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Piers Plowman and the Poetics of Enigma: Riddles, Rhetoric, and Theology

Curtis A. Gruenler

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Riddles, Rhetoric, and Theology

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For Pauline and Eric

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book tries to do two things, either of which might have been sufficiently ambitious on its own. First, it makes a broad case, based on the three fields of meaning of the Latin word *aenigma* in the Middle Ages—riddles, rhetoric, and theology—that a poetics of enigma was recognized across the medieval period and provides an important way of understanding, in their own terms, many of the most ambitious medieval literary works. Second, it seeks, in a more focused and sustained way, to unlock perhaps the most enigmatic medieval text, William Langland's *Piers Plowman.* This remarkable poem provides the most comprehensive and self-aware guide to the medieval poetics of enigma. While such a poetics was widely practiced and the rationale for it was expressed in many places, in most cases it is less explicit and is visible only a facet at a time. *Piers Plowman* plays across the whole range of the potential that medieval authors found in the enigmatic, and seeing this potential from other sources illuminates what this poem is up to and how it shaped English literature to come. As a third, bonus goal, then, I also suggest that the medieval poetics of enigma is a major root of what has come, in the modern period, to be called literature.

One of the virtues of enigmatic texts is that they appeal to beginners while occasioning new insights for those already familiar with a subject. I hope that will be true here too.

Note that the spelling of Middle English texts has been modernized throughout (except in titles of modern publications) to avoid obsolete characters. The spelling of both Middle English and Latin has been regularized to follow modern orthography of i and u as vowels and j and v as

consonants. Curly brackets indicate emendations of texts made by editors of the editions cited or, in the case of translations, the original language; square brackets indicate my own glosses of difficult words. Translations are my own unless otherwise indicated. Unless otherwise noted, *Piers Plowman* citations are to *Piers Plowman: A Parallel-Text Edition of the A, B, C and Z Versions*, edited by A. V. C. Schmidt, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2011), by version, passus, and line number(s).

* * *

This project began many years ago with my dissertation research, and I am grateful for help from many people. The cochairs of my dissertation committee, Henry Ansgar Kelly and V. A. Kolve, provided essential teaching and guidance, marvelously different and each the most excellent one could want. To my other committee member, Patrick Geary, I owe in particular the image of the project as resting upon a three-legged stool, which has been in my mind ever since. UCLA provided a stimulating and supportive scholarly community. I want to express particular thanks to some other members of the English faculty: Michael J. B. Allen, Lynn Batten, Edward I. Condren, Lowell Gallagher, Arthur L. Little, Donka Minkova, Joseph F. Nagy, Jonathan F. S. Post, Allen Roper, Paul D. Sheats, Debora K. Shuger, George Tennyson, and Robert N. Watson. Thanks also to the UCLA Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies for the opportunities it provided and to staff member Blair Sullivan for her collegiality. I also thank my undergraduate adviser from Stanford, Martin Evans, for showing me what literary scholarship could do and for sending me to UCLA, the single best piece of advice I've ever gotten.

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One little story distills how this project has been intertwined with relationships. One day, soon after coming up with enigma as a focus, I was walking with my friend John Dalton through UCLA's Rolfe Hall and asked him where he would look for Middle English riddles. That evening I found in my mailbox the issue of *Speculum* with Andrew Galloway's article "The Rhetoric of Riddling in Late-Medieval England." I first thought I would need to find another topic, then realized that his article was just what I needed to move forward—something I am glad to have been able to acknowledge to him in person already.

Hope College has been a wonderful place to work and to take a long time to write a book. For patient, consistent support both practical and personal, I thank my provosts, Jacob E. Nyenhuis, James Boelkins, and Richard Ray; my deans, William Reynolds and Patrice Rankine; and my department chairpersons, Peter Schakel, David Klooster, and Ernest Cole. Colleagues in English and other departments have also given many kinds of support and helpful responses to my work, including Susanna Childress Banner, Steve Bouma-Prediger, Rhoda Burton, John Cox, David Cunningham, Natalie Dykstra, Janis Gibbs, Stephen Hemenway, Charles Huttar, Rob Kenagy, James Kennedy, Julie Kipp, Joseph LaPorte, Marla Lunderberg, Steve Maiullo, Jesus Montaño, Jared Ortiz, William Pannapacker, Jack Ridl, Heather Sellers, Caroline Simon, Jennifer Young Tait, Beth Trembley, Jeff Tyler, Kathleen Verduin, Leslie Werkman, and Courtney Werner. Many thanks also to the English department's office managers, Myra Kohsel and Sarah Baar, and the staff of Van Wylen Library.

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Last, and first, thanks to my parents, Eric and Pauline Gruenler, to whom this book is dedicated.

INTRODUCTION

To be enigmatic remains a prized feature of literature. In English, *enigma* now refers to anything mysterious, but it descends from the oldest and most consistent term in Western letters for riddling language. Enigma, in this ancient and medieval sense, stretches literary art toward what resists saying—or, what is perhaps ultimately the same thing, presses ever further into the riches of what is always already being said.

This book aims to recover a distinctive poetics of enigma essential to many of the most enduring works of medieval literature. Modern (and postmodern) expectations for the enigmatic, while they have much in common with older ones, are nonetheless liable to miss important interests of these works. The most explicit literary theory native to the Middle Ages, on the other hand, is dominated by doctrines that might not seem hospitable to the playfulness and power of enigma. Yet the term was in widespread and sophisticated use. To see what *enigma* might have meant to a medieval author or reader—how it names a kind of reading experience they sought—brings to light a formative literary idea born at the intersection of riddles, rhetoric, and theology.

The term *enigma* makes more recognizable what I will often call a mode that moves beyond the riddle as a short form or genre to elements of riddling that can be incorporated into larger literary forms. *Poetics* in this application means more than principles for making a literary work; it means what the work itself does, or rather what author and audience

together do by means of it. In the hands of an author such as William Langland, the poetics of enigma reaches toward nothing less than a fuller participation in the divine act of creation and re-creation.

LANGLAND'S POETIC SIGNATURE

Much about the late fourteenth-century poem known as *Piers Plowman* is a riddle, including the name of its author. Cryptic signatures within the poem, in fact, provide some of the best evidence for calling him William Langland. Nine lines after the fullest of these, "I have lyved in londe . . . my name is Longe Wille," follows a different kind of signature, one that labels the kind of poetry this poet makes his own:

> Clerkes kenne me that Crist is in alle places;
> Ac I seigh hym nevere soothly but as myself in a mirour:
> *Hic in enigmate, tunc facie ad faciem*.

> [The learned teach me that Christ is in all places;
> But I see him never truly except as myself in a mirror:
> Here in a riddle, then face to face.][1]

Langland here partially translates and provocatively merges into his own text a favorite Bible verse of medieval theologians: "Videmus nunc per speculum in enigmate, tunc autem facie ad faciem" (We see now through a mirror in an enigma, but then face to face).[2] Most boldly, he changes St. Paul's word *Nunc* (Now) to *Hic* (Here). What could *Hic* refer to? "As myself in a mirour" invokes one of the main theological traditions carried by this verse: seeing the human person, especially oneself, as the fullest mirror of the divine, but an obscure one. It seems as if Langland's narrator is finding himself to be a riddle to which Christ is the answer. This narrator has by this point, almost five thousand lines through a poem of more than seven thousand lines, wrestled explicitly with his work as a poet and his larger quest for an effective form of language. In this extraordinary moment of poetic self-consciousness, then, *Hic* further designates the poem itself as an enigma, a game of composition and in-

terpretation interested in theological vision and even transfiguration. Behind what "Long Wille" the narrator could be saying to his interlocutor, Langland the poet is describing what his poem does and giving us a word for how it works: "Here, in the poem you are reading, one may see Christ truly, but in an enigma."

Langland's poetic signature draws out what is latent in the three fields of meaning of the medieval Latin word *aenigma*: riddles, rhetoric, and theology. His poem stands as a sort of *summa aenigmatica*, a gathering and synthesis of medieval aspects of the enigmatic. Langland's uses of riddling language activate central capacities of medieval literary and theological tradition in order to address acute needs of his time and place. Yet beyond this late fourteenth-century English flourishing of the poetics of enigma, shared with authors such as Chaucer and Julian of Norwich, there is a broad range of medieval art, both literary and visual, both major and minor, that can be better understood—both on its own terms and as a formative tradition that has been obscured, in large part, by the glare of its extensive modern legacy—in light of the poetics of enigma.

Ancient Greeks valued the enigmatic enough that αἴνιγμα is one of the earliest recorded words used to label a poetic form according to a quality of meaning.[3] For much of Western history, however, literary criticism and theory preferred instead a different notion of eloquence that came to dominate classical literary criticism, one more oriented to clarity and grace. Modern literary movements—the metaphysical poetry of Donne and Herbert, the romanticism of Coleridge and Keats, the modernism of Eliot and Stevens—repeatedly cultivated the enigmatic over against classicism, even if they did not use this word to identify what they were doing. While the meaning of this word itself has stayed remarkably consistent from Greek into Latin and thence into English and other modern languages, it has dropped out of literary theory and now refers more often, at least in English, to people and things than to language. With the enigmatic in the ascendant more than ever in the twenty-first century, it is a good time to understand anew its significance in the Middle Ages, familiar in some ways and deeply strange in others.[4]

What surfaces in Langland, then, is a fertile conjunction, available throughout the Middle Ages and beyond, of three sources of literary thinking tied to the term *enigma*:

- *Aenigma* was the main Latin word for riddles of all sorts—from oral, folk riddles to elaborate literary ones—a pervasive and perennial source of verbal creativity with a range as great as that of poetry itself.
- In rhetoric and related disciplines, classical treatments of figurative language defined enigma as a kind of allegory distinguished by its obscurity. As medieval schools used and extended these textbooks, and as allegory became a dominant mode of composition and interpretation, the figure of enigma named an important literary place for play at the boundaries of language.
- Theologians, under the influence of Augustine's interpretation of 1 Corinthians 13:12, took this single use of it in the New Testament to be a major clue to the Bible's own poetics and connected it to a dynamic understanding of the divine use of signs that both hide and reveal and thus solicit ever-renewed contemplation. In this domain, enigma partakes of a sacramental sense of the depth of language.

At the juncture of these three realms of thought and language, theologians and poets reconceived the value of difficult reading in education and spiritual formation. Medieval interest in the potential of enigma for theological imagination also sheds light on the relocation of the enigmatic to a more secular, more purely literary sphere near the end of the Middle Ages—by Boccaccio, Chaucer, and others—and into modernity.

Aenigma's three fields of meaning also involve three major domains of writing in which scholars have increasingly found the makings of medieval literary theory:

- vernacular literature, from patterns of form and moments of theorizing in literary works themselves to the study of folklore and orality[5]
- the theory taught in the arts of the trivium (grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic), including treatises on poetic composition and on reading[6]
- theology, both Latin and vernacular, as it addresses topics such as the theory of the literal and spiritual senses of scripture and the general nature of language[7]

The connections marked by the term *enigma* across these discourses yield a more robust framework for interpreting deliberately obscure medieval

texts than is apparent in any of them on its own. Rhetoric, taken by itself, seems dominated by classical ideals of eloquence; theology, by constraints of orthodoxy. The thread of enigma running through both, however, reveals greater flexibility and potential for the kind of reading now seen as literary. Discussions of enigma in these more theoretical contexts, meanwhile, suggest how the dynamics of riddling were seen to extend from the most local wordplay to the largest puzzles of structure and symbol.[8]

In the end, the enigmatic is less about a form than a function. Each of the three semantic fields of *aenigma* brings out a different element of purpose:

- play, seen most purely as a goal in riddles
- persuasion, conceptualized in rhetoric around the treatment of figures
- participation, a theological concept crucial to medieval Christian Platonism and expressed in commentary on 1 Corinthians 13:12

These purposes will be the ultimate criteria for identifying what is enigmatic and what is not. This approach allows for an expansive definition while avoiding the temptation to call everything enigmatic—though it will also become clear that in the outlook that most embraced the enigmatic, everything in fact is. It is at the level of purpose that the enigmatic can best be seen to differ from and often compete with other modes, even within the same text. The two close neighbors that most resemble and oppose the enigmatic are what I will call the didactic and the esoteric. An overview of enigma's defining purposes will distinguish it from other modes, place it in relation to some ancient and modern ideas, and introduce the structure of the book.

PLAY

The enigmatic differs from the didactic and the esoteric in that, whatever other purposes it may be seen to serve, it seeks to remain playful and continue the playing. The difference can be seen in the first riddle I remember from childhood, "What is black and white and red/read all over?"

It is the pun that makes it work, and thus it could have a didactic function of teaching awareness of homonyms. What makes it memorable, however, probably has more to do with the little thrill of getting the answer (a newspaper) and crossing the divide from those who don't get it to those who do. This is the esoteric mode that marks a boundary of knowledge and erects a sign of belonging within it. Yet the newspaper riddle becomes more enigmatic when one keeps reading it, looking for other answers: a penguin with the chickenpox? A blushing zebra? Someone in a tuxedo who doesn't get the answer? How many answers could there be? Now the game has shifted from a finite one with a certain answer to infinite play with the fit between language and the world. One can make it even more self-referential by noticing that the newspaper riddle combines a reference to the world of printing with an oral pun on the word *read*, from which *riddle* (in its original form *redels*) derives.

Riddles also play with the mysteries of things themselves, as in this brief one from the famous Old English collection in the tenth-century manuscript known as the Exeter Book:

> Ic þa wiht geseah on weg feran;
> heo wæs wrætlice wundrum gegierwed.
> Wunder wearð on wege: wæter wearð to bane.[9]

> [I saw a creature wandering the way:
> She was devastating—beautifully adorned.
> On the wave a wonder: water turned to bone.][10]

This one also turns on a pun: *weg*, way, becomes *wege*, wave. But the "wonder" is how water becomes ice. This is also the topic of the Latin riddle used in the standard medieval definition of *enigma*, where, as often in the Exeter Book riddles, the object to be guessed is also the speaker of the riddle (see below, chapter 4, the section "Grammar"). Even without such prosopopoeia, however, this Old English riddle imagines life in things and invites the reader to participate in that life.

A series of six questions on biblical subjects from a fifteenth-century manuscript shows the enigmatic breaking through the didactic on a religious topic like those common in Middle English verse. The questions and answers rehearse biblical knowledge in a mode similar to a catechism:

> Who was ded ande never borne? Adam, that was oure first beforne.
> Who was borne and never deed? Ennok and Ely, that we of reed [read].
> Who was borne er fader or moder? Cayme, that slough Abel his brother.
> Who was borne and twyes deed? Lasare, which God areysed.
> Who spake, affter that he was dede? Samuel the glorious prophete.
> Who spake, or that he was borne? John the baptiste of olde in the moder wombe.[11]

By cataloguing various exceptions to the usual realities of birth and death, however, these not only teach but also invite contemplation of deeper mysteries in the history of salvation. None of the six give Christ as their answer, yet all perhaps point to Christ as the greater enigma behind the riddles: fulfillment of and master over these realities. While the whole, seemingly complete list of biblical anomalies implies a riddle-like sense of closure, it also opens onto a larger, endless game of interpreting the significance of each of these facts, and the stories they are part of, within the history of salvation.

As a concept for thinking about the purposes of a poetics, play keeps in view its multiple possibilities and the fluid movement between them. In *The Ambiguity of Play*, Brian Sutton-Smith identifies seven "rhetorics" that theorists ancient and modern have found in various forms of play: education, games of fate, contests, formation of group identity, imagination, selfhood, and frivolity. All seven apply to riddling. Riddling is also unusual for its cultural universality. Chapter 2 will make use of a wide array of studies from around the world to supplement direct evidence of riddling in the Middle Ages. Oral riddling is always found to happen in the context of some kind of contest. When riddling becomes literary, it never completely loses the sense of contest, but other rhetorics emerge. Didactic and esoteric uses of riddling remain closer to the competitive, contest dynamic while also serving an educational purpose or forming identity around secret knowledge. Theological reflection on the enigmatic, however, brings out a range of purposes more like what Sutton-Smith identifies as imagination and selfhood.[12] Enigmatic play moves between a social, horizontal dimension and an inward,

vertical one. It forms community not by competition and exclusion but by sharing in the game of interpretation. Important to this kind of community is an element of frivolity, a commitment to playing for the sake of playing and continuing the play.

