

Introduction: The Poetics of Prayer and Devotion to Literature

IS THERE A PLACE FOR devotion in criticism? What about love and desire? Recent attempts to historicize and parochialize critique as one method of interpretation among others lead to these questions. Deidre Lynch's *Loving Literature: A Cultural History* (2015) identifies love as a requirement for critique and turns "to histories of criticism, canonicity, literary history, and 'heritage,' and, above all, to the emergence . . . of new etiquettes of literary appreciation . . . so as to examine how it has come to be that those of us for whom English is a line of *work* are also called upon to *love* literature and to ensure that others do so too."¹ Rita Felski offers a different analysis of the field in *The Limits of Critique* (2015), positing and resisting as central to literary study a version of critique to which love is antithetical—that is, a critique that "highlights the sphere of the agon (conflict and domination) at the expense of eros (love and connection) [and assumes] that the former is more fundamental than the latter."² Despite their distinct formulations of the relationship between love and critique and the role each plays within literary studies past and present, Lynch and Felski both argue that love ought to be central to the discipline.

This newfound interest in love, desire, and affect echoes, in many ways, the call voiced a decade and a half ago in the edited volume *Polemic: Critical or Uncritical* (2004). There Jane Gallop, Michael Warner, and others ask that literary scholars think with and about practices of "uncritical" reading and author love in order to understand the modes of subject formation to which these reading practices are bound. The "uncritical" reader, in particular the one who identifies too closely with characters, who invests too deeply in a plot, or who becomes a card-carrying member of an author's fan club, remains a serious object of study, especially in light of theoretical developments in affect theory, digital humanities, and fan studies. Yet a slightly different argument also appears in the volume. This is the claim that religious readers, like Lynch's literature loving readers, can be and in fact often

are also critical readers.³ Michael Warner’s pious readers and Amy Hollywood’s mystical subjects have been joined in recent years by Mark Jordan’s convulsing bodies, Aisha Beliso-De Jesús’s electric “coplesences,” and Ashon Crawley’s stomping spirits.⁴ Yet despite the foundational role that religion plays in twenty-first century conversations about the history and value of critique, these religious figures seem largely to have disappeared from literary critical discussions of the issue.⁵ Why are religious readers, particularly markedly embodied religious readers, absent from recent histories of literary criticism? Have they been forced to remain uncritical, scapegoats whose erasure enables other modes of putatively “uncritical” reading to be reclaimed as less excessive, credulous, or nonrational? Does postcriticism require a disavowal of the critical religious subject? These questions carry particular political relevance today, as the need for critical reading is ever more pressing and, simultaneously, the dangers of paranoia as the presumptive critical stance have become all too clear.⁶

The essays collected here return to the questions raised in earlier scholarship about the interplay of love and the literary-critical enterprise by attending to the practices of devotion. Following Richard Rambuss’s claim that devotional texts “afford us a plethora of affectively charged sites for tracing the complex overlappings and relays between religious devotion and erotic desire, as well as between the interiorized operations of the spirit and the material conditions of the body,” the essays gathered here demonstrate the close relationship between literary reading, critical reading, and devotion.⁷ Attending to the intersections of devotional practices (among them, prayer, recitation, scriptural exegesis, meditation, and contemplation) and the rhetorical and literary arts (invention, poetry, and fiction), contributors explore the ways in which the reading, writing, and contemplative practices of Christianity contribute—both historically and in the present—to the training, cultivation, and disciplining of affective attachments to, investments in, and analyses of literature. Contributors also examine the relationship between religious devotion and the devotion to literature through analyses of the ways in which materiality and embodiment condition the connections between devotional practices and the textual arts.

The goal of this special issue, then, is to desegregate religious studies and theology from the humanities more broadly by reasserting religion’s significance to the histories of critique, theory, and literature. Most of the authors are scholars of religion, and we all work with the assumption that the putative secularity of literary study in English is largely a ruse.⁸ Rather, religious frameworks, sensibilities, and practices have been present in the study of English literature from the beginning, even at the moments when the literary was most strenuously attempting to differentiate itself from the religious. This is not only a more accurate account of contemporary critical

frameworks and their evolution, but a signal of their limitations. Practices identified as the sole domain of a largely secular form of literary expertise may be more parochially Christian than their practitioners realize. Generalized understandings of literary devotion developed within these frameworks might inadvertently limit what is considered critical or rigorous, even literary.⁹

