

## “As Often as His Heart Beat, the Name Moved”: Devotion and the “As if” in *The Life of the Servant*

### Introduction

IN THE EARLY PERIOD OF his devoted apprenticeship to “eternal Wisdom” while he was yet a beginner, the fourteenth-century Dominican Henry Suso (c. 1295–1366) writes in *The Life of the Servant* of how “the servant” inscribed the name of the beloved on his chest as “a sign of love that would give testimony as an eternal symbol of the love between you and me, one that no forgetting could ever erase.”<sup>1</sup> As courtly lovers write the name of their beloved on their clothes, so he

threw aside his scapular, bared his breast, and took a stylus in hand. Looking at his heart, he said, “God of power . . . today you shall be engraved in the ground of my heart.” And he began to jab into the flesh above the heart with the stylus in a straight line. He jabbed back and forth, up and down, until he had drawn the name IHS right over his heart. . . . Kneeling down he said, “My Lord and only Love of my heart, look at the intense desire of my heart. My Lord, I do not know how to press you into me further, nor can I. Alas, Lord, I beg you to finish this by pressing yourself further into the ground of my heart and so draw your holy name onto me that you never again leave my heart.”

. . . The letters were about as thick as a flattened-out blade of grass and as long as a section of the little finger. He carried this name over his heart until his death. And as often as his heart beat, the name moved. (chap. 4)

The servant seeks here to become one with the prayer composed of the name of Jesus, to permanently wear the name of the beloved to whom he is

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**ABSTRACT** This essay considers an instance of medieval fictionality through the devotional text *The Life of the Servant* by the Dominican Henry Suso, specifically, through an examination of the “Servant’s” attempt to identify with Christ. Two forms of doubleness issue from this attempt, namely, the human servant seeking to embody the divine without remainder and his figuration as sinner and savior. Insofar as the text allows for a play between these polarities, the servant’s devotional practice can be understood as inhabiting the “as if,” or a kind of fictionality. The temptations of a devotional literalism—fiction striving to overcome its fictionality—is portrayed in the *Life* alongside a vision of devotion that retains the suspensions and play of the fictional. REPRESENTATIONS 153. 2021 © The Regents of the University of California. ISSN 0734-6018, electronic ISSN 1533-855X, pages 51–67. All rights reserved. Direct requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content to the University of California Press at <https://www.ucpress.edu/journals/reprints-permissions>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2021.153.4.51>.

devoted. It is an embodied strategy to solve the problem raised by the injunction in 1 Thessalonians 5:16 to “pray without ceasing.”<sup>2</sup> This inscription promises to overcome the predations of time, to deal with the anxiety of forgetting that “erases” the memory of the love between the soul and God, and with it, belief. It occurs following the first intense blush of love in which the servant enjoys two encounters with God and confidently declares to Wisdom, “Joy of my heart, this hour can never be lost to my heart” (chap. 2). However, despite the fullness of divine revelation in raptures that transcend time, the servant inevitably returns to the weight of the body and wonders what trace of these meetings with the beloved remain, how to realize such divine excess in a human life. By carrying the sign of this love in the flesh, the servant hopes he might not lose the beloved even while inhabiting the body. The scar is a permanent mark resting on top of the heart beating—keeping—time.

Inscribing and being inscribed by the name turned the servant into a book, his skin, parchment marked by letters from a stylus, available in turn for readers of the *Life* as a model for the spiritual path. This “certain Swabian friar” become the bearer of another name is fabricated as a living prayer and made available as an image of divine discipleship to those who encounter the text. The *Life* offers here another iteration in a chain of exemplarity textually transmitted, giving the servant’s life and body for the regard, consumption, and imitation of readers. The servant’s scarification echoes stories of figures as important as Ignatius of Antioch, whose martyrdom was included in the widely circulating thirteenth-century compilation *The Golden Legend*, where it says that the name of Christ was found not *on* but *in* the martyr’s heart, proving the efficacy of his “unceasing repetition” of Jesus’s name on the way to his execution. His heart and bones were said to be the only things untouched by the lions, and when his heart was cut open, the pagans saw the inscription “Jesus Christ” in gold letters.<sup>3</sup>

This scene introduces a section of *The Life of the Servant* that lasts for a lengthy nineteen chapters, in which the servant details the bodily and imaginative practices undertaken by him in order to compassionately identify with the sufferings of Christ and his mother. These practices include penitential offerings for the servant’s sins and his imitation of divine suffering. It is on these chapters that this essay will focus. Devotion, for the servant, is not the adoration of the beloved from a distance but rather seeks to unite with Christ such that the servant becomes him. Devotional identification here entails the inscription of the beloved on the body, whether through stylus, ritualized bodily practice assiduously repeated, or works of imagination. The essay will consider the structural features of the servant’s striving to identify with Christ. It will show that two forms of doubleness issue from this attempt to become the beloved. The first is the tension between

the human servant—finite flesh—seeking to embody the infinite divinity without remainder. The second is the figuration of the servant as simultaneously a sinner and Christ the savior. The fascination of the text in large part arises from the ways in which it wrestles with these performative contradictions.