Perhaps the best medieval term for the kind of play invited by enigma is contemplation. Commenting on Ecclesiasticus 32:15–16, "Run ahead into your house and gather yourself there and play there and pursue your thoughts," Thomas Aquinas writes:

> There are two features of play which make it appropriate to compare the contemplation of wisdom to playing. First, we enjoy playing, and there is the greatest enjoyment of all to be had in the contemplation of wisdom. . . . Secondly, playing has no purpose beyond itself; what we do in play is done for its own sake. And the same applies to the pleasure of wisdom. If we are enjoying thinking about the things we long for or the things we are proposing to do, this kind of enjoyment looks beyond itself to something else which we are eager to attain, and if we fail to attain it or if there is a delay in attaining it, our pleasure is mingled with a proportionate distress. . . . But the contemplation of wisdom contains within itself the cause of its own enjoyment, and so it is not exposed to the kind of anxiety that goes with waiting for something which we lack. . . . It is for this reason that divine Wisdom compares her enjoyment to playing in Proverbs 8:30, "I enjoyed myself every single day, playing before him," each single day meaning the consideration of some different truth.[13]

This passage begins by making an analogy between play and the contemplation of wisdom, but with the concluding verse from Proverbs the analogy collapses: Wisdom plays. Contemplative play participates in the play of Wisdom by which the world was made.

A remarkable connection between play, the enigmatic, and the pursuit of knowledge can be seen in John of Trevisa's translation of the thirteenth-century encyclopedia by Bartholomaeus Anglicus known as *De proprietatibus rerum* (*On the Properties of Things*). Trevisa prefaces his translation with a verse asking for blessing on what he calls "this game" (lines 23, 26):

In the firste lessoun that I took
Thanne I lerned *a* and *be*
And othir lettres by here [their] names.
But alwey God spede [provided] me
That [What] is me nedeful in alle games
If I pleyde in felde other in medes.
Outhir stille [quietly] outhir with noyce [noise]
I prey{d}e help in alle {my dedis}
Of hym that deyde uppon the croyce.
Now divers pleyes in his name
I schal let passe forth and fare
And aventure to pleye oo [one] longe game.[14]

Game and *play* in Middle English had a semantic range as broad as our word *play* or Latin *ludus*, extending from the most trifling amusements to the more serious play of battle, drama, or music. All three languages, that is, mark a strong continuity across a wide range of activities, a range spanning from low to high like that covered by *aenigma*.[15] Trevisa indicates a broad range of play, but he starts with lessons in the schoolroom. Since riddles often appear in medieval school texts, schoolroom play likely included riddling. The "one long game" he now plays certainly does. On the next page, Trevisa translates Bartholomaeus's statement of the purpose of his encyclopedia: "By help of God this werk is compiled, profitable to me and on cas to othir that knowith nought the kyndes and propirtees of thinges that beth toschift and isprad [spread about] ful wide in bokes of holy seyntes and philosophris, to undirstonde redels and menynges [riddles and meanings] of scriptures and of writinges that the holy gost hath iyeve [given] derkliche ihid [hidden] and wrapped undir liknes and fygures of propirtees of thinges of kynde and craft [nature and art]."[16] "Redels and menynges" here translates *enigmata*. As chapter 4 will show, 1 Corinthians 13:12 was often taken to mean that scripture itself was full of enigmas. Bartholomaeus's collection of learning—which begins with the names of God and proceeds through the hierarchies of angels to the properties of human beings, the bodies of heaven, the parts of time, the elements, birds, fish, geography, minerals, plants, animals, and miscellaneous "accidents" such as colors—all has as its first goal the

understanding of scripture. At the same time, however, scripture is also the key to reading the enigmas of things themselves. Trevisa's translation continues: "The apostle seith that the unseye [unseen] thinges of God beth iknowe and understonde by thinges that beth iseye [seen]. Therfore divynyte usith holy informacione and poesies that [in order that] myistik and dirk undirstondinge and figuratif speches, menynge what we schal trowe [believe], may be itake of the liknes of thinges that beth iseye [seen], so that spiritual thinges and thinges unseye may be covenabliche [conveniently] ordeyned to fleisschliche and to thinges that beth iseye."[17] The game, that is, goes in both directions. Interpreting the riddles of scripture gives meaning to the things of the sensible world as well. This is the long game, one that riddles and other enigmatic texts can also play and, indeed, can bring to greater awareness and intensity.

PERSUASION

The definition of *enigma* as an obscure allegory came to the Middle Ages from classical rhetoric, which was shaped by the needs of Greco-Roman civic communities. St. Paul's use of the term in 1 Corinthians 13:12, by contrast, comes at the center of his articulation of the Christian sacramental community: the institution of the Lord's Supper in chapter 11; the gifts of the Holy Spirit and the description of the Christian community as Christ's body in chapter 12; chapter 13's discourse on love; directions for worship and the use of gifts in chapter 14; and resurrection in Christ in chapter 15. The guiding purposes of classical eloquence, expressed most influentially by Cicero, were to teach, to delight, and to move. The obscurity of enigma never fit comfortably into this rhetoric, with its preference for clarity. Rather, the poetics of enigma became a prime way to adapt classical rhetoric to a Christian vision of life and community.

Two shifts between the goals of classical and Christian rhetoric bring the enigmatic into prominence. First, Christian emphasis on fulfillment in a life to come, of which this life is a mere shadow, gives the obscurity of enigma value for recognizing the gap and projecting across it. The question of how the tools of that rhetoric might be used to approach and

prepare for such a fulfillment opened a wide field for creative reappropriation. Enigma became the central paradigm for language that both affirms symbolic meaning and denies its adequacy in the face of transcendent mystery. Second, the New Testament vision of community is shaped less by conformity to a political hierarchy and formation of group identity against outsiders and more by conversion away from visible group identities and toward inner conformity to Christ. Chapters 4 and 5 will show how enigma suits meditative reading oriented to conversion and a politics of compassion toward the excluded. To express the rhetorical shift within the categories of the Ciceronian dictum, the cognitive goal becomes not so much teaching as contemplation of what exceeds comprehension; the affective goal becomes not so much delight as longing; the volitional goal becomes not just virtuous action but conversion, compassion, and empathetic participation.

The goals of reading conceived through enigma have much in common with modern notions of aesthetic experience. In literary theory, the New Critics, though they did not favor the term *enigma*, emphasized similar features such as ambiguity, irony, and paradox in order to articulate the bounded but still potentially infinite interpretability of aesthetic objects. Northrop Frye, in an essay called "Charms and Riddles" that is part of his attempt to articulate what he called an "anatomy of criticism" from within literary traditions, describes a spectrum that characterizes all lyric poetry. His choice of terms comes from those used to label two kinds of short verse common in Old English, but he could also be describing a shift toward the enigmatic that was happening in the twentieth century—or the fourteenth. Charms use sound and devices such as repetition to lull their audience; riddles use imagery and a different range of verbal figures to provoke vigorous engagement and play. Whereas charms render their audience subject to their powers, riddles empower their subjects as players, interpreters, and even coauthors. To one composing a charm, things are to be controlled, but to one composing a riddle, things are to be played with to see what they resemble and what they hide. In a medieval way of looking at the world, or any view oriented toward participation, these secrets and resemblances are not random but clues to the meaning of things.[18]

Poststructuralist thinkers have employed the term *enigma* even more broadly to imply that riddling does not just intensify one function of language but reveals the basic condition of all language. Indeed, the term is enlisted as a tool of awakening to endless deferral of meaning when Jacques Derrida announces in *Of Grammatology*, "To make enigmatic what one thinks one understands by the words 'proximity,' 'immediacy,' 'presence' . . . is my final intention in this book."[19] Because riddles block the immediate reference of language by hiding their answers behind novel figures, they do something, even in spoken language, that is like what all writing does when it removes language from the presence of speaker and listener whose shared situation can ground meaning. Whereas the free play of the deconstructed signifier is radically unbounded, however, the infinite potential of signs in the medieval poetics of enigma converges on transcendent reality. Suspicion of the possibilities of organic meaning associated with symbolism since the romantic era led Paul de Man to prefer the mechanisms of allegory that bare the inadequacies of their devices. Enigmatic allegories of the Middle Ages, on the other hand, draw attention to the work of interpretation precisely in order to project their capacity as machines of transcendence toward an infinite Other in whom every presence is recovered. Yet there is an ethical similarity between medieval enigma and the postmodern resistance to the dominating tendencies of the sign: both play with language in order to recognize the otherness of the other. Hans-Georg Gadamer's account of the importance of play for hermeneutics captures this compatibility: "The spectator is set at an absolute distance, a distance that precludes practical or goal-oriented participation. But this distance is aesthetic distance in a true sense, for it signifies the distance necessary for seeing, and thus makes possible a genuine and comprehensive participation in what is presented before us. A spectator's ecstatic self-forgetfulness corresponds to his continuity with himself. Precisely that in which one loses oneself as a spectator demands that one grasp the continuity of meaning."[20] Gadamer completes the circle between recognition of the other and recovery of the self that is implicit in the medieval poetics of enigma. His use of the term *participation* here remains primarily within the sphere of the theater, yet it perhaps also invokes the wider, philosophical and theological concept of participation that undergirds the rhetorical and poetic capacities of the enigmatic.

PARTICIPATION

The audience's participation in the theater was likely one of the senses of the Greek term *methexis* (also *metoche*) that Plato was building on when he used it metaphorically to refer to the relationship between perceivable things and the world of Ideas. This metaphysical sense, as taken up by theologians, is what *participation* means when it first comes into English use in the late fourteenth century. Though the *Oxford English Dictionary* labels this sense as obsolete, it is still in use among theologians.[21] Indeed, it has undergone something of a revival in recent years.[22] There seems to be no term more apt for the conception of immediate, sensible reality as a sharing in something unseen. Only later in English usage did it gain the current, social senses, such as participation in classroom discussion—thus reversing Plato's metaphorical turn from the perceptible to the imperceptible. In Latin, *participatio* carried a particular philosophical sense among those who imported Platonic metaphysics into Christian theology. The metaphysics and theology of participation have implications, in turn, for thinking about how knowledge works and about the psychology of spiritual experiences. An important bridge to application of the term in these more subjective senses seems to have been discussion of participation in the sacraments. All of these—participation as a way of conceiving both objective reality and our subjective knowledge and experience of it—are important to the medieval uses of enigma. To put it briefly and perhaps, at this point, cryptically, the enigmatic mediates a participatory view of reality and brings participation to consciousness.

Participation first appears in English in Chaucer's translation (ca. 1380) of Boethius's early sixth-century *Consolation of Philosophy*, one of the principal conduits of Christianized Platonism. The three times Boethius uses *participatio*, all carried into English by Chaucer, can serve to introduce three of the idea's key aspects. The first is the central Christian adaptation of Plato's metaphysics: the participation of human beings in the divine. Lady Philosophy, in her dialogue with the persona of the imprisoned author, leads him to understand that all partial goods, the loss of which he has been lamenting, derive from one, perfect good, which is God. Further, God is thus also "sovereyne blisfulnesse," so that to be truly happy is to be God. "But," she immediately qualifies, "certes by nature

ther nys but o God; but by the participacioun of dyvinite ther ne let ne distourbeth nothyng that ther ne ben many goddis."[23] Participation in God is the human destiny. This idea is one of the ways that the early Christian doctrine of divinization, captured in the saying, "God became human that humans might become God," remained important in Western theology.[24]

Boethius's two other uses of *participatio*, also transmitted by Chaucer, suggest two further aspects of the idea inherited by medieval thinkers from the church fathers: a passive participation by nature, and an active participation by free will and grace. Passive, natural participation applies to all things. "But alle thing that is good," says Lady Philosophy, "grauntestow that it be good by the participacioun of good, or no?"[25] This is the core Platonic idea: all things are and are what they are by participation in the Forms: good by participation in the Good, beautiful by participation in Beauty, and so on.[26] In the Christian Platonism conveyed by Augustine, human nature participates, especially, in the personal nature of the Trinity. Simply to be human, and thus to be made in the image and likeness of God, is to participate in God by nature.

In humankind, degrees of participation also involve choice. Lady Philosophy, in her discussion of the problem of evil, asks whether we should not consider a completely evil, wretched person to be more "unsely [unhappy] thanne thilke wrecche of which the unselyness is relevid by the participacioun of som good?"[27] *The Consolation of Philosophy* is one of the classic explorations of how humanity's rational nature includes freedom to choose good or evil, that is, greater or lesser participation. Boethius does not deal at length with how participation can increase—though this is the implied goal of reading his work. Mostly he asserts that Providence always works to correct evil and increase good. The relationship between free human agency and the all-powerful, all-loving will of God is a mystery that Lady Philosophy says is beyond her, yet she holds that freedom is found in contemplation and virtue.[28]

For later medieval theologians, the notion of active participation in the divine will is a central conceptual tool for thinking about the cooperation of free will and divine grace in the restoration of humanity from the effects of the Fall. Different conceptions of the effects of the Fall (or degrees of emphasis on those effects) lead to differing accounts of how

the active aspect of participation plays out. Augustine, though his works include a range of views, placed an influential emphasis on the inheritance of original sin that renders humanity incapable of any good until divine grace takes the initiative. On the other hand, another important patristic influence on the theology of participation in the later Middle Ages, the unknown fifth-century author now called Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, takes a more positive view of human capacity to engage in sacramental and contemplative practices that approach the divine.[29] Both authors, however, probe the ultimately mysterious interplay between divine and human agency and share the basic outlook that shows up in Boethius as participation. Moreover, both use enigmatic language in order to come as close as possible to a reality that ultimately goes beyond words, and both theorize the importance of the enigmatic for articulating and entering further into this reality.

What the theology of participation has to do with enigmatic language, particularly as received from Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius through theological and mystical writing, will be the burden of chapter 1. In order to look ahead to the literary importance of enigma, however, it may help to consider how it fits into the subjective side of participation, that is, what implications a participatory view of reality has for epistemology (conceptions of how we know things) and for what kind of representations best mediate knowledge and experience of spiritual reality.

One way to grasp a participatory view of knowledge is by contrast to the more usual modern view that could be called correspondence. At its simplest, the correspondence view sees the mind as a screen upon which representations of external reality are projected. Of course, more sophisticated modern and postmodern epistemologies give the mind a more active role in constructing these representations—and, indeed, reintroduce to it something much more like the idea of participation.[30] Philosophers have, since Kant, recognized the importance of the knowing subject in constituting the known object from the raw data of perception. As Wordsworth put it in "Tintern Abbey," we half create what we perceive. More recently, cognitive scientists have investigated the neuropsychological mechanisms by which we construct our worlds. If, as many cognitive theorists argue, all language builds on metaphors from embodied

experience, riddles make explicit and puzzling the basic processes of constructing meaning that are usually tacit and relatively transparent.[31] Yet modern views still work within a paradigm of correspondence rather than participation to the extent that they assume a gap between knower and known that is overcome by something that goes on in the mind in order to achieve a correspondence to external reality. Participation, on the other hand, takes knowledge to be a real relation between knower and known, more than just material cause and effect through sense data. For Plato, true knowledge comes from the mind's participation in the transcendent Forms. Aristotle says the mind becomes in some sense what it knows.[32] Augustine influentially uses the metaphor of illumination: the mind's participation in the light of divine truth makes it possible to know things truly. Most important in the present context, for Augustine and the tradition that followed him, "Truthful speech is a participation in the life of God the Holy Trinity."[33] Knowledge by means of language activates a latent capacity to participate in divine personhood. In a correspondence view, signs are disposable containers, as it were, of nonverbal representations of the substances that make up reality. In a participatory view, on the other hand, signs are indispensable mediators of the relations that, more than substances, compose reality.[34]

The shift in paradigms of knowledge, and the place of the enigmatic within them, are both reflected in English translations of 1 Corinthians 13:12. For English speakers, the meaning of this verse has been shaped by the translation in the Authorized (or King James) Version, which gave rise to an English idiom: "For now we see through a glasse, darkely." A marginal note to "darkely" included in the original, 1611 printing, and preserved in many later ones, indicates that the Greek means "in a riddle." In Latin, when patristic and medieval authors quote this verse, often no doubt from memory, they frequently insert an "et" (and) between "per speculum" and "in enigmate," which implies that they thought of the two phrases somewhat separately.[35] Medieval commentators can be grouped in two camps: some focus on "speculum" and assimilate "in enigmate" to the visual metaphor as merely denoting obscurity; others take mirror and riddle as two separate figures, one about vision and one about words. Early English translations show both approaches. Tyndale's 1534 translation, "Now we se in a glasse even in a dark speakynge," keeps the verbal

nature of an enigma and even implies an oral situation, though qualified with an adjective drawn from vision. The King James translators usually follow Tyndale, but in this case they adopted the wording first used in the Geneva Bible of 1560, "through a glasse darkely," which renders St. Paul's second prepositional phrase into a mere adverbial modifier of the visual metaphor. Already in the 1380s, however, the Wycliffite translation had largely subordinated "in enigmate" to the visual metaphor: "We seen now bi a myrrour in derknesse."[36] Loss of the idea of riddling in this verse suggests a loss of the idea of participation visible in English thought during the fourteenth century, as chapter 6 will explore. Whereas the mirror metaphor fits comfortably within a correspondence model of knowledge, riddling touches on a different paradigm of knowledge, one associated not with correspondence between images but rather with verbal dialogue. In this paradigm, representations, whether verbal or visual, do not merely reflect something of objective reality in the mind of the subject but instead mediate a real relation, a shared participation in being, between knower and known. Truth is conceived, not so much as the accurate description of things considered in themselves, objectively, but as the identity of each thing as constituted by its relations with all other things.[37]

Medieval commentators on 1 Corinthians 13:12, even in their discussions of the mirror metaphor, remain within a participatory understanding of knowledge mediated by symbolism rather than moving toward a modern epistemology of correspondence. If the soul is seen as a mirror here, this is not because it is seen to function like a mirror that reflects representations that correspond to things but because it is taken as itself a symbol of what God is. Likewise scripture and the created world are taken as full of symbols that communicate God's nature.[38] Monastic commentators especially imply a connection between this verse and the practices of contemplative reading of scripture (*lectio divina*) and meditation on creation.[39] Hervé of Bourg-Dieu (ca. 1080–1150) interprets the whole phrase through the grammatical definition of *enigma* as an obscure allegory and emphasizes the difficulty of the interpretive labor involved in knowledge mediated by symbols.[40] For Hugh of St. Victor (ca. 1096–1141), one of the fathers of Scholasticism, the enigma is scripture and the mirror is your heart, and both are sacraments, that is, signs of sacred things.[41] One of Hugh's students, Robert of Melun (ca. 1100–1167),

adds that, while every creature is now a mirror or obscure similitude of God, in the future God will be the mirror in which we see everything.[42] Then, as Dante portrays it in his *Paradiso*, the mediation will be reversed: whereas now knowledge of God is mediated by created things, then knowledge of created things will be mediated, and completed, by immediate knowledge of God. Because all things participate in God by virtue of their creation, knowledge of created things is completed only by knowledge of the Creator.

