconsequential (“bot I may nat praise þe so lightly…withouten”) and the true measure of the anchoresses’ worth as Christ’s lover (“bot þe special gift…is for to loue Ihesu Christe”). So, in one way, the experience of regulated solitude is indeed a precondition for living in Rollean holiness. However, the anchorhold must not be allowed to determine the quality of that holiness; the fact of Margaret’s enclosure cannot be allowed any discursive input regarding the anchoress’s spiritual excellence. Anchoritic walls were built by humans and are the extension of human judgment, and for Rolle the judgment of the many, even of those who praise anchorites for being enclosed, is almost always in error. It does not deserve consideration, because it prioritizes the external and material circumstances of a life that, as we have seen, ought to have no real authority to pass moral judgment on solitaries.
If I am correct and Rolle here implies that Margaret’s quality as a lover of Christ is independent of her enclosed status—this status having been a mere occasion for the development of her inner devotion—then he is in some sense encouraging her to adopt his own dismissive attitude towards the formal, material nature of her enclosure. But it is *that* enclosure that was of great interest to the ecclesiastical authorities involved at least in the beginning of her reclusion. Other texts for anchorites do not necessarily insist on their reader’s sense of dependence on ecclesiastical superiors, but in his *Form* Rolle outright encourages an almost opposite sense in Margaret. Her bishop would have objected to Rolle’s observation to Margaret that “a mans hert, that nane knawes bot God.” Such comment in an “inner rule” is bewildering: Margaret would have presented her “hert” for formal examination to the ecclesiastical superior approving of her entrance into the anchorhold—an examination of no trifling importance, to say the least—and yet Rolle’s comment encourages her to think such protocols irrelevant, or of secondary importance at best. 99 If the purpose of the *Ancrene Wisse* was to govern adequately those lacking other religious governors, the *Form* directly addresses matters of governance only to provide a new understanding of ruling one’s life well. The text displaces governance to such an extent that it verges on producing a sort of anchoritic solipsism. So for Rolle, and now for Margaret, the *iudicium* of “þe righteous juge” is neither episcopal nor monastic. What is finally most relevant for the anchoress is the divine standard by which she will be judged “how we haue lyved, whate oure occupacioun hath bene and whi.” 100

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99 The connection between interiority and formal penance, a connection that seemed to justify some Lollard interpolations to Rolle’s English Psalter, is also relevant here; see Gustafson, “Rolle’s English Psalter,” 301ff.
100 Rolle, *Form*, ll.287-8.
Divine will is highly conspicuous in this text, leaving very little space for ecclesiastical readings of *iudicium*.

In no way is this limited to the *Form*, for Rolle modeled parts of his vernacular Psalter, also written for Margaret, after this same skepticism towards ecclesiastical authority. There the “kings and princes” of Psalm 2:2 include the clerics Annas and Caiphas, “prynces of prestes,” who are among the “men in dignytes of haly kirke that ere vnworthi.” For Rolle, the thesis of this verse is that men of holy living ought to separate themselves from such who “draghs tham fra thought of heuen in till werldis besynes.” The resemblance of these two clerics to the medieval bishops who give themselves to worldly concerns (i.e. “rebus exterioribus”) can hardly be accidental. And beyond this, as the Psalmist insists that these holy men should break the *vincula* and *iugum* of such men that “studis in vanytes,” the regulatory and otherwise positive resonances of “bonds” would seem to attend the gloss. But here, the bonds are decidedly oppressive and have not been taken on willingly in devotion to God.

Thus thai rise agayns crist & mannys saule, bot we that draghis til heuen, brek we thaire bandis. That is, dispise we thaire bloundisynges & thaire manaunces, and kast we fra vs thaire зoke, that is thaire lordschiphe swa that fendis haf na maystri of vs.

Such an example of Rolle’s “ambivalent treatment of clerical authority” is striking indeed, for the yoke imposed by corrupt “princes of priests” is to be outright despised for oppressing those who direct their thoughts and wills toward heaven. And again, if we confront the distinction here between an eminence of status as opposed to one of moral

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102 Ibid.
excellence, then such a passage is a reminder to Margaret that her anachoresis is justified by its resistance to an ideology of status. Needless to say, this perspective was hardly compatible with the perspectives of a culture deeply committed to the eminence of the anchoritic “habite of holynesse.”

One could unfairly pursue these points to extremes, but certainly a Rollean anchorhold is a fundamentally different space than that of the Ancrene Wisse whose “bond” directs readers in a very different direction. While thirteenth-century anchoritic regulation protects anchoresses from the sin and worldliness beyond the cell, thus using the anchorhold as a spiritual burh, the Form exploits the power of secrecy by which Margaret can protect herself from her own religious culture’s preoccupation with exteriority. Rolle’s cell does not promote thoughts about the body; it provides an opportunity for the opposite. Far from being a means of asserting the authority of regulation, Margaret’s cell helps Rolle explore the extent to which its own imbedded materiality, its insistence on secrecy, could undo that authority. It is no mere coincidence that immediately after composing a song for Margaret to recite he encourages her to “reul” herself well, thus implying that the well-wrought form of music is more than merely analogous with the form of regulated anachoresis. It is with this sort attention to form and its relation to anchoritic discipline that he writes of a “band of swet brenynge” valuable for its capacity to govern solitary life (“for hit holdeth me ay / fro place and fro playnge”). This “bond” that so firmly “secures” the anchoress clearly mimics the work of regulated anachoresis itself. If, as has been suggested, the following phrases refer to the sort of publicity and distractions (“place” and “playing”) that anchorites were
scrupulously to avoid, the association between the guidance provided by affectivity and that provided by the discourse of regulation grows stronger still. And again, the argument Rolle seems to be making is intensified by the overt mention of proper anchoritic governance in the lines following.

After composing for her this song of longing, the meaning of “right rule” radically contracts around a few central components of Rollean affectivity.

If thou wilt be well with God, and have grace to rule thy life right, and come to the joy of love, the name Jesus, fast it so fast in thy heart that it cum never out of thy thought. And when thou speakest to him, and seest ‘Ihesu’ through custom, it shall be in thy ear, joy in thy mouth honey, and in thy heart melody, for thou shalt think joy to thy name be named, sweetness to speak, mirth and song to think it.

One notices that the first sentence has a logic of cause and result similar to that of the above ut-clause, where the solitary life is pursued for the purpose of a new sort of discipline and stability identical with canor. Here, Rolle observes that if Margaret desires an adequate discipline, she will find it in the Holy Name. This text “Jesus,” like the text of Christ’s body that Rolle reads in his Meditation B, is explicitly identified as the standard and guide (perhaps the only standard) that is in itself sufficient for right rule.

In prayer to Christ he writes, “let me vpon his boke study at my matyns and hours and euynsonge and complyne, and euyre to be my meditacioun, my speche, and my dalyaunce.” The “boke” he mentions is Christ’s wounded body, a placeholder that might just as likely encode, say, a periodic recitation of his own English poetry as his reading of any other “book.” But, indeed, since this is no “book” at all, but rather a mental image of Christ’s body, to invoke textuality here seems to mark a practice of

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104 Rolle, Form, l.606 and note, 200.
105 Ibid., ll.610-15.
106 Rolle, Prose and Verse, Meditation B, ll.243-5.
escaping what he felt were the confines of learned textual traditions for solitaries. Be that as it may, these lines and his other meditations are then followed by standard prayers (e.g. the Pater Noster and Ave Maria)—here it is easy to associate his behavior with regular practices designed specifically for hermits—and yet calling such practices “standard” should not be allowed to obscure the interpretative work.

The suggestion is strengthened by his remark that Margaret’s pronouncing of “Jesus” progh custume shall effect this right rule for her. This phrase makes clear that the Holy Name does not only partially constitute her regular behavior, but in extending the logic of the previous sentence, “Jesus” comes now very close to completing all that the demands of regular behavior sought to accomplish. The mystical doctrine that ends the passage also begins to determine right rule in its own terms. Immediately after this Rolle affirms that the Holy Name lends Margaret stabilitas (“continuely….hold hit stably”) and remedies her sins (“hit purgeth þi syn…hit remoueth anger, hit doth away slownesse”) with an immediacy unavailable to the readers of the Ancrene Wisse or of the Middle English versions of Aelred’s De Institutis. The Form’s commitments, deeply at variance with those of its analogues, are strictly Rollean and relocate the source of discipline firmly within the province of affectivity.

Ultimately, Rolle is trying to appropriate the authority to disengage Margaret from traditional ways of imagining anachoresis. Having first succeeded in gaining a place in the discursive tradition of regulation, such a place would allow him to reenact in anchoritic terms the sort of theorizing that had carved out for him a new version of eremitic regulation. That is, if we see Margaret’s anachoresis as the site of a new

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107 See the Lambeth officium in Oliger, “Regulæ Tres,” 263ff.
tradition of solitary self-governance established by Rolle himself, his writing the *Form* for Margaret becomes immediately intelligible as a deliberate transmission of this tradition. Margaret’s seclusion is an occasion for transcribing his “form” of regulation onto her. But also both the establishing of a Rollean tradition and the facts of Margaret’s anchoritic living experience a further displacement by which Rolle himself can step into the cell alongside Margaret, as it were, and resume on a new site the same critique of ecclesiastical authority, both material and discursive, over the lives of solitaries.

**How Absence is Read: *Canor*, the Desert, and the Need for *Iudicium***

His goal in the *Form* was to critique what he thought the superficial structures that officially distinguished between anchorites and hermits but did not, for Rolle, have much bearing on either’s being well or badly governed. The quality of a solitary’s discipline was simply not a matter in which the anchorhold as such, along with the official controls that existed in relation to it, had any input. In referring all matters eremitical to his self-justifying interior, he creates an ever-shifting form of living that threatens to obliterate any chance of standardizing outer behavior and the belief that it can and should be harmonized with inner behavior. Even to discuss his ideal self-regulating solitude in terms of a standard is misleading since his stated ideal acknowledges but largely resists the power that external constraints have for determining his internal life. It is instructive that even though Rolle would be accused of misrule, his reform-like search for a genuine eremitism resembles the sentiments in that Latin poem written against false hermits.

While that poem would, like Rolle, applaud a religion of the spirit against a false religion
of exterior dress, it nonetheless plays with the distinction between praise and blame, virtue and hypocrisy, interiority and exteriority ("Non reprobamus, sed veneramur religiosos; / Nec veneramur, sed reprehamus luxuriosos"). Any one of these binaries might, in practice, confusingly and misleadingly take the place of the other.

We see many in this age who are hermits,
But we don’t allow that all are religious,
And not because we would condemn exterior dress,
But because we have a good religion of the mind.
We do not reprove the religious, we venerate them;
Nor venerate the dissolute, but reprove them. 108

There is a crisis of knowledge here that requires the observation that the religious should not be accused, and that the lovers of luxury should not be esteemed. If confusion on this score was common enough, the central problem related to adjudicating among the empty claims of virtue and virtue’s content. And if the values that measured the extent of a solitary’s willingness to be governed are consistently displaced by Rolle, he needed to formulate some eremitical standard that could both take over where the discourse of regulation shows its limitations but which would not fall to a sort of religious anarchy.

If nothing else, he has forced some crucial and difficult questions. Just what sort of living does a hermit’s exceptional status justify, if the standards to which that hermit appeals are to a large extent subject to his own judgment? How can God be the adjudicating standard to which all human judgment submits, if all submissive gestures are always unreliable? How is individual judgment itself justifiably to be used in dialogue with tradition without wholly alienating that tradition? Still, all that has so far been discussed is significant chiefly as a function of those persistent, but fragmented dialogues.

to which I referred above. Those conversations were central to Rolle’s interrogations of exemplarity, authority and the narratives (Cistercian or otherwise) that his one-sided conversations with tradition strongly opposed. As I argue below, his works warn against the traditions’ potential to sabotage their own goals by over-valuing exterior signs of holiness at the expense of an inner excellence hidden from what he considered the all too superficial judgment of humans.

If this chapter has posed one question, it is a question about the ethics of writing and of living the eremitic tradition. Rolle’s critique of his own behavior (and of eremitical self-governance generally) was designed both to provoke censure and to force the question “on whose authority and in whose interest is virtue legitimized and delegitimized?” For where others refused so do so, Rolle forced the distinction between the hermit and monastic tradition. At the same time, his self-referential defense of anachoresis made it difficult to determine whether he was simply self-serving and hypocritical like those “false hermits” who exploited the language of newness and devotion to disguise their corruption. The De Falsis Heremitis matched a necessarily hidden but praiseworthy religion of the mind (grata religio mentis) against the visible marks or “fruits” of that inner religion. But the distinction created an inescapable tension for an anachoresis like Rolle’s that was thoroughly apophatic, since it was based on God’s invisible judgment, and hence less serviceable to judgments on the basis of fruits. The suspicion of irregular living that he creates in both his medieval and modern readers was in some way inevitable insofar as he emphasized a standard of regulation that refused to be manipulated for hypocritical ends. Rolle, we know, targeted

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109 J. Leclercq, De Falsis, ll.312ff.
his moral polemic against the coenobium and its monasticism-of-exteriors,\textsuperscript{110} leaving apophasis as the only category that immunizes the ascetic rule from the hypocrisy of justifying moral authority merely with reference to exteriors.

Admittedly, it was necessary to begin with a dialectical process that examined the \textit{iudicium} of the precept against divine justice. But the former was always undermined by human judgment and human exemplars, and not all attempts to justify solitary living with reference to a certain model of discipline were equally valid and defensible. Rolle argues that the need for divine judgment rests on the fact that arguments about ascetic discipline can never be perfectly divine, and are therefore more or less unjustifiable. \textit{Iudicium} is for Rolle what the mirror of reading one’s own interior (\textit{in tribunali mentis suae}) was for Grimlaic.\textsuperscript{111} Both insist on an absent “tribunal” whose judgment the rule is of itself powerless to record. Rolle’s work had been to take this insight to its logical and moral extremes, even if those extremes lead to the charge of “hypocrisy” or anarchy.

I have implied of course that Rolle’s work was essentially reformist. His perspective on these problems did not so much lead him to employ that twelfth-century voice of accusation and satire (though he did this too), as to restore to the rule a sort of philosophical discourse of justice. Ironically, this is precisely why Rolle cannot stabilize the image of his discipline: since divine justice is inescapably \textit{absent}, any attempt to appeal to such a standard is \textit{in appearance} as consistent with the aims of hypocritical

\textsuperscript{110} Rolle’s grounds for satirically objecting to the disciplinary laxness of coenobitic communities seem well supported by the English monasticism in his own day. David Knowles’ studies (see above) of English monasticism are still foundational on this problem, and on that of late-medieval diocesan visitations to houses that fell somewhat short of their disciplinary ideals. But as the \textit{Regularis Concordia} and Lanfranc’s \textit{Constitutions} give witness, this problem had clearly preoccupied English monastic reform movements from their inception.

\textsuperscript{111} Grimlaic, \textit{Regula Solitariorum}, \textit{PL} 103, col. 107B.
hermits as with those of reformists. What divine judgment implies and requires is a certain type of knowledge alienated from the institutional contingencies external to it and which place limits on it. This knowledge cannot be exactly identical with sapientia since that too is as available both to Rolle and his detractors in a way that God’s iudicium is not. And although Rolle recognized that religious reform requires the support of tradition, the continuities of tradition bespoke the inadequacies of human judgment. His theory involves a less legislative and deterministic commitment to the rule, offering instead an inquiry that is at base about the ethics of both observing and displacing the rule. For this reason the Melos concludes with discussions of religious hypocrisy and the Last Judgment (ultima examinatio). As he observes, precepta generalia must be superseded within an anagogical framework that can in turn be used to re-read those percepts.112 Those who think themselves worthy of becoming judges in the heavenly realm will painfully discover that their monasticism was a mere mask for their lust for glory rather than a truly holy living (excellencia sanctorum).113

Exploring the ethics of interpretation, Rolle watched other co-opt the need for judgment only to conceal an ideology that privileges authority over good iudicium. Human authority always and necessarily conflicts with divine judgment, and he believes that he can identify those who hold to an indefensible conception of what justifies their

112 Rolle, Melos Amoris, 185.11-13: “[…] holy and perfected men are thought to be those who come to the judgment as judges with Christ, because in their perfect living and by a certain exceeding behavior have transcended general precepts” [sancti viri et perfecti intelliguntur qui ad iudicium iudices cum Christo veniunt, quia perfecte vivendo precepta generalia per eminentem conversacionem transcendent].
113 Ibid. 185.15-19: “The great throng of those unworthy seizing up things who now but vainly believe that they can take up the power of judging at that final hour will find themselves pushed away by that excellence of the saints which in their vainglory they intended to co-opt” [Magna multitudo presumencium indigne qui nunc frustra estimant se accepturos potestatem iudicandi et in ultima discussione invenient se prorsus proiectos ab illa excellencia sanctorum quam per vanam gloriam sibi usurpare credabant]. Note again the inextricability here between living, judgment and eschatology.
authority. But does Rolle, then, use his own attention to exteriors to condemn them? Has he contradicted himself? Perhaps. But no reader denies that the hermit continually looked inward and usually avoided satirical polemic. As we have seen, it was necessary to break off his dialogues with monks, since any intelligible conversation on ascetic excellence stands as an argument against divine judgment.

From Rolle’s perspective, to understand dictates on behavior—such as warnings on male-female friendships—too superficially leads to mistaken judgments on how true authority can acquire the binding force it seeks. A rule is justifiable when and insofar as the inherent absence of divine judgment can nonetheless displace the rule itself, that is, when the authority of the rule obtains precisely because it is divine and lies elsewhere. The rule is a divine judiciary, so to speak, and its spiritual content can only be present in the absence of a discipline that Rolle thought dangerous, a discipline that failed because it arrogated an authority it did not possess. That authority was made too present, and therefore too vulnerable to errors which humans invented but which could be readily corrected by theorizing the absence of the rule’s form. The rule acquires its authority when it recognizes true authority’s absence: the divine and absent iudicium was the only antidote for a rule that sabotages its own authority by insisting on it. Otherwise, the rule became like song “in the mouth of a synful man that in ill maners syngis a goed

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114 Ibid., 185.20-186.4: “In this way there are many—especially these days—draped by the habit of religion who, as it seems appropriate to their profession, regrettably and groundlessly assume for themselves a certain authority. So, Lord Jesus, you who examine men’s hearts, have rejected all those who depart from your judgments because their mind was unjust” [Huiusmodi sunt multi iam et precipue in his diebus in habitu religionis constituti, qui, ut in conversacione sua liquet, quod dolendum est, sine causa sibi illam auctoritatem assumunt…propter quod, domine Iesu, qui scrutator es cordium, sprestiti omnes discedentes, a iudiciis tuis, quia iniusta cogitacio eorum].

255
Moreover, to remedy the torturous circularity of satire—by which “worldliness” controls both satire’s objects and therefore the terms of satire’s argument—Rolle recognizes that to some extent the rule lies outside of history and history’s texts.

Thus, his conception of the rule was invested with a certain elegiac quality; the rule was abolished when its authority was abolished, and both are the results of abandoning a rigorous dialectic capable of readings simultaneously corporeal, spiritual and apophatic. That a rule grounded on such a dialectic could never actually find expression as a rule was precisely the point. When this last point is understood alongside of his veneration for the sancti antiqui, we discover why his notion of regular living is an extended meditation on the Desert Fathers. Not only does it eagerly militate against contemporary material monasticism, but it self-consciously revels in the absence of the desert that even a modern desert stands at as great a distance as fourth-century Egypt. Rolle writes of the wine cellar of intoxicated stability and song (cella), but then observes that it is into “this desert” that he wants to be led. It is essential that this desert is both present and temporally deferred (desidero deduci), and that for inhabiting it the guide remains indispensable, but equally absent. He wants to be led, but will not of himself enter into that desert cell cum sanctis in summis. Just a few lines later, he returns to the traditional voice of the coenobitic guide who addresses his listeners as “karissimi” and encourages them to monastic excellence. But here the hortatory imperatives, the

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116 Rolle, *Melos Amoris*, 156.31-5: “The cell is the salvation by which he will sit securely and sing forever with the saints on high. Happiness flows into him who languishes in love and the Lover descends joyfully into his spirit; the sustenance of that higher cell emits an odor that breathes out healthful delight to those who love the Author. It is into this desert that I devotedly wish to be led” [Cella est salvacio qua secure sedebit et psallet cum sanctis in summis sempiterne. Illabitur leticia amore languenti et descendit in iubilo in animam Amator; refragrat refeccio cellarii superni odorem exalans salutifere suavitatis amantibus Auctorem. In hoc desertum desidero devote deduci].
community, and the specific virtues to which the precepts direct the listener are all characterized by absence: the absent monks are drunk on an absent sapientia so that they might live virtuously according to some absent precepts.\footnote{Ibid., 157.13-4: “Led into the wine cellar, dearest friends, you should partake and drink and become drunk”[Ergo introducti in cellam vinariam comedite, amici, et bibite et inebriamini, charissimi].} More than a mere quid pro quo for his monk detractors, this voice plays with the absence of reform by characterizing reform as absence.

The rejection of history that seems almost necessitated by Rolle’s theory turns out to be more complex. It was the analogy between canor and audible music that frustrated any simple opposition of history or materiality, on the one hand, and spirituality, on the other. Moreover, it may help to understand the function of canor if we consider that its tendency to separate Rolle from historicity also recreates and intensifies the essentially historical desert for which he longs. He uses the metaphor of desert reeds to describe monks who carry the appearance of holiness, but are internally without virtue.\footnote{Ibid., 160.35-161.7. “Hii assimilantur harundini vento agitate in deserto quia, dum religionis habitum assumunt, oves exterius apparentes, et interius fervore fortis dileccionis non affecti, quid allud recte dicantur quam harundo que in oculis intuencium apparret solidum et intus omnino vacuum inventitur? Summa igitur insania est parentes et propria relinquere, honorem mundi et divicias fugere, habitum mutare, monasterium vel solitudinem ingredi, pauperem fieri, et non totum cor omnesque mentis affectiones et animi cogitaciones ad Deum dirigere et in eius solius desiderio estuans eius amorem et beneplacenciam infatigabiliter exorare” [these are comparable to a desert reed tossed about in the wind because, although they take up the habit of religion and appear outwardly like sheep, inwardly they are not struck by the warmth of persistent delight; what then should such be properly called other than a reed which appears solid to the eyes of the observer, but is found to be completely empty inside? It is therefore most irrational to leave ones own family and possessions, to flee worldly honor and wealth, to change attire, enter a monastery or solitude, and become poor without directing one’s whole heart and all of the mind’s affections and spirit’s thoughts towards God, burning with desire for him alone and imploring his love and mercy ceaselessly].} Though the analogy satirizes contemporary monks, we might read the desert back into Rolle’s image of the reed. Just as reeds are part of the wilderness landscape, so too their hollowness, their inner absence, is an essential quality of their existence in the desert.
Just as the desert lies elsewhere, so too the sign of virtue that is perfectly apparent on the exterior of the hermit should therefore not be located even within him. To find that virtue entails sacrificing to the demands of presence the reformist commitments to keeping virtue immune from misappropriations, even if ostensibly reformist. The Egyptian desert is little more than the traveling monk’s seemingly perpetual search for hermits even holier than those already met. This is both an apophatic and reformist image. Just as the search for holiness must extend ever deeper into the “inner desert,” the hermit must continually long for the rule.