Insofar as the text allows for a play between finite and infinite, sinner and savior, I will argue that the servant's ascetic practice can be understood as one of inhabiting the "as if." In other words, as a kind of fictionality. This is not the fictionality of the modern English novel but rather a historically specific account of the fabrication (*fictio*) of the self through ritual practice that renders the subject both oneself and another. Suso's portrayal of the devotional "as if" offers a vision for a practice and a theology of exemplarity that does not operate according to an allegorical structure, which would entail the imposition of a form upon a content in which the aim is the latter's defeat; it does not model the dream of the transmutation of letter into spirit. A vision of the play possible within devotional identification is represented by means of portraying the possibility of such play in ascetic practice, yet also through the ultimate failure and renunciation of the asceticism of the first part of the *Life*. Chapters 4 through 19, I will argue, work out the futility of an allegorical logic through a dramatization of its temptations—the temptation of a fiction attempting to overcome its fictionality—culminating in its defeat in chapter 18, in which the servant hears a divine voice tell him to desist from his bodily mortification. The ground of such temptation is already apparent in the scene of bodily writing that opens chapters 4 through 19. The servant, seeking a union with the beloved that transcends time, carves the name of Christ on his body, thereby seemingly overcoming the distance between himself and Jesus through the permanence of a scar; the body is forever marked, the name never lost. The servant, it seems, attains perfect success in the quest for union at the outset of his journey. Such embodied literalism is, however, represented as increasingly dangerous—courting death—as the text portrays the servant engaged in the acts of violent ritual repetition required to overcome the fear of a loss of memory and presence that insistently asserts itself, despite the initial inscription that promised to transcend time. Literalism—the notion that to say "I am Christ" is a truth that can be wrought in the flesh—is shown to be an attempt to overcome the peculiar suspensions, play, and doubleness of the devotional "as if."

In order to unpack the notion of the "as if" that I see as operative in the *Life*, I will turn first to a very different medieval figure, the twelfth-century Cistercian Bernard of Clairvaux. The author of eighty-six sermons on the Song of Songs, in which he develops the allegory of the monastic soul as the bride of Christ, is not remembered for his life of self-denial. Bernardine

views on asceticism were passed on to later medieval readers under the dominant note, Simone Roisin argues, of “moderation,” despite the fact that such a portrayal was not entirely consistent with his representation in sources like *The First Life of Bernard of Clairvaux*, traditionally known as the *vita prima*.<sup>4</sup> In bringing together Suso and Bernard, I hope to show that, although there are crucial and telling differences between the thought and forms of life of the two men, there are also important continuities between them. A decidedly unbloody Bernard might help us understand the representation of the servant’s asceticism, and not only by way of contrast. In order to do this, I will look to Burcht Pranger’s study of what he terms Bernard’s poetics of artificiality. I will then turn back to *The Life of the Servant* and its portrayal of the servant’s self-mortification. At the end of the essay, I will briefly compare this medieval example with some modern notions of the fictional. I will argue that there is a contrast between the novelization of imagination and the explicit artificiality of this instance of the literature of exemplarity. The hyperrealism of Suso’s fictional practice, although it is a making that *makes real* what is formed through the work of ritual repetition, is not an expression of credulity; he works *against* credulity. The point of his ascetic practice is to meet Christ through artifice, the artifice of ascetic imitation rendered explicit in order to become a manual for others to follow.

### The Cistercian Imagination

In his study of Bernard of Clairvaux, Pranger notes the peculiar nature of what he calls the “artificiality” of the monastic imagination. The Cistercian monk, he argues, is *fabricated* through acts of ritual repetition, which include literary practices of rumination on texts. Jean Leclercq has written about these practices as the slow incorporation of the words of scripture and commentary through patient encounter and meditation upon the page: the “unending cycle of prayer and chant,” along with the regulation of every minute detail of life according to the *Rule of Benedict*, which Cistercians attempted to live *ad apicem litterae* (to the last detail of the letter). The Cistercian ordering of all behavior—even leisure—according to a rule is, for Pranger, an “artifice of eternity,” an attempt to render the monk’s life a realized eschatology, to render time a stable, eternal present.

Such a making of the monk also entails, for Bernard, a making of the Cistercian monastery. In a letter written to the bishop of Lincoln, who was concerned when a certain Phillip, on the way to Jerusalem, stopped at Clairvaux and decided to stay, foregoing the rest of his pilgrimage, Bernard argues that Phillip has taken a “shortcut” to Jerusalem by remaining at

Clairvaux: he has “arrived in the harbor of salvation. Right now his feet are standing in the courts of Jerusalem. . . . Rather than a curious spectator, he is a devout inhabitant and an enrolled citizen of Jerusalem, not of this earthly Jerusalem to which mount Sinai in Arabia is related, which is in bondage with her children, but of that free Jerusalem, which is above.” This Jerusalem is, he writes, “no other than Clairvaux.”<sup>5</sup>

Bernard is, of course, invoking the medieval fourfold meaning of scripture. But Pranger argues that there is here a crucial difference from what would otherwise be a rather predictable rhetorical strategy. If Bernard’s attempt to persuade the bishop were simply a matter of the allegorical transmutation of Clairvaux into Jerusalem, he would write something like the following: “I am sorry to have kept here your Phillip on his way to that most important of historical sites, Jerusalem in Palestine. But as you well know, Jerusalem means more than just history and geography. In a wider context, it symbolizes all places both physical and spiritual that are paradisiacal whether present, past, or future. And in view of such a wealth of meaning, we in Clairvaux claim our share of that utopian concept, doing our utmost to shape our humble monastic lives according to the contours of so ideal an existence.”<sup>6</sup> Pranger argues, however, that in the radical contraction of Phillip’s “shortcut” to Jerusalem, he has

with a deft stroke . . . telescoped all that is external to the monastery into a single location: Clairvaux. His has become the life of uninterrupted rituals of prayer and chant. . . . The extramural world of time and history is overtaken and absorbed by the drama of ritual. . . . As a result, life in the monastery proves to be conspicuously artificial, to the point of uneventfulness and timelessness. At the same time it is claimed by Bernard . . . to be conspicuously real.<sup>7</sup>