The two paradigms of knowledge also entail different views of what kind of knowledge is possible or desirable. A modern, correspondence paradigm tends to see an opposition between subjective and objective knowledge: the kind of knowledge epitomized by poetry is seen to have a symbolic and emotional richness that comes at the expense of scientific precision. Participation, on the other hand, favors the symbolic and enigmatic for their capacity to move toward both fullness and precision at once. Commentary on St. Paul's next clause, "but then face to face," suggests the ultimate goal of enigmatic rhetoric, what it both approaches most closely and recognizes as still distant. Hervé reserves the metaphor of vision for this direct presence of sight without intermediary.[43] Atto, bishop of Vercelli (924/5–960/61), on the other hand, describes this face-to-face knowledge of God in wholly aesthetic and affective terms: "For we will see joy, gladness, and the end of our desire."[44] For Hugh of St. Victor, the increases of faith as image and sacrament, that is, as mediated by symbols, lead to the goals of both knowing more fully and loving more ardently.[45] When Thomas Aquinas (1225–74) characterizes this face-to-face knowledge as clear and open, he could be said to combine representational clarity with the fullness or wholeness that comes, not from knowing merely through the limiting mediation of symbols, but from intimacy with that to which the symbols point.[46] Bonaventure (1221–74), in a sermon, glosses "face to face" as "in claritate plenaria," full clarity that also implies clear fullness.[47] An epistemology based on the metaphysics of participation does not neglect the goal of precise representation of reality in language but rather subordinates it to the function of signs within relationships.[48]

After Aquinas, however, with the cluster of intellectual developments linked to nominalism, what would coalesce as the modern representa-

tional paradigm comes to be articulated in ways that exclude the symbolic, and the language of precision completely dominates the "speculative" discourses of theology and philosophy.[49] Under the paradigm of correspondence, language serves an ideal of objectivity: that is, it becomes a tool for reducing the objects that appear in the mind to basic properties that are not dependent on a subject. Accuracy and precision are the goal. As this happens, literature and mysticism are relegated to shadow discourses, and the enigmatic, with its relational orientation and capacity for affective richness, is identified with the subjective over against the objective. "Through a glass darkly" suggests a gulf between human representations and true knowledge of the divine that can be crossed only by direct revelation. The poetics of enigma, however, mediates continuous approach to ever greater participation that will be fulfilled in knowledge "face to face."

The enigmatic inhabits the gap between perceptible things and the divine that, from the late Middle Ages on, came to seem less and less bridgeable. It works largely by intensifying the interplay between affirmations and negations of the divine reflected in the sensible. In fact, the usual medieval conception of reality sees not so much a gap as a hierarchy stretching by degrees from the highest order of angels, who enjoy the most intimate knowledge of God, down through the rest of the angelic hierarchy and then to humanity and the rest of creation. This, indeed, is the arrangement of *On the Properties of Things*, which transmits the common understanding, derived from Pseudo-Dionysius, of the angels' place in this hierarchic cosmos: "For this lawe is iholde and kept in the ordur of aungels: in participacioun of grace and of blisse somme beth the first and somme the secound and somme the last."[50] Bartholomaeus goes on to explain that one primary function of each of the nine angelic orders is to mediate knowledge to the next. Angels, that is, have their own ways of playing what Trevisa's prefatory poem calls the game that the whole encyclopedia aims to equip its readers for by giving them tools for contemplating the enigmas of the book of nature and the book of scripture.

Enigmatic narratives represent the playing out of the game of active participation in historical time. The organization of an encyclopedia suits the metaphor of a mirror because it is static and spatial and closely tied to the technologies of making words visible as texts.[51] Riddles, on the

other hand, engage the temporal character of speech and its orientation toward narrative. The enigmatic, that is, applies more even to discovering the participation of events in larger narratives than to contemplating the timeless order of creation. While a modern view tends to separate secular history from spiritual narratives, the enigmatic serves a medieval interest in continuity between mundane events and overarching narratives of salvation history. The allegorical interpretation of the Bible called figural or typological finds vertical references between events and theological meaning that also connect events in horizontal, historical patterns, which point, enigmatically, to a fulfillment at the end of time.[52] This is the basis of a participatory understanding of history. It can also lead a reader to consider his or her own life as participating in the relations of meaning disclosed in the interpretation of scripture. Augustine's *Confessions* is the classic example of a narrative constructed this way, and chapter 4 will show how Augustine understands his own text to be precisely a product of learning to read enigmatically. Mysticism, at least in the Western Christian tradition, could be said to involve cultivating not just a metaphysics and epistemology of participation but a consciousness of participation in the moment.[53] Enigmatic narrative poems, meanwhile, imagine possibilities of the participation of agents and events in a larger order of meaning both temporal and eternal, immanent and transcendent.

The central Christian experience of participation in a larger order of meaning is the sacraments. In 1 Corinthians 10, St. Paul's main text about the Eucharist, the Vulgate uses the term *participatio*, kept in a Middle English translation: "and the bred that we brekyn is it not the particypacyoun of goddys body."[54] To my knowledge, the term *enigma* is not much used in discussions of what came to be defined during the Scholastic period as the seven official sacraments of the church. Controversy over the Eucharist in particular pushed discourse about it toward logical precision. Yet a sacrament, in its broadest, most traditional Christian meaning, is, like a theological enigma, the sign of a mystery.[55] The conscious, subjective sense of participation cultivated by the enigmatic is an aspect of a general sacramental mentality with both horizontal and vertical dimensions. The body of Christ in which a communicant participated was traditionally understood to be not only the body present in the elements on the altar but also the whole church, articulated as a body

in 1 Corinthians 12, as well as the risen Christ in heaven.[56] Sacramental participation is both spiritual and social. The reading of enigmatic texts, likewise, works both vertically and horizontally: it stimulates both contemplation of the reality of metaphysical participation and membership in an interpretive community.

To summarize, literary riddling, especially within the intellectual conditions of medieval culture, summons readers into contemplative, open-ended play that gives them power to form a certain sort of interpretive community and lends itself to deepening an awareness and experience of what is best called participation. Many patristic and medieval Christian theologians, authorized by 1 Corinthians 13:12 and working from hints to be found in classical rhetoric, recognized the suitability of enigmatic language to the nature and experience of truth as participation in mystery.[57] A poetics of enigma nurtures a kind of community, oriented toward a center equally accessible to all and fully possessed by no one, that is always in tension with the more stable boundary making of didactic and esoteric rhetoric.

Piers Plowman is strenuously occupied with the conflict between these two visions of ecclesiastical community; indeed, Langland's poetic signature turns his poem toward its most sustained treatment of where to find the true church. For this quest, as well as for the poem's more inward pursuit of conversion, learning to read enigmatically is crucial. Langland's poem, like the enigmatic Grail stories of Chretien de Troyes and Wolfram von Eschenbach and like Dante's *Commedia*, emerges when fruit from the tree of Latin theological discourse falls into the soil of vernacular culture, where it sprouts into many different forms, from mysticism to the novel, related to the original tree not necessarily by theological aims but by an ethos of interpretive community and a sense of spiritual participation.[58] This book is concerned with those first vernacular seedlings, primarily in English and especially in *Piers Plowman.* To find the conditions of possibility and productivity for the poetics of enigma, it charts the landscape of thought marked by the word itself through the territory of riddles, rhetoric, and theology. The most fully developed enigmatic texts take into themselves this entire terrain of thought: they embed simple riddle forms within allegorical narratives that use a theological framework to initiate an endless game of interpretation.

PIERS PLOWMAN

Piers Plowman puzzles readers from the start with the question of what kind of a poem it is. "Enigmatic" is an easy answer, and indeed this word is often used, though without reference to its particular medieval domains of meaning.[59] It mixes elements of many medieval genres into a frame of dream-vision allegory.[60] Unlike any other dream-vision poem, however, it is made up of more than one dream—no less than eight in its fullest versions, plus two dreams within dreams. The resulting discontinuities make it very difficult to discern an overall structure or design that would clarify its form and direction. Yet the poem clearly intends to make some kind of progress: it is divided into sections called *passus*, meaning a step in Latin (plural *passūs*), usually several per dream, and it repeatedly invokes the notions of pilgrimage and quest. Within the dreams, its allegorical modes are quite fluid, much like actual dreams. Personifications of mental faculties mix with others representing social groups or institutions. The poem resists continuity and arrests interpretive attention with its density of wordplay, symbol, allusion, and self-commentary. Occasionally it even uses variations on what are recorded elsewhere as actual riddles. The definition of enigma as obscure allegory fits it at every scale, and recovery of the poetics of enigma can do much more to explain the kind of play the poem asks of readers and how this play was understood to be productive.

The problem of form has been a persistent one in *Piers Plowman* scholarship, yet in many ways this scholarship has been moving toward the understanding proposed here. In a 1998 account of *Piers Plowman* criticism, Anne Middleton identified the "hunger for significant form" as a feature both of the poem itself and of writing about it, one that was articulated in a 1939 survey by Morton Bloomfield and "remains in part unsatisfied."[61] Middleton's own answer to this hunger maps out how the poetics of enigma builds on earlier enterprises in Langland studies, though she does not use the term except to locate *Piers Plowman* among "other medieval long poems of enigmatic character yet compelling power" (such as *Beowulf* and *The Romance of the Rose*).[62] Middleton lauds the "crux-busting" accomplishments of scholars, which have solved, or at

least shed light on, many of the poem's riddles, both those that take a recognizably riddling form and other kinds of difficulties. More important for the question of form, however, and more relevant to the poetics of enigma, is not *what* such passages mean but *how* they function within the poem as a whole. In medieval understanding of the verbal arts, writes Middleton, a mode such as Langland's, "deeply figurative and analogous in its manner of proceeding," produces "as its most characteristic and beneficial experience startling and pleasurable recognitions that repeatedly elude argumentative formulation" (106). The best medieval name for this mode and the figure most closely associated with this kind of knowledge is enigma.[63]

At the opposite level of scale, the poem's relation to its intellectual and literary backgrounds, the question of form shifts attention, again, from what background is relevant to how it is used. Here Middleton cites Bloomfield's famous comment that the effect of Langland's loose but extensive use of various sources "is like reading a commentary on an unknown text."[64] She then suggests that the purpose of such "dislocation of the refound and reused fragment from its primary site of production" is "to return this treasure of wit to productive utility in sustaining the community and the individual desirous spiritual imagination" (109). What I will call the rhetoric of enigma could hardly be put more concisely. Langland's formal innovation is, to quote Middleton one more time, "a long narrative poem . . . conceived as an extended 'reading lesson'" (109). What the poetics of enigma generates, at every level, is not just meaning but models and parameters for playing a game of interpretation. Seen in this way, the poem's lack of a more consistent or closed form becomes, in part at least, a strategy for producing the kind of reading it has, in fact, often received.

Indeed, the space of play with institutional authorities that Langland opens up is one of his major contributions to the development of literary culture in English. The surviving manuscripts of *Piers Plowman* indicate that it was probably "the single most popular verse text disseminated in the fourteenth-century."[65] It was a London "best seller," as it were, during the writing career of Chaucer, whose works were not widely copied until the fifteenth century. My final two chapters will add to the arguments for Langland's influence on both Chaucer and Julian of Norwich

by suggesting that his early and formative dream-vision *The House of Fame* and her *Revelation* were responding to the poetics of enigma as they had encountered it largely through *Piers Plowman.* Copies of poems at this time were not so much sold as commissioned one by one, and the fifty-odd manuscripts of *Piers Plowman* show a great deal of variation that points to active, even playful involvement of copyists in constructing Langland's text.[66] Mostly, though, the manuscript variation has been understood to show the author's own process of revision, resulting in at least three different versions, A, B, and C, made available for copying at intervals datable from references to historical events: "Most typically, A is placed in the later 1360s (certainly after 1362), B around 1377 (and before 1381), and C after 1388 and perhaps so late as 1390."[67] Langland, that is, spent an entire poetic career writing, expanding, and revising a single poem—perhaps more continuously than the usual dating of the three versions implies—in response to events, to his audience, and, most of all, to rereading what he had already written.

Langland's responses to his own previous enigmas make *Piers Plowman* an especially rich study in the poetics of enigma. The A version consists of three visions, and all three end, as Ralph Hanna puts it, "in aporia or enigma."[68] These endings concentrate the difficulties that have energized each vision and, in turn, seed the visions that follow. The end of the second vision, the notorious tearing of the pardon sent to Piers—which Hanna calls "the poem's signal passage of enigma"—generates not only the remainder of the A text but also, as Nevill Coghill argued before the British Academy in 1945, the five further visions added in the B text as well as important revisions in the B version of the first three visions.[69] The tearing of the pardon is indeed an enigma, I will argue, in more precise ways than have been recognized, and Langland answered his climactic invention in the A text in large part by developing a more thoroughly enigmatic style. Thus almost all passages that will be central to this study, other than the pardon tearing, are new in the B text—such as the signature passage discussed above. The tearing of the pardon, equally notoriously, is omitted from the C text. This is one of many changes, large and small, that have led many to see the C text as less enigmatic than B.[70] Derek Pearsall, for instance, in his edition of the C text, suggests that its revisions are driven by an "overriding desire for clarity, economy, and unambiguity."[71] A. V. C. Schmidt finds a pattern in the C text's "movement

from the obscurity of *aenigma* to the clarity of *expositio*."[72] My argument, however, is that the C text works to make the poem's enigmas more readable without making them less enigmatic. A distinction between enigma and aporia might be helpful here. An aporia, not a common term in the Latin Middle Ages, might be said to be a problem that is seemingly insoluble, at least in the terms with which it is expressed. An enigma, on the other hand, presents a problem but also provides terms or images for productive thought. Langland writes both but increasingly, I suggest, aims for enigma. When he removes the tearing of the pardon, I will argue (following the suggestion made by Hanna and others), Langland adds new passages surrounding the deletion that compensate for it by offering new enigmas that are less problematic but at least as meaningful.[73] Changes in C, then, can shed interpretive light on the B text. This study will move back and forth some between the B and C texts but will primarily follow the C text as its guide to the poem's fullest and clearest intentions. Citations will indicate passages from other versions that closely parallel the one being quoted in order to help those interested in tracking development across versions, though usually without comment about how close the parallels are or how much revision is involved.[74]

Langland honed the poetics of enigma largely because the problems his poem wrestles with led him toward theological perspectives that require it. Much of the scholarship on Langland's theology has tended, like much theological writing itself, to make a case for one or the other position on a controversial issue. Is he a semi-Pelagian who holds that human works contribute to salvation or a neo-Augustinian who holds that salvation is purely by God's predestined grace?[75] Do his views align with the Latin inheritance (either older, patristic authorities or newer, Scholastic ones), or do they situate him over against this inheritance as an early voice of what has come to be called vernacular theology?[76] The vernacular was certainly becoming a more important and contested field for theological discourse, and Langland's was an important voice within it. Nicholas Watson has associated Langland with a distinctively inclusive salvation theology that corresponded to the inclusivity of the vernacular language in which it was articulated.[77] I will suggest that this aspect of Langland's theology can also be seen as part of a larger attempt to express in vernacular poetry a perspective—what I am calling participation—that has patristic and Scholastic roots yet took on new inflections over

against Latin-dominated ecclesiastical institutions. This perspective also cuts across other distinctions that typically frame the analysis of Langland's theology, especially between an emphasis on grace or works in salvation and the corresponding emphasis on divine or human agency.