So, here too, absence makes the rule grow fonder, and makes Rolle’s conception of the rule also a devotion par excellence to the reading of tradition. He only enriched that tradition by producing for it a more sophisticated discourse of justice that gives place to the apophatic image. Those exempla of holy solitude were, like God’s *iudicium*, insulated from the effects of contemporary human judgment, and only by turning to their absentness was Rolle able (or willing) to formulate a rule. The necessity of absence did not make it more difficult to justify the rule, but instead made it *the only means for making a just rule*. The rule is in crisis, because a certain type of knowledge is being increasingly isolated and alienated, particularly among those seeking out holy living. Rolle has insisted that a version of the rule may be both wholly compatible with monastic traditions, but only traditions that fled their own shortcomings. He would like to add newness to the terms of the Gospel of Matthew, “Primum querite regnum Dei et iustitiam

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119 Paphnutius says in the *Life of Onnophrius*, “I would go into the further desert so I could see whether there were any brother monks in the farthest reaches of the desert. So I walked four days and four nights without eating bread or drinking water,” trans. Tim Vivian (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1993), 145.
 eius, et hec omnia adicientur vobis,” where by all these things (hec omnia) would be meant the leges et praecepta which must not be permitted authority over iustitia.\textsuperscript{120} For the rule of absence here has a polemical and reformist force which insists that true authority in matters of governance must transcend that which humans habitually seek out in their desire for holiness. The search for the sapiens of the Egyptian desert was never linear, never complete. Or as he would elsewhere say in a passage about his own reading practices, “those who scorn the moderni have no respect for the ancients.”\textsuperscript{121} The regulatory text is corrupted when present, when it functions as a coenobitic narrative.

Rolle is like that. His work was such that it would renew, not eliminate, anxieties about rule and authority. He made himself into a standard against which late-fourteenth century texts about monastic and ecclesiastical power would succeed or fail to legitimize the authority of the singulare propositum. In this later history Rolle will be vindicated, if perhaps not in the way he imagined. We will now consider such discussions by Walter Hilton and William Langland whose interest in the ascetic authority of hermits and anchorites was unfortunately outweighed by their allegiance to the Athanasian genealogy studied in our first chapters. They would not follow Rolle in seeing in ascetic praecepta the incompleteness that could be finally superceded by singulare authority. We will watch how Langland and Hilton work to maintain the ideology Rolle condemned.

\textsuperscript{120} Matt., 6:33.
\textsuperscript{121} Rolle, \textit{Super Novem Lecctiones}, 195: “Sed profecto qui bonos modernos reprobat hesternos non laudat.”
Chapter 5: Involuntary Confinement as Anachoresis: A Latin Letter by Walter Hilton

Nudus et simplex
—Walter Hilton, Ad quemdam solitarius

Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.
But as for me, my feet had almost slipped.
—Psalm 73:1-2

In late-medieval England the rite of enclosure for an anchorite required both a positive desire by the prospective anchorite to be enclosed and the approval of the bishop who presided over the enclosure ceremony.\(^1\) An individual made known his interest in reclusion to local clergy who protected the institution from those who poorly understood their own intentions, those who would later flee the cell and scandalize ascetic reclusion. The physical and emotional trials of the cell, as well as the prohibition against flight, were spelled out by clerics consulted for advice and information. Such consultations are recommended, for example, in the fourteenth-century Speculum Inclusorum.

Therefore if anyone desires the solitary life with a mind to penitence, I neither simply encourage nor discourage such a propositum, for I do not know what spirit moves him; rather, I offer him this sort of counsel, that he reveal his holy propositum together with two or three discreet men of praiseworthy living, who will diligently and completely examine his intention.\(^2\)

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The paucity of source material about reclusion during this period contributes to the
difficulty of determining the nature of discussions between a cleric and the monk, priest
or layperson who became an anchorite. Even so, whether religious or layman, the
subject requesting enclosure was to understand that, once enclosed, an anchorite may not
leave the cell, and so abandon his purpose which was to pray for his local patrons or
community. He may also have been advised to abide by a set of behaviors designed to
enrich the dignity of the institution: prayer, other ascetic exercises and the avoidance of
most social interactions like teaching or mediating conflicts and financial transactions.
However, a written rule of living was not required for reclusion, and was probably
uncommon especially among the earliest recluse.

Further supports of the institution were twofold: liturgical and financial. The
support an anchorite received from his patron was different in each case, and Ann Warren
has discussed at length the matters of nutrition, money and the anchorite’s servant(s), all
of which ultimately came from a clerical or lay patron. Moreover, enclosure followed
upon a symbolical and liturgical rite or ceremony that, as it were, wedded the anchorite-
to-be with his new status as an official ascetic who, though dead to the world, lived fully
devoted to God. Presiding over this ceremony of enclosure was the local bishop, and by
the fourteenth century a set of procedures for enclosure had become standard and replete
with psalmody, gestures and liturgical instruments common to any rite requiring clerical

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3 To say nothing of the reliability of the rhetoric used by such texts as the *Speculum*, we seem to have far
more information about fourteenth- and fifteenth-century anchoritism than about previous centuries. The
many extant *ordos* for enclosure (see Jones “Ceremonies,” 34-6) are all very late, and Ann Warren's count
of anchorites and sites (about to be superseded by Jones’ forthcoming study) shows a similar pattern. See
*Anchorites*, 20, 53-91.
5 On the written and verbal “rules” for anchorites see Chapter 2.
The liturgical procedures, which were presumably applied to the majority of individuals desiring enclosure, began with a prospective anchorite at the back of the church and ended when the door of the anchorhold closed (permanently) behind him.

Thus the institution’s formal contours. It is noteworthy that the extant texts that have helped us piece together the interpersonal, financial, and liturgical facts of reclusion describe a clerical ideal, and one that is decidedly late-medieval. In practice, there must have been exceptions to this order even in the fourteenth century. Let us begin with the presumed volition of the anchorite. Hagiographies imply that this internal ascetic desire (and episcopal supervision) alone made an external and visible cell into a holy space, and not merely a small room.7 It is that desire which distinguished the anchorite’s cell from the prison cell which it closely resembled in exteriors, a distinction which obtained only with reference to ascetic volition: since an ascetically minded person desired enclosure in a cell, that cell was no mere confinement or instrument of control, but rather a sign of the anchorite’s devotion to God. By extension, an anchorite enclosed against his will, or someone who changed his mind and no longer desired ascetic reclusion, turned the cell into a prison.8 Volition was not a simple or stable fact in the mind of every (or any?) anchorite, and the cell did not simply look like a prison; it could also function like one.9

6 See Jones, “Ceremonies,”36ff., who has outlined and described the liturgy for enclosure.
7 In Belgium, Wiborada magno gaudio repleta is questioned by her bishop (Vita, BHL 8866, ch. 2.13); cf. also the women who follow her example (ibid., ch. 4). By contrast, the widow and recluse Ivetta was rather more independent-minded (BHL 4620, ch. 14.42), although her desire for reclusion is not in question.
8 While I do not discuss specific instances in which anchorites, having changed their minds about reclusion, felt trapped or imprisoned by the terms of their vow, such circumstances should considered alongside of the many other manifestations of coercion. See Dives and Pauper. Commandment VI, ch. 13, ll.53-6.
9 The official requirement of examination by a bishop prior to enclosure may explain the general lack of scholarly interest in the relationship between volition and enclosure. And the forward to a recent volume on enclosed anachoresis repeats the assumption that anchorites consented wholly to clerical demands on their allegiance; A. B. Mulder-Bakker, in Anchorites, Wombs and Tombs, ed. McAvoy, Liz Herbert
For instance, a letter to an anchorite by Walter Hilton (d. 1396), written perhaps after he had become an Austin Canon, illustrates that the former had not entered the cell voluntarily, but had been put there against his will. Since Hilton’s own connections with English anachoresis may help illuminate his perspective on this anchorite’s inner and outer life, let us consider why there is reason to think Hilton was, as S. S. Hussey said, “most probably once a solitary.” Together with his devotion to the lives and interests of solitaries—he was very familiar with Rolle’s work, for example—his fascination with ascetic topics and hesitation to enter a monastic order indicate that part of his life was marked by ascetic experiments. He wrote at least three times to anchorites—most famously in his letter to an anchoress, the Scale of Perfection, in a treatise “de imagine peccati.…cuidam Recluso,” and again in a virtually unknown letter to a male anchorite, which is the subject of the discussion below. Most tellingly, in the letter de imagine he links himself vocationally with the anchorite—“tu et ego, nostrique similes”—and elsewhere says directly that God called him to “sit” solitarius.

(Cardiff: Wales UP, 2005), 1-4. Even while Doerr notes the officially voluntary nature of the institution, he observes that throughout the Middle Ages enclosures within ascetic contexts were used to punish and control the ill-conformed (Institut, 42, n.3). Although this chapter does not discuss hermits who were forcibly confined to their cells, the reader may refer to chapters 2 and 3 for the Cistercian uses of force against those who wished to flee the monastery; see M. Cassidy-Welsh, “Incarceration and Liberation,” 23-42. See also Ann Warren (Anchorites, 92ff.) for brief discussion on the image of anachoresis as imprisonment. See also Gregorio Penco, “Monasterium – Carcer,” Studia Monastica 8 (1966): 133-43 and Juliane Ohm, “Der Begriff Carcer in Klosterregeln des Frankenreichs,” Studia Anselmiana 85 (1982): 145-55. For a more literary treatment see Joan M. Ferrante, “Images of the Cloister – Haven or Prison,” Medievalia 12 (1986): 57-66.

12 Ibid., 90.319 and 148.505 respectively. Nor do these examples exhaust the reasons we have for believing that Hilton had a personal reason for empathizing with solitaries and their ascetic desires. For example, his likely connections with eremitic culture and William Flete (a hermit), have been briefly sketched by J. P. H.
Given his connections to official anchoritic culture, Hilton would have known that the standards of the institution had been slighted in the case of the anchorite whose reclusion had been coerced. But why had it happened, and what did it mean for an individual’s volition to be violated in precisely this manner? In exploring Hilton’s letter to this particular anchorite I consider anachoresis’ entanglements with coercion and the moral dilemmas that confronted Hilton as a result. Despite his sympathies with anchoritic culture Hilton wrote supportively of using constraint against religious subjects, and of exploiting the metaphorical resemblance that long obtained between various types of cells, punitive and ascetic. Hilton was divided. He apparently valued ascetic volition while supporting the cell’s use as a punitive space. As his letter indicates, Hilton’s allegiance to the coercive use of the cell prevented him from an adequate analysis of ascetic volition, the very category that ultimately justified the anchorite’s form of living.

“As if Voluntarily”: Coercion in the Ad quendam solitarium

As he concludes his letter to an anchorite Hilton nervously complains that he had only written “as if voluntarily” (quasi voluntarie). In what I hereafter refer to as the Ad quendam solitarium, a letter and rule written by Hilton “to a certain solitary regarding his reading, intention, prayer, meditation and other matters,” Hilton seems to feel both compelled but extremely reluctant to write.\textsuperscript{13} The Ad quendam solitarium attempts to

\textsuperscript{13} Hilton, Latin Writings, vol.2, 221: “Incipit alia epistola eiusdem ad quendam solitarium de leccione, intencione, oracione, meditacione et aliis.” One recalls the feeling of nervous neccessity under which Cassian wrote his Conferences; see Chapter 1.
reconcile its reader with reclusion, and does so through a more or less standard discussion of prayer, meditation and a love for Christ’s sacrificial giving.

Hilton’s reluctance came because his act of writing, to some degree, condoned the circumstances of the anchorite’s reclusion although these circumstances had failed to satisfy the standards of the institution. In this case, the requirement had been violated that an individual’s own attitude about being enclosed not be superseded by the wishes of others who wanted to see him enclosed. But if the decision to enter the anchorhold had in this case been coerced, Hilton’s general unease tends to obscure this fact. Even when he wishes to indicate why he wrote quasi voluntarie, that same reluctance leads him to discuss his reader’s passivity with great indirection. He addresses the reclusion thus.

It seems to me that human modesty and a certain confusion trouble you as regards the fact that you were recently under God’s secret judgment and misled by some error, and that perhaps this was the cause of your reclusion, lest you should be further deceived by others’ perceptible glances.\(^1\)

Hilton’s nervousness and his language of uncertainty—“perhaps,” “modesty” and “confusion”—illustrate how unwilling he was to discuss the primary cause for reclusion. We recall that, officially, an anchorite was enclosed because he desired this particular form of ascesis. But since in this case personal desire did not primarily inform the anchorite’s entrance into the cell, Hilton later says that he did not approve of the cause of the his reclusion. Here he only notes that the anchorite had been “under God’s secret judgment” and “misled by some error.” So it was someone else’s “secret judgment” and disapproval for the addressee’s “error” that brought about the reclusion; he had been

\(^1\) *Ibid.*, II.65-8: “Occurrīt michi quod pudor humanus et quedam confusio molestant te pro eo quod dudum fuisti occulto Dei iudicio in quodam deceptus errore, et forsān hēc fuit causa tue inclusionis, ne per aspectum hominum notabilem plus confundereris.” All translations are my own.
coerced to enter the cell. Hilton’s indirection makes it unclear whether this individual had previously fled his cell only to wander about until re-enclosed, this time against his will. In 1332 a fate like this had befallen a certain anchoress named Christina Carpenter whose return to the cell, after fleeing, may also have been experienced as a sort of imprisonment.\(^{15}\) We will see presently why for Hilton’s reader reclusion came as punishment rather than as an expression of ascetic desire, but let us first consider why Hilton would have had reason to be uneasy with these circumstances.

Admittedly, the anchorhold was never unacquainted with deception—its resident need not have been as virtuous as the cell suggested he was!—and the prison and the cell had long implied each other metaphorically.\(^{16}\) Such analogies could persist in part because the inner life of a cell-bound subject was hidden away inside his body just as that body was hidden inside the cell. Whether he was a virtuous anchorite or merely appeared to be so was always in doubt; virtue was ultimately a matter of inner reform. This was also the case with an anchorite’s close cousin, the fugitive monk, who could be detained in a cell on account of his behavioral failings. Any exploitation of the cell’s resemblance to the prison only reminds us that the former space was always already a mere sign of virtue and was not to be confused with its resident’s own inner virtue or vice.

This last point has further implications. If the anchorhold was already a potential deception, an ecclesiastical or monastic authority who used a traditional sign of virtue as


\(^{16}\) The series of articles by Ellen M. Ross on Hilton’s *Scale of Perfection* affords an introductory defense of the ethics and form of Hilton’s regulatory model (see bibliography). However, Ross does not construe Hilton’s work as a polemical argument directed against Rollean *anachoresis*. 
a punishment for error was actively exploiting and enhancing that deception. To use a space to criticize an individual that was traditionally used to praise that individual also meant devaluing inner moral excellence in the same way that other forms of hypocrisy did. Those who may have compelled Christina Carpenter into the anchorhold did not think that she was a beacon of virtue. Why, then, should others? Again, the anchoritic cell depended for its moral legitimacy—regardless of whether the anchorite was virtuous or negligent—on the voluntary desire of its resident. To suggest, as an anchorhold-cum-prison did, that volition and moral behavior were not intrinsically connected removes any justification for enclosure traditionally construed in terms of an individual’s ascetic desire. To make punishment the starting point for reclusion is to advocate hypocrisy: those who used constraint thereby asked the anchorite to be holy on the outside and inwardly corrupt. The cell thus becomes even more duplicitous than it already had the potential for being. Since the cell was always a potential deception to onlookers, the anchorite could only ever seem to be something to others. Yet an imprisoning cell exploited exteriority when such exteriority was never constitutive of virtue.

If virtue’s sign is thought to be as valuable as its substance, then praise or blame only deepens the deception. Coerced reclusion depended on just this brand of deception.

But if I praise you, it is not for this, and if I accept your act [of reclusion], I do not approve of the cause. I ascribe this to you, brother, not for casting reproach upon you, but by way of reminding you that I will divest you of that garment of simulation, if it has indeed been wrapped about you like a cloak.\footnote{Hilton, \textit{Latin Writings}, II.68-72: “Verumptamen etsi laudo, in hoc non laudo; etsi factum recipio, causam non approbo. Hec tibi frater recenseo non ut tibi improperem, sed velut karissimum moneam ut pallium simulacionis, si eo velut diploide vestitus fueris, a te auferam.”}

267
The use of anachoresis as a form of permanent or semi-permanent detention makes a farce of the propositum, removing as it does any ground for arguing that the anchorite had chosen this form of living in pursuit of some ascetic goal. It is important to maintain that distinction between a passive enclosure externally imposed and an active enclosure that is the function of the solitary’s propositum. For only when that distinction is confused does it become clear that anachoresis is being exploited for its capacity to disguise. However grievous the anchorite’s past error, his forced reclusion only added to a series of errors, and as a result a series of disguises was needed to help perhaps both Hilton and his reader cope with past wrongs.  

I say “help” with the knowledge that any number of disguises meant to conceal the moral offense of coercion only adds to the offense. The letter’s terms of volition—like freely (libenter) or voluntarily (voluntarie)—make the enclosure appear more voluntary and conceal the prison behind the anchorhold. But this language also shows the prison for what it was. While he will appeal to liberty and volition, Hilon’s defense of imprisonment will remain irreconcilable with those appeals to inner liberty. When Hilton wished to correct the “error” of the anchorite by exploiting the punitive function of the cell, he himself fell victim to the exterior show of virtue offered by the anchorhold. Hilton is anxious to conceal the fact that this cell does not serve ascetic virtues.

18 For its discussion of religious devotion and concealment my observations are partly indebted to Kathrine Kerby-Fulton, Books Under Suspicion, passim.

19 Hilton at times appeals to disguises like “charity” and the like. It impoverishes a concern with “ethics” to suggest that the category of “charity” exhausts a discussion of his ethics. To name but one of several examples of this problem, E. M. Ross colludes with Hilton’s own structures of concealment while modeling what she thinks his “ethical” model of reform. See “Ethical Mysticism: Walter Hilton and the Scale of Perfection,” Studia Mystica 17, no. 2 (1996), 175.
The letter’s key term is “as if voluntarily” (*quasi voluntarie*). Hilton does not claim that a voluntary desire had led to this reclusion because no such claim could be made. Notably we learn nothing in the letter regarding the enclosure ceremony, or whether Hilton’s reader expressed his own ideas about reclusion verbally. The anchorite had been sufficiently “confused” regarding to cause of his reclusion to make any claims about his desire for the cell farcical. One suspects that the sanctifying of *this* reclusion was like the sanctifying of that marriage Chaucer describes between January and May: all form but little virtue. Just as ritual “holiness” was needed to cover the shame of their marriage and the extreme passivity of May, so too in this case the anchorite may have stood mute and passive while clerical blessings give the reclusion a hint of respectability.

Forth comth the preest, with stole aboute his nekke,  
And bad hire be lyk Sarra and Rebekke  
In wysdom and in trouthe of mariage;  
And seyde his orisons, as is usage,  
And croucheth hem, and bad God sholde hem blesse,  
And made al siker ynogh with hoolynesse.  

*(Canterbury Tales, IV. 1703-8)*

At its most direct the *Ad quemdam solitariun* nervously (*quasi voluntarie*) tries to make “al siker ynogh with hoolynesse,” but the text is devoted to a cautious language that does not quite wish to show us why or how the anchorite had been enclosed/imprisoned. As in Chaucer’s tale, a certain “modesty” prevents more transparent discourse. The letter never directly reminds us of the above-mentioned ritual of enclosure perhaps because that ritual had become as farcical as the marriage in Chaucer’s tale. Indeed, since Hilton’s letter of advice necessarily presupposed that the anchorite’s reclusion was praiseworthy, to discuss the cause of the coerced reclusion was to write with a great sense of reluctance.

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Putting the Heretic in Prison: The Canonical Hours and the Heresy of the Free Spirit

We learn in the letter’s opening paragraph that the anchorite had been steeped in some form of “error.”²¹ He had formerly been a priest who presumably manifested certain behavioral and theological errors that were used to justify his punishment/reclusion. His reclusion had been coerced when his Church superiors (who?) discovered a certain “error” in him that they wished to correct and hide, perhaps counseling him in such a manner that he could not avoid leaving the priesthood for the anchorhold. The anchorite’s intellectual or theological errors were of two general but closely related types. The first and more definite sort was his claim that the Church’s teachings and institutions could not in themselves compel his allegiance or justify affective and ascetic practices. Allegiance to recta fides is so central to the letter—Hilton appeals to it dozens of times—that the priest must in some way have transgressed a basic doctrine.²² How exactly had the priest-anchorite’s reasoning led him to this position?