Importantly, this technique of fabricating eternity in time requires more than simply a spiritualization of the literal Clairvaux and literal Jerusalem. While Pranger argues that what is notable about Bernard’s rhetoric is its “bravura,” in which he “declares ritual to be better than reality, or to be reality,” this claim is Bernard’s “double bluff”: it is a bluff insofar as he, when literalizing the allegory, asserts that the monastery *is* Jerusalem. It is a double bluff because he makes this claim appealing to the reader’s knowledge that in reality the monastery is “nothing but an artificial affair,” even as he holds to the assertion that it is Jerusalem. He “uses that knowledge [of the monastery’s artificial nature] to re-create with ingenuous playfulness a new dramatic situation that comprises both the ritual and its falling short of reality.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, the monastery—and monastic life—is both the realization of the advent of the kingdom of heaven *and* a barren land that requires laborious, continually repeated effort in order to be perceived as that realization. Pranger’s claim, in sum, is that, rather than see Bernard’s

argument as simply another iteration of a structure of devotion in which the temporal imperfectly mirrors the eternal in time and seeks continuously to transcend itself, Bernard *understands* that there is no arrival at eternity for human beings here below; we are always either too late or too early for it. Into the gap of this impossibility—of the incommensurability of worlds—ritual steps as the “staging” of eternity here below. The round of psalmody, chant, *lectio divina*, and the wearing of the habit is the labor of making the eternal real through the “as if”—the artifice, the fictionality—of ritual.

Bernard offers readers the identification of Clairvaux with Jerusalem, and thus is Clairvaux able to licitly claim itself as Phillip’s true destination. The significance of the earthly monastery is transformed as it becomes a sign referring, by virtue of continual ritual action, to an eternal thing; it is more “real” considered in relation to that which it, strictly speaking, is not. However, readers know that the notion that Clairvaux is Jerusalem is not true in a literal sense; it is not a spot on the map by the edge of the Mediterranean. They thus understand the allegory to be a staging, a theatrical gesture. But this act of make-believe (artificiality) is what puts one in touch with the real, with what lies beyond time and decay, beyond the limitations of a plot of swampy land in the French wilderness. The literal is in play between knowing that the fiction falls short of reality and doubling down on that shortfall in order to dramatize the real.

I would like now to think about how the structure of artificiality or fiction that Pranger identifies in Bernard helps us understand devotional practice as described in the first book of *The Life of the Servant*. Here one finds an all-encompassing ritualization of life in which the servant seeks both to become Christ and to transform his environment such that all things signify the divine through works of imagination and practices of living “as if” or otherwise. These works can be understood as fictional in Pranger’s sense if we read them not only as acts of an allegorical imagination, in which the servant attempts to intensify the reflective capacity of his body and life so that it might better image the divine, but also as deeds that demonstrate the impossibility of such manifestation.

In seeking to become Christ, the servant displays a piety with a tenor very different from Bernard’s, one that is exemplary of much mendicant spirituality with a focus on the human Christ as the model of the spiritual life. While it is true that, for Suso as for Bernard, the play between infinite and finite is operative, Suso’s version of that play takes in the complications of his incarnational theology. Insofar as God becomes human, the divine does indeed enter time and the limits of the flesh, seeming to overcome incommensurability and thus to promise the servant the possibility of divine enfleshment without difference. On the other hand, the severity of the servant’s ascetic practices suggests that his attempt to embody Christ is no

more likely than Bernard's monastery becoming Jerusalem. In their respective pieties, they both are practitioners of the "as if." However, Suso's text demonstrates the struggle with maintaining such a doubleness not apparent in Bernard.

The most disconcerting scenes of staged ritual action in the first book of the *vita*, in which the servant attempts to realize in time the promise of the prayer of the heart, are those involving his ascetic practices. The prologue to Suso's *The Exemplar*, the compilation of Suso's vernacular works in which the *vita* appears, suggests the stadial account of spiritual progress in Origenistic terms of the beginner and the progressing. The spiritual life is one that unfolds in time. In the first part of the *vita*, the servant stages himself as a penitent, a person at the beginning of the spiritual journey. As part of this initiation through purgation, he began wearing on his back a cross he made into a barbed object, with thirty nails and seven needles protruding from it. He then flagellated himself two or three times a day, beating himself with the cross on his back, driving the nails into his flesh. Typically, he did this twice daily. The third time would occur only "when he allowed himself too much comfort or enjoyment" (chap. 16), and so functioned as a punishment and compensation for those pleasures. For example, when he "carelessly" took the hands of two girls while sitting in public, he greatly intensified the mortification of his flesh in an attempt to atone for his wrongdoing. Tying the cross to his back, he threw his body onto it so that the nails plunged into his flesh; he then flagellated himself thirty times in front of images of the saints and prostrated himself one hundred times, causing the nails to stick in. Between each genuflection he pulled the nails from his body, making the pain unbearable (chap. 16).