Enigma and participation are closely related to the "functional ambiguity" that Kathryn Kerby-Fulton finds in writing that made revelatory claims touching on theological controversies during Langland's time. While she finds it "tantalizing to believe that Langland wanted it both ways: an overtly orthodox theology hiding a daringly liberal salvation message—or at least its hope," Kerby-Fulton emphasizes the need for ambiguity in order to avoid suspicion and censure in an increasingly dangerous theological climate and sees pluralism about salvation theologies as the primary goal.[78] The poetics of enigma, however, leads in a somewhat different but not incompatible direction: the goal is a theological perspective that includes and reconciles positions that were increasingly seen as incompatible, and the function of ambiguity is not so much to hide—though this is an acknowledged use of enigma—as to explore the play of meaning within orthodoxy. The poetics of enigma is one of Langland's major tools for his twin and interdependent goals, as James Simpson has emphasized, of reforming the individual and reforming the church.[79]

Why would a poetics of enigma have had a particular appeal in late fourteenth-century England?[80] A familiar narrative of the social context of *Piers Plowman* suggests a general answer. In Langland's time, as now, crises of institutional authorities and the discourses associated with them left a vacuum that invited explorations of alternate, literary modes of finding meaning, hope, and community. Yet if modern and postmodern fascination with enigma finds in it an alternative to discredited cultural foundations, the medieval poetics of enigma, on the other hand, appeals to an ancient fruitfulness still potent in the roots of old authorities—more reformist than revolutionary, as Simpson uses the terms.[81] In 1377, the earliest date usually given for completion of the B text, the succession of ten-year-old Richard II to the throne exacerbated a crisis in national government that had been building since the beginning of the Hundred Years War in 1337. Similarly, the beginning of the Great Schism in 1378 deepened the crisis of ecclesiastical authority that had already found a focus in the so-called Babylonian captivity of the papacy in Avignon beginning in 1307. The more basic and widespread social crises in the

wake of the Black Death of 1347–51 reached a flashpoint in England with the Rising of 1381, which registers the earliest response to *Piers Plowman* (see chapter 2, the section "The Letters of John Ball") and likely led Langland to delete the tearing of the pardon (see chapter 5, the section "C-Text Enigmas I"). At least as important, however, for Langland's ongoing attempt to rearticulate a basis of individual and communal well-being in largely noninstitutional terms were the increasingly technical nature of academic discourse and several related changes in thought that undermined a theology of participation.[82] I imagine small groups of people listening to *Piers Plowman* being read aloud, puzzling over it together, and finding empowering seeds of thought and friendship in tumultuous times—while, in the process, giving vernacular literature a new place in English culture.

OVERVIEW

This book reconstructs the elements of the poetics of enigma as they might have been known to an author such as Langland, Chaucer, or Julian of Norwich. Situating this study in late fourteenth-century England sets some limits to its coverage of the traditions of riddles, rhetoric, and theology, though much of the material included is much older and was widely enough known that the poetics recovered here is broadly relevant across medieval literature. Early authorities such as Augustine and the grammarian Donatus remained the most influential, and making sense of how they were received involves telling stories that also include some texts not well known later. Although the riddles of the Anglo-Saxon bishop Aldhelm, for example, were probably gathering dust in monastic libraries, his brilliance is irresistible and his influence likely profound even if untraceable.

As the enigmatic moves toward an encounter face to face, so this book moves toward an encounter with literary works. Each chapter moves from theory to practice, and the whole sequence of seven chapters braids together the three strands of riddles, rhetoric, and theology. The three strands, the enigmatic as form, as invitation to a kind of reading, and as a way of seeing reality—with the attendant purposes of play, persuasion, and participation—each take their turns at the forefront but are

also interwoven throughout. Examples from *Piers Plowman* in each chapter further tie the book together.

Chapter 1 focuses on major texts in the Latin medieval tradition that articulate the value of enigmatic language for the sake of understanding the theology of participation and entering into a deeper experience of it. Augustine and Aquinas are the most important theologians of participation and its implications for language, while practices based on it can be seen in the program of contemplative reading represented by William of St. Thierry's *Enigma of Faith* and Hugh of St. Victor's *Didascalicon* and reaching its Latin culmination in Bonaventure's *Journey of the Mind to God.* The Middle English *Cloud of Unknowing* receives brief treatment here with the reception of the mysticism of Pseudo-Dionysius. This chapter closes with a sketch of changes in the climate of late Scholasticism toward the fourteenth century that would shift the poetics of enigma from Latin to the vernacular.

Chapters 2 and 3 turn attention to traditions of riddling in both Latin and the vernacular. Chapter 2 focuses on evidence of riddling as a practice and on riddles that survive in collections or on their own, while chapter 3 looks at riddle contests, from simple catechetical dialogues to contests within larger narratives. Chapter 2 gathers for the first time the scattered and heterogeneous evidence of Middle English riddles that survive outside of stories or dialogues and sorts it in relation to classical and Christian, Anglo-Saxon legacies of riddling. Two examples from the first vision of *Piers Plowman*, the Plant of Peace passage and Conscience's prophecy, as well as the so-called John Ball letters from the Rising of 1381, begin to suggest what the form could do in the conditions of late fourteenth-century England. In chapter 3, the most complex and fully developed riddle contest in medieval literature, Langland's banquet of Conscience, is seen to reveal the theological and anti-institutional potential of play found in two texts it may well have been modeled on, the two most well-known riddle contests in the late Middle Ages: the story of St. Andrew and the Three Questions and the dialogue of Solomon and Marcolf.

Chapters 4 and 5 reconstruct the medieval rhetoric of enigma, both as taught in the arts of language and as expressed in literary works. Chapter 4 follows the understanding of enigma that a student might have

gained through texts read in school. It frames this account through the narrative of education in the third vision of *Piers Plowman*, which interprets and is in turn interpreted by this rhetorical teaching. At the center of this chapter (and thus the center of the whole book) is Augustine's story in the *Confessions* of learning to read the Bible, the world, and himself, still unsurpassed as a reflection on the rhetoric of enigma. Chapter 5 explores the rhetoric implied by Langland's most important instance of enigmatic reading within his poem, the tearing of the pardon, and his reformulation of that enigma in the C text. It also suggests that Langland's construction of Piers and his narrator as models of desire points to the function of similar models in other enigmatic medieval narratives.

Chapter 6 resumes the story of the theology of participation and the poetics of enigma with developments in England in the fourteenth century in order to argue that Langland, especially in the fifth vision of *Piers Plowman*, and Julian of Norwich, in her parable of the lord and the servant, practice a self-consciously enigmatic mode in the vernacular in order to sustain and intensify a vision of conscious participation in the life of the Trinity.

A final chapter braids together the concepts of play, persuasion, and participation through the convention of riddles as an ending move. The endings of *Piers Plowman* inherit a tradition of enigmatic endings that links the enigmatic mode to both pastoral and apocalyptic poetry, a conjunction also seen in *The Romance of the Rose* and Dante's *Commedia.* Chaucer's *House of Fame*, meanwhile, reorients this tradition to a secular but no less enigmatic fulfillment. A brief epilogue looks ahead to the afterlife of the medieval poetics of enigma in modernity.

Chapters are meant to proceed in a conceptual order but be self-contained enough to be comprehensible in any order. Chapter 1 shares a theological focus with chapters 6 and 7 but comes first because it is the most occupied with sources prior to *Piers Plowman* and discusses what I expect to be the least familiar idea in the book, the theology of participation. Chapters 3 through 5, as indicated in their titles, treat the middle visions of *Piers Plowman* in reverse order. Readers unfamiliar with the poem, especially if they are reading it along with this book, may want to follow the order of the poem and read these chapters in reverse.

CHAPTER 1

LANGUAGE FOR A THEOLOGY OF PARTICIPATION, THEORY FOR A POETICS OF ENIGMA

The poetics of enigma, as employed by medieval authors, draws on three kinds of sources. Oral riddling is enigma's most ancient and basic expression. The classical discipline of rhetoric made enigma an object of explicit reflection. Yet the richest springs of enigma are sacred scriptures, not just the Bible, both Jewish and Christian, but others such as the Sanskrit Vedas and the Qur'an. During the Middle Ages, when Christian faith harnessed the institutions of literacy, the enigmatic mode powered a theological vision, and theologians pondered its power. Because the enigmatic is now more associated with a secular literary aesthetic, with immanent rather than transcendent mystery, its distinctively medieval uses and rationales will make more sense within an understanding of the theological vision that embraces such a playful sort of persuasion. This vision, for which I will use the term *participation*, could be called a doctrine. Yet it is also a way of seeing or a practice of faith, one that fades when reduced to stable, precise formulation. Keeping participation conceptually alive, so that it can become a summons and not simply an idea, requires a different sort of language.

This chapter will show how medieval theologians understood the enigmatic as a kind of language most suited to the goal of entering further into participation in the divine. It will also sketch, at the end, how this vision began to fall apart in the later Middle Ages, especially in the sophisticated, academic theology that was still being conducted in Latin. In this changing intellectual climate, literary experiments with the enigmatic mode in vernacular languages would preserve and reimagine a theology of participation.

To say that enigma serves a vision merely restates 1 Corinthians 13:12—"We see now through a mirror in an enigma, then face to face"—but also poses a puzzle. How is it possible to see in a riddle? And how, to take this verse as it was taken throughout the Middle Ages, could this be the closest approach now to the vision face to face that is yet to come? Medieval thinking about this verse and its implications followed lines laid down by Augustine, who quoted it, alluded to it, or otherwise used the term *enigma* with reference to it throughout his works.[1] It is in his treatise *De Trinitate*, however, that he uses the term most often and speculates about it most fully. This is the essential starting point from which this chapter will chart representative developments in the interpretation of 1 Corinthians 13:12 and, more broadly, in monastic, Scholastic, and mystical theology that condition the later medieval understanding of enigma within the theology of participation.[2]

THE ENIGMA OF THE WORD IN AUGUSTINE'S *DE TRINITATE*

Augustine's *De Trinitate* remains a classic resource for thinking about one of the central problems of Christian theology: how to find language for a God at once infinitely transcendent, intimately personal, and mysteriously triune. It has had incalculable influence not just on the Christian doctrine of God but on the practice of theology, its interaction with philosophy, and even certain topics that have become more the province of philosophy proper.[3] Even its style and its circuitous, repetitive structure draw readers into a labyrinth of what Anselm would call "faith seeking understanding."[4] As a recent English translator writes, "Augustine is pro-

posing the quest for, or the exploration of, the mystery of the Trinity as a complete program for the Christian spiritual life, a program of conversion and renewal and discovery of self in God and God in self."[5] Augustine's itinerary takes into account all that is said both openly and obscurely about the Trinity in scripture and encompasses all, both in outer, historical life and in inner, psychological life, that participates in the being of the Trinity—which is, in principle, everything. For Augustine, as David N. Bell puts it, "We are, and we are what we are, by participation in God."[6] Participation is an idea Augustine took from Neoplatonism, adapted to Christian theology without ever systematically arguing or explicating it, and made part of the soil of medieval thought in which the enigmatic would thrive.

Augustine cites 1 Corinthians 13:12 at least twenty-seven times in *De Trinitate*, more often than any other verse. It distills the interpretive procedure by which Augustine follows the guidance of scripture in moving from created things to the divine while avoiding speculative excess. Until we live in glory, "We see now through a glass in a puzzle [*in aenigmate*], that is in symbols [*in similitudinibus*]."[7] Even the credal language for the Trinity is inadequate and provisional: "And provided one can understand what is said at least in a puzzle [*in aenigmate*], it has been agreed to say it like that, simply in order to be able to say something when asked 'Three what?'" (7.7, p. 224).

After the first half of the treatise treats references to the Trinity in scripture, the second, more famous half focuses on the image of God in the human soul. Though "worn out and distorted" (14.11, p. 379), this image can be reformed if the soul turns its fundamental reflection of the Trinity, the threefold activity of remembering, understanding, and loving, not toward the world or itself but toward God. "But the image which is being renewed in the spirit of the mind in the recognition of God, not outwardly but inwardly from day to day, this image will be perfected in the vision that will then be face to face after the judgment, while now it makes progress through a puzzling reflection in a mirror [*per speculum in aenigmate*]" (14.25, p. 391). Perfect knowledge and love will involve perfection of the knower transformed into the image of the One known. The vision "face to face," for Augustine, means full participation.[8] Until then, he writes, we progress through enigmas. The

enigmatic is not just an unavoidable condition of our language about the divine but a means of growing into greater participation in God. Augustine emphasizes its capacity to engage and heighten both understanding and love in his rhetoric of spiritual reading, spelled out in *De doctrina Christiana* and the *Confessions*.[9] In *De Trinitate*, his focus on enigma leads rather to something more like a philosophy of language grounded in an underlying theology of participation in the second person of the Trinity.

The enigma verse takes center stage in the final book when, having reached the image of the Trinity in human remembering, understanding, and loving, Augustine asserts also its utter inadequacy because none of these capacities can be attributed to one person of the Trinity alone. Augustine looks once more for a better image, and the extended reflection on 1 Corinthians 13:12 through which he frames this contemplation became the direct source for nearly every medieval commentary on it. In the *Glossa ordinaria*, the standard biblical commentary of the later Middle Ages, the longer, marginal comment summarizes Augustine's explication: "*Mirror*. Is the soul, through the force of which we know God in some way, but obscurely. *Riddle*. Is not every allegory, but an obscure one. Whence just as through 'mirror' he signified an image, so by the term 'enigma' he signified a likeness that is, however, obscure and difficult to comprehend."[10] In the source passage, Augustine, rhetoric teacher that he was, glosses *enigma* according to its standard definition as a kind of allegory distinguished by obscurity. As an example he cites Proverbs 30:15, "'The blood-sucker had three daughters,' and other sayings like that" (15.15, p. 407). He adds that, like the story of Isaac and Ishmael that Paul discusses as an allegory in Galatians 4:24, what functions as an enigma can be not just words but things. "Now," he continues, "we can indeed take it that by the use of the words 'mirror' and 'enigma' the apostle meant any likenesses that are useful for understanding God with, as far as this is possible; but of such likenesses none is more suitable than the one which is not called God's image for nothing" (15.16, p. 407). He returns to the image of God in the human person, but now to intensify his exploration of both its likeness and its unlikeness as they follow from what we now call the mystery of consciousness. "If it was easy to see, the word 'enigma' would not be mentioned in this connection. And what

makes the enigma all the more puzzling is that we should be unable to see what we cannot not see. Who fails to see his own thoughts? And on the other hand who does see his own thoughts . . . ?" (15.16, p. 407). Yet *enigma* not only signifies the obscurity of this most inward image but further leads Augustine to focus on the experience of thought in language.

For Augustine, the ability to know and say something true is grounded in the participation of our thought in what it knows, which in turn depends on the participation of our minds in the relation between the second and first persons of the Trinity.