We use the term “devotion” in its broadest sense in order to question and undo the epistemological restrictions generated by sharp distinctions between the secular and the religious. These essays pursue connections between devotional practices, literary production, and contemplative or intellectual labor so as to turn the intellectual project called Religion and Literature away from an emphasis on thematics and toward an investigation of practices. We follow Niklaus Largier’s proposal that those writing the history of Christian mysticism and secular modernity move away from identifying persistent motifs and intellectual paradigms shared by medieval mystics and modern intellectuals and, instead, toward an interrogation of the ways that practices of reading shape sensation, perception, and what he calls “a poetics or poesis of experience.”¹⁰ We ask not only how religious practices are organized around literature but also how these practices are transmuted into putatively secular forms of devotion. How might one be “religiously devoted,” for example, in a political (devotion to candidate, cause, state), epistemological (devotion to methods and objects of disciplinary formation), or aesthetic (devotion to artistic pursuits, modes of experimentation, or artifacts of popular culture) sense? To what extent can we demarcate religious and nonreligious devotion, and what is at stake in attempts to do so?

Most importantly, perhaps, these essays demonstrate that the work of devotion is as much about the transformation wrought through it as it is about the specificity of its object. Moreover, as these essays show, this emphasis on transformation was already in place in the Christian Middle Ages. We collectively are interested in devotion not as a stance of subservience before a divine or human other, but as transformative practice. Devotion does not merely—or uncritically—receive, follow, and reinscribe predetermined patterns of thought or courses of action. The ends or outcomes of its critical performances are not fully known in advance, even when they are animated by identifiable desires. The essays in this issue thus read for textual accounts of devotional practices as well as the ways in which the text itself delivers or demands particular forms of practice.

The repeated and ritual performance of devotional practice is central to the accounts found here of religion’s inextricability from the writing, reading, and study of literature. Of particular importance, argues Constance Furey, is the tradition of commenting on and reciting the Psalms. In a deft

reading of Philip Sidney's *The Defence of Poesy* (1595), a foundational text in the rise of English literary criticism, Furey challenges interpretations of Sidney's invocation of King David that cast the inspiration of divine poets in opposition to the literary invention of "right," or secular, poets. Instead, she argues that the tradition of Psalm commentary from Athanasius to Luther to which Sidney is bound is deeply concerned with rhetoric, in particular with personification; the diversity of voices and "notable *prosopopoeias*" characteristic of the Psalms lend both religious and secular verse their transformative force. As Niklaus Largier has explained, "In prayer and contemplation, [techniques of spiritual exercise like the singing of the Psalms] shape the body and the soul, providing it ultimately with a new *habitus* of the perception of the world."¹¹ Furthermore, while modern thinkers like Maurice Barrès (1862–1923) may characterize repeated prayer and spiritual exercise as a "mechanical method," Furey builds on Hollywood's reading of Benedict of Nursia (ca. 480–547) and John Cassian (ca. 360–435), which shows that the prayerful recitation of the Psalms in the monastic setting is not simply a rote or deadening devotional practice at odds with the spontaneity and immediacy of mystical experience, but rather the very ground on which the transformation of the monk's affect and experience are made possible.¹² "When we have the same disposition in our heart with which each psalm was sung or written down," writes Cassian, "then we shall become like its author, grasping the significance beforehand rather than afterward."¹³ In other words, the Psalms provide a text not for mere recitation, but instead, through a kind of cohabitation with the psalmist's voice, for the cultivation, affirmation, and redirection of affective experience. Ultimately, for Sidney as for Cassian, the personification of and in poetry opens a space of cohabitation with multiple voices that makes possible the transformation of the reader.

As Julie Orlemanski illustrates, the recitation of the Psalms also enables the prosopopoeial invention found in Bernard of Clairvaux's (d. 1153) *Sermons on the Song of Songs*. Just as the cohabitation of multiple personae in the Psalms facilitates the monk's identification with the psalmist, Bernard's dramatic engagement with the Song of Songs is marked by his identification with the voice of the Bride. Drawing on the practices of psalter recitation, the schoolroom exercise of prosopopoeia, and the commentary tradition that reads the Song of Songs as a drama, Bernard's exegesis unfolds as an act of person-making. As a result, Orlemanski argues against the claim that the rise of fiction mirrors the rise of secularization and argues instead for the importance of Bernard's sermons—indeed, the importance of the religious imagination—to the history of literary fiction.