These penitential deeds in which the servant paid for his sins and was purged of his resistance to the divine will are seamlessly assimilated by the text to a practice of what many medievalists would call affective devotion—the development of a compassionate identification with the sufferings of Christ and his mother. In wearing the cross, the servant not only undertook an act of penance but hoped to "bear on his body some sign of his heartfelt sympathy for the intense sufferings of his crucified Lord" (chap. 16). The cross was *also* worn in "praise of the deep sorrow of the pure Mother of God that so utterly pierced through her heart and soul at the time of [Christ's] wretched death" (chap. 16). Chapter 13 details how he first "accompanied Christ on his wretched way of the cross when he was led out to die" through bodily exercise and imaginative engagement. Both of these—asceticism and imagination—are, he says, a "contemplation" of Christ's passion, a way of "following in his footsteps." In his own rendering of a European Jerusalem, he writes of how he began a regular practice after matins of transforming the chapter room, when everyone was absent, into the places where Christ

walked to his death, kissing the floor periodically while “imagining to himself as vividly as he could” (*bildet*) Christ’s suffering. He “walked” four interior paths of accompaniment with Christ—dying to his desire for friendship, his desire to have the respect of the world, for the comforts of the body, and finally he “call[ed] upon him and ask[ed] him [Christ] not to go to his death without him.” He further demanded that Christ accompany him because he had “a right to go along.” In addition to a practice of cultivating these desires, the servant would “kneel down facing the gentle Mother” as she was led past him and “kiss[] her footsteps.” He then would stride after Christ, a journey that culminated at the pulpit where, beneath the cross, he “knelt to watch his Lord being stripped of his clothing and nailed to the cross.” He would then himself take the discipline—flagellate himself—and thereby “nail himself on the cross with his Lord” (chap. 13). The servant also drastically restricted his water intake, to the point that his tongue became cracked and did not heal for more than a year. This self-imposed drought was, God tells him, a way to remember when “I was thirsty as I was dying with only a little vinegar and gall” (chap. 19).

These deeds, in both their penitential and devotional aspects, set up a *distance* between Christ and the servant, for it is the servant’s sins for which Christ suffered, and his compassion and grief for his pain is made worse by the understanding that he is their cause. However, the very acts that are expressions of penance, guilt, and compassion are also identifications with Christ, for in them he not only travels in imagination to the places where Christ and his mother suffered, or realizes the gulf between himself and God, but also bears the crucifixion in his body in a profoundly literal way. In other words, the acts of self-mortification that stage the servant as penitent and devotee are simultaneously imitations of Christ, for the primary model followed in his penitential practice is Jesus. In these acts of penitence-imitation the *vita* sets the terms of a gap even as it closes the gap, thereby establishing the structure of the spiritual fiction of the text. The puzzle of reference in the *vita* is even more complex than in the case of Clairvaux and Jerusalem, as the servant, through his ritual action, becomes identified with both Christ and Christ’s *antithesis*. Time pushes back against this conflation, but with tenuous effect: the deeds that are petitions for healing and forgiveness—that establish the servant as sinner, if a penitent one—are, *at the same time*, identifications with Christ; he is both a neophyte and a savior.

### Practices of Memorialization

The acts of imaginative transformation of the world, rendering it “as if” something else, occur in book I in relation not only to the body but

also to the servant's environment and action. The ritual regulation of his life extends to every detail of living, an attempt to render Christ present at all moments of mundane existence, making all things a memorial; as far as possible, life is regulated by ritual practice. Jacques LeGoff argues that it was "easy in the Middle Ages for people to veer off into dream, madness, or mysticism."<sup>9</sup> This text shows just how much work such imaginative transformations in fact entail. Pretending that Jesus was present at meals, the servant made believe that he was the beloved disciple. He would incline his body toward the heart side of his companion and speak to him. Every serving of food and drink he offered to Jesus as if to a guest. His drinking was symbolically orchestrated so that he drank five times at meals to signify the five wounds of Christ, but "drank his (fifth) time twice" because water and blood flowed from his side. When he ate fruit, he divided it into four parts and consumed the first three pieces in the name of the Trinity, the fourth in the "love with which the heavenly Mother gave her tender child Jesus an apple to eat." Moreover, he ate the fourth part unpeeled, because this is how children eat apples. From Christmas "until some time thereafter" he did not eat the fourth part, offering it to the Mother to give her young son (chap. 7).

Such an extension of the memory of God to the world of the servant's immediate experience is furthered in the liturgical context of the *sursum corda*. The *sursum corda* is the dialogue between the priest and the congregation—Lift up your hearts; we lift them up to the Lord; and so on—that composes the preface of the Eucharistic prayer. Three "illuminating fantasies" were undertaken by the servant upon hearing the priest's command to "lift up your hearts," in which he "was lifted aloft into God and through me all creatures." This expansive gesture of inclusion occurred through an imagination that radically parsed all elements of creation in order to include even "particles of dust" and gathered up all moments of time. In the first of these he placed himself not at the foot of the cross or the table of the last supper, but in the midst of all that is made:

Before my inner eyes I placed myself along with all that I am, with my body, soul and all my powers; and around myself I placed all the creatures that God ever created in heaven, on earth, and in the four elements, each with its own name, be it the bird of the air, the beast of the forest . . . the foliage . . . of the earth, the countless grains of sand of the sea, and . . . the tiny particles of dust reflected in the sunlight and all the drops of water, which as dew, snow or rain have ever fallen or will fall; and I wished that each of them was sending aloft a pleasant stringed melody torn from the essence of my heart and was thus playing a new exhilarating song of praise for the beloved gentle God from eternity to eternity. (chap. 9)

Here the servant imagines himself as a new Adam (and thus as Christ) surrounded by, played by, all creatures. The language of the "tearing" from

the heart recalls the scene of the scarification of his chest. The pain of his body—its sacrificial vulnerability—funds a harmonial vision in which he becomes the instrument for all of creation. Here again we see an example, although in a very different affective register, of prayer as a state of “as if,” in which the present is enveloped by eternity, and the servant’s identity as a new Adam-Christ has the capacity to lift up all creation into a state of pure praise, being without sin.