> If anyone then can understand how a word can be, not only before it is spoken aloud but even before the images of its sounds are turned over in thought—this word that belongs to no language, that is to none of what are called the languages of the nations, of which ours is Latin; if anyone, I say, can understand this, he can already see through this mirror and in this enigma some likeness of that Word of which it is said, *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God* (Jn 1:1). For when we utter something true, that is when we utter what we know, a word is necessarily born from the knowledge which we hold in the memory, a word which is absolutely the same kind of thing as the knowledge it is born from. (15.19, p. 409)

This section of book 15 was one of the major sources for the medieval consensus that the inner or mental words Augustine is talking about have a real relation with the things they signify.[11] As Etienne Gilson puts it, the Son is Resemblance itself, by participation in which all created things have the resemblance to God by which they exist and are what they are.[12] For human beings this participation includes the capacity for rational knowledge, and, on the authority of the prologue to the Gospel of John, Augustine finds this participation to be raised to the highest order and made conscious in language. "But," he says of the ways that human languages are expressed or even thought of silently, "we must go beyond all these and come to that word of man through whose likeness of a sort the Word of God may somehow or other be seen in an enigma" (15.20,

p. 410). Here, as Augustine contemplates for several pages the likeness and unlikeness of a mental word to the Word made flesh, he leaves the mirror metaphor behind for a while.[13]

The central enigma of our word's participation in the divine Word not only grounds all capacity for true speech but also implies a special potential for enigmatic writing.

> So when that which is in the awareness is also in a word, then it is a true word, and truth such as a man looks for so that what is in awareness should also be in a word and what is not in awareness should not either be in a word. It is here that one acknowledges the *Yes, yes; no, no* (Mt 5:37; 2 Cor 1:17; Jas 5:12). In this way this likeness of the made image approaches as far as it can to the likeness of the born image, in which God the Son is declared to be substantially like the Father in all respects. (15.20, p. 410)

As if anticipating the Derridean, poststructuralist critique, Augustine points to the need for a Transcendental Signifier and Signified in order to anchor referentiality in human language.[14] But that is not all. The clear and wholehearted "yes" or "no" that expresses perfect integrity of knowledge and word is not a minimal representation but a maximal affirmation. It is both full and precise: "And the reason this Word is truly truth is that whatever is in the knowledge of which it is begotten is also in it; and anything that is not in that knowledge is not in it" (15.23, p. 415). Augustine's inquiry here is primarily into the nature of God and the human mind, with the goal of further activating in himself and his readers their latent participation in the divine life.[15] Along the way, however, he lays out a theory of language which includes an ideal of truthfulness—not just lack of error but fullness of meaning—that is modeled on the relation between the First and Second Persons of the Trinity.

There seems room to take this ideal as a goal of poetic language, even though the enigma through which Augustine contemplates Christ as the Word is a purely mental word, not an articulated one, and despite his occasional harsh words about fictions. He certainly attributes such a goal to the language of scripture. Yet he also quotes Virgil, "an outstanding master of words, one who knew them well and had looked closely into

the bias of thought" (15.25, p. 417), in support of a related psychological point. Even Virgil's poetry helps, albeit in a very minor way, mediate his relation to the Word as enigma.[16]

To have its restorative effect, the enigma of the inner word must elicit not just contemplation of self-presence but a mental act of referring this relation to its source.

> However, those who do see through this mirror and in this puzzle [*in quo aenigmate*], as much as it is granted to see in this life, are not those who merely observe in their own minds what we have discussed and suggested, but those who see it precisely as an image, so that they can in some fashion refer what they see to that of which it is an image, and also see that other by inference through its image which they see by observation, since they cannot see it *face to face*. For the apostle did not say "We see now in a mirror," but *We see by a mirror*. (15.44, p. 429)

The function of the enigmatic, in this passage, seems to be the decisive one of making the image in the mirror signify, so that the visual metaphor requires the verbal one. The richness of signification Augustine finds in the inner word as image applies to allegory in general, especially when found in things and not just words (that is, in history and not fiction). Enigma's distinctive obscurity, however, further implies the negative aspect of the image, its dissimilarity to the divine, which is in fact the major emphasis of book 15 of *De Trinitate*. As Marcia Colish points out, book 15 adds the negative counterpart to the positive exploration of images for the Trinity that makes up books 1 to 14 of Augustine's treatise.[17]

A dynamic interplay between affirmation and negation is crucial to how contemplating the Trinity becomes a spiritual way toward increasing participation. The inner word is enigmatic not only because it is difficult to understand in itself. Calling it enigmatic also points to the usefulness of enigma for keeping both likeness and unlikeness in mind. One wonders, particularly when he uses the word without more of 1 Corinthians 13:12, if Augustine was thinking of the riddle as a form that combines both figures that point to an answer and others that block that reference. As one holds an enigma of the Trinity in mind—ruminates on it, as the

monks would come to say—its obscurity prolongs and deepens the work of understanding and loving:

> Why then look for something when you have comprehended the incomprehensibility of what you are looking for, if not because you should not give up the search as long as you are making progress in your inquiry into things incomprehensible, and because you become better and better by looking for so great a good which is both sought in order to be found and found in order to be sought? It is sought in order to be found all the more delightfully, and it is found in order to be sought all the more avidly. (15.2, p. 396)

While his express intent in *De Trinitate* seems theological, Augustine's rhetorical orientation keeps him aware of the interpretive experience that he describes and seeks to elicit, and that is in fact his deeper goal. Progress depends on the affective as well as cognitive impact of the enigmatic. It aims not only to articulate the webs of participation that make the creation but to transform the contemplator of this order by engaging the most intense, self-conscious acts of understanding and love.

Augustine's meditation on human participation in the only-begotten Word in the final book of *De Trinitate* intensifies several themes of his theology and Christianized rhetoric, all of which would remain central to the culture in which vernacular theological writing would eventually take shape. Participation is for Augustine both latent and active.[18] It is a given in his theology that all things are what they are through participation in the source of all being, and that human beings, as rational beings, are in the image of God as a latent participation no matter how much it is disfigured. At the same time, he conceives salvation as a process of entering into greater participation in the life of the Trinity that happens at once by the gift of grace and by the most active cooperation. He sometimes distinguishes this active participation from the latent image as degrees of likeness that can vary.[19] The idea of participation is crucial to how Augustine and many thinkers influenced by him maintain the paradoxes of grace and works and of divine and human agency as productive tensions rather than mere dichotomies. The reception of the divine Word as an inner word imagines that the will becomes most free by participation in

divine knowledge, which makes possible knowledge of truth and truly free action.[20] Augustine's theology of the Word is one instance in the long history of the Judeo-Christian discovery of a God who does not overpower or displace human agency but brings it to freedom and fulfillment. The enigmatic, with its interplay of activity and receptiveness, knowledge and desire, affirmation and negation, becomes an important way of not only transmitting this theology but also entering into it as a lived experience.

One further passage from *De Trinitate* hints at how its theology might authorize not only the contemplative reading of enigmas given in scripture and the world but the writing of new ones:

> There is another likeness to the Word of God that can be observed in this enigma; just as it is said of that Word, *All things were made through him* (Jn 1:3), stating that God made all things through his only-begotten Word, so too there are no works of man which are not first uttered in the heart. . . . Here too, if it is a true word, it is the beginning of a good work. And a word is true when it is begotten of the knowledge of how to work well, so that here too one may apply the *Yes, yes; no, no*. (15.20, pp. 410–11)

Augustine's account of human action as a participation in the divine work of creation could be read narrowly to support the writing of literature only as a didactic adjunct to moral philosophy, which became a typical medieval view. Yet Langland's defense of writing poetry as part of doing well, and the similar views to be found in Dante, Chaucer, and others, reflect a later medieval humanism that is also Augustinian in its view of artistic creation as a participation in the creativity of the Word. For both the general case of all good work and the specific case of poetic work, the enigma of the inner word makes such participation a conscious, creative, individual act.[21]

Augustine's theology of enigma as an occasion for a deepened experience of participation in the Trinity became a key ingredient in the medieval development of theological speculation, contemplative practice, and creative writing. All of these cultivated the enigmatic mode. The remainder of this chapter will consider several texts and traditions

that inflected the later reception of enigma's theological significance and articulated it anew in response to conditions that would tend to marginalize it.

Paul Ricoeur has suggested that two "spurious substitutes" threaten "an interpretation that would respect the original enigma of symbols."[22] Ricoeur calls these substitutes allegory and gnosticism, terms that fit well the early development of Christian theology. Augustine's own fashioning of theological language is poised between the danger of oversimplifying the Christian mysteries through allegorical interpretation and, on the other side, the danger of claiming a secret knowledge that cannot be publicly disclosed, as seen in the gnostic Manichees to whom he was attracted in his youth.[23] In *De Trinitate*, the emphasis on enigma in the final book balances between the inadequacy of the analogies to human psychology made in the previous books and the inaccessibility of a privileged and wordless communion with the divine. M.-D. Chenu points out similar, divergent tendencies in the twelfth-century "symbolist mentality" stemming from, on one hand, Augustine's theory of the sign and, on the other, the approach to symbolism found in the works of the sixth-century author now known as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite.[24] To combine Chenu's contrast with Ricoeur's, the more Augustinian approach tended toward allegorical didacticism and the Pseudo-Dionysian toward gnostic esotericism. Yet Pseudo-Dionysius shares with Augustine a theology of participation experienced and expressed through enigma. Several important later medieval authors illustrate different versions of articulating this theology while resisting the didactic and esoteric temptations. Out of this tension emerge aspects of the poetics of enigma seen more fully in vernacular, literary manifestations: the role of affect, engagement with history and daily life, expansion into analogy, and intensification in visionary experience and sacrament.

Writing in the first half of the twelfth century, William of St. Thierry and Hugh of St. Victor illustrate at once the maturation of monastic theology and the beginnings of Scholasticism. Both are strongly Augustinian thinkers (though Hugh was also an important early commentator on Pseudo-Dionysius) and helped shape Augustine's continuing influence. William's *Enigma of Faith*, written for a community of monks, teaches advanced contemplation of the Trinity while avoiding esotericism, in

part through his emphasis on affect. Hugh's *Didascalicon*, meanwhile, lays down what would become the curriculum of Scholasticism but keeps doctrine alive and enigmatic through constant return to the historical sense of scripture and to history itself. The influence of Pseudo-Dionysius toward the esoteric has two sides that became more distinct over the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. One, the Dionysian strain in vernacular mysticism, verges toward gnosticism but often, as in the case of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, remains in the territory of enigma by its contact with ordinary life. The use of Pseudo-Dionysius by Scholastic authors, on the other hand, strengthens the enigmatic interplay between positive and negative language about God. In Aquinas, especially, this dynamic becomes the basis of an entire philosophical method of analogical discourse in service of a full-fledged metaphysics of participation. Bonaventure's *Journey of the Mind to God*, woven on the frame of 1 Corinthians 13:12, achieves a remarkable synthesis of all these theological strands through a meditation on St. Francis's ecstatic mystical experience. Both Aquinas and Bonaventure also witness to a growing late medieval tendency to locate the prime experience of the enigmatic in the sacrament of the Eucharist.

MONASTIC THEOLOGY: WILLIAM OF ST. THIERRY'S *ENIGMA OF FAITH*

In the monasteries that became the centers of European learning after the decline of Rome, a vision of spiritual life grew around a program of reading and prayer that put into practice the uses of enigma described by Augustine. Pope Gregory the Great (d. 604), monasticism's other favorite model of reading the Bible, explains the rationale in the opening sentences of his commentary on the Song of Songs:

> After its banishment from the joys of Paradise, the human race came to the pilgrimage of this present life with a heart blind to spiritual understanding. If the divine voice had said to this blind heart, "Follow God!" or, "Love God!" (as was said to it in the Law), once this was uttered, the numbing cold of its obtuseness would have prevented it from grasping what it heard. Accordingly, divine speech is

> communicated to the cold and numb soul by means of enigmas and in a hidden manner instills in her the love she does not know by means of what she knows. Allegory provides the soul set far below God with a kind of crane whereby she may be lifted to God. If enigmas are placed between God and the soul, when the soul recognizes something of her own in the language of the enigmas, through the meaning of this language she understands something that is not her own and by means of earthly language hopes for eternal things.[25]

In a hymn addressed to Gregory, the eleventh-century monastic reformer Peter Damian admires his example of reading in terms that express the goal of participation through the enigmatic: "You marvelously solve the mystic / Riddles of holy scripture; / Truth itself teaches you / Mysteries of contemplation."[26] "Mystic" here could suggest monastic theology's tendency to treat the Christian mysteries as hidden secrets requiring spiritual advancement. Leclercq, however, in his classic study, suggests that the term *gnosis* is appropriate for monastic theology to designate not "a secret doctrine reserved for the initiate" but rather "that kind of higher knowledge which is the complement, the fruition of faith, and which reaches completion in prayer and contemplation."[27] Leclercq's prime example, Bernard of Clairvaux (d. 1153), is no doubt the most important, but Bernard's friend and fellow abbot William of St. Thierry (d. 1148) more consistently uses the language of 1 Corinthians 13:12 to articulate the open rather than hidden, yet endless and recursive progress of the contemplative way.[28]

William is particularly known for the term *affectus*, which expresses his version of monastic thought's "dependence on experience."[29] A complex and untranslatable word in William's work, *affectus* leans toward an emphasis, shared with Bernard, on love as the heart of contemplation, yet not at all to the exclusion of knowledge. Indeed, *affectus* engages reason as much as it does emotion ("affect" in the current, psychological sense). Moreover, *affectus* conveys active participation. "On the one hand," writes W. Zwingmann, "*affectus* relates to the soul's ascent towards God (man is active); on the other, it also serves to designate the condescending grace of God, who stoops to the soul in search of Him (so that man,

in a sense, is passive). . . . One may say that in the *affectus* God works in us and we cooperate in this divine action."[30] William unfolds the components of this cooperation in two treatises that he describes as one work divided into two books, "the first of which, because it is straightforward and easy, I entitled *The Mirror of Faith;* the second, because it will be found to contain a summary of the grounds and formulations of faith according to the words and the thought of the Catholic Fathers and is a little more obscure, *The Enigma of Faith.*"[31] The *Mirror* revolves around *affectus*, while the *Enigma* aims more at what he calls *ratio fidei*, the reasoning of faith.

In the *Mirror*, William guides readers to contemplating and being shaped into the image of the Trinity and the incarnate Christ through the purity of faith, hope, and love: "Those who are alone with themselves are likewise made worthy of seeing in yet another way, by reflecting through faith; in another way he is in them through the grace that *affects* and they in him through the *affectus* of devotion."[32] Yet the *Mirror* also looks ahead to, and already enters, the stage of enigma that is more rational: "Since man still sees in a mirror and in an enigma and passes like an image, it is in a mirror that we are taught by metaphor, and it is by a yet more obscure enigma that we are trained, in the simple and evident image that we are more sweetly *affected.* Yet, piety itself, truth itself, is given or taught only by the Holy Spirit! Only by the finger of God is it inscribed on the mind."[33] The sequence here, placing the simple and evident image after the enigma, or perhaps coordinating them, bends the stages into a cycle. The action of *intellectus* relaxes into the passivity of *affectus*, yet understanding is also a reception of the Word and *affectus* is an action of the heart. The whole rhythm, moreover, participates in the Trinity imaged in remembering, understanding, and loving.[34] Remembering corresponds to latent participation, while understanding and loving correspond to the active participation that William is more interested in.[35]

William is also famous as a critic of the pioneering Scholastic thinker and teacher Peter Abelard (d. 1142), whose preoccupation with logic he saw as dangerous to the authority on which faith depends. In the *Mirror*, William could be said to offer a corrective by way of contrast.[36] *The Enigma of Faith*, however, teaches and exemplifies a rational, even

philosophical process integrated into the progress of faith. The *Enigma*, which borrows much from Augustine, especially *De Trinitate*, is primarily an extended meditation on the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation. Indeed, on the one occasion when he uses the phrase "enigma of faith," William seems to have in mind not a verbal formulation but the mystery of participation in the Trinity made possible by the Incarnation.[37] He discusses the need to transcend the form of words and at the same time to continue to be informed and formed by them. "This occurs," he writes, "when faith, beginning to work through love, also begins to be formed into love and through love into understanding, and through understanding into love, or into understanding and love at the same time. It is difficult for a man so affected to discern which comes from which, since already in the heart of the one who believes, understands, and loves, these three are one, somewhat in the likeness of the supreme Trinity."[38] Reasoning is crucial but needs to happen as part of personal relationship that is always moving toward the vision "face to face." This is what makes it the "reasoning of faith." Indeed, for William as for Augustine, the inner, true word in the depths of each person's heart is already a participation in the Word made flesh.[39] Delving into the limits and "labyrinth" of the terminology of substance and relation for the nature of the Trinity, William reminds readers that the meaning of the words must be informed by the reality beginning to be experienced through faith and love, but insists on bringing along the orthodox form of words with all of its enigmas.[40]

At the center of *The Enigma of Faith* is a passage on the three degrees of understanding by which faith progresses. These initially sound like a linear ascent to a stable state of perfect enjoyment:

> The first degree, which is founded on authority, is that of faith, and it has the form of faith which has been formed from the credible witness of a proven authority. The second is that of reason, not of human reason, but of that which is proper to faith and which has itself the form of words sound in faith, and in agreement with divine authority in all things. . . . Now, the third degree is that of illumining and beautifying grace which puts an end to faith, or rather transforms it beatifically into love. It conveys a person from faith to vision by initiating a knowledge which is not that which faith possesses.[41]

The possibility of ecstatic union with God in this life, reached through love and participation in the Holy Spirit rather than participation in the Word, is explored in many of William's other works.[42] Yet here William is careful to add, "Arrival belongs to the next life"; what matters now is to continue the journey.