Rachel Smith also asks what role the "as if," of artifice and of fictionality, plays within medieval Christianity. Through a careful analysis of the operation

of prayer in *The Life of the Servant*, the fourteenth-century autohagiography by Henry Suso (d. 1366), Smith demonstrates the ways in which monastic and other forms of religious life involve attempts to transform the everyday into the divine. Burcht Pranger argues for the centrality of artificiality to the monastic imagination, an artificiality that depends on a “double bluff” in which earthly things are rhetorically and liturgically remade as eternal things, becoming that which they, strictly speaking, are not. Following Pranger, Smith examines the continual labor of prayer undertaken by Suso’s servant as a practice of fabrication in which he continually attempts to alter the referentiality of every detail, however minute, of his life, such that everything refers to Christ. Prayer as an address to the divine other—an act predicated on twoness—seeks to overcome itself as the servant attempts to signify and thereby to become the one to whom he prays. Smith, like Orlemanski, ends by asking how medieval notions of the fictional might enter into conversation with more contemporary articulations, engaging in particular the work of Catherine Gallagher.

At the heart of these imaginative exercises, as Robert Davis shows in his essay, is the rhetorical art of *inventio*. In contrast to readers of the *Proslogion* who locate in it the figure of Anselm (d. 1109) as philosopher, logically building up the “ontological argument” for God’s existence, Davis argues that the text instead models a form of prayer that is less interested in establishing a definitive truth and much more concerned with conveying, through the rhetorical practice of *inventio*, “the affective and intellectual *habitus* of thinking and desiring God that constitute the practice of prayer.” According to Davis’s reading, *cogitatio*, or ruminative and ascetic thinking, is linked to *inventio*, the search for or discovery of novel arguments, and, as such, is bound to the pleasure, anguish, risks, and even failures of thought. Instead of knowing God with full certainty beforehand, the practice of thinking, guided by the rhetorical art of invention, produces the object of devotion. Because this invention of God is not guaranteed, the space between desire and fulfillment, and the concomitant deferral of satisfaction—a satisfaction that may, in fact, never be attained—becomes the precondition for the prolonged and arduous labor of devoted thought. In other words, the indeterminacy of the devotional object allows for the transformational practice of devotion itself.

Moving from the High Middle Ages to the second half of the twentieth century, Eleanor Craig’s interpretation of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *DICTEE* (1982) offers a shrewd analysis of the dangers involved in reifying the devotional object to which Davis alludes. Craig identifies the ambiguous relationship between the practices of devotion that sustain liberatory struggles, on the one hand, and the way these devotions might also sustain the modes of violence against which they aim, on the other. Layering religious,

national, familial, and textual devotions, *DICTEE* not only blurs the lines of media, traditions, languages, and time periods but also significantly complicates the relationship between ideology and devotion. While the text remains anticolonial and antimisogynist in its stance, its embrace of militarism and martyrdom raises difficult questions about the ideological assumptions undergirding *DICTEE*'s devotions. Craig argues that as a meditation on the power and perils of devotion, *DICTEE* purposefully underlines the ambiguities of political resistance and complicity. Rather than reifying any particular object of devotion and risking the unintended violence, exclusion, and coercion of ideology, Cha complicates the trajectories of her texts' desires by drawing from a diverse set of archives and, therefore, resignifies the rhetorical arts of invention and discovery as partial safeguards against ideological hegemony.

Kris Trujillo's reading of the history of the journal *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* suggests similarly complex relationships between forms of political and literary devotion. Trujillo notes that the founding of *GLQ* in 1993 marked a moment of simultaneous subversion and institutionalization and argues that the liveliness and inventiveness of queer theory is not simply opposed to institutional norms. In fact, establishing a journal stabilized an academic space that could make room for the disruptive and "weird." Trujillo thus revises interpretations that would attribute to queer theory purely resistant status or hopeless assimilation to academic norms. *GLQ*'s iterative form, which Trujillo reads as a kind of devotional practice centered around mourning, thus demonstrates that citation is not reproduction, at least not in a consistent way that would predetermine its effects. Queer scholarship's alignment with repetition and ordinariness opens up realms of complicity, but also potential space for transformation. Trujillo recalls the suggestion by Carolyn Dinshaw, one of *GLQ*'s founding editors, that religious time could be an antidote to the conceits of secular progressive politics that often inhabit queer theory. Affirming that ritual and recitation are crucial to queer theoretical work, he argues that building the collectivities necessary for political transformation requires acknowledgment of these dimensions of theory's time and labor.