### Fiction, Prayer, and Reference

In appealing to the language of the fictional, I am continuing what is now a lengthy tradition of considering *The Life of the Servant* in relation to questions of historical event and literary invention.<sup>10</sup> I am not concerned with debates regarding the “fictional” per se as a terminological category; rather, I use that term to refer to a particular structure of reference, namely a form of referentiality that occurs by means of ritual seeking to create states of the “as if.” The ritual actor learns to be him- or herself and another. Nevertheless, it can be generative to sometimes think comparatively, not least for the ways in which it throws comparands into relief. For this reason I want here to compare the notion of fictionality expressed thus far here with portions of its definition by Catherine Gallagher, particularly in terms of the novelization of imagination and the artifice of ascetic imitation depicted in a work of exemplification such as the *Life*.

In her study of the modern rise of fictionality, Gallagher argues that fictionality is a historically specific phenomenon that is tied to the appearance of the novel: “The historical connection between the terms *novel* and *fiction* is intimate; they were mutually constitutive,” she writes.<sup>11</sup> It is through the rise of the novel that “fictionality becomes manifest, explicit, understood.” The conceptual apparatus required to conceive of fictionality, she argues, developed in early modern Europe, issuing at the end of the seventeenth century in the novel, a genre defined as a “species of literature concerned with the narration of imaginary events’ portrayal of imaginary characters.”<sup>12</sup> This definition of fictional narration relies on leveraging a contrast with the premodern meaning of fiction as “that which is fashioned or framed . . . whether for the purpose of deception or otherwise.” Premodern “fiction” was an invention of the imagination that, unless it marked itself as invention, was understood as attempting to *deceive* readers. “Honest fictions . . . were expected to distinguish themselves by their incredibility,” thus protecting readers from being tricked into believing what they read.<sup>13</sup>

Most contemporary critics, Gallagher argues, operate with a definition of fiction derived from Philip Sidney that holds fiction to be literature that

“somehow suspends, deflects, or otherwise disables normal referential truth claims about the world of ordinary experience.” Given these parameters, such critics would be content to place premodern works of fable, allegory, romance, and such under the category of fiction.<sup>14</sup> Thus, in order to distinguish the fictionality of the novel—true fictionality—from these premodern genres, Gallagher argues that what is crucially missing in them is the way in which the novel, with what she calls an ambivalent relation to its generic demands, attempted to “coax readers to accept the imaginative status of characters” even as it “concealed fictionality by locking it in the confines of the credible”; unlike premodern narratives that display their fantastical nature, the novel hides “fictionality behind realism.”<sup>15</sup> The “sophistication” for Gallagher of a reader of novels—a sophistication putatively lacking in premodern readers—is their encounter with a plausible narrative that they do not believe, a disbelief they pleasurably suspend for the sake of sympathy, edification, or simply the joy of entering the world of the novel.

Medievalists including Michelle Karnes and Julie Orlemanski have responded to Gallagher’s portrayal of the Middle Ages as constitutionally incapable of the sophistication necessary to think in the suspensive states required of fiction.<sup>16</sup> Orlemanski has shown the way in which Gallagher’s argument depends on the conceptualization of a credulous Middle Ages to which modernity and its hallmark literary form, the novel, stand in a relation of historical and epistemic transcendence.<sup>17</sup> Yoking the fictional to periodization narratives relies upon ideologies of secularism as forms of disenchantment that police the proper limits of belief.<sup>18</sup> Early novels, in Gallagher’s account, “discourage faith” and “train readers in an attitude of disbelief.”<sup>19</sup> In response to such constructions of the medieval mind, medievalists, Orlemanski notes, have either simply backdated the secularist account of fictionality to include medieval works—a move that preserves novelistic realism as the norm for fictionality and thus narrates history according to the same teleological emplotments in which secular modernity is a liberation from “bad belief,” and fictionality is both its training ground and expression—or appealed to a universalist account of fictionality as an inherently human activity.<sup>20</sup> My aim is not to appeal to either of these options. I am not articulating here a singular account of medieval fictionality but attending to an instance of a text manipulating and deploying referential truth claims in a nonliteral manner. I have shown that, like the novel, the fictional in Pranger’s Bernard and Suso’s *Life*, entails a willing suspension of disbelief—in the service, however, of greater belief—for in both of these figures we see an acknowledgment that it is impossible “to bring divine life into plenary presence” while also doubling down on the bluff that one is *plausibly* doing just that through ritual practice—creating

Jerusalem, Christ's body, here below.<sup>21</sup> I have argued, in other words, for a sophistication in these medieval texts that Gallagher does not recognize.