> And in the meantime as we examine the mysteries [*aenigmata*] of this first knowledge of God which is through faith, let us call upon him who made darkness his cover, not that he might not be seen but that he might be sought after more carefully, and to the degree that he would be sought after more carefully, to be more dearly loved when he shall have been found. Through his help and instruction, let us strive and seek to understand him through faith to the degree that he grants this for now; later it will be through his grace that we pass from faith to vision.[43]

The *aenigmata*, that is, both the mysteries themselves and the words that express them, play a special part in propelling the cycle of reasoning and *affectus* by which both knowledge and love increase. Scripture, the creeds, and the works of the fathers, particularly where they are most difficult and obscure, are an inexhaustible resource for the growth of faith conceived not just as a virtue but as fuller participation.

William's emphasis on the enigmatic serves to temper two kinds of what I am calling esotericism: that of the cloister, focused purely on affective experience; and that of the schools, focused on the methods of elite learning. The prestige of each would grow in the following centuries. Franciscan spirituality would take the affective emphasis beyond the cloister, and the universities would make the application of philosophy to theology ever more intricate and impressive. William shows how Augustine remained a resource for finding a balance, one that Bonaventure, writing from the center of affective and Scholastic influence, would rearticulate. Likewise, cultivating the enigmatic mode in the vernacular would help fourteenth-century authors to give life to the practice of theology that was becoming forbiddingly technical, while also giving intellectual depth to the movement that scholars now call affective piety. In vernacular prose, Julian of Norwich, noted for drawing on learned

sources in order to move beyond merely affective devotion, does so especially by theorizing cyclic stages of contemplation that progress by means of ever-renewed interpretation.[44]

For later writers such as Julian and Langland, it will be clear that the activity of writing is itself an important part of a spiritual process, but this must be true for William of St. Thierry and other monastic authors as well. One can see an embrace of the enigmatic mode in the style of monastic writing, as in that of William's great model, Augustine. Whereas Scholastic style seeks clarity, writes Leclercq, "The monks speak in images and comparisons borrowed from the Bible and possessing both a richness and an obscurity in keeping with the mystery to be expressed."[45] Monastic communities imbibed the enigmatic daily in the liturgy, including the singing of the Psalms, the section of the Bible that most clearly indicates its own use of this mode.[46] Composing new texts for the liturgy involves remixing the sacred words in order to evoke further shades of their mysteries.[47] Authors of liturgical texts might not have seen themselves as participating in the creativity of God in a modern, romantic, Coleridgean sense. The image of God is seen instead, as William says, in believing (or remembering), understanding, and loving. To compose verses for a new feast, for example, just as to compose prose aids to contemplation, is merely to renew the action by which the community receives God's prior action of drawing believers into greater participation, with enigma as a means of that cooperation. The further extension of participation to meditation on all the things of the world as enigmas, already a part of monastic spirituality, becomes linked to a general program of academic study through the influential work of William's contemporary, Hugh of St. Victor.

VICTORINE READING: HUGH OF ST. VICTOR'S *DIDASCALICON*

The tradition of monastic reading now known as *lectio divina* was seen as participatory in the simple sense of being "an intimate dialogue with a living, present, divine interlocutor."[48] Hugh of St. Victor (d. 1142) taught at a new house of Augustinian canons established just outside Paris in the

early twelfth century and focused on learning. His influential writings make monastic reading practices and Augustinian theology into a plan for education and the Scholasticism that would emerge from the universities. In his widely read *Didascalicon*, in particular, he consolidates the interpretation of the Bible according to its various senses as the basis for a course of contemplative reading that includes every other academic subject. Augustine had made the case for the Christian value of classical learning, and monastic schooling had nurtured the core disciplines of the trivium and quadrivium while deploying, sometimes to a dizzying extent, the exegetical doctrine of the three- or fourfold senses passed down by Augustine and other fathers. Hugh's *Didascalicon*, however, synthesizes the order of the disciplines, the doctrine of the senses, and monastic reading practices to form a design for all study.[49] It provides a helpful bridge from Augustine's theology of the Word to vernacular authors of the fourteenth century who were trying to uncover the mystery of the presence of the Word in the particularities of their own time and place.

The two halves of the *Didascalicon*, three books on studying the arts and three on studying scripture, might seem to anticipate the modern separation between secular and sacred, or between philosophy and theology. But the first half's discussion of the arts, or kinds of knowledge, includes theology as the highest of them, all encompassed within philosophy as "the love of that Wisdom which, wanting in nothing, is a living Mind and the sole primordial Idea or Pattern of things."[50] Thus the scope of the arts is knowledge of all things, the book of creation and its Author, and the second half takes the book of scripture as the key to learning how to read the book of creation for its wisdom. For, as Augustine had written and Thomas and others would repeat, "In the divine utterance not only words but even things have a meaning." Hugh, however, adds the revealing comment that this is "a way of communication not usually found to such an extent in other writings" (5.3, p. 121). Scripture is exceptional in this respect, but not unique; other texts too explore the meaning of things, but with less authority. Hugh holds up the goal that all reading and writing penetrate to an understanding of how all things participate in divine Wisdom.

Like William, Hugh is aware of the esoteric dangers of enigma (and also perhaps saw them in Abelard).[51] His main discussion of the moral or

tropological sense of scripture warns against getting too caught up in zeal for knowledge and for penetrating the obscurities of the allegorical sense, to the detriment of "desire to imitate the virtues set forth" (5.7, p. 128). Here he mentions the danger of exclusive interest in "untangling the enigmas of the Prophets and the mystical meanings of sacred symbols [*sacramentorum*]" (5.7, p. 129). Yet this warning assumes the appeal of such study and implies its value when it does lead to desire for the things signified. Later, after laying out historical and allegorical understanding as the foundation and superstructure that tropological understanding then decorates, Hugh offers this brief, pregnant paragraph:

> Concerning tropology I shall not at present say anything more than what was said above, except that it is more the meaning of things than the meaning of words which seems to pertain to it. For in the meaning of things lies natural justice, out of which the discipline of our own morals, that is, positive justice, arises. By contemplating what God has made we realize what we ourselves ought to do. Every nature tells of God; every nature teaches man; every nature reproduces its essential form, and nothing in the universe is infecund. (6.5, pp. 144–45)

The moral sense is not primarily in explicit moral commands but in seeing the divine action in nature and history. Here is the basis for the development of what Hugh classifies in book 2 as the practical arts of ethics, economics, and politics under a theory of natural law (perhaps giving a nod to the natural philosophy being developed by his contemporaries associated with the school of Chartres).[52] Worthy as these disciplines might be on their own, Hugh sees greater importance in reading the endlessly fertile participation of nature in the divine mysteries as a means of lifting up each individual into love of wisdom.[53]

Hugh's guide to reading flirts with didacticism more than esotericism. His own style, though lyrical at times and effective in its use of extended images, shows that he was in fact a schoolmaster. His plan of learning can be seen in retrospect as preparing the way for methodical and increasingly specialized Scholastic practices. Three central principles, however, keep his guidance oriented to the enigmatic: that the interpre-

tive process should be flexible and recursive; that a reader needs to assemble and comprehend the various kinds of knowledge as an integrated whole; and that reading is completed in meditation that leads to contemplation.

Hugh's approach to interpretation, grounded in Augustine's theology of the Word, spirals endlessly toward fuller and clearer understanding of the implications of that theology. He summarizes the core idea with immediate reference to scripture but wider significance for other kinds of reading: "What, therefore, the sound of the mouth, which all in the same moment begins to subsist and fades away, is to the idea in the mind, that the whole extent of time is to eternity. The idea in the mind is the internal word, which is shown forth by the sound of the voice, that is, by the external word. And the divine Wisdom, which the Father has uttered out of his heart, invisible in Itself, is recognized through creatures and in them" (5.3, p. 122). How, then, is one to study to recognize the eternal Word in the creations of time? Each half of the *Didascalicon* contains a chapter with the title "Concerning the Method of Expounding a Text," the only title that is repeated, and the latter one, on scripture, merely summarizes the former. In either case, his procedure moves from the finite to the infinite, from what is better known to what lies hidden, from universals to particulars in order "to investigate the nature of the things those universals contain" (3.9, p. 92).

Study and meditation are the first of five steps leading through prayer and performance to contemplation (5.9, p. 132). Ascent is the goal, but life is such that we must also continually descend and begin again.[54] Yet this ascent also requires a circulation between analysis and synthesis, the particular and the universal, worked out through the relationship between what Hugh calls the letter, the sense, and the *sententia*, or deeper meaning. With scripture, the sense or obvious meaning corresponds to what exegetical tradition called the literal or historical sense, and the deeper meaning corresponds to the spiritual senses. Hugh acknowledges the problem that sometimes in scripture there is no sense, no obvious meaning that makes sense or accords with truth, only the letter and a deeper meaning.[55] Yet he counsels not to move past the sense too quickly but to dwell on it for what it might yet reveal if interpreted in the order of history, what we would now call historical context. Thus Hugh has

rightly been lauded as a pioneer of modern exegetical scholarship.[56] More central to the *Didascalicon*, however, is the spiraling movement between letter, sense, and deeper meaning in order to find more that has been hidden in the letter and in the individual particulars to which it most directly refers.

The exegetical doctrine of the spiritual senses provides the primary blueprint for this movement, and Hugh's emphasis on the integration of the literal and spiritual senses ensures that the interpretive spiral is ever widening and generative. Hugh's main discussion of the senses of scripture here uses a threefold model: history and two spiritual senses, allegory and tropology. The image of constructing a building, adapted from Gregory the Great, establishes the importance of keeping the three senses united in proper order.[57] History is the foundation because the spiritual senses apply not just to words but to things, and the things are related as events in a narrative, so the whole foundation needs to be laid out in order for upper levels of the structure to be built on it. Hugh makes a plea for learning even those details of history that seem inconsequential so that their significance can be seen in light of the whole. It is in this context of studying the historical sense that he famously writes, "Learn everything; you will see afterwards that nothing is superfluous. A skimpy knowledge is not a pleasing thing" (6.3, p. 137). Allegory, then, "is that spiritual structure which is raised on high, built, as it were, with as many courses of stones as it contains mysteries" (6.4, p. 141). Hugh envisions this as pressing further and further into obscurity, and to that end he supplies a brief, narratively ordered account of the mysteries to be found, from the Trinity to the resurrection of the body. This summary would in fact become the outline for his much larger work *De sacramentis*, often seen as the first great medieval *summa* of theology. For Hugh understands theology less as a separate science working logically from a set of presuppositions than as an art of interpretation constantly turning again to the inexhaustible letter and the historical sense. This historical orientation extends beyond theology as a set of eternal truths to an awareness of the unfolding of revelation within time, its stages and renewals, and the consequent need to pay attention to history beyond the closure of the scriptural canon.[58] The interconnection of the scriptural senses and their basis in history resist the didactic tendency that can come from detaching

them into separate categories of doctrine. Rather, the enigmas of history remain sources of new spiritual insight.

This vision of the participation of all history in the divine plan includes the life of the reader through the formative results Hugh sees in good reading. The two spiritual senses correspond to two fruits of sacred reading, knowledge and morals (6.6), and to the two actions that increase active participation in the divine and set the program for all study, "the contemplation of truth and the practice of virtue" (1.8, pp. 54–55). The reformation of the reader through contemplation and virtue is the goal of reading both in the arts and in theology. Each half of the *Didascalicon*, on the arts and on scripture, includes a section on the meditation that reading should lead to. The three kinds of meditation that follow from the arts already anticipate the spiritual senses that structure interpretation of scripture: "One consists in a consideration of morals, the second in a scrutiny of the commandments, and the third in an investigation of the divine works" (3.10, p. 93). The first two correspond to the tropological sense and the third to the allegorical, built on the foundation of history. In the arts as in scripture, the path of study leads from things to their participation in the divine, and in each case Hugh is primarily interested in actions, that is, events in history. Meditation seems to arise especially from obscurities but moves beyond interpretive procedure: "Meditation takes its start from reading but is bound by none of reading's rules or precepts. For it delights to range along open ground, where it fixes its free gaze upon the contemplation of truth, drawing together now these, now those causes of things, or now penetrating into profundities, leaving nothing doubtful, nothing obscure. The start of learning, thus, lies in reading, but its consummation lies in meditation" (3.10, pp. 92–93). In the second half, Hugh adds that reading and meditation lead to further ascent through prayer, action, and contemplation and that this ascent often requires descending again to previous stages (5.9).

After these hints that obscurities have a special role in moving readers toward meditation and contemplation, Hugh ends the *Didascalicon* by saying that meditation has not been written about well and reserving it for separate treatment. One place to look for this treatment is his *De arca Noe morali*, the first of three treatises on spiritual life that unfold as interpretations of Noah's ark.[59] While performing the kind of integrated

reading according to several senses taught in the *Didascalicon*, Hugh gives instruction on how God's work of restoration in history can become a focus of meditation for the sake of personal, inner restoration.[60] Chapter 4 of the fourth and final book addresses why God speaks secretly and obscurely. God hides, Hugh says, in order to arouse desire: "For such is the heart of man, that if it cannot gain possession of the thing it loves, it burns the more with longing."[61] Interweaving his own text with references to the Song of Songs, Hugh depicts how God speaks in hiding in order to move the soul to follow into another country where they can be intimate. This summons is the reason God speaks from hiding, as it were, in the law and the prophets as well as, in the Gospels, through parables and riddles (*per parabolas et aenigmata*). He adds that it is fitting for the secrets of mystical understanding to be hidden in figures so they are not cheapened by being open to everyone. While mention of enigmas also brings to mind a more esoteric function of excluding, Hugh's discussion of the uses of obscurity for the restoration of the soul emphasizes how it excites desire and inquiry.[62]

By grounding it in this monastic sense of the value of enigma for contemplation and in the study of history, Hugh strengthens the capacity of the threefold scheme of exegesis—more widespread and familiar in its fourfold variation—to articulate the narrative dimension of the theology of participation. The place of this exegetical scheme in Hugh's work shows how it is not so much a key to orthodox decoding of obscure, figurative texts as it is the most well-articulated and influential approach to reading the world according to a theology of participation, and in particular to a theology of history as participation in the unfolding of divine purpose.[63] Certainly the three- or fourfold scheme could harden into method and produce reductively didactic or fancifully esoteric interpretations of scripture. The Scholastic move toward more analytical ways of organizing theological knowledge would somewhat eclipse Hugh's emphasis on history.[64] History becomes another field for the encyclopedic compilation of symbolism, along with lapidaries and bestiaries, analysis of names and etymologies, commentaries on colors and numbers in the Bible and the liturgy, as in the massive, four-part *Speculum quadruplex* by Vincent of Beauvais. Yet for people faced with the necessity of acting in the world, and for literature imitating action in order to shed some light

on it, the most important kind of symbols were those to which Erich Auerbach drew attention under the term *figura*: people and actions linked to an understanding of meaningful patterns in history revealed in Christ (allegory), happening in the life of every individual (tropology), and to be consummated in the new heavens and new earth (anagogy).[65] Bonaventure's *Breviloquium* uses the Pauline figure of breadth, length, height, and depth to include the spiritual senses in an even more expansive vision of how scripture is the key to understanding all things, especially history, and thus to participation in divine action. Scripture's breadth is its division into two testaments, each containing the other; its height is its unfolding of hierarchies rising into increasing mystery; its depth is its spiritual senses; and its length is its narration of all history "like a beautifully composed poem" that provides the overall view needed for beginning to guess the riddles of historical particulars.[66]

Exegetical approaches to opening the mysteries presented by the Christian theology of participation are bound up with other aspects of later medieval culture that begin to flourish in the Renaissance of the twelfth century. As Auerbach shows in *Mimesis*, the figural view of history contributes to breaking down the classical rules of literary decorum, so that the lives of ordinary individuals come to be portrayed as sharing in the most momentous patterns of history.[67] Similarly, Hugh's program of study is related to what Chenu calls a new awareness of history, which also includes new forms of historical writing more interested in making sense of the present and less dominated by transmitting an epic view of the past.[68] Like Hugh's *Didascalicon* and *De sacramentis*, works such as Peter Comestor's *Historia scholastica* provided an aid for gaining the narrative framework needed to see present events as meaningful. More broadly still, the cultural expressions associated with what Colin Morris has called the medieval discovery of the individual—such as the writing of autobiography, the increasing practice of confession, and the invention of romantic love—all help cultivate attention to the significance of individual experience in the light of larger structures of meaning.[69] Works such as the *Divine Comedy* and *Piers Plowman* would use the enigmatic to cultivate readers' interpretation of their own history as part of a larger, unfolding narrative. Yet this new awareness of history could also find expression in an interpretive scheme that was less than enigmatic, as in the

influential apocalypticism of Joachim of Fiore, which manages to be both didactic and esoteric.[70] Meanwhile, the multifaceted late medieval flourishing of what we now call mysticism often moves away from history and toward esotericism, yet, in the legacy of Pseudo-Dionysius, preserves and amplifies another of medieval Christian theology's most dynamic expressions of participation in the play of enigma.