First, he had slighted his own office, and by extension the sacrament of holy orders, by refusing to recite those prayers ordained by the Church specifically for those, such as himself, who hold clerical office.²³ He apparently spoke and behaved dismissively towards the canonical prayers (horas canonicas) which, as Hilton reminds

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²¹ The word appears three times in the passage. See below.
²² Hilton, Latin Writings, ll.173-6: “Thus, a good motion of your heart in spiritual ascesis is when it begins from the faith of the Church and returns to the same. For thus, according to the Apostle, God’s righteousness is revealed by faith and for faith, for the just live by faith” [Bonus ergo circuitus cordis tui in exercicio spirituali est quando incipit a fide ecclesie et ad eandem redit. Sic enim secundum Apostolum, Revelatur iusticia Dei ex fide in fidem; cum iustus ex fide vivit].
²³ Ibid., ll.302-4: “And in truth, since you are a priest you should give first place to the canonical hours before all else, and if you are able, you should perform them with greater devotion and attention” [Et revera tu qui sacerdos es horas canonicas ceteris preponere debes et cum maiori devocione et attencione exsolvere si poteris].
him, attach to the priesthood.\textsuperscript{24} Since the Church sanctifies all works attached to an order, what appears to have been the priest’s lack of interest in canonical prayers also manifested itself as an indifference towards ecclesiastical authority \textit{per se}. Hilton spends some time referring to conversations that he has had with the priest (perhaps prior to reclusion) when he insists that heretics reject those canonical prayers which the church has instituted.\textsuperscript{25} Hilton reasons that if a priest knowingly \textit{(scinter)} ignores institutional practices that transmit the faith of the Church, he therefore also ignores its authority in general. The priest had set himself up in competition with ecclesiastical authority.

[...] As if out of zeal for greater perfection he neglects the canonical hours, thinking that he pleases God more with his own singular meditation than with the prayer that the Church has ordained. Zeal they may have, but not in keeping with knowledge. He does not know the virtue of such a prayer, perhaps because he does not sense it. But whoever is a priest, even if he is truly contemplative, I do not think he should behave thus or think thus about his behavior.\textsuperscript{26}

The priest had apparently claimed that it was the praying contemplative, not the Church itself, who benefits and justifies clerical offices and ultimately all of Holy Church.\textsuperscript{27}

Hilton, perhaps with as much pity for the priest as irritation by his perspective, does not

\textsuperscript{24} \textit{Ibid.}, ll.343-6: “And like baptism, the priestly order is a sacrament to which, by institution of the Church, the ministry of vocal prayer has been added. There is no doubt but that the Church makes of great effect all such works connected to an ecclesiastical order” [Et ordo sacerdotalis sacramentum est, sicut baptismus, cui annexum est ex institucione ecclesie oracionis ministerium vocalis. Et non dubium quin talibus operibus annexit ordinis ecclesia magnum effectum tribuit].

\textsuperscript{25} \textit{Ibid.}, ll.347-50: “Thus the heretic who rejects the institution of the Church is deceived, as he knowingly ignores the canonical hours. He does not recognize the Church or its faith, and because he does not believe humbly he therefore does not understand truly” [Ffallitur ergo hereticus institucione ecclesie contempnens, horas canonicas scienter omittens. Ecclesiam enim non agnoscit neque fidem eius, et quia non credit humiliter ideo veraciter non intelligit].

\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Ibid.}, ll.352-8: “et tanquam zelo mairois perfeccionis pretermittit horas canonicas, iudicans se plus placer Deo per suam singularem meditacionem quam per oracionem ab ecclesia determinatam. Zelum quidem habent sed non secundum scientiam.Huiuscemodi oracionis non novit virtutem, quia forte non sensit. Qui autem sacerdos est, eciam si vere contemplativus sit, credo quod non sic faceret nec iudicaret faciendum.”

\textsuperscript{27} \textit{Ibid.}, ll.326-31: “And therefore the Church itself produces the effect of the prayer you have uttered. [...] Thus you should not say that you therefore benefit the church by your labor” [Et ideo oracionis huius per te emisse ipsa effectum consequitur...Non dicas ergo te prod esse ecclesie per laborem tuum].
directly label the priest a heretic. The latter’s position, however, is no less heretical. But given the nature of Hilton’s responses, the priest-anchorite must have asked which set of prayers carries greater ideological weight—those recommended by Hilton and ordained by the Church, or those which the priest-anchorite prefers? The priest’s answer slighted the value of the institutionally mandated behaviors like saying the canonical prayers.

At a more fundamental level, Hilton is convinced that the priest does not speak, act or think humbly enough (*humiliter*). Failing to believe humbly in what the Church has ordained is the root problem. For example, from the above passage we can see that the priest had reasoned thus: a virtuous and efficacious prayer is virtuously *felt*, and since that feeling derives from the individual, the prayer is likewise beneficial *on account of that individual*. For the priest, his own prayers, not the canonical ones, had stirred greater feeling inside of him, so he preferred them to those which had been formally instituted. For Hilton this means that the priest had arrogantly and presumptuously—not *humiliter*—determined that the Church was in no way responsible for any virtue of a particular prayer. The conclusion, besides making him a heretic, had made the priest highly negligent and uninterested in the formalities of his office.28

But this was not his only argument against ecclesiastical authority. The priest’s error seems also to have been supported by the claim that certain virtues sanctified the canonical prayers, rather than the other way around. That this was indeed his claim is suggested by the fact that Hilton’s defensiveness comes in the contexts of several points

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28 *Ibid.*, II.304-7: “In saying them you should not rush to the end, nor become afflicted with a lack of interest, thinking it a great burden imposed upon you and wishing to serve God more freely; nor should you desire to perform any exercise of prayer or meditation until that is finished” [In dicendo non festines ad finem, nec tedium officiaris, quasi grave iudicans tale onus tibi inponi eo quod liberius velles servire Deo, nec desideres facere aliud exercitium oracionis vel meditacionis quousque istud persolvatur].
he makes about the virtues of faith, hope and charity. The anchorite thinks that canonical prayers fail to promote these three virtues, because he does not feel them when offering those prayers.\textsuperscript{29} In other words, these virtues exist prior to all Church-ordained practices, and justify those practices. Thus, when the priest had considered whether faith, hope and charity could be adequately pursued independent of the Church’s formal direction, his answer was in error, even heretical.

The problem is in a way far larger than the matter of the priest’s affective feeling. As noted above, \textit{recta fides} is an essential category for Hilton, and for his argument against the anchorite’s error to have relevance for the heretic, the two must agree on what constitutes \textit{recta fides}. But of course they do not. A reading of this passage quickly makes it clear that Hilton and the anchorite do not share the same definition of \textit{recta fides}: the anchorite thinks that the “faith” (in the above triad of virtue) is independently his own and that it justifies all other behaviors; by contrast, Hilton thinks that \textit{fides} belongs to the Church and can justly claim the priest’s allegiance.\textsuperscript{30} Not only does “faith” create the disagreement between the two. The fact that the priest desires an affectivity that is also viable \textit{despite} the Church’s notions of “faith” guarantees that in the course of their interaction he and Hilton will contest the meaning of several spiritual and ecclesiastical categories. Quarrels over the performance of the canonical hours were

\textsuperscript{29} \textit{Ibid.}, ll.321-3: “Do not think this prayer fails to promote faith, hope and charity. Nay, they flow and abound all the more richly, even if you do not always feel it” [\textit{Non credas hanc oracionem fore fidei, spei et caritatis expertem. Ymmo fluit, habundat affluentissime, etsi tu non hoc semper sencias}].

\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Ibid.}, ll.317-21: “And you are a member and minister of the Church committed to this appointed office. Great is the benefit of this sort of prayer, though not by virtue of its being spoken or believed, but because it belongs to the Church in whose office you pray, for by saying it you are the music of the Church. If anyone acknowledges the Church, he understands this prayer’s virtue” [\textit{Et tu es minister et membrum ecclesie, ad hoc officium deputatum. Magnus est effectus huius oracionis, non ex merito dicentis credentis tamen, sed ex merito ecclesie cuius vice oras, nam organum ecclesie tu est in hoc. Si quis ecclesiam agnosceret, virtutem huius oracionis intelligeret}].
therefore a stage on which numerous other disputes were taking place, not least of which was a dispute over the meanings of key religious terms.

That those conflicts were caused by basic and far-reaching differences of definition readily explains how the priest could have landed in the hands of someone who compelled his reclusion. Speaking of his ideas to others as he spoke to Hilton may well have guaranteed condemnation. Relatively early in the letter we learn of the highly irregular manner in which the priest discussed with Hilton his affective love for God. In a passage showing that the two had conversed about the priest’s ideas and behaviors it sounds as if both are still coming to terms with this strange ascetic imprisonment.

During our last conversation your speech was not wholly pleasing to me […] You are most curious in your manner of sharing what you feel, and it is a wonder how you remain scarcely intelligible in any regard.\textsuperscript{31}

The priest’s “feeling” and his meditation of heart were wildly unfamiliar to Hilton, though we do not know precisely why. Hilton never uses the anchorite’s own words, so we do not know just what sort of resonance his affectivity may have had for others who were possibly involved in his reclusion. It is certain, however, that that language recalled to Hilton’s mind the thoughts and behaviors of heretical schools then active in England.

In this connection, and perhaps as an inevitable consequence of the first error, Hilton suspects the priest of a second, namely that he has practiced a type of affectivity traceable to the so-called heresy of the free spirit.\textsuperscript{32} Hilton mentions the heresy obliquely.

\textsuperscript{31} *Ibid.*, ll.84-9: “Nam in ultimo nostro colloquio non plene placuit michi communicacio tua […] Multum es curiousus in proferendo que sentis et quasi mirabilis, vix ab aliquot intelligibilis.”

\textsuperscript{32} On the heresy of the free spirit see Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, *Books Under Suspicion*, 404-6 et passim. For Hilton’s critique of the spirit of liberty see J. P. H. Clark, “Hilton and ‘Liberty of Spirit,’” *Downside Review* 96 (1978): 61-78. Here and below my own analysis depends on a dual resonance of the Latin “liber,” to the extent that it suggests voluntary *anachoresis* as well as a potentially heretical ideology.
as if he cannot write quite as confidently about this error as he did about the priest’s rejection of canonical prayers. Nonetheless, the anchorite suffers a kind of haughtiness—not unlike his “negligent” and haughty refusal to speak the canonical hours—that Hilton thinks characterizes heretics in general. Hilton may suspect that this particular heresy lies at the root of the other.

He is also deceived who thinks that he has attained a spirit of liberty, and as if out of zeal for greater perfection he neglects the canonical hours, thinking that he pleases God more with his own singular meditation than with the prayer that the Church has ordained.

Hilton also suspects that this affective error lies partly at the root of his dismissive attitude towards ecclesiastical authority.

And whenever someone practices spiritual ascesis there remains the great danger that he become deceived either in intellect under an illumination which breeds mere false opinions and heresies, or in a false affect and an inflamed imagination.

Hilton, we recall, was bewildered by the priest’s scarcely intelligible descriptions of his spiritual experience. A singular and esoteric affectivity on the priest’s part would explain both Hilton’s suspicion and hesitation. Spiritual singularity was both troubling and reassuring since speech that was theologically singular was by definition not stably orthodox, and nor was it solidly heretical. The impasse is resolved by the threat of a label and a suspicion: the anchorite suspiciously resembles the heretic who haughtily embraces the error of the “spirit of liberty.”

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33 See, for example, Scale, Book I ch. 58, where the link between heresy and pride is assumed to be fundamental.
34 Hilton, Latin Writings, ll.351-4: “Ffallitur eciam contemplativus qui spiritum libertatis adeptum se putat, et tanquam zelo maioris perfeccionis pretermittit horas canonicas, iudicans se plus placer Deo per suam singularem meditacionem quam per oracionem ab ecclesia determinatam.”
35 Ibid., ll.159-62: “Et quia in homine se spiritualiter exercente, maximum periculum vertitur ne decipiatur vel in intellectu false illuminato gignente opinions et hereses, vel in affect ficte et ymaginarie inflammat.”
Yet the priest’s spiritual singularity is only somewhat reassuring, for it has the potential, from Hilton’s perspective, to drive the priest ever further away from orthodox teachings. Again, the anchorite did not dissent from minor doctrinal particulars, but was *fundamentally* ill-reconciled with theological definitions (like *fides*) that conflict with his own spiritual person, even if those definitions are specifically underwritten by Holy Church. Here again the potential danger that the priest’s practice of developing his heretical notions only leads him deeper into a separate and heretical theology.

For your notions are still quite singular [*singularis*] and high-minded with imagining, inquiring, and expounding; and likewise in your meditation your heart is otherwise and directed in a different direction than the way of truth that those who are authorities have conferred upon me.\(^\text{36}\)

It sounds unlikely that the priest had committed his ideas to the page, but Hilton would obviously prefer to help keep it that way. It is enough that the priest was orally “expounding” and “inquiring” in a haughty fashion and in a way that suggests theological sophistication. The risk of course is that the priest should develop his error further and teach it to others. If Hilton thinks that the heresy of the free spirit, like a virus, might lay threateningly dormant in the anchorite’s heart, then the coerced reclusion surely appeared to be, in ecclesiastical terms, the safest measure. As Katheryn Kerby-Fulton has more recently shown, the suspicion of error quickly developed into a demand for censorship.\(^\text{37}\)

And since it is the priest’s inner spirit that cannot quite be controlled, the censorship must take on a physical form more effective than simple reclusion. In the *Scale of Perfection* Hilton addresses heresy in connection with “teeth” (i.e. talking too much). In heretics


these teeth are bloody because they are full of sin.38 But what Hilton also means of course is that teeth are easily concealed, just as they are in the case of dissembling heretics. That is, heretics can easily dissemble the truth, however depraved their hearts. But perhaps even more to the point, heretics can and should keep their mouths closed. In the course of emphasizing his own judgment of others, Hilton has deemphasized his more narrow concern, namely that anchorites show their teeth (i.e. talk) too often. They would do well to keep enclosed in their mouths the ideas that, if spoken, would reveal them as the heresies they are. The spirit of liberty should be remedied by closing—closing the mouth and closing the door behind the anchorite who speaks too often. The heretical anchorite should do the same now that his relative silence and isolation are guaranteed.

The Problem of “Freedom”: Singularity as Indeterminacy

But again, unwillingness is the letter’s chief theme. If Hilton, writing “as if voluntarily,” felt compelled to address the anchorite, it seems clear that he was displacing onto his act of writing the constraint that was used against his addressee. Everything done or said in the text comes quasi voluntarie, and Hilton’s attempts to hide the facts of coercion only more vividly reveals a quasi-voluntary consent or consensus. But it was not simply the erring anchorite who was hidden behind the anchoritic walls; Hilton was himself attempting to hide the embarrassment that this use of the anchorhold brought upon the institution. Hilton never directly admits to this because an anchorhold-cum-prison presented a moral dilemma. It is not surprising that metaphors of concealment, “darkness” and deception recur often in the Ad quemdam solitarium. The metaphors that

38 Hilton, Scale, Book II, ch. 43.
connote both anchoritic living and imprisonment—“reform,” “darkness,” “punishment,”
“volition,” “bondage”—occur in abundance throughout the letter. The application of
words to two different kinds of “enclosure” derives not only from the fact that
anachoresis was being used as coercion but also that Hilton could thus allay his
discomfort with an anchorhold-cum-prison. Hilton reasons that as long as the prison
seemed to function like an anchorhold all might still be well.\(^{39}\) An ounce of hypocrisy
was worth a pound of correction.

Our priest continued to exercise the “spirit of liberty” that, because his reclusion
was compelled, also prevents us from determining exactly in what sense he remained
“free” and the extent to which that freedom was curtailed by the anchoritic prison.\(^{40}\) In
his Scale of Perfection, a rule addressed to an anchoress, Hilton argues against the notion
that the unconstrained expression of some heresy could be innocent. The argument,
however, is rather difficult to follow and largely incoherent. The priest-anchorite, we
recall, is indifferent to the Church’s definition of fides. Of course this position bespeaks
pride, a moral failing. But as Hilton says of the heretic in his Scale, he “supposith evere
that he dooth wel and techeth wel, and so he weneth that his wai were the right wai.”

There is a wai whiche semeth to a man rightful, and the laste ende of hit bringith
him to endeles deth. This wai speciali is called heresie, for othir fleischli
synneres that synnen deedli and lyen stille thereinne comonli supposen evere
amys of hemself, and felen bitynge in conscience that thei goo not the right wai.
But an heretik supposith evere that he dooth wel and techeth wel, and so he

\(^{39}\) Relevant for the Ad quemdam solitarium is the discussion on “private grief and public salvation” by M.
\(^{40}\) For example, he admonishes the anchorite to turn from his error as if the prison were not sufficient for
compelling a moral reform; Hilton, Latin Writings, ll.162-5: “Therefore, lest you come to ruin in your
intellect by opinions and fantasies and twisted beliefs, bring back under control every foolish and simple
notion of ‘truth’ that exalts itself above itself” [Ideo ne in intellectu per opiniones et fantasias et dogmata
perversafallaris, redige in captivitatem simplicis et quasi stulte fidei omnen intellectum extollentem se
super se].
weneth that his wai were the right wai, and therfore felith he no bitynge of conscience ne mekenessee in herte. And sothli but God sende hym mekenesse while he lyveth heere, of His merci, at the laste ende he goth to helle, and neverthelesse yit weneth he for to have doon weel and geten him the blisse of hevene for his techynge.41

How can Hilton claim that the path of heresy represents both a willful and prideful rejection of Holy Church and the path that “seems right to” him? Moral conscience does not presuppose a willful antagonism towards an outside authority; Hilton must invent this antagonism. Disregarding ecclesiastical authority, if it “seems right” to someone consulting “his wai,” does not entail pride, but might rather result from one’s honest and rational attempts at understanding spiritual experience. If the heretic abandons every prick of conscience, which after all lies inside of the individual, how can Hilton know this and why is he dependent on such an argument? The answer is that since Hilton cannot know about a heretic’s conscience, he needs to control the definition of that conscience by claiming that it is defective in some way. It matters little whether the heretic does feel a “bitynge of conscience”; Hilton’s more immediate interest lies in preventing the heretic from spreading his error. The desire to control the definition of conscience is a stand-in for the desire to control the heretic himself.

Hilton suppresses any objections to constraining a heretic who is only behaving in a way that “semeth to a man rightful.” So in the Ad quemdam solitariun the priest-anchorite is reminded that he will only advance his salvation “through Christ and the Church.”42 There was good reason for emphasizing this, since he immediately opposes a

41 Hilton, Scale, Book I, ch. 58
42 Hilton, Latin Writings, ll.149-50: “Trust humbly, however, that you will advance your salvation alone through Christ and the Church” [Hanc tamen salvacionem humiliter speres solum per Christum et ecclesiam te fore consecuturum].
trust in the Church to the anchorite’s tendency to adhere to his own “stirrings,”
“conceptions” and desire to pursue mysteries.\textsuperscript{43} He is being led by his own conscience
much like the heretic is whom Hilton condemns in the \textit{Scale}. But an opposition between
inner stirrings and the Church are not inherent to the pursuit of “true” contemplation; a
paragraph later Hilton retreats somewhat, observing that the anchorite should indeed
“desire to understand” what he believes, but should nonetheless remain “cautious in that
understanding.”\textsuperscript{44} The tolerance is not wholly sincere, since it depends on the anchorite’s
agreement that his conscience is secondary to Church teachings. After all, encouraging
an anchorite-prisoner to remain “cautious” seems cynically to ignore the recent punitive
measures used against the priest. Hilton expressly declares that the anchorite must by all
means never return “to that which is opposed to the ordination of the Church and the
writings and authority of those holy fathers.”\textsuperscript{45} Should the anchorite feel something on
which the ancient fathers are silent, he should disregard his own thoughts and tightly
yoke himself to what he (presumably) knows to be orthodox teachings.

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., ll.150-55: “For then, with this foundation laid, if you should feel any sort of unfamiliar stirrings or
conceptions, or if they reach to the intellect, and if you keep your eye open for peering into mysteries, or if
you feel a fire of affect burning in your members, you should humbly and prudently recover lest you
completely adhere to them” [Tunc enim isto fundamento posito, si sencias motus et conceptus spirituals
quaescumque quasi insolitos, sive pertineant ad intellectum, ac si haberes oculum apertum in misteriis
perscrutandis, sive ad affectum ac si sentries ignem estuantem in tuis visceribus, sic humiliter et prudenter
debes recipere ut tota eis non hereas].

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., ll.188-90: “I say this not that you should not desire to understand what you believe, but that you
remain cautious in that understanding” [Hoc dico non ut minime desideres intelligere que credis, sed ut
cautus sis in intelligendo].

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., ll.165-72: “There must be no returning to that which is opposed to the ordination of the Church and the
writings and authority of those holy fathers and doctors approved by the Church. And even if you
should feel something which the Church has not yet expressly declared, nor the ancient fathers have
brought to light, you should forswear yourself in this matter and commit both it and yourself to the faith of
the Church, and not stubbornly keep to your own imagination as if inspired by truth, and as if in defense of
that ‘truth’” [Adversus illam nichil recipiendum est quod ordinacioni ecclesie et dictis sanctorum partum
doctorum ab ecclesia aprobatorum auctoritati obviat. Et eciam si aliquid sensias quod per ecclesiam
expresse nondum declaratur, nec per antiques patres detegitur in lucem, teipsum in hoc deseras et ecclesie
fidei tam te quam illud commite, nec pertinaciter inhereas sensui tuo quasi illuminato a veritate, pro illius
quasi veritatis defencione].
Much later Hilton will ventriloquize a prayer for the anchorite, but in the course of declaring how he thinks the anchorite ought to express allegiance to Holy Church through prayer, Hilton effectively invents the anchorite’s silence and passivity. It is a passivity that Hilton has imposed on him in the very act of modeling which words ought to be prayed. For that reason, the act of putting into the anchorite’s mouth the language of obedience hopes to conceal just what sort of passivity his reclusion has asked of him. In addition to his dismissive attitude toward the canonical prayers, then, the priest’s error had been (and was still) a certain singularity, an insistent affirmation of his own conscience. Hilton does not use this last term often in the Ad quemdam solitarium, perhaps because conscientia does not help him condemn the anchorite’s thoughts and behaviors as singularitas, since this term signals isolation from a larger body of believers. He erred by not holding to practices of meditation and speech that were clearly either orthodox or heretical, and Hilton must finally resort to calling him singular.