The practice of fiction becomes a staging for Pranger, a work of theater that seeks, as Gallagher writes of the novel, to "suspend normal referential claims about the world of ordinary experience" and thus create a space in which things operate "as if" they are something else; they are made capable of greater referentiality.<sup>22</sup>

However, if on the one hand the *Life* asserts the plausibility of the servant becoming Christ (and insofar as it does this, it conceals the impossibility of the success of the enterprise), the laborious work of fabrication required to stage this becoming is not concealed in the *Life* as Gallagher asserts of the fictionality of the novel. Rather, the making of the servant into Christ is the result of repeated ritualized effort dramatically portrayed in the *Life*, its inner mechanisms exposed in order to render the *Life* a manual, something that could be reproduced. In other words, for its exemplarity to become operative. The work of *making* in which the fictional consists—in the *Life* through inscription—is exposed in the *Life* in a way that the novel, according to Gallagher, attempts to hide.

If the novel conceals its fictionality in the "guise of the credible," in the first book of the *Life* the servant aims for a different kind of literalism: he seeks to move from the "as if" stance of staging Christ's passion to full inhabitation of the fiction, both in the flesh and in the soul. Christ is the one whom the servant aims to represent, and it is the attempt to progress toward the fullness of such representation that the first book of the *Life* charts. The *Life* creates a fiction that seeks to overcome its own fictionality by attempting to render the body a stable object that forgets nothing and that seamlessly brings divine life into plenary presence. The hyperstaging of the body through the servant's ascetic practices forgets that the artifice is a double bluff. This forgetting is the temptation the text dramatizes in order to render it apparent. The destruction of the flesh here through this attempt is telling—revealing the limits of this literalism—and he will, after twenty-two years, receive a revelation that tells him to stop, at the point when, the *Life* says, "his choice was to die or give up." He then turns to interior practices of detachment (*Gelassenheit*) as the ground of transformation, preserving the body from the attempt to enflesh eternity.<sup>23</sup> Insofar as fictionality fails, incarnational theology leads, in the first nineteen chapters, to a regimen predicated upon an aggression toward the body in its inability to transcend time; the body is a site of lack, that which needs to be overcome in order for christomorphosis to be complete.

Chapter 45, however, introduces a knot into Suso's text and into my argument. In that chapter, the Virgin Mary appears to Elsbeth Stagel, a Dominican nun from the convent at Toss and Suso's "spiritual daughter."

Mary tells Elsbeth that the servant has “spread the sweet name of Jesus far and wide.” Christ, she says, “has chosen the servant for the task of enkindling with desire many hearts through his name and leading them to their eternal happiness.” Elsbeth, her attention drawn through this spiritual vision to the servant’s devotion to the holy name, including the fact that he “carried that name over his heart,” was inspired to create first one, then many, small badges with IHS embroidered on red silk, which she sent out to be worn by others. Prior to Elsbeth’s dissemination of them to spiritual friends, the servant began “putting them all over his bare breast.”

The servant’s body here becomes a contact relic. His flesh, made one with Christ, is able to deliver illumination to others through their wearing of the badges, which bear his presence both through their reinscription of his original act of scarification and from having touched his chest. It would seem that this passage explicitly contradicts the failure of the ascetic project in chapters 18 through 19. Is the literalization that I have argued is critiqued in the *Life* instantiated here to support the servant’s spiritual authority? Does the servant substitute his bodily suffering for that of his followers, rendering their sacrifice unnecessary? Is the failure of asceticism a failure only for others—particularly women—and thus a way of stopping the transmission of saintly power? The text characterizes the wearing of badges along with daily recitation of one Our Father as “austere practices,” an almost parodic example of self-denial when compared with the mortifications the text has outlined previously.<sup>24</sup>

According to Werner Williams-Krapp, the portrayal of the servant’s mortified flesh is a negative exemplar for a female readership, an appropriation of practices trending in houses of Dominican women that Suso found dangerous and inappropriate for a woman’s weak constitution.<sup>25</sup> Jeffrey Hamburger similarly argues that the *Life* offers a containment strategy: the “*imitatio Christi* is recast in ritualized, institutionalized forms, governed by texts and enacted through images. . . . Suso’s example mediates between Stigel and Christ; she reproduces his practice, without reenacting it.”<sup>26</sup> Amy Hollywood notes that the servant represents himself according to tropes common among thirteenth-century male-authored lives of female saints, whose exposed and bleeding flesh operates as proof of holiness. She argues that Suso expropriates the authority of women’s identification with Jesus: “Suso offers his body as a replacement for the female bodies of the early beguines. By attempting to decrease women’s suffering, he seems to claim he makes a better model for Christ and his humanity, inadvertently usurping a central salvific role open to women.”<sup>27</sup> I have argued elsewhere that the logic of becoming Christ—becoming an *alter Christus*—is considered theologically problematic by some hagiographical literature of the thirteenth century, for the representation of this sanctity challenges the

dogmatically declared singularity of Christ.<sup>28</sup> Such difficulty is also apparent in the debates between Dominicans and Franciscans when they were competing to lay claim to examples of saints who are *alter Christus*.<sup>29</sup> Suso's portrayal of the failure of an asceticism, which later is shown to render his body a vehicle for substitutionary atonement able to suffer for others, would, according to this line of thinking, be another instance of policing the boundaries of devotion and sanctity.

However, it is possible to read the badges in relation to the text's articulation of the limits of bodily mortification differently, in keeping with the structure of devotion and its fictionality that I have argued is present in the *Life*. By the logic of an allegorical reading, the badges dilute and feminize saintly power and fall short of the servant's more literal *imitatio Christi*. In the alternative, nonallegorical logic of devotional fiction, the badges celebrate liberation from the need to play out union with Christ as perfect mortification, or the self-defeating quest to be done with one's own body. Here the success of the servant's asceticism lies in the very abrogation of a literalness that takes its meaning from fleshless unity with an ideal. Devotional identification does not require the elimination of the difference that flesh makes. The servant's "failure" to construe the requirement otherwise ends up being instrumental to the success that Mary says he attains.