DENIS AND THE *CLOUD*: ENIGMA AND MYSTICISM

Mysticism has a long medieval history, largely under the continuous influence of Augustine and Gregory the Great, transmitted and reformulated by authors such as William of St. Thierry and Hugh of St. Victor. Later medieval mystical theology also bears the strong stamp of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, or Denis, as he was known in Middle English (and will henceforth be referred to here).[71] As central as interplay between positive and negative language about the divine is to Augustine's theology, it is even more prominent in Denis. Modern use of the Greek terms *cataphatic* and *apophatic* for these two poles of theological discourse, or sometimes even for two different kinds of theology, stems from his works. Though now thought to have written in Syria in the fifth or sixth century, this Greek-speaking author successfully posed as the Dionysius of Acts 17 who was converted by the apostle Paul himself. Thus his writings were given near-canonical authority until his identity began to be questioned by modern scholars. His influence in the West was limited during the early Middle Ages but grew steadily over the twelfth century and exploded in the thirteenth and fourteenth. Throughout the later Middle Ages he was further conflated with the St. Denis who, by legend, established Christianity in Paris. Aquinas and other Scholastics frequently cite the four treatises attributed to him, *The Divine Names*, *The Celestial Hierarchy*, *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, and *Mystical Theology*.[72] Even the currency of the term *mystical* derives from the last of these. The second canon of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), in rejecting Joachim of Fiore's reduction of the mystery of the Trinity, uses the language of Denis's mystical theology to reassert it: "For between the Creator and a creature there can be remarked no similarity so great that a

greater dissimilarity cannot be seen between them."[73] Altogether, Denis's works both reinforced Augustine's approach to the enigmatic and introduced an alternative, more esoteric use of figurative language and symbolism in theology.

The twelfth-century wave of commentary on Denis's works began with Hugh of St. Victor's exposition of *The Celestial Hierarchy.* In the Latin translation he used, *enigma* occurs in a sentence that gives it the more esoteric function of hiding the understanding of "supermundane" truth. Yet this is part of a larger passage on the need for images based on sensory experience in order to lift contemplation to what it cannot access directly. Hugh's commentary on this passage focuses, as in *De arca Noe morali*, not on the negative use of the parables and figures of scripture to conceal, but rather on their capacity to stimulate study and devotion.[74] Hugh includes a definition of *symbol* that reflects the Platonism shared by both Denis and Augustine: "A symbol is a juxtaposition, that is, a coaptation of visible forms brought forth to demonstrate some invisible matter."[75] In Denis, as in book 15 of *De Trinitate*, the movement from visible to invisible is driven by a dialectic of affirming the similarity in the symbol while removing the dissimilarity. Denis, however, in his *Mystical Theology*, dwells on negation, which his works at times seem to imply allows a closer approach to the mystery of what exceeds comprehension. Richard of St. Victor (d. 1173), successor of Hugh, states the core principle: "Every figure demonstrates the truth the more clearly in proportion as by dissimilar similitude it figures that it is itself the truth and does not prove the truth; in so doing, dissimilar similitudes lead the mind closer to the truth by not allowing the mind to rest in the similitude alone."[76] Such a concentrated combination of similarity and dissimilarity sounds even more like what riddles do than Augustine's extended, rhetorical approach to obscurity. Denis's approach to symbols also wants to organize contemplation of the transcendent according to hierarchies, components of the grand scale of being, so that one begins with those furthest from the source of all being and thus most apt to remind one of the inadequacy of all symbols. Even when contemplation reaches the top of the hierarchy, the essential action is to negate all knowledge and enter into what an anonymous English author of the fourteenth century would call "the cloud of unknowing."

This term comes from *Mystical Theology*, which the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* translated into English under the title *Deonise [Denis's] Hid Divinity.*[77] Denis's typically paradoxical style comes out in the translation of his opening prayer, in which *sovereyn*, mostly translating the Latin source's *super*, expresses a supernegative or superpositive that points toward the divine:

> Thou unbigonne and everlastyng Wysdome, the whiche in thiself arte the sovereyn-substancyal Firstheed [Firstness], the sovereyn Goddesse [Godness, not goddess], and the sovereyn Good, the inliche [inward] beholder of the godliche maad [divinely made] wisdome of Cristen men: I beseche thee for to drawe us up in an acordyng abilnes to the sovereyn-unknowen and the sovereyn-schinyng height of thi derke inspirid spekynges, where all the pryve thinges of devinytee ben koverid and hid under the sovereyn-schinyng derknes of wisest silence, makyng the sovereyn-clerest sovereynly for to schine prively in the derkyst; and the which is—in a maner that is alweys invisible and ungropable—sovereynli fulfillyng with ful fayre cleertees all thoo soules that ben not havyng iyen [eyes] of mynde.[78]

Those whose minds lack eyes include everyone, as is clearer in the Latin source. Denis, by comparison to Augustine, is not interested in remedying the effects of sin as much as in pressing to the limits of human finitude. The possibility of attaining any wisdom depends on the principle of participation, as the English translator has made plainer by replacing "Trinitas" with "Wisdom" as the name by which God is addressed. God's own vision as "beholder" is likewise the means of participation in wisdom, so that human sight is a sort of return to God of the divine sight. This metaphor reflects Denis's Neoplatonic view of the creation as proceeding from and returning to the divine. The language of this prayer for ascent (or return) already performs the interplay between affirmation and negation that is the treatise's basic teaching. The enigmatic could be said to reach an extreme of compressed intensity in Denis. The goal of both fullness and clarity in the kind of knowledge sought could hardly be better expressed. Yet there is a loss of the interpretive process important to the rhetoric of enigma, and this is related to Denis's disengagement from history.

The *Mystical Theology* does not mention Christ or give a role to love in the approach to God. Commentaries on Denis, beginning with Hugh's, worked to accommodate his teaching to the dominant, Augustinian theology. A later Victorine, Thomas Gallus (ca. 1200–1246), introduced in his commentary on Denis's works the idea, like that found in William of St. Thierry, of an "*affectus*" of the mind that goes beyond intellect in the ecstasy of the cloud of unknowing.[79] Thus, following Gallus, the *Cloud* author expands the simple "This is my prayer" at the end of the opening prayer in *Mystical Theology* into "And for alle thees thinges ben aboven mynde, therfore with affeccyon aboven mynde as I may, I desire to purchase hem unto me with this preier."[80] Similarly Gallus himself hints, in a summary of the first part of *Mystical Theology*, at how its way of negation might be reconciled with book 15 of *De Trinitate:* "Having got that far, knowledge itself is darkened since it is increased beyond itself towards greater knowledge. Also the breadth of the vocal word, or even of the mental one, is restricted to the simplicity of the eternal Word. And it is there also that deification occurs, that is to say, a changeover from human things to divine."[81] Thus Augustine's theology of the Word and Denis's ascent by unknowing could come together, as Aquinas and Bonaventure would show more comprehensively, to enrich and reinforce the theological significance of the enigmatic. Yet these two major sources for thinking about theological language and the interpretation of signs and symbols could also lead in somewhat contrary directions: on one hand, to didactic allegorism that emphasizes the positive character of theological language, the transparency of signs, and the way of affirmation; and on the other hand, to esoteric gnosticism that emphasizes the limits of language, the opacity of symbols, the way of negation, and the superiority of affective experience. Entering the cloud of unknowing requires a demanding mental operation of purification. Even the way of affirmation as treated by Denis can make elaborate, stepwise ascent through the mediation of hierarchies, both human and cosmic, seem necessary.[82] When the goal is seen to be a kind of experience rather than understanding, it leads away from the time-bound, the created, the historical, the sphere of becoming, embodiment, and individuality.

The Cloud of Unknowing offers an instructive example, among many from the flourishing of mysticism in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, of both the temptation to gnosticism and the potential of the

enigmatic to offset it.[83] The *Cloud* marks itself as esoteric in the most obvious way by announcing that its teaching is only for those who have advanced to the second-highest degree of Christian life and are ready for the highest. Its author directs the friend to whom he is writing to leave all created things behind. His concern is with the inner life, and while he acknowledges the value of considering God's gifts, he teaches an austere and demanding technique: "to think apon the nakid beyng of him, and to love him and preise him for him-self."[84] To place the negative way—entry into "the cloud of unknowing"—on a higher level is to separate it sharply from the way of affirmation. The *Cloud* requires self-forgetting and self-abandonment, either as an inner motion or as a surrendered state.[85] Like Gallus's commentaries, the *Cloud* also supplements Denis's strictly intellectual movement of contemplation with the idea that what goes beyond understanding is love. The same author's *Book of Privy Counselling* explains human life as a participation in the life of God, but the directions for contemplation are not to embrace creation as the book of God but rather to exclude everything, including all conceptions of God, and begin from "nakid entent."[86] Even when the summit of contemplation is reconceived as not just a stark negation of intellect but a being-affected that suggests some sort of feeling, this approach to God collapses the prolongation of interpretive work that stimulates both understanding and desire, activity as well as receptiveness.

The *Cloud*'s recommendation of single-syllable prayers shows such a collapse, yet these prayers can also be seen as akin to riddles in their concentration of the interplay between affirmation and negation, activity and passivity. The author commends this technique as an exception to his central teaching "that in this werk men schul use no menes [means, methods]" (71). He acknowledges the value of reading, meditation, and prayer for beginners. Indeed, digressing briefly to insist that these three must be kept together, he seems to uphold the tradition of monastic reading seen in William of St. Thierry and Hugh of St. Victor.[87] He calls scripture a mirror in which the eye of reason sees the "visage goostly" of conscience (72). If this is an allusion to 1 Corinthians 13:12, then "in aenigmate" is reduced, in a fashion that radicalizes the orthodox, Augustinian gloss, to the self alone.[88] For those who do the work of the *Cloud*, "Theire meditacions ben as thei were sodein conseites and blynde felynges of theire owne wrechidnes, or of the goodnes of God, with-outyn any menes of

redyng or heryng comyng before, and with-outyn any specyal beholdyng of any thing under God" (73). And when they pray in words, which is seldom, it is "bot in ful fewe wordes; ye, and in ever the fewer the betir" (74). Despite this extreme concentration of any verbal mediation, however, the ensuing explanation of the power of one-syllable prayers includes notable instances of narrative imagination and interpretive subtlety and shows the *Cloud* giving guidance to mystical practice not just through negations—unknowing—but through vivid images from everyday life.

What the author calls an "ensaumple in the cours of kynde [nature]" (74) posits a man or woman in an emergency, such as a fire, calling for help with one piercing word. Such one-syllable prayers are so powerful, he adds, because they are prayed with the full spirit in all its height, depth, length, and breadth. This figure comes from St. Paul's prayer that his readers might be "filled unto all the fulness of God" (Eph. 3:19). The *Cloud* author applies it first to the one praying and then to God so that it becomes a sort of diagram for how such a prayer is a participation in the basic divine attributes and conforms the soul to "the ymage and the liknes of God" (75).[89] Whereas Bonaventure, in the *Breviloquium*, uses the same figure expansively, for the endless meaning of scripture as gateway to participation, the *Cloud* uses it more intensively, for mystical experience. Such a combination of a brief but allegorical and Scholastic-sounding bit of exegesis with a dramatic example from ordinary life captures a playfulness that runs throughout the *Cloud* and lightens its esoteric gravity. One-syllable prayers are rather like riddles in their humble, even playful attempt to invest language with fullness of meaning.

Elsewhere the author calls the highest contemplation play (55) and says one ought to feel like a child being played with affectionately by its father (88). As others have suggested, some of its strategies might best be seen as games like hide and seek.[90] Its single-syllable prayers could perhaps become playful if treated like a mantra. Moreover, even if the *Cloud* does not recommend meditation on more extended, enigmatic texts or on the created world, the treatise itself is carefully adventurous in its use of paradoxes and comparisons to physical reality, of which the title image is only the most prominent.[91] Like this image's source, and perhaps like most mystical texts, the *Cloud* prefers the visual to the verbal for metaphors of knowing. Whether positive or negative, these suggest an instantaneous, timeless experience as opposed to the duration and process

implied by figures such as the Augustinian inner word. Nonetheless, the work of the *Cloud* involves play with words that keeps its rather gnostic goal connected to the everyday, with the potential to inject ordinary life with depth even if the ordinary is not the means to that depth.

THE ENIGMATIC METAPHYSICS OF THOMAS AQUINAS

The *Cloud* shows the tendency for the enigmatic to drop out of a mysticism oriented to negation over affirmation and to experience over understanding, but it brings something like enigma back to make the path more accessible and ground it in the familiar. Enigma tends to drop out of Scholasticism too because of its opposite orientation toward what can be said positively and toward knowledge expressed with logical precision in the formats derived from schoolroom lectures and disputations. Indeed, Scholastic theology became increasingly divorced from the need to be oriented toward the contemplative practices that Hugh saw as the culmination of reading. This separation of theology from the practical disciplines of Christian life would eventually be exacerbated by intellectual innovations that undermined the thought structure of participation.[92] Yet Thomas Aquinas, in combining the Neoplatonic theology received especially from Augustine and Denis with the philosophy of Aristotle, provides the richest intellectual basis for a poetics of enigma. Aquinas elaborates the idea of latent participation into a full-fledged metaphysics.[93] At the same time, his attention to the conditions of human knowledge implies a phenomenology of active participation, one in which the sacraments become central.[94]

Aquinas's commentary on 1 Corinthians 13:12 reflects his use of the term *enigma* throughout his vast corpus and situates his understanding of it within major aspects of his thought. Beginning, in good Scholastic style, with a distinction between three kinds of seeing, he takes the indirectness of seeing in a mirror to mean that "we know the invisible things of God through creatures," as taught by Romans 1:20 and followed by Augustine, Denis, and exegetical tradition. "And so," continues Thomas. "all creation is a mirror for us, because from the order and goodness and magnitude which are caused in things by God, we come to a knowledge of His power, goodness and eminence. And this knowledge is called see-

ing in a mirror."[95] The principle is familiar, but the phrasing deserves scrutiny. The language of causation recalls Aristotle but could also come from Augustine or Denis, and it suggests how Thomas takes Aristotle up into the Christian doctrine of creation in order to refine the metaphysics of participation. Using the Aristotelian categories of act and potentiality and of form and matter, Thomas asserts that God is pure Act, who gives to all material beings the raw potentiality that is matter. Things are what they are because their matter participates in their given form, which in turn participates to a given degree in the essential form that is God's action.[96] Intelligent beings participate in the highest degree by being able to understand and to will.

Negative theology, which Thomas derives principally from Denis, underwrites his claim that God, in the simplicity of pure Act, is utterly beyond comprehension (other than God's own). Even being cannot be said properly of God but is rather a participation in God. At the same time, Aquinas integrates the negative with the affirmative so that the negative cannot be an end point of thought, the sheer darkness of unknowing. Instead the two are always kept in dynamic interplay. Causality is the basis of affirmations from what is seen of God in creatures, as "in a mirror." His commentary's first two examples of what is reflected are wisdom and goodness, those divine attributes that call to intelligence and will, respectively. The third attribute, eminence, is precisely that by which God's incomprehensibility exceeds what can be seen, said, or known. *Magnitude* refers to hierarchies of being within creation that point to the idea of such eminence, which keeps human knowledge from ending in negation. Behind every negation is always a supereminent ("soverein" in the language of the *Cloud* author) affirmation. Yet negation is necessary to move up the hierarchy and to understand that the created hierarchy is not in continuity with the divine because there is no continuity of the finite with the infinite.