But as even Hilton sees it there are two challenges posed by singularitas beyond the fact that it escapes strict theological categorizations. First, the anchorite’s singularity prevents Hilton from knowing whether he is moving closer to or further from orthodoxy; if the latter, then the use of the anchorhold as a prison seems even more absurd than it already clearly was. Second, and as a consequence, Hilton must still find compelling reasons to justify the anchoritic prison, even though such justifications will necessarily

\[46 \text{Ibid., ll.155-9: “[...] immediately take recourse to Christ and the truth of the Church, saying with feeling, ‘Lord Jesus, may you be my sole hope, merit and reward. Whatever I feel think or say, I submit to the faith of the Church and desire salvation through you alone’” [sed statim ad Chri\textsuperscript{stum} habeas recursum et ad ecclesie fidem, dicens cum affect, ‘Domine Ihesu, tu sis solus spes mea, meritum et premium meum. Quicquid sensero, quicquid cogitauero et quicquid dixerо ecclesie fidei subicio et per te solum salvari cupidio].} \]
require the kind of certainty about error and transgression that *singularitas* prevents Hilton from having. Any effort to attach the anchorite to a discussion of justice—with reference to sin, punishment, redemption and so on—will fail on account of Hilton’s own ignorance of the anchorite’s spiritual condition.47

The central tension in the *Ad quemdam solitarium* is between Hilton’s certainty that ascetic reclusion can lead to genuine moral reform and his lack of certainty about just how the priest-anchorite should go about that reform. On the one hand, when his religious superiors compelled the anchorite to enter the cell, Hilton knew that their only justification was the hope that the anchorite’s life would end in a virtuous manner. The cell that violated its resident’s volition presupposed a moral endpoint that justified the use of coercion. This endpoint should find the anchorite pure in both body and belief. On the other hand, Hilton makes clear three points that set him in opposition to the end-justify-the-means rationale of the anchoritic prison: (1) he is not wholly convinced of the moral value of coercion, (2) he does not entirely agree that orthodox belief is a precondition for ascetic virtue, and (3) Hilton actually denies the presumption that the anchorite’s future can be foretold in such a way that justifies the anchoritic prison. All three of these points will eventually lead Hilton to argue against his own support for the forced enclosure, and it is in particular Hilton’s deep sympathy for the anchorite’s *singularitas* that devastates all arguments in support of coercion. How does Hilton, then, first set himself against the use of *anachoresis* as punishment?

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At a remarkably early point in the *Ad quemdam solitarium* Hilton sabotages his otherwise frequent attempts to justify coercion by quoting from the *Conferences* of John Cassian. In the first conference, on which Hilton depends, Cassian established that ascetic practice was justified by two facts, one inherent to the ascetic and the other inherent to his practice. First, Cassian’s theory presupposes an un-coerced moral desire by the ascetic for *anachoresis*. The second component of that theory stipulated that the monk’s *finis* is unobtainable on this earth; it is deferred indefinitely. Both arguments are irreconcilable with all forms of coercion, and Hilton would need to suppress both in order to support an argument for coercion. This is because coercion depends on the notion that an ascetic’s endpoint can be completely articulated on earth, since that virtuous endpoint, when obtained, will then seem to justify the suffering that coercion entails. One must see the end from the beginning lest the moral offense of using force against an ascetic be perpetuated by the failure of forceful acts to effect some ultimate good, however slight.

By contrast, in Cassianic theory no virtuous endpoint is guaranteed, precisely because *anachoresis* depends equally upon the uncertainties of human desires and their moral weakness. In the *Conferences*, ascetics are frequently uncertain—hence the question-and-answer format of the text as a whole—about matters of the body and spirit.48

There is of course no guarantee that Hilton had an adequate understanding of Cassian to warrant a fuller examination. And most of the letter is certainly far removed from the latter’s monastic principles. Nevertheless, Hilton begins with a text-book description of Cassianic *anachoresis* as the search for *puritas cordis* and love as though coercion had not characterized this particular process of enclosure.

48 See Chapter 1.
For purity of heart, like the goal and recompense due to retired soldiers, must be ardently desired, and for attaining which one must work aggressively, humbly and prudently by a continual bodily and spiritual ascetical.\textsuperscript{49}

Much later Hilton will build upon this sentiment in a way that harmonizes with Cassian.

I say that to you […] by way of example, not so that you should hold always only to this [manner], but that you should do thus or otherwise just as God inspires you. For God leaves to us the widest fields of his wisdom in sacred Scripture in which we can through mediation walk and pick out its spiritual flowers.\textsuperscript{50}

The term puritas cordis is deeply, though not exclusively, Cassianic and the comparison of ascetics to soldiers is exactly that used by the theorist in his first conference. And like Cassian, Hilton seems in the second passage to suggest that however necessary fasts, vigils or reading may seem to the monk, these things are infinitely negotiable, because they are secondary to one’s final goal, purity of heart.\textsuperscript{51} However, throughout the letter Hilton does not address the fact that for Cassian anything that troubles the mind or distracts its attention on God must be discarded by the ascetic. Above all, the individual ascetic is by definition the only person fully qualified to judge whether anything in his life still impedes his focus on God. But the passivity created both by an anchoritic prison and the dictates of Hilton’s letter stand opposed to the notion that the priest-anchorite can or should himself pursue his finis.

Hilton also refuses to adequately translate Cassian’s emphases on deference and volition, since his efforts to justify coercion cannot remain coherent in the face of unpredictability (singularitas) and individual volition. What Hilton suppresses here is the fact that the priest-anchorite cannot possibly pursue purity of heart since his volition has

\textsuperscript{49} Hilton, \textit{Latin Writings}, ll.15-18.
\textsuperscript{50} \textit{Ibid.}, ll.422-26.
\textsuperscript{51} Cassian, \textit{Conf.}, 1.7 [CSEL 13.21].
been compromised. Even where Cassian prefers a monk whose obedience is absurdly radical, the monk of the *Conferences* must continually choose to be thus obedience. Only thus will he earn ascetic independence. By contrast, Hilton says that in ascetic practice “there is not always liberty.” (The *Scale* perpetuates the exact same notion.) But of course, for an imprisoned priest there is *never* liberty. And the notion that the ascetic life is not always consistent with liberty scandalizes the same Cassian Hilton quotes. Or again, Hilton observes that the priest is “truly miserable,” while in the *Conferences* although a monk can and will have hardships—like a soldier or merchant who suffer losses—he can never justify becoming miserable (*miserum*), since every hardship is voluntarily accepted. For his part Hilton tries to reconcile the priest with his misery because he secretly needs to rationalize and justify the force that had been exercised against the priest. But the misery cannot possibly be morally defended, because misery that is forced upon an individual cannot have ascetic value either for an anchorite or Cassian. Immediately after Hilton quotes Cassian he tells the anchorite to “enter into the hollow earth” (i.e. the anchorhold), a command that again sets Hilton against Cassian and volition. Hilton does not seem to see that the meditation that “compels” the anchorite to praise God is morally vacuous, since it is compelled.

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52 See, for example, Goodrich, *Contextualizing Cassian*, 202-7.
54 Hilton says elsewhere that he considers the notions of coerced and voluntary action morally parallel insofar as both render a sort of reward (“meede”) upon the anchorite. At one point in the *Scale* he writes: “An nothir meede there is […] whiche oure Lord geveth for special good deeds that a man dooth wilfully over that he is bounden to doo.” Clearly, actions deriving from both volition and obligation inform the life of anyone who has undertaken a monastic vow. However, what concerns us presently is the extent to which the actual making of such a vow is accompanied by the will to obscure the distinction between an act of volition and one of coercion. Both the *Scale* and the *Ad quemdam* attempt to make the case that one might acquire “meede” from God whether one bears moral responsibility for enclosure (this is voluntary enclosure), or whether enclosure is externally imposed, rendering the anchorite morally passive.
55 Hilton, *Latin Writings*, ll.434-5: “[meditation] will make you perceive yourself as truly miserable and, hence compel you to give praise to God.”
Why, then, did Hilton first make the mistake of courting tolerance (“God leaves to us the widest fields in sacred Scripture”) when he would argue against Cassian? And how does Hilton indicate that he was wrong on both counts, namely that “liberty” is not always necessary and that the ascetic finis is always theologically and ascetically knowable? Here it is essential to underscore that, as a category, singularitas proved rather attractive to Hilton even if it summarizes his general uncertainty about the priest-anchorite’s entire inner disposition—both his theological notions and the nature of his ascetic volition. This is why Hilton cannot bring himself to name the anchorite a heretic. While we must pursue Hilton’s deeper meditations on singularitas, these meditations were never able to develop until Hilton first condemned the anchorite’s error. Only then could Hilton realize that he was in fact not wholly convinced that condemnation was in order, or justifiable. And in fact, Cassian’s point about a deferred endpoint that the ascetic can never quite attain in this life finally leads Hilton to admit that absolute certainty over the priest-anchorite’s ascetic and theological life would be impossible.

Keeping the Anchorite Imprisoned: Three Biblical Exempla

Throughout the letter theological error and singularity repeatedly refuse to be reconciled. Hilton could appeal to the one only at the expense of the other; the anchorite could never simultaneously be a heretic and singular. And since Hilton’s dilemma was in part engendered by the theological indeterminacy of the anchorite’s inner life, it became impossible to justify coercive tactics against him—like enclosure—without the discourse of “error.” It was finally only some form of misbehavior, not singular behavior, that
could be construed as a justification for an anchoritic prison. Hilton reasoned correctly that the ideology of imposed confinement is more at home with heresy (where punishment was more easily justified) than with singularitas (where no error could be proven and punishment appeared arbitrary). And because punishment and coercion presupposed theological and moral certainty, the discourse of error and punishment was at one with moral exemplarity. The anchorite was either exemplarily good or bad, orthodox or heretical. Still more, moral exemplarity implied textual exemplarity as well. In justifying the anchorite’s reclusion, then, Hilton would turn to a series of literary exempla whose central message was that a sinner’s will could be violated if the end result was his reconciliation to God.

Here of course Hilton needed a special sort of exemplum for a not-so-holy anchorite; he required narratives that illustrate the virtue and vice of a single individual, but which avoided the indeterminacies of singularitas and justified the use of the anchorhold as a prison. In short, Hilton needed to tell a story about a figure who moved from vice to virtue, and whose virtuous ending came only as a consequence of divinely sanctioned force. Like the Scale, the Ad quemdam solitarium mentions a single person who, more than any other, makes it very difficult to distinguish the anchorite from the prisoner: Adam. The medieval memory of Adam was centrally about his imprisonment in Hell. For Hilton to model Adam as both anchorite and Hell’s prisoner would justify anachoresis as a form of God’s judgment rather than as an ascetic’s desire. As he would reason, Adam landed in Hell and the anchorite in the cell because in the perfection of God’s justice both figures would thus be led from vice to virtue, disobedience to
obedience and from error to righteousness. Surely, he writes, God brings “even his enemies to peace.”

For if you pursue your work faithfully, from his mercy and when it pleases him God will turn your work into repose, bitterness into sweetness, and reason into wisdom. For when man’s path pleases God, says the wise man, he brings even his enemies to peace.\textsuperscript{56}

If divine justice created both Hell and the anchorhold, who can justly condemn an anchoritic prison? It was with reference to Adam’s circumstances that, for Hilton, forced confinement could have the support of divine justice. Admittedly, since all solitary ascetics are associated with some form of error, ascetic desire ought to make it impossible to justify the use of the cell as a punishment. But Adam possessed two characteristics that helped resolve asceticism’s hostility to coercion. First, he had every reason to desire God, especially after his fall. Hilton thinks that if anyone ardently desired God like an ascetic it was Adam. But secondly, it was equally true that no figure from human history so well illustrated both an ascetic’s “bondage” in sin and the justice of God’s use of hell as a prison to punish sinners. In this case, that punishment was a type of enclosure that, as luck would have it, happened to resemble the anchoritic cell.

Hell, prison, enclosure and darkness together evoke punishment and/as reform, because error is seen to justify that punishment just as it had justified every ascetic’s desire to serve God better. Thus, the anchorhold-\textit{cum}-prison can exploit the anchorite’s holy desire for reform even if all forms of forced confinement ignore an individual’s

\textsuperscript{56} Hilton, \textit{Latin Writings}, ll.264-8: “quia si fideliter operates fueris, Deus ex sua misericordia quando sibi placuerit convertit tuum laborem in quietem, amaritudinem in dulcedinem, et rationem in sapienciam. Quia, cum placuerit, inquit Sapiens, Domino via hominis, inimicos eius convertet ad pacem.”
desires and volition. Adam had both a reason to desire reform and an “imprisoned” status in the medieval imagination, since his exile from Eden led to a kind of enclosure in Hell.

So although anyone who has been born from Adam’s common bond is infected by this longing, having put on Adam’s fleshy garments, it nevertheless does not drive his action in all matters uniformly.\(^{57}\)

And again in the *Scale* Hilton writes of Adam,

\[\ldots\] oure Lord God schoop in soule man to the ymage and the liknesse of Him… But thorugh synne of the first man Adam it was disfigured and forschapen into anothir liknesse, as y have bifoire seid… But that reformynge myght not ben had by noon ertheli man, for everiche man was in the sam meschief, and noon myght suffice to helpe hymself, and so mykil lasse ony othir man. Therfore it nedide bi doon by Hym that is more thanne a man, and that is oonli God.\(^{58}\)

The fact of Adam’s imprisonment in Hell is then recalled and justified.

For it fil from that gostli light and that heveneli foode into that peynful myrkenessen and beestli lust of this wrecchid liyf, exilid and flemed out fro the heritage of hevene that it schuld han had yif it hadde stonden, into the wrecchidnesse of this erthe, and afyrward into the prisoun of helle, ther to have ben withouten eende. Fro the whiche prisoun to that heveneli heritage it myght nevere have comen agen, but yif it hadde be reformed to the first schap and to the first liknesse.\(^{59}\)

Reform is the end that justifies every punitive means. As it seems, Hilton has made a highly consistent and unassailable argument in favor of the anchoritic prison.

But he would also use the life of the Apostle Paul to argue that coerced reform is morally justifiable because the “holy” end reveals itself in hindsight and overshadows the disagreeable facts of force and resistance.

For how did it hinder Paul that he had persecuted—as he was drawn unwillingly to the path of salvation—he who afterwards followed Christ with an ardently

\(^{57}\) *Ibid.*, ll.40-3: “verumptamen licet quilibet propagates ex Adam lege communi hac concupiscencia sit infectus, indutus tunicis Ade pelliciis, non tamen uniformiter hecconcupiscencia in ominibus exercet suum actum.”


\(^{59}\) *Ibid.*
devoted mind, concluding a necessary beginning with voluntary devotion, he also ended a glorious life with a more glorious ending? Therefore have no fear regarding your fall or this corrupt beginning, because it is spiritual judgment alone that weighs your subsequent living and its praiseworthy ending.\textsuperscript{60}

But of course, this kind of reasoning only rephrases the argument that the anchorite’s voluntary and internal ascetic desire was irrelevant to his status and his error. Hilton would need something more compelling than the mere analogy Adam offered, specifically he needed to maintain two fictions. First, in support of clerical authority he required the appearance that the priest’s entrance into the anchorhold had been voluntarily undertaken. Secondly, and more importantly, Hilton needed to prove that he knew the final end (\textit{finis}) of the priest’s life and that his ultimate correction would justify imprisonment. He needed a completed narrative, and one that would show that Adam, the priest and another victim of divine force, the Apostle Paul, all ended their lives in perfect holiness \textit{with the help of coercion}.

The figure of Adam was useful to Hilton only insofar as his imprisonment in sin and Hell ultimately led to liberation and redemption, a change that Hilton claims the imprisoned anchorite can experience, however grievous his error had been. The analogy depends on hindsight: we know that Adam erred, was bound in sin/Hell, but was then released from that bond by God’s mercy. The same is true of the Apostle Paul who was blinded and then “bound” to serve God. Hilton reasons that the priest-anchorite will have

\textsuperscript{60} Hilton, \textit{Latin Writings}, ll.76-82: “Quid enim obfuit Paulo quod repente fuerat secatus, ad viam salutis velut invitus videtur attractus, qui postea Christum toto animi fervore secutus, inicium necessitates voluntaria devocione consummans gloriosam vitam fine gloriosiori conclusit? Non timeas ergo casum nec inicium corruptum, quia solum ex vita sequente et fine laudabili totale pendet anime iudicium.” For Paul’s conversion see \textit{Acts} 9.1ff.
the same experience, so long as he submits humbly to the correction of forced confinement. But there are three problems with Hilton’s conclusion.

First, the analogy works like any _integumentum_—metaphor, allegory or whatever—by concealing what it hopes to reveal, and this is exactly what the anchorhold does, especially an anchorhold used as a prison. To fit the story of Adam onto the anchorite creates and exploits an _appearance_ of resemblance when it seems useful to conceal a kind of “error” like the fact that Adam and the priest are in many respects _not_ alike. This is exactly the problem with disguising the prison as an anchorhold. It is not that Adam and the anchorite are alike. Rather, their lives might _alike be used_ to fortify an otherwise difficult argument: that just as God had justly punished error by imprisoning Adam and forcing the Apostle Paul’s conversion, humans were justified in doing the same. But in the case of the priest-anchorite’s reclusion some matters of high moral interest were indeed different since Hell was no anchorhold, Adam-as-prisoner was not an ascetic with a _propositum_, and religious officials were (alas!) not God.

Humans differ from God in not knowing the end from the beginning, but Hilton claims this ability for humans and thus brings me to the second problem with his argument about Adam and the anchorite. For the analogy further suggests that Hilton, the anchorite and others can know (1) just how God will eventually punish or reward Christians for their earthly beliefs and conduct, and (2) why they will be thus rewarded or punished. Indeed, for the analogy between these two “prisoners” to remain coherent on this score Hilton must know both that the priest will eventually be redeemed and that his
imprisonment was—like Adam’s!—a means for achieving that end. However, Hilton will explicitly deny that he knows either.

His confession of ignorance leads to the third problem. When he insists on using Adam’s life and final redemption to justify the imprisonment of someone whose future he admits is uncertain, then Hilton implies that all such analogies are finally unjustified. More to the point, the stories he tells in the *Ad quemdam solitariun* will commit the same error of his Adam/anchorite analogy: they will posit a future point of redemption despite Hilton’s knowledge that such points cannot be predicted. All of the exempla that he will use to justify the anchorite’s imprisonment will fail for precisely these reasons. They will all attempt to predict that the anchorite will be redeemed—a prediction Hilton also admits cannot be made—and to justify the initial grounds for enclosing him, grounds that were officially and morally unjustifiable. The problem with all of Hilton’s uses of exempla to rectify the error of the anchorite’s story, including and especially the violation of his will, is that all such exempla assist in perpetuating a deception—and coercion.

A third exemplum shows these inconsistencies in more spatial terms. As he opens his text it quickly emerges that concealment (*tenebra*) and exemplary narratives are meant to stand in some relation with each other. But what has been concealed is the will to impose *anachoressis* as detention. And the tie between an exemplum ostensibly about “truth” and concealment is not designed to help either the anchorite, who had just been enclosed, or Hilton avoid *exploiting* narratives for their power to conceal.

Dear brother in Christ, I implore you by the body of Jesus Christ to walk, devoted to God, in that vocation to which you have been called. For rejecting the wide path of worldly conduct, and cautiously avoiding the traps set by erroneous belief, you have fled [*fugisti*] to the small town of Segor and the city of refuge, desiring
to be saved there along with the just Lot from the flames of Sodom, that in fivefold sensuality was corrupted in secular life and afterward burned spiritually on the mount of pretended virtue, you were drunk with the wormwood of error and have feebly collapsed; but thanks be to God, for though you fell were not dashed, since the Lord kept his hand beneath you, raising and saving you mercifully from the shades of ignorance. Do, therefore, what you have come for, for you have come to render yourself totally into Christ’s rest, by serving not the old man who is corrupted by the allurements of error, but the new man who is created in righteousness and by the sanctity and purity of heart.61

The *parva civitas* is the anchorhold, but this opening repeatedly refers to some “error” on the anchorite’s part. It will only gradually emerge that this error was profoundly relevant to the anchorite’s reclusion. Even more so, that error was central to the circumstances of that reclusion. But those circumstances are here being concealed and displaced onto the anchorite as if he were engaged in deception (*in monte similate virtutis*). Hilton also takes refuge, as it were, in an analogy: like those in OT exempla who fled to a city of protection, the anchorite has acted wisely by fleeing for redemption to the enclosure. So he invents another narrative that he hopes will explain to the anchorite exactly how his recent enclosure should be understood. Whatever his life prior to his enclosure, all competing justifications for the anchorite’s present condition are replaced with Hilton’s own exemplum about Lot and others.

Unhappily, the flight to the city of Segor is offset by Lot’s flight from Sodom. A minor detail, perhaps, but Hilton has figuratively, if momentarily, placed his reader both

61 *Ibid.*, ll.1-14: “Dilecte in Christo frater, obsecro te in visceribus Ihesu Christi ut digne ambules Deo vocacione qua vocatus es. Spernens namque viam latam mundialis conversacionis, necnon latebras erronee persuasionis caute declinans, fugisti ad parvam civitatem Segor urbemque refugii, cupiens in ea cum iusto Loth salvari ab incendio Sodome, qui prius sensualitate quinaria corruptus in vita seculari ac postea in monte similate virtutis spiritualiter incestans, inebriatus absintio erroris fragiliter corruisti; sed Deo gracias, quia et si lapsus non tamen collibus, quia Dominus supposuit manum suam, te elevans de tenebris ignorancie misericorditer liberando. Ffacerfo ad quod venisti, venisti enim ut totaliter te inperderes in obsequium Christi, non serviendo secundum veterem hominem qui corrumpitur in desiderii erroris, sed secundum novum qui in justicia creatus est, in sanctitate et cordis puritate.”

293
inside and outside of the refuge, covering and disguise of the anchorhold. The instability of Hilton’s analogy is of interest because it is symptomatic of the deeper artifice running throughout the text. Unlike the anchorite’s propitium, the OT narratives are completed and have no obvious relevance for anachoresis. It would seem, rather, that Hilton wishes to invent the analogy because the anchorite’s “error” needs to be displaced and forgotten as an unfortunate beginning to his propitium. Indeed, the opening shows Hilton repeatedly returning to that “error” so as to re-narrate Hilton’s own desire to displace deeply erroneous beginnings. It is not so much that the anchorite “fled” to this place of safety, as that Hilton wishes to flee from the fact that the anchorite cannot with certainty escape the burning Hell of Sodom. The analogy with Adam forces itself into this new narrative where Hilton discovers that the anchorite can, in fact, never be completely safe. Should he remain disobedient to God, the anchorite will eventually find himself in the prison of Hell. Meanwhile, his earthly wandering and estrangement from the “heritage of hevene” remains his portion in the present.