For those seeking perfect union with Christ, the badges can therefore signal release into a nonallegorical representation of Christ's wounded body. The servant is still a mediator here, but as scarred and no longer as bleeding. The offering is not that he bleeds for others but that he conveys, from the perspective of a retrospective self-wounding, how it is possible, without loss of devotion, to begin with a healing. The badges, like scars, are the appropriate reminder.

### Inscribing the Gap

Now, return to our original image of the servant. Occurring early in the *vita*, the act of the inscription of the name is the union with the name that the servant will spend the rest of the first book attempting to realize. The servant *becomes* the prayer here. An *address* to one he hopes will be present to him—in other words, a gesture predicated on twoness, on a gap, is seemingly overcome through the writing of Jesus's name in his flesh; it is temporarily silenced as he becomes the one to whom he prays. The servant, assimilated to the name of Jesus, becomes Christ. The gap between himself and his beloved is closed in this scene insofar as the servant bears Christ in his body, guaranteeing the memory of God through the permanence of a scar. Yet the *Life* goes on to show that this fulfillment does not in fact

overcome the anxiety of the loss of memory. Nor does it guarantee divine presence, leading to often violent ritual repetition in an attempt to stabilize the eternal in time. The name beating with the heart is both an eschatological fulfillment that seems to solve the problem of time *and* a promise that must be fulfilled throughout the servant's earthly life, a life in which he negotiates not only the boundary of the finite and infinite but also sinful and perfected being. For Pranger, it is Bernard's knowledge of the incommensurability of the temporal and eternal that renders the "artifice of eternity" precisely artificial, a fiction, and yet a fiction through which one stages the "real." Book 1 of the *Life* charts the profoundly laborious works of asceticism and imagination that the servant undertakes in order to become Christ. He attempts in the first book to overcome incommensurability through ever-more creative, elaborate, and violent means. Like Clairvaux-made-Jerusalem, his remaking happens through ritual scenes in which he stages himself as someone else even as he remains himself. Insofar as the impossibility of the closure of this effort in a moment of perfect arrival is recognized, if denied, through the bluff of ritual—ritual being artifice covering its nakedness—devotional identification is represented as a work of fiction. The aspiration to be eternal here below is impossible. The sinner and the savior remain simultaneously present. Ritual occupies the space of these impossibilities and supplants the gap. The *Life* as a manual for readers' own ritual practices through the depiction of the servant's ascetic rituals is an act of make-believe, a laborious, never-ending work of occupying a space of the "as if" in the service of overcoming time in order to realize a faith that is not subject to forgetting, a union not undone by distance. This fictional structure sets the terms of the servant's practice even as he attempts to defeat it in his desire to become the beloved.

## Notes

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1. Henry Suso spent much of his career in Constance. He was sent to the *studium generale* in Cologne, probably in 1323 (the same year as the canonization of Thomas Aquinas), to undertake advanced studies in theology in part, at least, under the tutelage of Meister Eckhart. Upon his return home, much of his time was spent preaching near Constance and participating in the *cura monialium*—the spiritual direction of Dominican nuns. Henry Suso, *The Life of the Servant*, 1. 4, in *Henry Suso: The Exemplar, with Two German Sermons*, trans. with an introduction by Frank Tobin (New York, 1989). Subsequent references to the *Life* will appear parenthetically in the text by chapter. *The Exemplar* includes four of Henry Suso's works: *The Life of the Servant*, *Little Book of Eternal Wisdom*, *Little Book of Truth*, and *Little Book of Letters*. He writes in the prologue to *The Exemplar* that he edited and compiled these works as an authoritative model for further