Turning toward death as a way of turning toward life also surfaces in Amy Hollywood's reading of Henry James's *The Wings of the Dove* (1902). Here again, devotion is more than repetition. Hollywood argues that Honoré de Balzac's Swedenborgian novella, *Seraphita*, is a crucial influence for James. In contrast with Balzac's angel, however, who longs to escape the physical body, James's Milly Theale yearns to hold onto life. There are moments when her material reality, her wealth and the power it brings, seems to put the physical world within her grasp. Yet these same advantages are also what open her up to deception and exploitation, the unfolding of

which makes life in its concrete relationality unbearable. Hollywood finds in James's novel a refracted grief and remembrance for his cousin Minny Temple. He memorializes Minny's struggle to live when she knew that she would die, a struggle that refused Christian redemption and instead maintained attachment to physical life. As in Craig's essay, writing and reading are practices that make present what is past. While Milly Theale's survivors may seem destined for bleak forms of regretful solitude, James's personal correspondence refuses to concede the past as lost. Even a past that is decidedly swallowed by the abyss does not dictate that one remain in a static state of melancholy. James posits the *cultivation* of interest in one's own consciousness as a viable alternative—that curiosity, activity, and creation counter the forces that draw one away from life. Far from denying loss, James shows that devotion to the dead and to memory can generate attachment to life.

In Hollywood's, Trujillo's, and Craig's articles, memorialization is a key site of transformation, inviting and reanimating the past in a way that does not represent simple surrender or subservience to loss. There is, however, inescapable moral complexity to rehearsing death in this way, to expecting it to (or making it) generate meaning for ongoing living. The dead, after all, do not benefit. This raises an ethical question that must be posed regarding the terms of devotion discussed in this issue. To the extent that devotion is about transformation rather than its object, what then happens to the object? When objects of devotion are human, living or dead, do practices of devotion risk turning them into *things* that serve devotion itself and neglect other forms of accountability?

Although these essays move from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century, dropping into early modernity only with Furey's essay, the pivot Furey provides is crucial to the argument this collection begins to explore. Furey shows that the distinction between divine and "right," or secular, poetry was less stark for Sir Philip Sidney than many modern readers would like to imagine. Similarly, John Dennis (1658–1734) and other eighteenth-century critics argue that religious language is poetic and poetic language religious; for Dennis, this is because both elicit and direct the human affective life. Like Sidney, Dennis draws on centuries of interpretations of the Psalms, songs sung by the faithful to God and understood as depicting the entire range of human feeling, insisting that God touches humans through language, poetically deployed.¹⁴ A question underlying our shared—and ongoing—project is what it means that at least one strand of modern English literary study is grounded in practices specific to Christian modes of devotion, both Roman Catholic and Protestant.

The contemporary American poet Susan Howe, reading the words of Jonathan Edwards (1703–58) and Sarah Pierpont Edwards (1710–58),

recognizes that their writing is a palimpsest of scriptural texts, images, sounds, and phrases by which Howe herself is deeply moved. But, she writes, “I read words but don’t hear God in them.”¹⁵ Her devotion, however, the careful attention she gives to their texts, remains. If for devout readers of the Psalms, recitation of and meditation on their words allows one to redirect all affect toward God, what is the end toward which Howe writes? Might her devotion to the past and its futures mark a new mode of relational fidelity to one’s others that can itself be understood as properly poetic and properly religious, if not any longer properly Christian? Or are the constraints of this Christian heritage ones against which we should push? Ones to which we should stand resistant? Only further research and reflection, and the expansion of this project beyond the confines of the Christian tradition, will allow us to answer.

Notes

1. Deidre Lynch, *Loving Literature: A Cultural History* (Chicago, 2015), 1.
2. Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago, 2015), 17.
3. See esp. Michael Warner, “Uncritical,” in *Polemic: Critical or Uncritical*, ed. Jane Gallop (New York, 2004), 13–38. For Amy Hollywood’s attempt to challenge the assumption that religious reading is necessarily uncritical, see Amy Hollywood, “Reading as Self-Annihilation,” in *Polemic*, 39–63, reprinted with some additional notes in Amy Hollywood, *Acute Melancholia and Other Essays: Mysticism, History, and the Study of Religion* (New York, 2016), 129–48.
4. See Mark Jordan, *Convulsing Bodies: Religion and Resistance in Foucault* (Stanford, 2014); Aisha Beliso-De Jesús, *Electric Santería: Racial Assemblages of Transnational Religion* (New York, 2015); and Ashon Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (New York, 2016).
5. For an important exception, see David Marno, *Death Be Not Proud: The Art of Holy Attention* (Chicago, 2016). On the debates around secularism and critique, see Talal Asad et al., *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech* (Berkeley, 2009). The questions Asad and his co-authors raise have been foundational to the ways that religion has been approached in the humanities, yet the volume also reproduces the dominance of juridical language and theories of governance over the question of religion. The essays collected here speak both with and against this text by shifting focus toward devotion, literature, and aesthetics.
6. One further area of debate on these topics involves discussions and critiques of surface reading. For some key touchpoints, see Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best, eds., “The Way We Read Now,” special issue, *Representations* 108 (Fall 2009). In defense of reading strategies that Marcus and Best align with Frederic Jameson, the editors of a special issue of *Social Text* argue that there is no virtue in attempting (or pretending) to withhold critique, as all acts of reading are political. They insist on the importance of being “‘suspicious and aggressive,’ under historical conditions that call for nothing less”; Nico Baumbach, Damon R. Young, and Genevieve Yue, “Introduction: For a Political Critique of Culture,” in “The Cultural Logic of Contemporary Capitalism,” ed. Nico