And again, this exemplum, like the others, presupposes a future point of moral and theological security when Hilton will himself deny the possibility that the anchorite can have such security. The latter is simply too singular. As we have seen, the structure of set narratives—about Adam and Paul—performed the same function as the anchoritic prison: both forced the ascetic to think of future possibilities as inevitable despite all indications that such predictions remain (and ought to remain) impossible. When in the passages that follow Hilton seems able to relent, he is motivated by the realization that by attempting to reunite the priest with ecclesiastical authority, he could not avoid defending
the coercive tactics that he also wanted to repudiate. It is no accident that the above
exempla come early in the letter, and hence prior to his eventual success at repudiating
the use of coercion against ascetics. Let us turn to those observations he makes that
undermine his own attempts to prove that the anchorite’s life would have a “praiseworthy
ending.” Even with such proof it was not certain that ascetic living could be thus
justified with force, but in the absence of such proof no justification would ever be
possible. In any case, the anchorite’s own singularitas determined that predictions on
future ascetic behavior were wholly impossible, even for the ascetic himself.

Overthrowing the Coercive Anchorhold and the Failures of Disguise

No material from the letter as eloquently shows Hilton’s turn away from the
discourse of coercion as does his own biography, and specifically the fact that he had
once been a solitary before joining the Austin canons at Thurgarton. His experiment with
anachoresis is of special interest for the Ad quemdam solitarium since it helps explain
why Hilton eventually comes to express some tolerance for the anchorite’s behavioral
and theological alterity. We must recall that Hilton could only condone a coerced
reclusion if he knew the end of a narrative, which was structured by a beginning (error),
middle (reform) and endpoint (orthodoxy) in the anchorite’s life. His defense of
constraining an erring ascetic depended on a knowledge that the ascetic’s life would, as a
result of the forced used against him, end virtuously. But did Hilton have grounds for
maintaining that his own intellectual career would proceed so predictably?
While as a solitary Hilton may himself have been certain that he wished to serve God in some manner, his ascetic intention was not greatly stable; he was not always certain just what spiritual or bodily form of living his desire should take. As J. P. H. Clark tells, Hilton had for some time studied Canon Law (probably at Cambridge) when he then “abandoned a promising legal career.” It would seem, then, that at some point prior to entering the house at Thurgarton he lived as a solitary, another potential career that he obviously also abandoned when he decided finally to become an Austin canon. In other words, Hilton’s career shows considerably movement and instability.

It is tempting to suspect him of some uncertainty about matters of personal conduct. Indeed, it is not only his Ad quen dam solitari um that repeatedly reminds its reader to maintain a “pure intention” despite perhaps his own uncertainty about practical action (de intencione, non tamen ita stricte dico de accione). In another letter that bears some striking resemblances with that addressed to the priest-anchorite Hilton again reminds his reader that the advice he offers on religious decision-making “concerns intention, not so much action” (verba mea de intencione voluntatis tue, non autem de accione). In this separate letter Hilton was writing to a friend, Adam Horsley, who was undecided about entering a monastic house, though he felt a religious burning for God. In what seems to be a preoccupation with uncertainty Hilton again writes elsewhere, this time to a solitary friend of his who was uneasy with his life as a solitary ascetic and not convinced of the virtue of holding to that form of living. In fact, this last example

63 Hilton, Latin Writings, ll.269-70.
64 Hilton, Latin Writings, De imagine peccati, ll.521-22.
65 Ibid., 69ff.
shows Hilton fighting with his own demons of instability and restlessness. In sum, several of his Latin letters are addressed to individuals who are uncertain of their career path just as he had become uncertain of (and unsatisfied with) his own as a solitary.

Hilton, then, was a failed and unsettled solitary who was well positioned to understand and sympathize with the inner indeterminacies of the priest-anchorite he addressed in the *Ad quemdam solitariurn*. And it is not safe to argue that Hilton was always whole-hearted in his reproaches against the priest’s theological error. On the one hand, he links spiritual and bodily *ascesis* to help legitimize the constraints of the anchoritic prison. Apparently, Hilton does not realize that the instabilities of his own life cast doubt on his project of predicting some virtuous and stable future for others.

What must be pursued in this matter is the double exercise of body and spirit. For, as is clear enough to you, spiritual training is accomplished in three ways, namely in reading, meditation, and prayer. However, so that you might safely run in this exercise, set forth a stable foundation, that is, right belief."  

Yet, as some of the passages indicate, Hilton is uncertain that the priest-anchorite is a heretic, nor does he say that heretical impurity is in necessary conflict with an undivided ascetic desire. He does say that a heretic influenced by the devil will unavoidably be prevented from pursuing his ascetic desires. And it is the ascetic turning to Christ that Hilton thinks is central, both for him and the error-filled anchorite. For at one remarkable moment Hilton backs away from his earlier insistence that only faith in the Church would redeem the priest. He replaces the “Church” with “Christ,” empathizing perhaps with the intellectual wandering that no anchoritic prison could remedy.

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So as I have said, if you can subject yourself for your own sake and humbly remain obedient to Christ, and if that impulse of yourself—demonic though it may be—continues until you die, I do not think that it will damage your spirit. For your faith in Christ will redeem you.\footnote{Ibid., ll.235-38: “verumptamen sit e pro posse tuo deserveris et humiliter subieceris te Christo, etsi ille motus duraret usque ad mortem et forsan ex diabolo esset, non puto nocrer anime tue. Fides enim tua per Christum salvaret e.”}

Theology has here given way to the more general “Christ,” a figure to which the anchorite had never refused allegiance. Though Hilton is not specific in this passage, the “impulse” referred to here can be none other than the anchorite’s dismissive attitude towards the power of the Church to ordain and justify certain prayers and meditations. Hilton is growing more tolerant of the anchorite’s singularity and, as we will see, increasingly nervous about his own attempts to justify the anchoritic prison.

In addition to the biographical details of Hilton’s life that softened him towards the anchorite, a single theme that Hilton himself embraces in both this letter and in the \textit{Scale} was equally resistant to proof about the anchorite’s ending: the apophatic image of “unknowing.”\footnote{See the popular and contemporary works by the Cloud-author, Phyllis Hodgson, ed., \textit{The Cloud of Unknowing and the Book of Privy Counseling}, EETS 218 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1944).} When Hilton expressed his sense that his own rigid exempla were also promoting the moral dilemmas they were designed to eliminate, he exploited various metaphors of vision, blindness and darkness. These images prove disastrous to coercive arguments. Just as Hilton remained unconvinced that his own narrative “ends” justified the coercive “means” used against the anchorite, so too does he repeatedly undermine his own hope to foresee the final spiritual state of the anchorite. He implicates himself in the language of blindness and darkness, a language of anchoritic singularity.
For example, in the following passage and elsewhere he uses metaphors of vision to make two mutually incompatible points, even though it is incompatibility itself that mostly closely agrees with blindness, unknowing and singularity. He says, on the one hand, that the priest-anchorite’s meditation will help him endure the prison “if not immediately at first, perhaps at its middle or endpoint.” Hilton claims that he can see how the anchorite’s life will end.

To that extent you should be humble and the flame of your mediation will blaze, if not immediately at first, perhaps at its middle or endpoint […] We must wait humbly while we expect the infusion of grace, whose arrival is shown when it brings with it wonderful and deep pleasantness. For that which you previously in your folly viewed with a blind eye, a cold heart, you will now see clearly, delightfully, with a burning heart, and with a delightful sprinkling of humility.69

Yet at the end of this passage he confesses his blindness, his uncertainty about what he had just said was true: “But forgive me, I do not know whether what I am saying is true: God knows” (Parce michi quia nescio an verum sit quod dico; Deus scit). Elsewhere the fact that the moral benefits of meditation are certain forced Hilton to make both the point that he sees the anchorite’s future (“the flame of your meditation will blaze”), then to admit that he is blind to that future (“I do not know whether what I am saying is true”). This tension derives from the fact that he is not convinced that depriving an ascetic subject of liberty can either cause or justify final spiritual benefits.70 Hilton does not

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69 Hilton, Latin Writings, ll.426-36: “Tantum sis humilis et in meditacione tua exardescet ignis, et si non cito in principio, forte in medio vel in fine…instandum est humiliter expectando gracie infusionem, cuius adventus signum est quod affert secum miram et intimam suavitatem. Nam illud quod prius cecucienti oculo, frigid corde et quasi inspido vidisti, iam clare et delectabiliter et calente corde videbis una cum sapida humilitatis aspercione que faciet te sentire vere te esse miserum et dare laudem Deo.”

70 Ibid., ll.332-5: “Rather, if you humbly believe and remain penitent for your negligence, it is by faith in the Church and by your ardent love that canonical prayers will not only stand even with, but also be preferable to those other private prayers of yours which seem to come more willingly from your spirit” [Sed si humiliter credas et de negligencia penitias, per ecclesie fidem et ferventissimam caritatem comparabitis et eciam preferetur alis oracionibus tuis privates liberiori spiritu per te forsan emissis].
know because he cannot see the future; the anchorite will therefore also not necessarily “see clearly.” Since inner reform may or may not come about, it follows that all arguments for coercion must necessarily fail, even if made to seem morally justified. Unpredictability proved that a certainty over matters of reform was only a mask for coercion.

It is crucial that we notice the metaphors of image and appearance, vision and darkness, both here and elsewhere. They are not only references to a dark cell—whether a prison cell, anchorhold, or Hell—but are reflections of Hilton’s own blindness to the moral stakes of his argument. For darkness (“myrkenesse”) is essential to the apophatic image and to Cassianic theory, since it suggests that the ascetic’s ultimate goal is not seen and cannot be anticipated. However much the individual keeps a certain goal in mind, he can only know that he is striving towards God, but not anything about his future physical and spiritual state. It is his conscience that is guiding him, and both categories of volition and conscience oppose coercion. In the following passage we find Hilton again attempting to use Adam to justify the imprisonment. Perhaps he also has the Apostle Paul in mind as well, although he remains unmentioned.

For that false light is on the part of creatures an improper desire which the devil first promised to sinful man, saying, “Your eyes will be uncovered and you will be like gods.” […] O how happy their eyes were before they had been closed by that false light, when unclosed eyes were interior and fixed upon that true light to which darkness had no access. Hasten, therefore, you who have lost in Adam the true light and were deceived by the false light, to recover the same by a purity of heart and with the help of God’s grace.71

71 *Ibid.*, l.32-9: “Ista enim lux falsa est concupiscencia creaturarum inordinate quam primo homini peccanti promisit dyabolus, dicens, Aperientur oculi vestry et eritis sicut dii…O quam feliciter ante errant oculi eorum ab hac falsa luce clause, quando interiores oculi aperti errant et defixi in illam veram lucem cui tenebre non succedunt. Tu igitur qui in Adam amisisti veram lucem, per falsam lucem deceptus, per cordis puritatem, Dei gracia mediante, eandem recuperare festines.”
The anchorite is merely another Adam. After all, the anchorhold admits of little light, and Adam’s eyes were (ever so conveniently!) blinded by sin just after the serpent had promised him a perfect vision of good and evil. But Hilton only restates his own problem whenever in the Scale or the Ad quendam solitarium he uses the imagery of light and darkness, sight and blindness. In both letters, but again especially in the latter, the reader is asked to reconcile a single tension that cannot be reconciled. Blindness is both something good—since it signifies mankind’s celestial and unseen goal—and something bad since it connotes moral error. That is, blindness (or darkness) is both apophatic desire and sin. Likewise, Hilton’s metaphors of sight have dual meanings, one of which is spiritual illumination and understanding. But this is also an understanding of the priest’s final end, an end of which Hilton’s apophatic image denies him knowledge. Hilton cannot both know and not know the priest-anchorite’s moral endpoint. If the celestial goal is necessarily apophatic, then the use of a material cell to effect correction reveals a kind of contradiction, rendering the light/darkness analogy incoherent.

Hilton’s comparison of the priest’s conversion to anachoresis to the conversion experience of the Apostle Paul is highly revealing and not unrelated to the subject of disguise.\footnote{Ibid., ll.76ff.} That Paul had been physically overwhelmed by God’s miraculous power largely answers for Hilton’s fondness for the analogy. Also, the potent and irresistible conversion which renders its subject passive helps Hilton disguise beneath the appeal to divinity his own unease over the extent to which the priest’s enclosure had been non-voluntary. Although the themes of blindness, error and coercion inform the both

\footnote{Ibid., ll.76ff.}
Apostle’s life and that of the priest-anchorite, Hilton hopes to make the only essential component of each narrative its holy ending. But again, in the case of the anchorite, that ending is neither obtained nor known, and no amount of force can guarantee knowledge about an inherently unpredictable future. The apohatic image insists on this fact!

So when Hilton reminds the priest-anchorite that Paul’s forced conversion had caused a brief period of physical blindness—for the brilliant glory of God had left the Apostle temporarily disabled—that blindness proves the limits of consensus. Paul’s blindness only underscores the necessity of moral error, not future reform. So Hilton requires a miracle of his own. He must have a sort of clerical foreknowledge if he is to successfully conceal (another act of blinding!) the anchorite’s dissent and the clerical desire for detention. Nor does he notice that the anchorite’s life has an unpredictable quality (“continually directed to God”) that conflicts directly with Hilton’s other assertion that work will turn into repose, “bitterness into sweetness, and reason into wisdom.”

Hilton still appeals to volition and “pure intention,” but when he refers to the need to make a firm foundation for ascesis (by which he means orthodox belief) he notes the burdensome and laborious quality to the anchorite’s prayer that becomes “more laborious than sincerely felt” (laboriosum pocius quam affectuosum). In this passage we note again Hilton’s need to ventriloquize the anchorite’s error as error in an effort to pursue a clerical will that demands that dissent (“enemies”) be overlain by the anchorite’s silence (“peace”). Hilton wants to set up an equation between the anchorite and Paul, because it is only the latter’s “praiseworthy ending” that momentarily seems to justify the violation of conscience and volition. Singularitas, rather than error, is therefore the more

73 Ibid., ll.251-68.
persistent problem, since it forces Hilton to see, and then suppress, the fact that “enemies” may or may not be brought to peace through the use of force or otherwise. Hilton’s own emphasis on endurance (“be always speedy, enduring”) suggests a deferred endpoint, and hence an uncertainty about the prospect of future “peace.”

In the exempla of Adam which Hilton uses in the Scale and the Ad quemdam solitarium, he describes how the soul of man, disfigured by error, was first exiled from Eden and cast into the “prisoun of helle.” Hilton combines images of exile and imprisonment because mankind’s sinful wandering from God (exile) requires a punishment that prevents all further wandering. The analogy between Adam’s imprisonment and anchoritic living proved so attractive to Hilton because Adam’s life had been the kind of story that, when transferred to the anchorhold, could be used to justify the anchorite’s life as a prisoner. The unfortunate construction of confinement as simultaneously voluntary and involuntary could, in the course of such narratives, be further obscured and even forgotten. It is fascinating to observe how to Hilton’s mind movement and bondage (Adam’s “exile” and his “bond”) cooperated to produce such moral perils that Hilton cannot escape. The outpouring of sin from Eden’s fountain resists all measures against it.

Consider, therefore, carefully how in you that false light breathed life into such roots that were—like a flame or fountain—wont to flow into rivers of such vices that will trouble you more severely and will blind your mind’s eye more frequently, and you will only with great effort rise against them. You must want above all that such a fountain can be dried up, namely that such rivers flowing, as it were, within you are obliterated. And so that I can help you dam up your fountain, I will show you what inwardly and outwardly disperses those rivers into your eyes.  

\[74\] Ibid., ll.49-56: “Considera ergo vigilanter de teipso lucem falsam quales aspirant radios, istam fomitem sive fontem quales solet emitter rivulos, qualia sunt vicia que acrius te vexant, que eciam mentis tue
Movement, exile and escape frustrate Hilton’s metaphors of confinement, because those metaphors were already incoherently applied: humans cannot be willingly coerced, their inner life cannot be both constrained and set at liberty—at least not simultaneously. The association of the cell (something good) with Hell and wandering (something bad) with an act of divine justice just seems confusing. Moreover, since the soul’s imprisonment in sin is inescapably a corrupt beginning, there is no way for Hilton to construe anachoresis both as an ecclesiastically imposed form of control and as a positive beginning (i.e. a propositum) by which the anchoritic subject has the best way of achieving personal excellence. But in his texts, and especially in the Ad quemdam solitarium, anachoresis must be both of these if the text is to legitimize a certain kind of duplicity.

Just as important is the hint of guilt that Hilton seems to display, particularly towards the end of the letter. Although the category of conscience is suppressed throughout, it seems to underlie many of Hilton’s admissions of his own error, not least of which is the above confession, “but forgive me, I do not know whether what I am saying is true: God knows.” Even if he does not directly address his own conscience, it becomes clear that Hilton was deeply discouraged by his own willingness to reconcile the anchorite with the prison. For example, Hilton at last addresses duplicity, but is of course insistent that the threat of hypocrisy and duplicity is unique to the anchorhold, and not produced by clerical power. He is careful to imply that he wishes to “bring to light” what possible error attends (in)voluntary anachoresis. Just barely perceptible, however, is the

fact that Hilton understands just how duplicitous his own role in justifying the anchoritic prison has been.

Scripture says that “the watchmen on the walls have taken off my garment.” It is best to remove the *garment of duplicity so that you might appear naked and simple* before him in whose sight all things are bare; nor should you doubt that even if perhaps at the outset your eye was not simple, that it should become simple and that your whole body will be made light.75 [emphasis added]

Hilton is apparently not yet worried that he has implicated himself in the work of making *anachoresis* “appear naked and simple” (*apareas nudus et simplex*). For him, the verb is necessary, for the mere appearance of disclosure underscores the cloud of duplicity over Hilton’s reconstruction of a holy and completed life. The problem is identical with that Hilton has faced all along in his use of OT exempla and the life of the Apostle Paul. But let us return to Hilton’s admission—“But forgive me, I do not know whether what I am saying is true: God knows”—that his use of exempla and their logic of finality and certainty cannot finally justify confinement, however powerful the analogies. By his own reasoning Hilton cannot himself be immune from the burden that duplicity brought both him and the anchorite.

Blindness, as we have seen, is not simply a burden—it promotes a pious expectation of Heaven—but when the anchoritic prison makes the need for control the final purpose of *anachoresis* then blindness becomes nothing more than a burden. Hilton finally all but explains as much when he associates himself with, of all people, the same

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anchorite he has been criticizing. For Hilton, uncertainty and apophatic darkness have
made it irrational to venture any further defense of coercion.

O if only this burden were pulled from your neck, and indeed from mine as well,
so that we might freely pursue God! For I am also a son of the old Adam, bearing
a hood of disgrace.  

More specifically, Hilton is blind like Adam and feels coerced to justify an anchoritic
prison. The lack of spiritual sight by the anchorite runs parallel with the letter’s blindness
to its own disunities. On closer inspection, these words by Hilton seem to indicate that he
“sees” just how blind he is. Light and dark, liberty and coercion, struggle chaotically
over the fact that using the cell as a prison is an insult to ascetic practice. Indeed, Hilton
says that light and darkness had themselves contended for dominance in the anchorite’s
heart.

For that inaccessible light is not reached except by pure eyes and a clear heart: for
no pollution penetrates into that life. And you will strive to close the door of your
senses and imaginations and immediately you will perceive a hollow abyss—that
is your own blindness—what great chaos separates your mind from the true light […] But it is then light when your mind walks along the tracks of the herd and
nourishes itself in the use of your senses, whether in deed or in imagination. For it
is then in the darkness but does not feel, walking in it as it were at midday.
Indeed, when it strives to enter into itself, it then even palpably feels the darkness,
because it does not see the light of heaven. Scripture observes that the earth was
formless and empty and that there was darkness across the face of the abyss. 

One need also but briefly reflect on the potential confusion of metaphors that might result
from the fact that an anchoritic enclosure is both a space of darkness (a cell admits of

76 Ibid., ll.393-6: “O utinam hoc iugum rumperetur de collo tuo, et eciam de meo, ut libere possemus
intendere Deo! Nam et ego sum filius Ade veteris, portans capucium ignominie.”
77 Ibid., ll.18-32: “Non enim illa lux inaccessibilis attingitur nisi puris aspectibus et mundis affectibus:
nihil enim inquinatum incurrit in illam. Ingredere ergo fossam et Claudere coneris ostium sensuum et
ymaginacionum et statim sencies fossam abissum, scilicet propri ceicitatis – chaos magnum mentem tuam
a vera luce dividens. Sed tunc lux est cum mens tua egreditur post vestigia gregum et pascit se in usu
sensuum tuorum in re vel in ymaginacione. Nam tunc in tenebris est sed non sentit, ambulans in illis velut
in meridie. Cum vero ingredi ad se conatur, tunc tenebras sentit eciam palpabiles quia lumen celi non
videt.Terra, inquit scriptura, erat inanis et vacua et tenebre errant super faciem abissi.”
little light) and (spiritual) illumination. Yet the anchorite’s uncertainty as to exactly what constitutes “true” illumination tends to be fertile soil for cultivating further confusion and even duplicity. Perhaps no single passage as immediately expresses authorial duplicity as does Hilton’s observation in the letter that the darkness of the anchorite’s abyss (i.e. both his cell and his error) is to be both embraced and rejected: “that abyss, even if it is dark, is nevertheless a false light.” The passage in question happens also to address Adam’s initial fall from grace and to preface the main content of the letter.

In a highly disorienting and seemingly random fashion the *Ad quendam solitarium* appeals variously to purity and then corruption, freedom then constraint, reclusion then detention, burden then enjoyment. Hilton suggests that the “constancy that works perseverance” will eventually overpower the anchorite’s inner and outer instability. But this structure is necessarily at odds with the apophatic image, for since the meditative absence that also figures prominently in his letters argues that such ends are unintelligible, narrative exempla develop their own capacity for deception.

It first seems to me that insofar as the inconstancy and lightness with which before now the variety of your actions has certainly troubled you—choosing now this, now that—your spirit’s impulse has accordingly driven you in various directions. You have brought this sickness with you into your little dwelling. For it is not that you have discarded the oldness of this garment just by investing your body with reclusion. So therefore it is now necessary that you firmly make your mind stable with a rudimentary *propositum*, prudently temper the heat of your itching will (*voluntatis*), and that you willingly (*voluntarie*) seize hold of the constancy that works perseverance.