- reproductions because there were unauthorized versions of his works in circulation. Middle High German: Heinrich Seuse, *Deutsche Schriften: Im Auftrag der Württembergischen Kommission für Landesgeschichte*, ed. Karl Bihlmeyer (1907; reprint, Stuttgart, 1961), 3–195.
2. *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (New York, 1989). On unceasing prayer in Cassian, see his *Conference* 9. Following the description of the servant's engraving Jesus's name on his chest, Suso writes of how the servant used the "Book of the Ancient Fathers" as a pillow. "He then drifted away and it seemed to him that some kind of light flooded out of his heart, and he looked toward it. There on his heart appeared a golden cross into which many precious jewels had been skillfully inlaid"; Cassian, *Conferences*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York, 1985).
  3. Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, 36, trans. William Granger Ryan with an introduction by Eamon Duffy (Princeton, 2012), 143.
  4. Simone Roisin, *L'Hagiographie Cistercienne dans le diocèse de Liège au XIIIe siècle* (Louvain, 1947), 92–93. *The First Life of Bernard of Clairvaux*, known as the *vita prima*, emphasizes Bernard's asceticism as being in accord with Cistercian ideals of poverty. For example, it says that he damaged his stomach by eating only raw vegetables and emphasizes his disgust at the wealth of Cluny. See William of Saint-Thierry, Arnold of Bonneval, and Geoffrey of Auxerre, *The First Life of Bernard of Clairvaux*, 1.21–24, trans. Hilary Costello (Collegeville, MN, 2015), 24–27.
  5. M. B. Pranger, *The Artificiality of Christianity: An Essay in the Poetics of Monasticism* (Stanford, 2003), 48. Pranger has further discussion of this correspondence as well as Bernard's preaching of the Second Crusade in *Bernard of Clairvaux and the Shape of Monastic Thought: Broken Dreams* (Leiden, 1994). In the case of the Second Crusade, Pranger argues that the preaching obviously concerns the literal Jerusalem, but Bernard manages to pull these "extramural events" into the circular round of monastic ritual life, particularly in his treatment of the practice of preaching the crusade: Through self-accusation Bernard turned his political activities into an element of life mourned as part of the monastic *officium flendi*. See 32–44. See also introduction to part 3 ("A Way of Living"), 126–33.
  6. Pranger, *Artificiality*, 49.
  7. *Ibid.*, 51.
  8. *Ibid.*
  9. Jacques Le Goff, *The Medieval Imagination*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago, 1992), 6.
  10. The exemplary figure of the servant is related in a text that is generically difficult to name, but to which Richard Kieckhefer has applied the term "autohagiography"; *Unquiet Souls: Fourteenth-century Saints and their Religious Milieu* (Chicago, 1984), 6. The text cannot be taken as autobiographical in the sense of having as its central ambition the portrayal of its subject's life "as it really happened." Rather, we see in it the representation of a figure according to fourteenth-century ideals of sanctity; Frank Tobin, introduction to *Henry Suso: The Exemplar*, 40. This figure, "the servant" is never identified as Henry Suso, a lacuna that foregrounds the artful nature of the "I" in the text; Alois M. Haas, *Nim Din Selbes War: Studien zur Lehre der Selbsterkenntnis bei Meister Eckhart, Johannes Tauler und Heinrich Seuse* (Freiburg, Switzerland, 1971), 154–55, 168–69, 192–95, 206–8. See also Bernard McGinn, *The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany* (New York, 2005), 203. See Frank Tobin for a helpful contour of much of the debate about the status of the text's "literal truth" in relation to historical events and persons: "Henry Suso and Elsbeth Stigel: Was

- the *Vita a Cooperative Effort?*,” in *Gendered Voices*, ed. Catherine M. Mooney (Philadelphia, 1999), 118–35.
11. Catherine Gallagher, “The Rise of Fictionality,” in *The Novel*, ed. Franco Moretti (Princeton, 2006), 1:337.
  12. *Ibid.*
  13. *Ibid.*, 338.
  14. *Ibid.*
  15. *Ibid.*, 337.
  16. Michelle Karnes, “The Possibilities of Medieval Fiction,” *New Literary History* 51, no. 1 (Winter 2020): 209–28; Julie Orlemanski, “Who Has Fiction? Modernity, Fictionality, and the Middle Ages,” *New Literary History* 51, no. 1 (Winter 2020): 145–70.
  17. Steven Justice argues that the medieval is exoticized by contemporary scholars as an era of the immediacy of belief rather than one that included cultures of dissent, strategy, and critique alongside “devices of faith” that are transmitted to learners. Such a portrayal of the medieval enables scholars to view medieval faith as a “black box” inaccessible to modern scholarship. Steven Justice, “Did the Middle Ages Believe in Their Miracles?,” *Representations* 103 (Summer 2008): 1.
  18. Orlemanski, “Who Has Fiction?,” 146.
  19. Gallagher, “Rise,” 346.
  20. Orlemanski, “Who Has Fiction?,” 153, 148–49; 151.
  21. Edith Wyschogrod, *Saints and Postmodernism: Revisioning Moral Philosophy* (Chicago, 1990), 13.
  22. Gallagher, “Rise,” 343.
  23. Suso, *Life of the Servant*, chap. 19. A mysterious teacher tells him that he has found himself in the advanced school that teaches the “art of detachment,” in which one learns “complete and perfect detachment from oneself” (*genzú, vollkommú gelassenheit sin selbs*).
  24. Suso, *Life*, chap. 45.
  25. Werner Williams-Krapp, “Henry Suso’s *Vita* between Mystagogy and Hagiography,” in *Seeing and Knowing: Women and Learning in Medieval Europe, 1200–1550*, ed. Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker (Turnhout, 2004), 37–38. There is a lacuna generated by this argument. The compelling and vivid description of ascetic deeds risks rendering them an object of seductive fascination rather than simply negating or placing them in a subordinate position. As Dominican theories of preaching at the time held, the more horrific, violent, and impressive an image, the more it would sear the memory and inspire action in kind. See M. M. Mulchahey, “*First the bow is bent in study*: Dominican Preaching before 1350 (Toronto, 1998), 461, on the efficacy of examples to teach and to inform the memory according to Humbert of Romans in the treatise *Liber de dono timoris*: “According to Gregory, *exempla* move [listeners] more than mere words do and are more easily grasped by the understanding and more deeply fixed in the memory.” On the specific power of the grotesque example in Dominican theory, see Robert Sweetman, “Christine of Saint-Trond’s Preaching Apostolate: Thomas of Cantimpré’s Hagiographical Method Revisited,” *Vox Benedictina* 9, no. 1 (July 1992): 67–97.
  26. Jeffrey Hamburger, *The Visual and the Visionary* (Cambridge, MA, 1998), 263.
  27. Amy Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife* (Notre Dame, 1995), 203–4.
  28. Rachel J. D. Smith, *Excessive Saints* (New York, 2018), chap. 2.
  29. Amy Hollywood and Rachel Smith, “Christology,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Mystical Theology*, ed. Edward Howells and Mark A. McIntosh (Oxford, 2020), 484–506.