- Baumbach, Damon R. Young, Genevieve Yue, special issue, *Social Text* 34, no. 2 (June 2016): 7.
7. Richard Rambuss, *Closet Devotions* (Durham, 1998), 2.
 8. We emphasize English studies here because of the limits of our expertise. The same may be true for the development of criticism in other national literatures, but we are not in a position to make that claim. Comparison of the development of the critical enterprise across languages, literatures, and nations, we contend, needs to take into account the role religious practices and modes of reading play in the development of literary studies. For relevant examples of the kinds of comparative work in which we are interested that focus on the international stretch of English literature through its colonial and imperialist projects, see Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (New York, 1989); Isabel Hofmeyr, *The Portable Bunyan: A Transnational History of "The Pilgrim's Progress"* (Princeton, 2003), and Michael Allan, *In the Shadow of World Literature: Sites of Reading in Colonial Egypt* (Princeton, 2016).
 9. In addition to the scholarship cited earlier in the notes, this special issue participates in a broader debate about devotional practices, critique, and theory in the humanities and emphasizes the particular role of religion and theology. Significant texts from this conversation include Joanna Picciotto, ed., "Devotion and Intellectual Labor," special issue, *The Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 44, no. 1 (Winter 2014); Patricia Ingham and Noah Guynn, eds., "Surface, Symptom, and the Future of Critique," special issue, *Exemplaria* 26, nos. 2–3 (2014); and the previously cited Baumbach, Young, and Yue, "The Cultural Logic of Contemporary Capitalism."
 10. Niklaus Largier, "Mysticism, Modernity, and the Invention of Aesthetic Experience," *Representations* 105 (Winter 2009): 39. See also Niklaus Largier, "The Media of Sensation," in *The Anthropology of Catholicism: A Companion Reader*, ed. Valentina Napolitano, Maya Mayblin, and Kristin Norget (Berkeley, 2017), 316–25. For Largier, Michel de Certeau offers one way of thinking about the art of figuration derived from medieval mysticism as itself a practice of writing and conversation. Indeed, de Certeau provides a foundational analysis of mystical speech and mystical tropes in both *The Mystic Fable: The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Chicago, 1992), vol. 1, and "Mystic Speech," in *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, 1986), 80–100. De Certeau acknowledges that mysticism emerges through a linguistic "process of fabrication" (*Mystic Fable*, 140), yet he is less interested in the role practices of religious devotion play in the production of mystic speech than are the essays collected here. An interest in reading practice emerges most markedly in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley, 1984), and especially in his essay "Reading as Poaching" from that collection, but the connections between these two book projects remain to be made. Finally, while de Certeau gestures toward a continuity between what he calls the "mystic poetics" of premodernity and modernity, his exilic, nostalgic, and melancholic account in *Mystic Fable* ultimately relies on a presumptive historical rupture—a secular modernity absent God, who, even in absence, is centered as the object of devotion—in ways that the essays collected here resist.
 11. Niklaus Largier, "Praying by Numbers: An Essay on Medieval Aesthetics," *Representations* 104 (Fall 2008): 78.
 12. Maurice Barrès, *Un homme libre*, quoted in Largier, "Praying by Numbers," 78. Amy Hollywood, "Song, Experience, and the Book in Benedictine Monasticism,"

- in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism*, ed. Amy Hollywood and Patricia Z. Beckman (Cambridge, 2012), 65.
13. John Cassian, *Conferences*, 10.11, in *John Cassian: The Conferences*, trans. Boniface Ramsey (New York, 1997).
 14. John Dennis, “The Advancement and Reformation of Modern Poetry” (1701) and “The Grounds of Modern Criticism” (1704), both in *The Critical Works of John Dennis*, ed. Edward Niles Hooker (Baltimore, 1939). On this issue in Dennis, see Shaun Irlam, *Elations: The Poetics of Enthusiasm in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Stanford, 1999). On Dennis and the Psalms, see Sarah B. Stein, “Translating the Bible to Raise the Fallen: John Dennis’s Psalm 18,” *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 43 (2014): 4–27.
 15. Susan Howe, *That This* (New York, 2010), 12.