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78 For some discussion on Hilton’s use of resemblance and reform see J. P. H. Clark, “Image and Likeness,” 204-20.

Hilton observes that the anchorite should “willingly” strive towards a conclusion 
\((\text{perseverantem, constanciam})\). But what conclusion is meant exactly? One that is
unforceable by others, or one that is deferred and lies beyond clerical control? If one can
take for granted the anchorite’s pursuit of a life that involves discarding instability for
constancy, then his own active consent to adopt that prescribed life as his own should
also be granted. But of course the fact of volition does not necessarily entail consensus.
It seems rather that Hilton is calling to mind the possibility that the anchorite’s sense of
his end and the means for attaining that end are \textit{not} identical with what is here being
prescribed. It is for precisely \textit{this} reason that his independent volition is at all relevant
and \textit{cannot} be taken for granted. Moreover, if inner dissent is possible, then the ending to
Hilton’s narrative is not inevitable. But it is exactly with this presumption of inevitability
that Hilton wishes to invest his narrative. Both his arguments about Paul and Adam
express the same tolerance for coercion and the same nervous awareness that exempla
expressing blindness about a future redemption were also arguments themselves and
\textit{against} using coercion to ensure what could not be ensured.

The language of necessity (“it is now necessary”) disguises the possible dissent of
one individual as the consensus between two, and the pursuit of perfection appears
voluntary because it is also made to appear inevitable. Despite this, Hilton perhaps
unintentionally perpetuates the sense that the relationship between reform and volition
remains unresolved. Above we read of Hilton’s attempt to contrast the anchorite’s
“itching will” with his “willing” submission to authority even while the verbal echo
\((\text{voluntatis...voluntarie...})\) suggests that we not follow Hilton in forcefully distinguishing
acts performed voluntarily from acts deriving from one’s willfulness. Rather, it is
Hilton’s argument alone that demands such a distinction, whereas the verbal echo that
concludes the passage suggests that a measure of rhetorical force is necessary to
maintaining that distinction.

The conditionality of his own utterances (“if you pursue your work faithfully”) is
immediately rejected because of the uncertainty that it shares in common with
singularity. But at length Hilton does finally confess his own error, observing that he
does not know whether what he has said in the letter is true. The admission is essentially
a repudiation of the anchoritic prison, since that prison had depended on the argument
that coercion will lead to certain redemption. Hilton, as it turns out, was never quite as
certain as he wished to seem.

Alas, dearest brother, I have written many words, if not deeply intellectual. I do
not know whether these or others are suited to you, but if anything that is there is
true and edifies you, give thanks to God. For I greatly fear to have written you
such things, for I know nothing. As I say, I am pressed to write as if voluntarily,
because such things cast about in my heart…I leave and commit everything to my
Christ. I do not know how to speak, because I am a child and wretched. Dearest
brother, I ask that you pray for me; you do not know how things are with me, how
greatly I need such prayers lest the noonday demon overcomes me.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, ll.470-8: “ecce, frater karissime, multa verba scripsi, sed modicum sentenciam. An tibi vel alii
congruent nescio, sed si aliquod sit quod verum sit et te edificet gracias age Deo. Multum enim timeo talis
tibi scriber, quia nichil scio. Verumptamen quasi voluntarie scriber coartor, quia talia versantur in corde
meo […] Totum desero et Christo meo committo. Nescio loqui, quia puer et miser ego sum. Ora pro me
rogo, karissime – nescis qualiter mecum agitur, quam multum indigeam oracionibus ne me fallat demonium
meridianum.”}

This ending is both troubling and relieving in its expressions of deep regret over the fact
that the priest had entered the cell under constraint. The conclusion to his letter provides
the strongest link of error and coercion with Hilton himself. But not only does he admit

\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, ll.470-8: “ecce, frater karissime, multa verba scripsi, sed modicum sentenciam. An tibi vel alii
congruent nescio, sed si aliquod sit quod verum sit et te edificet gracias age Deo. Multum enim timeo talis
tibi scriber, quia nichil scio. Verumptamen quasi voluntarie scriber coartor, quia talia versantur in corde
meo […] Totum desero et Christo meo committo. Nescio loqui, quia puer et miser ego sum. Ora pro me
rogo, karissime – nescis qualiter mecum agitur, quam multum indigeam oracionibus ne me fallat demonium
meridianum.”}
that he has perpetuated error and coercion, but also that he has been their victim.\textsuperscript{81} His commitment of “everything” to Christ effectively underscores his need to disavow his arguments and tolerate “as if voluntarily” this troubling use of the anchorhold. The final lines hauntingly imply that Hilton still must labor under a mask of volition. And yet, these words bespeak uncertainty and do as much as Hilton might possibly have done to reject the hypocrisies of an anchoritic prison and return to the apophatic image of “unknowing.”

\textsuperscript{81} On the Church as the victim of violence see Michael Goodich’s \textit{Violence and Miracle}, (25-41).
Chapter 6: Volition, Coercion and Anachoresis in Langland’s Piers Plowman

Finis alterius mali gradus est futuri.
—Seneca (Hercules Furens)¹

The coercive and punitive use of anachoresis, the attempt to assert clerical power by the very means—the cell—that for Rolle was a source of the ascetic’s theological authority, only deepened the demand for a notion of authority as dialogical, postponed. For Hilton, constraint was not an attractive mode of directing anachoresis, nor did he completely reconcile his allegiance both to Holy Church and the solitary. That the two were inextricably tied to a contest over authority inspired Rolle, but dismayed Hilton. It now remains to consider the meditations of Hilton’s contemporary, William Langland, on the function of ecclesiastical (and monastic) authority relative to that of the solitary.

Langland’s Piers Plowman is filled with hermits. Readings of his treatment of ascetic solitaries usually focus on one particular type from among the several types of solitaries discussed in the poem. More precisely, scholars have mostly inquired into Langland’s understanding of fourteenth-century eremitism, often with the goal of determining what sort of people Langland considers hermits, and of organizing the late-medieval social identities and behaviors in England that describe the poem’s “hermit.”² If the fact that Piers also refers to the early Egyptian hermits and English anchorites has not gone completely unnoticed, it has nonetheless been subordinated to the implicitly

² Most recently E. A. Jones has asked this question in “Langland and Hermits,” YLS 11 (1997): 67-86.
more pressing question of Langland’s contemporary hermits. This focus seems at least partly justified. For since *Piers* makes various (and unclear) arguments about dissimilar, but in some sense “eremitic,” subjects, the otherwise straightforward inquiry into a single type of contemporary ascetic has produced complex answers.

Scholars have distinguished between hermits who wander about, those who remain and pray in a cell, employ themselves as plowmen, or who do not quite fit any single description. Vincent Gillespie’s study of the Paternoster in *Piers* showed the continuity in Langland’s mind among the various subjects whom he associated with this prayer, including hermits, Hawkyn and the dreamer himself. Thus individual readers have helped underscore both the distinctions between eremitic types and the fact that a hermit’s identity seems interwoven into that of the poem’s other actors. Our first introduction to hermits in *Piers* famously compares the hermit with the shepherd.

> In a somer seson, whan softe was the sonne,  
> I shoop me into shroudes as I a sheep were,  
> In habite as an heremite unholy of werkes,  

(B Prol. 1-3)

Langland did not (or at least not consistently) think of eremitic behavior in terms of a single type, and all analyses so far have made it clear that the poem discloses a complicated interplay of various eremitic identities and behaviors in the fourteenth century.

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4 For some of the earliest work on hermits’ tendency to frustrate description see Hanna, “Meddling,” 86ff.


His deeper interest in the wanderer or hermit-pilgrim is almost universally acknowledged. If, as Malcolm Godden has shown, Langland creates a vocational and behavioral continuity between hermits and plowmen—a far stabler sort of person—the poem remains obsessed with physical instability. As an expression of ascetic idealism the praying, stable hermit was a compelling image for Langland, yet chiefly because it offsets the spiritual or mental instabilities of those who clearly also ranked as hermits. The wanderer brings with him those behavioral uncertainties that the cell more effectively conceals, and yet *Piers* repeatedly returns to categories of instability. A hermit’s instability reaches beyond merely his behavior or social character when the poem associates hermits with the “lunatyk lollers” whose mental instability or singularity likely seemed an embarrassment to the institution.7

Implicit to most discussions of the poem’s hermits is the claim that the Middle English and Anglo-Latin regulatory literature written for them can help us understand just what sort of ascetic behavior Langland thinks proper or improper. From the perspective of monastic regulation his attitude towards hermits appears at times satirical, tolerant, but also upset and judgmental towards the unregulated. To be sure, as Ralph Hanna shows, if Langland indeed fostered some tolerance for eremitic misconduct, it is Hawkyn, a figure who is presented to us as a hermit—called “the active man,” he seems almost Rollean in his singularity—and who challenges the notion of a single eremitic social identity and the relevance of regulatory literature to fourteenth-century hermits.8 Like the dreamer, Hawkyn dresses like a hermit, but one whose behavior does not match that of any other

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7 The work of Lawrence Clopper has been interesting in this regard, even if it has not focused on hermits directly; *Songs of Rechelesnesse* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 181-218.
8 More particularly in his last study; Hanna, “Will’s Work,” 23ff.
eremitic figure in the poem and whose highly singular and unruly character (Hanna thinks) Langland tolerated rather than condemned.

The present discussion agrees both with the thesis that the poem’s hermits are variously constituted and unstable in their identity, and with the related reading that regulatory theories—though not the Cassianic sort—are relevant to Langland’s ascetic constructions. But just how did Langland negotiate that relationship between his singular hermits, on the one hand, and the regulatory need to define different eremitic types in the interest of praise and blame? My own readings return to the theme of coercion and volition we analyzed in connection with Hilton, and suggest that this ethical relationship rests at the center of all of Langland’s comments on anachoresis. As in the previous chapter, I will here emphasize that formulations of the voluntary and ascetic propitum within Piers had to do with how both regulatory theory (of the coenobitic and ecclesiastical tradition) and narratives tended to legitimize coercion. This is a theme to which each of Langland’s passages on hermits and anchorites can ultimately be returned, even if the tension is often merely implied or occluded as it had been in Hilton’s letters.

In fact, the C-text of Piers not only implies, but directly advocates, the use of the anchorhold as a prison. There, a woman who encourages others to act corruptly is threatened with imprisonment as an anchoress if she does not mend her behavior. Curiously, her potential fate is not described as “prisoner,” but as “ancre,” even though she does not appear to have any ascetic motivations whatsoever. Through this woman Langland turns to Hilton’s meditations on the place of conscience and volition in ascetic practice. As I will argue, the passage’s apparently single-minded desire for forceful
correction belies an uncertainty about whether physical confinement should be embraced at the expense of conscience and volition. Ultimately, all of the poem’s meditations on anachoresis, in all of its historical and intellectual variety, can and must be understood as working through an ethics of ascetic authority within the context of institutional (ecclesiastical and coenobitic) power. The complex and interwoven forms of discourse and their relevance to an irreducibly material history—a history that Langland knows stretches back to Cassian’s Egypt—were central to his ethics of ascetic authority.

In passus iii of the C-text Lady Mede, who represents bribery, is threatened with enclosure “as an ancre.” She is told that she would remain enclosed until she amends her infectious cynicism and conforms to more transparent and ethical social transactions. Of course, reclusion was to be permanent and life-long, so Langland is aware that the appeal to ascetic correction was a thinly veiled expedient for punishment and control.

In the castel of Corf y shal do close the as an ancre
Or in a wel wors woen, by seynite Mary my lady,
That alle wantowen women shal be war be þe one
And bitterliche banne the and alle þat bereth thy name
And teche the to louye treuthe and take consail of resoun. (C iii. 140-44)

Lady Mede is warned that if she continues to corrupt others she will be enclosed as an anchoress so that other women will learn by her example. It is the one moment in Piers when anachoresis is made to seem a highly disagreeable prospect. Severed from an ascetic context, this use of the cell prompts us to wonder how frequently Langland separated anchoritic living from a discussion of asceticism proper. Were other enclosures in Piers capable of suggesting non-ascetic uses of the anchorhold?

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Let us consider the sermon by Holy Church from passus i, where Holy Church recalls another instance of enclosure that, as with Hilton’s priest-anchorite and Lady Mede from C iii, involves disobedience, moral corruption and forced confinement by a religious superior. In this case the superior is God.

‘Lucifer with legions lerned it in hevene, 
And was the lovelokest of light after Oure Lord selven 
Til he brak buxomnesse; his blisse gan he tyne, 
And fel fro that felawship in a fendes liknesse 
Into a deep derk helle to dwelle there fore evere.’ (B i. 111-15)

While I am not suggesting that Langland thought specifically of an anchorite as he narrated Lucifer’s confinement in Hell, we must remember that Hilton connected anchorites in particular with Adam as Hell’s prisoner. The speaker, Holy Church, is made to voice her approval for punishing disobedience with forced enclosure. Structurally, the circumstances that surround Lucifer’s bondage in Hell differ only slightly from those that led Langland to threaten Lady Mede with enclosure “as an ancre.” It would be naïve to insist that, as religious memory of forcefully correcting error, Lucifer’s bondage has no relevance to the forms of bondage that were being promoted in Langland’s context and disguised as ascetic practice. It is not a simplified set of equations (Mede = anchoress = Lucifer) that we find here, but rather an ideological continuity binding all who represent “treuthe” and “buxomnesse” and who will consider force as a means for achieving them.

Still, it is worth underscoring the differences between confinement in Piers and in Hilton’s letters. One such difference relates to Langland’s attitude towards concealment. Both of the above passages have a frankness that Hilton lacks. Not unlike Hilton’s priest-anchorite whose transgressive behaviors were met with forced correction, Lady Mede
learns that *anachoresis* can be used to punish those who do not care to reform and to warn others who are likewise error-prone. The passage is remarkable for its frank admission of anchoritic doubling: a space for voluntary ascetic fervor was also a residence for those deprived of volition. As Hilton knew only too well, the cell presented itself as a contest over the meaning of *anachoresis*. But if Hilton sought to conceal the tension, the passage on Mede here from Langland is refreshingly honest about duplicity.

It was a contest to which Langland would repeatedly return and which he would (usually) not occlude behind metaphors of blindness or pious exempla. The problems of the *Ad quemdam solitarium* are more transparently presented in *Piers* when, for example, it honestly admits the fact that conscience and heresy dwell comfortably together. As Hilton admitted (and then denied), heretics include those who lived the advice of their conscience. Langland knows better.

> And as Hope highte thee, I hote that thow loyve
> Thyn evencristene everemoore eveneforth with thiselwe.
> And if conscience carpe therayen, or kynde wit eyther,
> Or eretikes with arguments, thyn hond thow hem shewe: (B xvii. 135-8)

Heresy and conscience may equally inform the same person’s objections—in this case, to a theological point—but, for Hilton, this implies that forced correction could seem a necessary tactic against someone whose conscience did not commit him to ideological unity with the Church.¹⁰ Langland here and elsewhere directly confronts the fact that one’s conscience might sincerely and freely wander outside of official Church ideologies.

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¹⁰ Cf. what Kathryn Kerby-Fulton has called “Doubt Theology” in *Books Under Suspicion*, 337ff. I take Hawkyn’s theological indeterminacies (discussed below) as a potential version of what she discusses here. It also seems relevant that Langland’s portraits of the Desert Fathers should be examined in connection with a theology of doubt.
Langland tends to keep the inconsistencies in his thinking about solitaries to a minimum by presenting a more coherent response to the problems of heresy, conscience and coercion than Hilton could. The stories about eremitic and anchoritic behavior he uses function to disclose the tensions besetting Hilton’s letters: he shows us a woman who, like the priest-anchorite, is threatened with forced enclosure, while a second figure, a hermit named Hawkyn, embodies those categories of conscience and volition that protest coercive reclusion. Hawkyn is highly prone to error. *Piers* presents him in passus xv as a hermit whose conscience is not violated and whose body is not coerced, but who nevertheless proves so extremely singular that he might as well be a heretic. It is surprising in a way that Hawkyn’s *singularitas* and life of error do not land him in an anchoritic prison since, as his thoughts and behavior show, Christian doctrines pay an exacting price to a hermit’s freedom from ecclesiastical constraint.

This is never truer than when the hermit dissents from even the basic injunction to love others. As the above passage’s opposition of love and conscience implies (“thow loyve thyn evencristene…and if conscience carpe therayein”) even a sincere conscience shrinks from the obligation to love one’s fellow Christians. For Hawkyn does not so much as know that he might be expected follow the (hardly coercive!) counsels of charity: “’Where wonyeth Charite?’ quod Hawkyn. ‘I wiste nevere in my lyve / Man that with hym spak, as wide as I have passed” (B xiv. 97-8). Hawkyn, then, stands in vivid contrast to the imprisoned anchorite. While Hilton is considerably distraught over the fact that the priest had been coerced to adopt a particular form of living, Langland’s interest in Hawkyn is the result of the hermit’s liberty to behave both willingly and
willfully. When he first appears Hawkyn is a figure almost wholly exempt from external coercion. It is no accident that as he stood in contrast to the anchorite-prisoner he also dissented from monastic precepts; he is a monastic “order of his own,” since he lives without a rule or a vow of obedience to any superior.

And so singular by himself as to sighte of the peple
Was noon swich as himself, ne noon so pope holy;
Yhabited as an heremyte an ordre by hymselfe—
Religion saunz rule and reasonable obedience; (B xiii. 282-86)\(^{11}\)

He is as estranged from monastic and ecclesiastical officialdom as a hermit might possibly be, although (or precisely because) he is not constrained by external expectations or devices of any sort. Langland does not exactly want to celebrate this trait in Hawkyn, but at moments such as this in the poem monastic control—the notion of an “ordre”—will show its cooperation with external coercion, just as it did in Robert of Knaresborough’s life and in Cistercian exempla on wandering monks. As we see here and further below, he does not perform those prayers or ascetic exercises that Hilton realized could be imposed more easily on the enclosed anchorite.

‘Ne nevere penaunce parfournede ne Paternoster seide\(^{12}\)
That my mynde ne was moore on my good in a doute
Than in the grace of God and his grete helpes.’ (B xiii. 396-8)

In view of Langland’s description of a woman forced to be enclosed as an anchoress, Hawkyn seems a crucially important instance of how the solitary looks when not coerced by others, when “so singular by himself.” If Hawkyn remains largely unthreatened with constraint it is perhaps because Langland wanted to revive in him a kind of ascetic purity

\(^{11}\) Granted, Hawkyn is described here merely “as an heremyte;” see, however, Hanna, “Will’s Work,” where he reemphasizes the fluid identities the poem promotes (44f.). See also Gillespie, “Thy Will Be Done,” 102-8.

\(^{12}\) See ibid., 107.
defined as the un-coerced life of conscience. Hawkyn is willful and non-willing, but never unwillingly coerced.

**Langland Resists Exemplarity as Coercion**

The themes of volition, conscience and force intersect not only in the brief instances noted above, but they also inform the remainder of Langland’s explorations of anachoresis. I just observed that Hawkyn seems immune from the use of external force. But I also noted that it was his estrangement from the monastic understanding of exemplarity that forms part of this “liberty.” A refined model of ascetic behavior worked in the same way against the *singulare* solitary as did the anchoritic prison since both sought, though through difference means, to determine the beginning, middle and endpoints of that ascetic’s life. But in *Piers*, several figures such as Hawkyn and Lady Mede show a resistance to narrative exempla as a form of control. Let us return for the moment to the threat that the latter would be enclosed “as an ancre.”

Langland often suggested that ascetic reform needed a genuine inquiry or beginning that forestalled a hypocritical certainty. This inquiry he found in Hawkyn, even if he found much besides that troubled the search for solitary perfection. His allegories of ascetic wandering (error/errare) were often inquiries of sufficient instability to avoid linear narratives or exempla that, as with Hilton, predetermined an endpoint when such endpoints simply could not be known.\(^{13}\) In *Piers* the facts that nothing truly

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ends and that coercion is viewed with great skepticism are mutually dependent. Whether
in the rule and its doctrine of obedience (which Hawkyn ignores) or in the anchoritic
prison cell (which Mede escapes) Langland resists finality and exemplarity as the
external appearances of ascetic excellence. To quote again the text involving Lady Mede,

In the castel of Corf y shal do close the as an ancre
Or in a wel wors woen, by seynte Mary my lady,
That alle wantowen women shal be war be þe one
And bitterliche banne the and alle þat bereth thy name
And teche the to louye treuthe and take consail of resoun. (C iii. 140-44)

Langland confronts the imbalances of involuntary anachoresis both as a form of and a
remedy for “error.” He begins where the forced enclosure of a rebellious woman is
disguised as the measure necessary to correct error, appealing to a moral and formal
endpoint named “treuthe,” although it is unclear how truth, forcibly imposed, could retain
its moral value. Appeal to the love of truth and the counsel of reason is unavoidably a
euphemism for an appeal to physical control. Although Mede cannot so easily divest
herself of corruption, the passage wants desperately to determine the course of her life.

Langland has gathered into a single moment a bewildering series of questions and
errors. He asks us to see that language, allegory and error produce an inquiry into reform
instead of reform itself. For one, the passage tempts us to forget that the prospective
“ancre” in question is not ascetically minded and has no obvious religious interests
whatsoever. Thus the speaker here, a king, dismisses ascetic motivations. On the one
hand, the joke is on the king. Mede’s identity, her raison d’être, would seem to make her
wholly incapable of reform (“teche the to louye treuthe”) as defined by terms external to
her. Her detention in the castle of Corf would not signify anything other than how
inherently incompatible her purpose (i.e. bribery) is with that conception of “good” held by those who wish to correct her. She cannot think as the king thinks she ought, and so her anchorhold would become a hypocritical deception for onlookers and a sign of an external authority’s (equally hypocritical) contempt for the solitary’s propositum.

Yet Mede’s consecration as an anchoress does not actually transpire. The clerical instruments of control—its use of her as an exemplum of reform and its use of forced reclusion—do not actually materialize. We are left instead with a series of questions: can Mede indeed leave behind the error of profoundest corruption? Even more to the point, can that demand for reform which produces incarceration and hypocrisy content itself with error instead? True, the passage bears out a clerical reproach that it was the individual anchorite who was to keep the anchorhold from becoming a space of deception and hypocrisy. But Langland suspects that the disguise presented by moral categories (“treuthe” and “consail of resoun”) can likewise create more impediments to ascetic reform than it solves.14 The function of personification allegory is central: if the allegory is as unstable as the hypocrisy of involuntary detention suggests (i.e. if Mede can be reformed), then Langland’s inquiry is all the more powerful since the possibility of Mede’s reform is deferred. On the other hand, her correction could also conceal the fact that the will for reform was only an effort to avoid calling Mede by her right name. Just how much does the coercive demand for reform or the appropriation of ascetic categories really traduce the virtue of the anchorhold?

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14 It is interesting to consider the notion of counsel (“consail”) as deriving from the advice the prospective anchorite was to receive prior to consecration; see above, “but I only offer this sort of counsel” [sed consulo per hunc modum consilii] from the Speculum Inclusorum, 73. Thus the notion of counsel becomes a euphemism for coercion, despite its designed function as a cautious warning.
The answer here and elsewhere depends on the type of agency granted the anchorite. And that agency will in turn be marked by an error and inquiry instead of an imposed linear movement from error to “treuthe.” The episode with Mede shows that ascetic agency resists prescriptive demands to the extent that those demands were actually a coercive discourse only nominally committed to “treuthe” and the “consail of resoun.” Only when an anchoress is made to wear the mask of moral error can a regulatory framework moving one innocently towards holiness disguise its instruments of compulsion. How an anchoress imagines her ascetic agency could easily be co-opted by a language that conflates her agency with “consail” and externally imposed precepts.

The passage indicates, moreover, that the rupture between one’s inner disposition and outer behavior (i.e. enclosure) serves not to satirize, but merely to describe the condition of the solitary ascetic. The pursuit of reform becomes but another mask for an anachoresis legitimated solely (and hypocritically) by external mechanisms of control. Lady Mede may be all too fittingly “anchoritic:” her propositum is exceedingly indeterminate. To insist on a holy and truthfully reformed goal masked both a desire to control ideologically unwieldy subjects and the ethical dilemma that pursued a non-voluntary anachoresis. Even so, Piers points to “treuthe,” “resoun” and personification allegory to reveal that these were mere appearances of moral stability. So too did anchoritic agency finally rest in the hands of a morally flawed subject (Mede) neither capable nor incapable of being reformed. Again, the fact that Mede was not enclosed maintains the need for further inquiry into the forms of coercion and forestalls the naïve finality of enclosure and exemplarity.
It is worth observing parenthetically that, like Hilton, Langland also thought of Adam’s imprisonment in Hell. The justifications for life-long “languor” seem to be that joy cannot be known unless one has already experienced suffering. The logic is identical with that used in the scene with Lady Mede, and Langland almost certainly has in mind the fact that Adam was “bound” in Hell, as Hilton reminded the priest-anchorite.

‘So it shal fare by this folk; hir folie and hir synne
Shal lere hem what languor is, and lisse withouten ende.
Woot no wight what were is ther that pees regneth,
Ne what is witterly wele til “weylawey” hym teche.’ (B xviii. 225-28)

Langland’s reasoning is also identical with Hilton’s insofar as both imagine a virtuous endpoint that appears to justify forced confinement. As is worth underscoring again, however, Lady Mede is not finally enclosed, her correction is not enacted, and the narrative of her life is not finished. Instead, Langland adds to his consideration of force the suggestion that the only remedy for making Mede a hypocritical and forced exemplum of virtue (i.e. as an anchoress) is a figure named Conscience. For it is this figure who emerges at the lines concluding the king’s speech to her and who prevents her reform from being forcibly enacted.

If one again imagines that the words are spoken to a prospective anchoress, the text shows us those moral categories that both Langland and Hilton realized could be displaced in favor of imposing regulatory imperatives: “Y haue a knight, Conscience, cam late fro bezende; / Yf he wilneth the to wyue, wolt thow hym haue?” (C iii. 145-46). Conscience and a voluntary ascetic desire (“wilneth”) will tend to become the more important categories in Langland’s thinking about hermits and anchorites than they had
been for Hilton.\textsuperscript{15} They will stand in opposition to the coercion we have just seen exercised against Mede. Using such categories Langland will suggest that it is only the solitary’s willing conscience that can offset and remedy Mede’s condition or that of the priest-anchorite in Hilton’s \textit{Ad quemdam solitarium}. More importantly, with this image Langland recognizes that, though the anchorhold is used as a mask, those who gaze upon it will know its corrupt interior and ignore the disguise. That is, with the example of Lady Mede he can show just how an external structure, like the walls of a cell, points beyond itself, revealing that structure as a device that cannot alter the moral quality of its resident who either has or has not been voluntarily enclosed.

\textbf{Conscience and Coercion: The Desert Fathers in \textit{Piers}}

So as we have suggested, the exempla of virtue were also types of “structures,” like an anchoritic cell, that had a coercive function. As we have seen in Hilton’s letters, the narratives—about the lives of Adam or Paul, for example—were allies with physical coercion since both bound, as it were, the anchorite to proceed in a manner and towards a (narrative) endpoint he had not willingly chosen for his life; the exempla cooperated with the prison in saying to the anchorite “this is how your ascetic life must begin, proceed and end.” In the course of his discussions of solitaries Langland depends on standard analogies, like that between the anchorite and Adam, which entrap his solitaries—albeit textually—in narratives that argue against conscience and moral consent because those categories remain hidden. For Langland the rhetorical coercion of narrative worked in exactly the same manner and encouraged the same divide between form and substance.

\textsuperscript{15} See the illuminating comments by Lynn Staley on Langland and Conscience; \textit{Languages}, 323ff.
that opposed coercion to conscience or volition. Langland will also allow us to see in his
exempla about the early Egyptian hermits that his own textual explorations of their lives
also hid the unhappy fact that merely to describe an ideal solitary presupposed the
coercive measure of demanding “tretuhe” and the “consail of resoun.” Langland
showed that the narrative text praising the solitary could function as a prison that had no
moral value since it concealed the volition and conscience of the subjects it purported to
describe.

Langland is partly fond of remembering the Desert Fathers, because these are the
types of hermits he would like to see in England. His praise of these hermits comes at the
expense of contemporary hermits whom he thinks are too much like Hawkyn and behave
objectionably—or rather are too singulare, and cannot be easily controlled. Langland’s
praise of the Desert Fathers is meant to temper this singularity somewhat by praising
hermits who have already died and whose virtue can be tied to pious exempla. That is, in
realizing that texts on these hermits have already controlled the official memory of them,
Langland also understands that a particular kind of textual memory likewise affords
ideological control. The implication reads, “modern hermits should/must behave in the
manner of the ancients.” An imprisoning anchorhold becomes less necessary under these
circumstances, for textual narratives already exercise a coercive logic. (This is why Rolle
insists that to condemn the modern hermits is to condemn the ancients.)

In several instances Langland depends upon a diametrical opposition that
separates his contemporary and historical exempla. This opposition was of Langland’s

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16 See Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, Reformist Apocalypticism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990),
20-1 et passim.
own making and had the added effect of indefinitely deferring any sustained engagement with singularitas. The language of penance, poverty and “parfit lyvynge” is evoked to argue in favor of a past perfection that Langland’s own moment has abandoned.

Knowing, however, that the singularity of Hawkyn leads to troubling behavioral and theological consequences, Langland succumbs to a series of ruses that flatter a need for ecclesiastical order. His history of some Desert Fathers, for example, ends with Paul’s (primus heremita) founding of the Augustinian order of friars.\(^\text{17}\) To be sure, his appeal to a long departed past also disguises his desire for singularity and not exemplarity. Langland hoped to legitimate his desire for the inchoate and singular lives of desert hermits, yet it is through their connection with a contemporary religious order that the desperately singular case of fourteenth-century hermits was obscured.

Paul certainly did not found an Augustinian order. But Langland opposed Rolle’s point that the accusations of duplicity of which solitaries’ hidden authority had made them targets were clerical misrepresentations. His representations of hermits’ lives will pull against each other for just this reason. In passus xv, when discussing the Egyptian hermits Antony and Paul, Langland needed to disclose their ascetic authority to support the claim that they did not deceive their admirers.\(^\text{18}\) Yet he uses the very form which Rolle had opposed—hagiography—unaware that in doing so he rendered the authority of the hermits a function of the hagiographical text. Impatient with eremitic autonomy, he shows that the ideology of the narrative has already overthrown that autonomy.

\(^{17}\) See also Katheryn Kerby-Fulton, Reformist Apocalypticism (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990), 41.

In *Legenda Sanctorum*, the lif of holy seintes, 
What penaunce and poverte and passion thei suffrede—
In hunger, in hete, in alle manere angers. 
Antony and Egidie and othere holy fadres 
Woneden in wildernesse among wilde beestes; 
Monkes and mendinaunts, men by hemselfe 
In spekes and in spelonkes, selde spoken togideres. 
Ac neither Antony ne Egidie ne heremyte that tyme 
Of leons ne of leopardes no liflode ne toke, 
But of foweles that fleeth—thus fynt men in bokes—
Except that Egidie after an hynde cride, 
And thorugh the mylkyf of that mylde beest the man was sustened; 
Ac day by day hadde he hire noght his hunger for to slake, 
But selden and sondry tyme, as seith the book and techeth. 
Antony on a day aboute noon tyme 
Hadde a brid that brought hym breed that he by lyvede; 
And though the gome hadde a gest, God fond hem bothe. 
Poul *primum heremita* hadde parroked hymselfe, 
That no man myghte hym se for mosse and for leves. 
Foweles hym fedde fele wyntres with alle 
Til he founded freres of Austynes ordre.  (B xv. 269-89)

The passage submits Antony’s life to narratives produced in books (“thus fynt men in bokes”). But of course narrative exemplarity simultaneously made Antony’s authority and his life (especially his beginning) functions of itself. If the regulatory precepts (on silence, for example: “selde spoken togideres”) on which this displacement depends constitute Langland’s chief interest, they are nevertheless not identical with Antony. The eremitic life is further displaced in the example of Paul who here founded a monastic order. The hermits have become mere prefaces to a later monasticism. Langland looks to them for regulatory and hagiographical exemplarity, but he ends up reproducing two separate histories: one of the monastic rule and one of the hermits.

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20 Recall that the *Ancrene Wisse* had pointed to Antony and other Desert Fathers as the founders of an “order;” *Ancrene Wisse*, ed. B. Millett, Praef: “Pawel, the earste ancre, Antonie ant Arsenie, Makarie ant te othre, neren ha religiuse ant of Sein James ordre?”
His memory of Paul and Antony is that they both stayed physically stable. Insofar as Langland tells us how reformed monasticism wishes to remember ancient hermits, he also tells us how that monasticism wishes to keep its contemporary hermits. He knows that Paul and Antony are bound within the book—not as punishment for wandering, but with the coercive assumption that solitaries can and should be kept from error. Like Peter Damian, Langland cannot have the hermits he admires running about unregulated by coenobitic authority. But unlike Damian, Langland did not image that eremitic figures of disobedience like Hakwyn should be “plunged into some deep pit of misery.” As Damian mimics the voice of the despondent hermit, we hear Langland’s Lucifer and Adam, and we do not hear his Desert Fathers or Hawkyn, though for different reasons.

He has cast me into a place of darkness like a man long dead. He has walled me in so that I cannot escape, and weighted me down with fetters; even when I cry out for help, he rejects my prayer.21

Piers wants to keep the Desert Fathers from metaphorically languishing in an anchorhold with their inner disposition refusing clerical control. His solution, then, is to deprive the ancient hermits of an interiority entirely. His exempla are pious memories, but like Damian’s many threats against errant hermits those memories are designed to compel obedience, not appeal to the conscience of someone like Hawkyn. I do not mean to imply that Langland wished to weigh the Desert Fathers down with fetters, but that he had other, equally coercive measures for achieving the same effect. True, a body bound against its will is not the same as a Desert Father on the written page. But physical bondage presupposed the expectations of exempla, and as we have seen, regulatory imperatives were tantamount to forced enclosure when the ascetic subject no longer

21 Damian, Letter 165, 187.
wished for a particular form of living, but was still denied the option to leave a residence, whether monastery or anchorhold.  

This is why the ascetic desire of Antony and Paul becomes so irrelevant that the latter can be reimagined as the founder of a monastic order. But why, then, does Langland admit elsewhere that he cannot control the formlessness of history when it is a history of eremitic practice? Here again, what his memory of ancient monasticism gives with one hand it takes with the other. First, the solitary dreamer, who is clothed “as an heremite,” begins passus xv by observing that it took him “wonder longe” to understand what constitutes Dowel. This image recalls the first few lines of the Prologue, although here the dreamer blatantly acknowledges just how ignorant and foolish he appears to others as he wanders about from one social setting to another. As with Rolle, the dreamer’s life is ridiculed by others while showing few signs of ascetic stability. More to the point, that history of Paul and Antony that is designed to erase all memory of the wandering fool is itself interrupted by a history of Anglo-Saxon England at that point when Augustine is said to have begun converting the nobility. The inchoate and primitive English Christianity of 597 is a reflection upon the need to embrace the fiction of a monastically pure Egyptian anachoresis. The gloss in a passage on “hethen” combines a memory of heathen people with the formless, unruly quality of a natural landscape.

“Hethen” is to mene after heeth and untiled erthe—
As in wilde wildernesse wexeth wilde beestes,
Rude and unreasonable, rennynge withouten keperes.  (B xv. 457-60)

The passage looks back to the previous passus with Hawkyn. The last line describes the hermit Hawkyn excellently, and even gestures toward the quality of “reson” that both the

22 See Chapter 3.
dreamer (at the outset of this passus), Lady Mede and Hawkyn had been lacking. More obviously, it can hardly escape us that the “wilde windernesse” where both the beasts and “heathen” dwell is also the great *eremus*: “Antony and Egidie and othere holy fadres / Woneden in wildernesse among wilde beestes.” Animals, the wilderness and the ascetic seem to merge together so as to overthrow the rigid divide between monastic exemplarity and a hermit’s foolish (“in that folie I raved”) and formless “rennynge” about without monastic guidance (“withouten keperes”).

I am suggesting, then, that Langland’s reference to the conversion of Anglo-Saxon England encodes a memory of actual people whose incoherent notions of living ascetically stand as a sort of counter-history in which ascetic perfection remains as elusive and absent as do the distant centuries. It is perhaps fitting that ancient Egypt’s cultural alterity was particularly attractive for a poet who had grown impatient with English ascetics. Even so it remains significant that the images of eremitic reform in this passus compete with what was for Langland an unpleasantly vivid memory of the past’s eremitic formlessness. If a modern monasticism justifies the lives of Antony and Paul, this English wandering “withouten keperes” stands to offset that naïve historiography and hagiography. How, then, might those Egyptian origins referred to above offer the reformist solace, when England’s own wilderness offered nothing worth imitating?

But the point of his interest in ascetics who wander without monastic superiors is that their behavioral liberty refuses exemplarity, since exemplarity was already a potential form of coercion. The fact that they might be imitated sounds suspiciously as though some external standard, rather than their own volition, is guiding their lives. Langland
had already bound Antony and Paul within a text that strips them of singularity, and his veneration for the Desert Fathers expresses not so much a relief that they led exemplary lives, but rather his relief that textual exempla made their lives irrelevant. At any rate those lives could be almost incarcerated by both the text and a historical distance which fabricated alterity and absence. Later in passus xv his discussion of solitaries sustains itself as such only because Langland rhetorically exploits two deeply opposed models of anachoresis, while preventing their interaction. I emphasize those terms that bespeak his awareness that some stood at a great ideological distance from his idealism.

Ancres and heremytes, and monkes and frères
Peeren to Apostles thorough hire parfit lyvynge.
Wolde never the feithful Fader that hise ministres sholde
Of tiraunts that teneth trewe men taken any almesse,
But doon as Antony dide, Dominyk and Fraunceys,
Beneit and Bernard [bothe], the whiche hem first taught. (B xv. 416-21)

What is interesting about Langland’s conception of progress, correction and absence is that they expose his ambivalence towards the “error” of an initial ascetic undertaking.

The ancient hermits, their modern counterparts and the potential error that characterizes both are all conceptually replaced by coenobitic and mendicant figures. A dialogue capable of providing a space for error is prevented, to say nothing of a Rollean dialogue that discards its coenobitic interlocutor. And all of this is possible because the regulatory certainty embedded in monastic exemplars (Benedict, etc.) presupposed a behavioral and ideological “scale” that “ancres and heremytes” are imagined already to have climbed.

The notion that solitaries always returned to an inchoate beginning and ideologically wandered about without a concern for correction or perfection was unendurable. A sort of textual correction, then, needed to be imposed upon them.
Langland’s sentimental record of the Desert Fathers needs both to emphasize their historical distance from fourteenth-century England and to render them ideologically homogenous with his own context. The narrative tried to preserve a distance that appears consistent with the exceptionality of *singularitas*; but that same narrative preserved an ideologically familiar and safe image. It simply would not do to have desert hermits look too much like a Hawkyn whose life Langland had just depicted as contrasting with regulatory precepts. The eremitic Hawkyn is thoroughly sinful and non-penitential.

In haly daies at holy chirche, whan ich herde masse
Hadde I nevere wille, woot God, witterly to biseche
Mercy for my mysdedes, that I ne moorned moore
For losse of good, leve me, than for likames giltes;  (B xiii. 383-6)

Antony and Paul must stand as supreme standards of eremitic excellence. However, as we have seen, they express a regulatory excellence rather than historical lives. Hawkyn, by contrast, is not the image of such excellence; he is *lived* eremitism—that is, as *singularitas*. In a sense, Langland needed a dual disguise. First, he needed to conceal the error of those Desert Fathers by presupposing their having reached a summit of regulatory progress. Next, he disguised that ideological resistance to *singularitas* by arguing (as the above passage does) that a text about ancient hermits does not displace and discard their actual lives. By combining both narratives—hagiographical and historical—into one Langland conceals his preference for regulatory demands, paying only token homage to Paul and Antony (whoever *they* are!).

The condition which led the anchorite far afield into error and beyond was so troubling to both Hilton and Langland that both sought out ways in which categories of compulsion and exemplarity could mutually constituted each other, mimicking the
anchoritic prison without overtly advocating force. If the exemplary lives of the desert solitaries do not serve to justify forced enclosure, it was because the very historical remoteness of their lives—the absence and error that constituted cultural memory—made it necessary to explore the coercive potential of exempla.

As noted above, when considering the example of the anchoress, Langland refers to a woman who would enter into a cell, not one who has lived there for an extended period. As an analysis of duplicity the episode with Mede needed to dispense with exempla of excellence, since such exempla could only displace the solitaries’ own ascetic will and conscience. In Hawkyn—the embodiment of a highly inchoate anachoresis—wandering and inchoate anachoresis would become antidotes to sentimental narratives of the Desert Fathers that removed actual solitaries from ideological and behavioral danger to the empty security of pious memory. Yet there is a strong link in Piers between some notion of beginning and anachoresis that works against other narratives. Finally, if Langland embraces Egyptian hermits as the presumed “fathers” of ascetic solitude, the Prologue anticipates but does not narrate the various solitary lives mentioned there.

**Hawkyn, Renunciation and the Hermits of the Prologue**

Just as Hilton’s apophatic uncertainty, his “blynde thynkynge,” protests the turn to control, theological consensus, and a morality of externals, for his part Langland uses Hawkyn, his image of singularity, to offset an asceticism void of volition and sincerity. What’s more, Langland uses him as an image of ascetic renunciation: that is, the more behavioral version of contemplative uncertainty and unknowing. As any reader of the
literature on the Desert Fathers knows, hermits and anchorites were praised for their ability to renounce.\(^{23}\)

It is significant that Hawkyn is so often characterized by what he does not do (“Ne nevere penaunce parfournede ne Paternoster seide”), rather than simply by what he does. He absents himself from all coercive demands including those of the monastic precepts. Of course, among the Desert Fathers the virtue of renunciation related to the ascetic contempt for earthly comforts, and Hawkyn is only too willing to maintain those comforts in his own life. His sins and social ties are such that for Langland Hawkyn was no world-renouncing desert hermit. And yet, it is his estrangement from the demands of coenobitic monasticism and clerical power—both of which Langland deeply distrusts—that make Hawkyn one of the figures in Piers who could potentially come to model the sort of renunciation Langland has in mind. For despite his otherwise troubling histories of the Desert Fathers Langland knows that a return to the Egyptian desert entails the individual’s rejection of sin, but not necessarily his allegiance to those monastic or theological controls that were historical and institutional accumulations. In other words, if he considers his need for contrition, Hawkyn would be on his way to becoming an ascetic subject who renounces everything except Christ. Christian history would begin anew once Hawkyn sheds a tear for his sins. And of course this would only transpire with a conscience- and volition-driven contrition.

It is with this ideal of renunciation in mind that Patience speaks to Hawkyn. In a passage that recalls Paul and Antony Patience suggests that Hawkyn become an image of

\(^{23}\) My interests and interpretations in this section run somewhat parallel with the claim by David Aers that Langland still found the sign of poverty—a stepping stone, perhaps, to renunciation—inadequate and in need of being superseded; *Sanctifying Signs*, 99-156.
eremitic absence: his life should be made into a series of refusals and renunciations. And most significantly, *this* hermit is not a mere device that helps Patience anticipate official coenobitic or mendicant culture. I emphasize the language of particular interest.

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“Have, Haukyn,” quod Pacience, “and et this whan the hungreth,
Or whan thow clomsest for cold or clyngest for droughte;
And shul nevere gyves thee greve ne gret lordes wrathe,
Prison ne payne--for pacientes vincunt.
By so that thow be sobre of sighte and of tonge,
In [ond]ynge and in handlynge and in alle thi fyve wittes,
Darstow nevere care for corn ne lynnyn cloth ne wollyn,
Ne for drynyke, ne deeth drede, but deye as God liketh,
Or thorugh hunger or thorugh hete--at his wille be it.
For if thow lyvest after his loore, the shorter lif the bettre:”  (B xiv. 50-9)
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The list of negations appeals to Hawkyn’s potential for becoming a hermit who renounces. We notice Patience’s insistence that Hawkyn will *not* be fettered and *not* be put into prison, but that his life will refuse all potential forms of coercion, both physical and institutional.\(^{24}\) More than anything else, Hawkyn remedies those acts of remembering the Desert Fathers which violated their *singularitas* and kept *anachoresis* firmly within the grasp of regulatory control. If the encouragements by Patience sound like coercive precepts, it is because we have not yet seen how antithetical coercion was to all absences, negations and refusals. We see essentially the same pattern later and just prior to Langland’s mention of the Desert Fathers. Though the passage does not directly name hermits or anchorites, it clearly concerns ascetic practice. Moreover, the appeal to primitive living works alongside the passus’ otherwise pronounced eremitic interests.

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It is ruthe to rede how rihtwise men lyvede—
How thei defouled hir flesh, forsoke hir owene wille,
Fer fro kyth and fro kyn yvele yclothed yeden,
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\(^{24}\) Cf. Godden, “Plowmen,” who notes, “The word *poverte* is repeatedly used by Langland to refer to voluntary poverty, the ascetic life of hermits and others who forsook the world to follow Christ,” 146.
It appears at first that primitive asceticism is a cause of some emotional disturbance ("ruthe to rede"). It is unclear whether this passage expresses approval or disapproval for a highly inchoate form of pious living ("how rigtwise men lyvede"). The ambivalence is telling: in what sense is it "ruthe to rede" of ascetic renunciation? It is not only the absence of wealth ("no richesse") that characterizes this asceticism. Langland’s problem in fact centers on the conflation of physical, temporal and ideological absence, and these ascetics are the site of that conflation. Still more, the ascetics are absent from Latinate guidance ("no book"), depending solely on conscience instead.  

More importantly, since the two objects renounced by these ascetics (i.e. books and wealth) may not be moral equivalents, the passage suggests a broader conception of renunciation as such. What is actually both lamented and celebrated in this passage is the series of negations or absences that characterized solitary ascetics ("forsoke...fer fro...fro...baddely...no book...ne no richesse"). These renunciations, ostensibly the cornerstones of singularitas, are causes for pity ("ruthe"). The fact that two lines later Langland again uses the term "ruthe" to condemn those who worship money rather than God only further promotes the ambivalence with which the text’s "pity" confronts solitaries and the formlessness of their propositi.

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25 *Piers* often associates wealth and bookish learning, criticizing the over-valuation of each; discussion of these themes is common in Langland criticism. See Clopper, "Songes of Rechelessnesse," 1-104; and Wendy Scase, *‘Piers Plowman’ and the New Anti-Clericalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
Renunciation is the chief category that Langland found so deeply attractive here. If we ask why, he points us to the promotion of the ascetic conscience (“no book but conscience”) and the freely motivated volition of ascetic beginnings (“hir owene wille”), as opposed to a coerced volition. Although these ascetics had forsaken their wills, the word has a double valence that runs parallel with Langland’s ambivalent pity: will as sensual indulgence and will as ascetic desire are both meant. And if Langland cannot quite bring himself to grant these ascetics a will independent of regulatory coercion, he nonetheless looks with admiration, if also pity, upon their series of renunciations (willingly undertaken). The point here is essentially that made above about volition with the implied argument that renunciation, conscience and ascetic desire lead us to admire ascetics who were clearly unregulated (“no book”) in any prescriptive sense.

To repeat, Langland’s pity marks that tension between regulatory injunctions and punishment, on the one hand, and the formless and non-coerced quality of *anachoresis*, on the other. But let us look at a point in the poem where this pity had not yet developed—for it is still perceptible in Hawkyn—and where Langland first celebrated absence and renunciation. In the opening lines of the prologue we are asked to embrace the virtue of a certain type of hermit. At first sight it does not seems as though this hermit has any virtue to speak of. Everything Langland will eventually praise (or think he is praising) in the lives of the Desert Fathers is missing in this early portrait.

In a somer seson, whan softe was the sonne,
I shoop me into shroudes as I a sheep were,
In habite as an heremite unholy of werkes,
Wente wide in this world wondres to here.
Ac on a May morwenyne on Malverne Hilles
Me bifel a ferly, of Fairy me thoghte. (B Prol. 1-6)
It is hardly apparent that this “heremite” has an ascetic intent, a propositum. And to observe that this propositum bespeaks a certain virtue sounds stranger still, since the hermit does little more than wander about (“wente wide in this world”), sleep and avoid occupying himself (“unholy of werkes”). The propositum that justifies his behavior is not ascetic at all: he wishes to travel and hear of “wondres.” As far as I can tell, the image of a such a hermit who wanders about “in a wildernesse,” wholly unfamiliar with social, monastic or ecclesiastical bonds, will never again return to the poem, except perhaps at its conclusion.26 Where is the virtue of a hermit who neither fasts, works nor prays?

Eremitic virtue is here constituted by a particular absence—by the hermit’s not being coerced to meet any particular regulatory demands. If it seems that ascetic virtue cannot possibly be founded on absence, or that the absence of coercion from the passage proves its irrelevance in this case, then we have not read Rolle or Hilton with sufficient care. What we do not know about this hermit tells us much a great deal, namely that Langland does occasionally liberate hermits like Hawkyn from the coercive ideologies that asserted “a hermit proceeds towards perfection like this.” Since there is no “this” in the passage, no ascetic conduct like prayer and fasting, what has been removed is not the propositum, but the clerical or monastic presumption that the hermit’s virtue is definable by a prescriptive code. Here we find a propositum that can only exist as such insofar as it is not the product of an external demand that the hermit proceed in a particular manner towards perfection. The poverty, silence and fasting that locked Langland’s Antony and Paul in relation with with coenobitic and ecclesiastical is absent. This “heremite” obeys

26 For an alternative reading of the significance of this moment and its significance for Will’s subsequent wandering see Katheryn Kerby-Fulton, Reformist Apocalypticism, 193-4.
no textual progression from error to “perfection,” and no ascetic precepts (or monastic orders!) will be retrospectively read into his life. To the extent that the “hermite” wanders about in search of “wondres” his propitum is just as unintelligible to the languages of ecclesiastical control as was Rolle’s to those with whom he quarreled.

The hermit who wanders on Malverne Hilles embodies the conscience and consent of which Lady Mede was nearly deprived by her reclusion/imprisonment. However uncomfortable the suggestion might be for an Aelred or an Ælfric, Langland thinks that coercion qua precept is dismantled by the moral qualities of conscience and consent, qualities which subtend the propitum. This is a disquieting suggestion for his own praise of the Desert Fathers, since that praise was yet another means to compel prescriptive behavior. As we have seen, a memory of Antony and Paul entailed demanding that their behavior conform to coenobitic monasticism. In the wandering hermit, at least, that Langland remained skeptical—as he was skeptical of so much else!—of his own reading of history.

But let us return to the Prologue. As it continues, it is the grumbling, reform-starved side of Langland’s persona (the one we meet in passus xv) who finds a regulatory language that leaves little room for hermits or anchorites who wander about in search of a propitum. After falling asleep, the above wandering and unregulated hermit sees, among others, solitary ascetics whose life he would like to see better regulated.

In priers and penaunce putten hem manye,  
Al for love of Oure Lord lyveden ful streyte  
In hope to have heveneriche blisse—  
As ancres and heremites that holden hem in hire selles,  
Coveiten noght in contree to cairen aboute

340
For no likerous liflode hire likame to plese. (B Prol. 35-30)\textsuperscript{27}

Suddenly the solitaries to be criticized are those who care little for physical stability and wander about, despite the fact that the first few lines of the Prologue had given no indication that the “heremite” had committed any fault for his physical wandering. Why this change? Since the dream vision and its function as social analysis are now fully underway, the narrator’s persona has switched ideologies. Langland now finds it necessary to provide the solitaries’ lives with an evaluation consistent with a regulatory framework. Although he has suggested that the wanderer’s \textit{propositum} and the insistence on physical stability are independent of each other, the dream vision forces the wanderer to submit to regulatory stability. Here Langland’s notion of eremitic and anchoritic living is again hostile to error, with the implicit demand that their prayer life (“preiers and penaunce”) must characterize their \textit{propositum}.

We notice, moreover, that the conception of that error here is tightly narrowed to clerical control of space (“holden hem in hire selles”). Langland is not exactly advocating imprisonment or constraint, but he does approve of clerical authorities who demand that solitaries “remain in their cells.” Of course, such verbal or textual demands closely cooperated with and were the counterparts of more directly applied tactics of coercion. If we do not see Lady Mede’s prison cell or that of Hilton’s anchorite looming as a potential threat, it is because the solitaries themselves have obviated the need for threats. I do not mean that physical stability was always and necessarily a result of coercion; a hermit could certainly \textit{desire} to be stable. However, the conscience- and

\textsuperscript{27} See Anne Middleton, “Acts of Vagrancy,” for many illuminating points relevant to my discussion (243ff.).
consent-driven *propositum* cannot possibly be equated with such stability without also becoming an argument in support of external control.

Langland’s appeal to cell-bound solitaries is a case of offering at one moment what he takes away at the next. For to suggest, as he had, both that eremitic wandering is normative and that solitude should be accompanied by physical stability (“holden hem in hire selles”) reveals just how radically the clerical desire to control solitaries’ spaces could disassemble otherwise coherent analyses of *anachoresis*. On the one hand, this clerical voice so insistently desires stability that it threatens to reduce eremitic and anchoritic virtue to the demand for enclosure at any cost to consensus. So Langland at least countenances the existence of solitaries who roam about with the decidedly non-ascetic aim of pleasing their bodies (“hire likame to plese”). But far from having a stable desire for regulatory control over ascetic bodies Langland returns to the habits of roaming solitaries because he sympathizes with at least some measure of error. As we have seen, throughout *Piers* he will evoke examples of *singulare* ascetics. And his tendency to interrupt his own exempla also wrests his solitaries from the over-determined and corrective theory that Hilton’s letters require. Langland is fascinated by mistakes, because these “problems” offset the theoretical and moral concerns that attend coercion.

For all his criticism of hermits and anchorites who desire “in contree to cairen aboute” he does not resort to appeals for constraint as he did in the case of Lady Mede. Nor does Langland keep to his demand that hermits “holden hem in hire selles.” We see repeated once again in the prologue that he escapes that forced reconciliation between obedience and singularity which attended clerical control over the solitary’s life,
especially its ending. Added to the above two examples from the prologue in *Piers*
comes a final illustration of solitary behavior that again shows eremitic singularity.

    Heremytes on an heep with hoked staves,  
    Wenten to Walsyngham – and hire wenches after:  
    Grete lobies and longe that lothe were to swynke  
    Clothed hem in copes to ben knowen from othere,  
    And shopen hem heremytes hire ese to have.  (B Prol. 53-7)

Quite unlike Hilton’s emphasis on (re)form, here we have analysis of the *formless* quality
to solitary lives. Singularity, rather than inevitable consensus, is the theme of this
moment as it will be the theme of Hawkyn’s eremitism. To be sure, *Piers* cannot entirely
conceal its desire to keep unregulated solitaries from behaving as they do. But neither
does the deception implied in the last two lines (“clothed hem…shopen hem…”) or the
hermits’ laziness (“lothe were to swynke…hire ese to have…”) earn Langland’s reproach.
He is able to name them “heremytes” despite the fact that these so-called ascetics bear
little resemblance to the Desert Fathers—those champions of “preiers and penaunce.”

The issue is identical with the problem of allegory in the Mede episode. Is an
anchoress *really* an anchoress if she is indifferent to moral reform and must be forced into
the cell? Likewise here. In what sense do these various examples of “heremytes”
conform to a single category on which narratives of reform can depend? Such
observations as “the hermit will improve his life thus” would be impossible in the
prologue without putting that hermit in Lady Mede’s position. An additional problem
with the above hermits is that they clothe themselves in such a way as “to ben known
from othere.” Knowing them as hermits is clearly only a knowledge of external
appearances! In what sense they are *really* hermits should remain unclear because
determining their identity any further would presuppose a desire not merely to define them but to constrain the development of their lives. So the presence of contemporary hermits who are as singular as Hawkyn implies Langland’s refusal to conform them textually to the standards of traditional ascetic practice or clerical expectations.

But at this point towards the end of the Prologue Langland is beginning to find his desire for a certain kind of ascetic who is neither coerced (“holden hem in hire selles”) nor simply laymen who misname themselves (“shopen hem heremytes”). Likewise, his later attempts to indicate that either plowmen, Hawkyn or the Desert Fathers modeled his ideal of renunciation were closer, but still not exactly what he has in mind. Hawkyn comes very close indeed, but we need to take seriously the absence implied by both a voluntary ascetic desire and the virtue of renunciation which call forth so many words of negation. *Piers* is certainly interested in a morally responsible ascetic *life*, but that life should be constituted by what seems to be its opposite: renunciation and absence. For Langland the various forms of coercion finally must impede his shaping of ascetic excellence, because that work of shaping could not be undertaken in *Piers* without recourse to coercive and overbearing exempla.

Conclusions

It bears repeating that Hilton and Langland were only beginning to understand Rolle’s reasons for keeping solitaries independent of regulatory narratives. To justify the forced enclosure of ideologically resistant subjects both authors placed them within a

28 Cf. Anne Middleton, “Acts of Vagrancy,” who observes of Will’s writings that “it seems to be a condition of the integrity of his ‘work,’ or the defensibility of the project, that it never be fully identifiable or coexistent with any form of its (merely) textual incarnation,” a claim closely relevant to my own (289).
narrative that moved from error to virtue. Narratives would cooperate with and be a mask for externally imposing a religious vocation that traditionally had to be undertaken voluntarily. Rolle’s project succeeded only because he saw hypocrisy and deception (his “habite of holynesse”) as the consequences of submitting anachoresis to regulatory demands, whether ecclesiastical or coenobitic. For him, the will to prescribe (let alone compel) a regulatory endpoint inevitably conjured a mere “habite” of holiness that dispensed with moral substance. It was only when Langland suppressed this point that his regulatory demands also became regulatory dilemmas. In freeing himself from anxieties about solitaries Langland needed to divest them of that “habite of holynesse,” and he does as much in the figure of Hawkyn. True, this hermit may be a site for new anxieties, but he is also Langland’s means for advocating a non-coercive, non-hypocritical asceticism of a concealed moral substance rather than religious “habite.”

While the formless and incipient propositum of solitaries is of particular interest for Langland (especially in the case of Hawkyn), Hilton’s superimposing regulatory form upon their lives, by contrast, makes for an especially ambivalent mixture of pity, admiration and contempt for the anchorites to which the Scale and the Ad quemdam solitarium are addressed. It is hardly surprising that we have seen Hilton’s highly aggressive attempt to resolve the problem of form and the beginning of anachoresis. Hilton set about this by obliterating the solitary’s potential for remaining as ideologically absent as he is physically. It is because of such an ambivalent mixture of pity and contempt that the possibility of involuntary confinement gains such strength in Hilton’s Ad quemdam solitarium especially. One means by which our authors record that
ambivalence was through their justification of anachoresis as punishment. Here again, the site at which the vacillation between punishment and approval takes place is at the outset of solitaries’ propositum, and hence prior to the exercise of coercion. To that extent, the pity that is perceptible in the mixture of punishment and approval is simultaneously a critique of the anchoritic beginning.

But we have seen that Langland at least recognizes in that beginning a conscience-driven renunciation that obviates force. Hilton would follow suit, even if his expressions of conscience and renunciation are of a different variety. In Piers and in the Ad quemdam solitarium the discourse of conscience and free volition takes on an even penitential pitch. The example of Hawkyn again proves instructive since those negations characteristic of ascetic renunciation also characterize Hawkyn’s final act of penance and the authority of his conscience. Hawkyn is immersed in error, but that same error was a series of renunciations that both include standard prayers (“ne Paternoster seide”) and his later embracing and rejecting of his own will and volition.

I will end by arguing that Langland, like Hilton, found that the solution to his regulatory dilemmas lies with confession. Only in confession would hypocrisy, disguise and the clerical expectations that supported them be disarmed. Of course, as should be clear by this point, our authors did not consistently reflect upon confession as such a remedy. Langland discovered that a moment of genuine confession collapsed beginnings and endings into a single present characterized by both error and reform. Even when he did not thoroughly recognize it, conscience and volition were finally the categories that reconciled Langland’s ancient and contemporary hermits and Hilton’s ambivalence.
towards apophatic absence. Let us return to Hawkyn whose ascetic life is fashioned by conscience, renunciation and volition. The language of absence dominates his most moving speeches: “‘I have but oon hool hater,’ quod Haukyn, ‘I am the lasse to blame / Though it be soiled and selde clene—I slepe therinne o nyghtes;’” (B xiv. 1-2). Or again,

In haly daies at holy chirche, whan ich herde masse
Hadde I nevere wille, woot God, witterly to biseche
Mercy for my mysdedes, that I ne moorned moore
For losse of good, leve me, than for likames giltes; (B xiii. 383-6)

We find the language of renunciation in what Hawkyn does not possess (“but oon hool hater”). Likewise, the honesty of an un-coerced conscience (“Hadde I nevere wille”) works at one with those other acts of renunciation. If his non-ascetic failures—his failure to recognize the good of penance—are troubling, we might recall that ascetic practices had been so intermingled with coercive demands that they no longer reflected the willing conscience of the Egyptian or English hermits who were “rennyenge withouten keperes.”

It is only because of Hawkyn’s failures that he can begin to consider what he himself wants to renounce, and how he thinks this renunciation might serve God. No one coerces his final confession of sins from his mouth. True, Hakwyn displays the kind of contrition that someone like Hilton would like to see, but Langland does not supplement his confession with observations of Hawkyn’s subsequent fasting, poverty or chastity.

“Allas,” quod Haukyn the Actif Man tho, “that after my cristendom I ne hadde be deed and dolven for Dowelis sake! So hard it is,” quod Haukyn, “to lyve and to do synne. Synne seweth us evere,' quod he, and sory gan wexe, And wepte water with his eighen and weyled the tyme That evere he dide dede that deere God displesed-- Swouned and sobbed and siked ful ofte That evere he hadde lond or lordshipe, lasse other moore, Or maistrie over any man mo than of hymselfe…”

347
I were noght worthi, woot God,” quod Haukyn, “to werien any clothes, Ne neither sherte ne shoon, save for shame one To covere my careyne,” quod he, and cride mercy faste, And wepte and wailede--and therwith I awakede. (B xiv. 320-32)

In the face of such expressions of conscience and ascetic renunciation (“Ne neither sherte ne shoon, save for shame one”) all forms of coercion seem to have no place, even if the need for correction could hardly be greater. Langland has managed this by keeping duplicity and disguise as far away from Hawkyn as possible. Appropriately, what the hermit’s *singulare propositum* looks like after he understands the ascetic need for penance remains unspoken. Langland awakes, and Hawkyn proceeds wherever his will and conscience take him. The beauty of Hawkyn’s tears lies in a blend of authority, error and reform that materializes in a present moment and needs no supplementary exempla replete with precepts from Patience or any other clerical voice.

To return to the difficulties of imprisonment and coercion that unite both authors’ thinking on solitaries, while the cell offered nothing praiseworthy, it did present a danger. An anchorite was never *necessarily* an exemplary ascetic simply because the enclosure itself presented the trappings of ascetic excellence. If Hilton and Langland developed an appreciation for this fact, they did not consistently remain attentive to its consequences. Their discussions of anchoritic virtue succumbed to these dangers. Though our authors thought that error could be remedied by forced confinement, it was their own error in embracing coercion that brought them to exquisitely tortured meditations on how ascetic authority might be violated and hypocrisy embraced.

As *Piers* comes to a close we seem to revisit the problem that both Langland and Hilton faced as they thought of forced enclosure, although *anachoresis* does not seem to
be explicitly at issue. The figures of conscience and hypocrisy contend at an enclosure of sorts. And though this enclosure is named Holy Church, its resemblance to an anchorhold derives from the fact that such allegorical figures gathered around and inside of the enclosure represent the tensions that both authors have faced in their analyses of ascetic practice and coercion. Appropriately, “Pees” is made to seal the gates of the enclosure off from those, like “Ypocrisie,” who wish to enter and corrupt “Conscience.”

Envye herfore hatede Conscience,  
And freres to philosophie he fond he to scole,  
The while Coveitise and Unkyndenesse Conscience assailede.  
In unitee Holy Chirche Conscience held hym,  
And made Pees porter to pynne the Yates  
Of alle tale-telleris and titereris in ydel.  
Ypocrisie and hii an hard saut thei made.  
Ypocrisie at the yate harde gan fighte,  
And woundede wel wickedly many a wise techere. (B xx. 295-302)

While we are not dealing with an ascetic enclosure exactly, the fact that hypocrisy is forcibly trying to enter the enclosure at the expense of Conscience rings hauntingly familiar. Like a cell that is meant to be sealed off from assaults against moral excellence (“woundede we wickedly many a wise techere”), the integrity of Holy Church is compromised when force and hypocrisy violate that hidden excellence (Conscience) which alone justifies the integrity of the enclosure.

As is well known, the Dreamer will finally not seek his redemption in enclosures, but will set out on pilgrimage in search of Piers Plowman. Is Langland prepared to repudiate all enclosures as too easily corruptible, and therefore not worth using to champion inner moral worth? As to many other questions, Langland, I think, is not prepared to answer definitively. He is wary of enclosures, to be sure, and laments their
misuse. But as we have seen above, he never explicitly and directly condemns their misuse. And this remains the more troubling component of his analysis, for Langland’s occasional tacit approval for coercion asks us to read cautiously those other moments at which he advocates conscience, volition and renunciation.

A strange fact emerges when we compare Langland’s Hawkyn, who is not threatened with force, with Lady Mede and Hilton’s priest-anchorite who are both the sites of coerced enclosure. It is Hawkyn whom we find weeping, not those other two objects of punishment from whom we would expect such suffering-induced tears. Why is this? There remain two dominant discourses: one of contrition or conscience, and the other of the rule (typified by the cell). In Rolle’s work these discourses found their way back to each other. For Hilton and Langland, the union remained unhappy. The hypocritical anchorhold-cum-prison interposed itself between form and conscience and the dialogue between the two persisted aggressively. Renunciation, however, was both physical and textual. In its portraits of primitive, inchoate or wandering anachoresis the poem writes a series of failed hagiographies. Yet these never appear as even suggestively hagiographical, because Piers’ eremitic and anchoritic figures have already renounced the terms by which hagiographies began, continued and concluded. Instead, Langland wrote a history of singularity. His appeals to coercion and the Desert Fathers—appeals to exemplarity à la Athanasius—finally give way to the disorienting persistence of error.
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