Affirmation and negation are equal partners in the dance of knowledge, and Aquinas identifies enigma particularly with negation:

> It should be further noted that a likeness of this sort, which is of a likeness gleaming back on someone else, is twofold: because sometimes it is clear and open, as that which appears in a mirror, sometimes it is obscure and secret [*obscura et occulta*], and then that vision

> is said to be enigmatic, as when I say: "Me a mother begot, and the same is born from me." That is secret by a simile [*per simile occultum*]. And it is said of ice, which is born from frozen water and the water is born from the melted ice. Thus, therefore, it is clear that vision through the likeness of a likeness is in a mirror, by a likeness hidden in an enigma, but a clear and open likeness makes another kind of allegorical vision. Therefore, inasmuch as we know the invisible things of God through creatures, we are said to see through a mirror. Inasmuch as those invisible things are secrets [*occulta*] to us, we see in an enigma.[97]

Aquinas follows Augustine's rhetorical analysis, substituting for Augustine's biblical example of a riddle the one that had become standard from the grammar textbook of Donatus (see below, chapter 4, the section "Grammar"). He calls enigma first "obscure," the word used by both Augustine and Donatus and used most often elsewhere by Aquinas. But then he calls it "occulta," secret or hidden, a word smacking of Denis at his more esoteric. Yet he also expresses the whole figure of vision through a mirror in an enigma much more positively as "through the likeness of a likeness" (per similitudinem similitudinis). Enigma brings the negative but also contains within its own figure the endlessness of the interplay between affirmation and negation.

Thomas's interpreters, perhaps following the lead of Thomas himself, have focused on the concept of analogy as his way of expressing the metaphysics of participation and balancing affirmation and negation.[98] Analogy is a mean between univocity and equivocity that is necessitated by rejecting those two alternatives on theological grounds. If any terms were univocal when said of both God and a creature, that is, if they meant precisely the same thing, then there would be categories of affirmation unlimited by any negation that would thus be metaphysically prior to God, not a participation in God. In that respect, God would be brought within the sphere of human comprehension. Later, some Scholastic thinkers, beginning with John Duns Scotus, would consider the notion of being to be univocal. On the other hand, if language is equivocal with regard to God and anything else, then the knowledge of God is limited to negation and the links of participation are broken. But, as

Gregory P. Rocca puts it, "Analogy points to a relation between creatures and God, by which we compare things to God as to their first origin and thus attribute to God the names of perfections."[99] The metaphysics of participation means that all things created by God are in some way signs of God, even if what they show is true of God eminently and incomprehensibly. Analogy could be said to be the linguistic logic of the poetics of enigma, though I am not aware of any medieval author who says just that. But Aquinas comes close.

Most often when Thomas uses the term *enigma*, whether in the phrase from 1 Corinthians 13:12 or on its own, commonly in adjectival form, it describes the knowledge of faith. In one sense, as in the contrast to "through a mirror" in his commentary, it expresses the limits of knowledge of divine things in this life.[100] But, especially when used on its own, it also expresses the possibility of the kind of knowledge that Aquinas calls faith. *Enigma* works as a shorthand term for all that Aquinas works out logically in terms of analogy.[101] Aristotelian psychology commits Aquinas to the view that what we know, we know from sense experience and authoritative words. Yet Thomas also combines Aristotle's approach to knowledge with Augustine's conception of the inner word as a participation in the Word.[102] All cognition involves inner, mental signs that mediate relations between psychological states and external realities. This extension of Augustinian sign theory manifests how all human reasoning participates in divine intelligence.[103] Enigmatic signs mediate the knowledge called faith by directing cognition to its highest object, the knowledge of God, in which it is destined to find fulfillment and rest. At the same time, the Aristotelian component of this Christian theory of knowledge extends the enigmatic to all fields of knowledge and includes them, even more thoroughly than did Augustine or Hugh, within a theological project.[104]

Thomas's thought clarifies from a theological perspective how enigma engages believers as whole people. Knowledge and love are no more separable for Thomas than for Augustine or for William of St. Thierry. For Thomas the Aristotelian, however, because we are embodied creatures, our thinking remains tied to images from our senses. Sense knowledge, moreover, is what moves us. Plus, as Thomas further indicates in his article on why theology uses metaphor, images from lowly things have the

advantage of reminding us of the unlikeness that attends any likeness they have to God.[105] Analogies are products not of intuition but of judgment, which is aware of how they both affirm and deny in order to assert "what *cannot* be fully conceived or defined."[106] And these judgments are made by faith that is not only knowledge but also a virtue by which the will assents to certain fundamental truths about God as infinite creator and the creation as a likeness of God, all of which are summarized, as it were, in the doctrine of participation.[107] Enigma engages natural capacities toward perfection by the work of grace. Such grace too is participation of human agency in divine agency, participation by which human agency, far from being displaced by the divine, is brought to full activity, to fulfillment in understanding and joy.[108]

Aquinas acknowledges extraordinary cases of knowledge that he calls enigmatic, such as the visions, dreams, and parables typical of prophecy, but his emphasis is on the ordinary.[109] For Thomas, this means the sacraments. Responding to the question of whether sacraments are necessary after the coming of Christ, Thomas writes,

> As Dionysius [Denis] says, the state of the New Law is an intermediate one, half way between the Old Law on the one hand, the figures of which are fulfilled in the New, and the state of glory on the other, in which every truth will be made manifest fully and absolutely in itself. Hence in the latter state there will be no sacraments. At present, however, as long as we know *as in a mirror darkly*, as we are told in 1 Corinthians, we need sensible signs of some kind to enable us to attain to spiritual realities. And this is something that pertains to the very nature of the sacraments.[110]

Thomas's own devotion to the Eucharist is well known. His formulation of the doctrine of transubstantiation could be seen as a concentrated instance of his thinking about how the enigmatic works, though I am not aware that he uses the word there.[111] More relevant, though, is the single instance of Thomas as practitioner of enigmatic poetry: his hymns for the feast of Corpus Christi. The fourth stanza of his "Pange lingua gloriosi," famously difficult to translate, plays in compressed, paradoxical fashion with the theology of the Word that is at the root of the poetics of enigma:

Verbum caro panem verum
Verbo carnem efficit;
Fitque sanguis Christi merum;
Et si sensus deficit,
Ad firmandum cor sincerum
Sola fides sufficit.

[Word made Flesh, by Word He maketh
very bread his flesh to be;
Man in wine Christ's Blood partaketh,
And if senses fail to see,
Faith alone the true heart waketh
To behold the mystery.][112]

Christ himself, the paradigm of all enigmas, fashions what was no doubt the prime experience of the enigmatic in medieval life, the Eucharist. The hymn invites meditation not just on the mysteries but on the sign's effect in at once stretching toward and falling short of the truth. It calls forth the knowledge that is of the heart rather than of the head but that is no less knowledge for deriving its strength from the will. Neale's translation further adds the appropriate note that such knowledge is not the sleep of reason but a waking into the highest knowledge. Whether poetic fictions outside the liturgy could have such an effect is something that Aquinas (along with Hugh, William, and Augustine) would have doubted, yet to which his work might nonetheless point the way.[113]

THE BONAVENTURAN SYNTHESIS

One final theological text, Bonaventure's *Journey of the Mind to God (Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, 1259), weaves together all of the strands already discussed and adds others that relate the enigmatic to important later medieval trends.[114] While the *Didascalicon* organized and directed a basic approach to reading, the *Itinerarium* envisions and theorizes its furthest extension into contemplation. Hugh addressed the *Didascalicon* to members of a school community; Bonaventure addresses his text to those at an advanced stage of devotion ready to ruminate over the words of one of

the most elevated contemplative texts, and yet also to anyone in "this vale of tears" ready to receive help to rise up to God.[115] Hugh was master of a group of Augustinian canons, a new order that was part of a twelfth-century movement seeking close imitation of the apostles beyond the restrictions of the Benedictine cloister. Bonaventure, who introduces himself in the *Itinerarium* as the seventh successor to Francis as minister general of the Franciscan order, was at the center of that more prominent and radical movement. Nonetheless, much of what distinguishes the Franciscans and other mendicant orders extends the Victorine emphasis on history and the literal sense into the conviction that, as Chenu puts it, "exegesis, dogmatics, and preaching could not be separated for one who would master the gospels, because they could be fully comprehended only by participation in the immediate action of the word."[116]

Like many of Bonaventure's works of instruction and devotion, the *Itinerarium* crafts a style of order, balance, and concision that resembles the enigmatic in its aesthetic unfolding of the endless significance guaranteed by the theology of participation.[117] At the same time, however, in his refinement of the Augustinian path through inwardness to universality, Bonaventure anticipates the increasing focus on individuality that would, in later Franciscans such as Duns Scotus and William of Ockham, begin to erode the epistemology of participation.[118] The *Itinerarium* itself intensifies this epistemology by centering it on the individual's participation in the unique event of the Incarnation and Passion. This experience reached its height, for Francis and many others in the late Middle Ages, in a personal vision. Three new emphases in Bonaventure's treatment of contemplation are crucial for later enigmatic literature: focus on the suffering Christ, greater individualism, and the authority of visions.

The *Itinerarium* was occasioned, Bonaventure writes, by his own experience, though not a visionary one: a visit to Mount Alverna, site of the most influential of all medieval Christian visions, in which Francis saw "a winged seraph in the form of the Crucified" and received the stigmata (prol. 2, p. 1). Bonaventure's treatise takes his recollection of Francis's vision as its focal, enigmatic text and derives from it a seven-chapter structure, with the seraph's six wings forming six steps of contemplation that climax in Christ on the cross as the door to the final passage beyond contemplation. Bonaventure uses the term *enigma* only once, in a quo-

tation of 1 Corinthians 13:12 at the transition from seeing vestiges of God in the external world to seeing the image of God within the mind—precisely the interpretation of this verse made authoritative by Augustine. Yet this verse also structures the entire *Itinerarium* because the six steps are grouped in pairs according to the prepositions used by St. Paul, with the first step in each pair being a "*speculation . . . per*" and the second a "*speculation . . . in.*"[119] Like the *Cloud* author, Bonaventure prefers visual metaphors throughout. He uses the image of a mirror with both "through" and "in," and he consistently expresses the epistemology of participation through the metaphor of illumination. Indeed, he shares to a great extent in the orientation toward clarity associated with the visual over the verbal and with philosophy over rhetoric. The *Itinerarium* is concerned to certify the possibility of true knowledge of God despite the conditions of this life. And yet recognizing how and why this knowledge is obscure provokes the movement upward from step to step.

To this end, Bonaventure elaborates Augustine's epistemology of the inner word. Movement from the first step to the second, from seeing God through the things of the external world to seeing God in the world, proceeds by inquiring into how we know external things. Bonaventure articulates in Scholastic, philosophical terms the process by which the mind combines what it perceives with a mental word that participates in the divine, creating Word, so that we recognize things for what they really are as known by God. This analysis also brings out, however, the inadequacy of actual vocal or written language to express this mental knowledge. Experience of this gap between word and truth helps propel the ascent from "through" to "in," to a deeper penetration of how we refer things to their Creator. The ability to read things as signs is impaired by both finitude and fallenness, and these deficits are met by the function of things both as signs given in the order of nature and as special, supernaturally instituted signs:

> For creatures of this visible world signify the invisible things of God . . . partly by their own proper representation; partly because of their prophetic prefiguring; partly because of angelic operation; partly also by virtue of superadded institution. For every creature is by its very nature a figure and likeness of the eternal Wisdom, but

> especially a creature that has been raised by the Spirit of Prophecy to prefigure spiritual things in the book of Scriptures; and more especially those creatures in whose figures it pleased God to appear through the ministry of the angels; and, finally, and most especially, any creature which He chose to institute for the purpose of signifying, and which not only has the character of sign in the ordinary sense of the term, but also the character of sacrament as well. (2.12, p. 16)[120]

The action of grace adds to the natural signification of things a further, metaphorical significance by which they show not only, for instance, the goodness of God by their beauty but also God's special, saving action. Emphasis on the sacraments here may reflect the growing devotion to the Eucharist during the thirteenth century but anchors it in the kind of reading of all things taught by Hugh and theorized also by Aquinas.

Of all natural signs, as Augustine had taught, the most meaningful for us is our own minds, the focus of the *Itinerarium*'s steps 3 and 4. Here again ascent from seeing *through* to seeing *in* depends on grasping why we are obscure to ourselves and on receiving restoration through the Word made flesh. For this inward repair of true signification, the given signs of scripture are especially helpful, and Bonaventure explains how scripture's three spiritual senses facilitate three means of active participation: "the tropological which purifies for righteousness of life; the allegorical which enlightens for clearness of understanding; and the anagogical which perfects through spiritual transports and the most sweet perceptions of wisdom" (4.6, p. 26). Like Hugh's treatment of the first two spiritual senses of scripture, Bonaventure's three are a capacious and flexible part of a dynamic process, not merely of making statements that are true according to a representational epistemology, but of restoring signs to their full referentiality by restoring our own spiritual senses, that is, spiritual seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and feeling. Then the sign that is the human mind can refer fully by becoming fully conscious of its participation in the divine.

The final chapters deal in paradoxes that resist summary even more than the rest of this gemlike work, but they exemplify the theological use of the enigmatic to press into mystery and bring an acute consciousness

of the fulfillment of signs in pointing beyond themselves—which is itself one of the ways that Bonaventure points to the fulfillment of persons in the relationality of the Trinity. Chapter 5, moving from *speculatio* through and in the mind to *speculatio* through Being as the name of divine unity, dwells first on why the intellect is blind to the Being itself that illuminates it. As in Aquinas, Bonaventure's therapy for this blindness involves submitting the logic of Aristotelian metaphysics to the Pseudo-Dionysian play of affirmation and negation that makes it work analogically.

The sixth step moves further beyond the capacities of natural reason to the mysteries of the Trinity in its name of the Good, which include the sending of the Son and the Spirit. Here Bonaventure reaches the climax of an exegetical image used across this pair of chapters: entry into the Holy of Holies to see the ark described in Exodus 25. He identifies the two cherubim overshadowing the mercy seat as contemplation of God in Being and Goodness, Unity and Trinity, and, at the end of chapter 6, invites the reader to be each of these in turn as they gaze at the mercy seat between them, signifying the incarnate Christ as this divinity joined with humanity in even greater mystery. Bonaventure attaches to this image of presence and absence carefully piled patterns of paradox that play with all the resources of Scholastic Latin. It is like a riddle in reverse, one that gathers into itself all the exposition that has preceded it with maximum linguistic compression in order to await a flash of insight into what is already known. In such a perfect illumination, the one contemplating would be not just an image but a likeness, as the Son is of the invisible God. Bonaventure makes the vision of participation radically Christological.

Christ, then, as chapter 7 sets out, is the way and the door by which the mind transcends not only signs but itself. This taking up of humanity into the divine is the ultimate fruit of the ultimate enigma of the taking on of humanity by the divine. *Enigma* is the most apt term, in medieval Latin or modern English, for the idea of a maximal fullness of meaning that, by its hidden density, points most powerfully beyond itself. Bonaventure evokes the final transport of the mind to rest in God in three different ways, each of which points to a major current of enigmatic discourse in the later Middle Ages. The first is exegetical, what Hugh would call historical and allegorical: a brief recital of how Christ's passion

fulfills what is prefigured in the Exodus. This salvation narrative makes it possible for the one contemplating Christ to participate in the same meaningful pattern of a passage into new life. Images of the Red Sea and "hidden manna" might point to the Eucharist as a particular occasion of sharing in this passage. Second, Bonaventure returns to the model of Francis receiving the vision of the seraph fastened to a cross. Third, he describes the relinquishing of all intellectual activity in a transport of the *affectus*, as taught by William of St. Thierry and Thomas Gallus, and quotes the opening prayer of Denis's *Mystical Theology*, given above in the Middle English translation by the *Cloud* author. Thus he joins the two most enduring sources of theological enigma, exegesis and Denis's play of affirmation and negation, with a major new one of the late Middle Ages, individual visions. Finally, Bonaventure's own discourse passes over from a mode of seeing, that is, one dominated by visual metaphors, to one of asking and praying, framed as a dialogue: "If you wish to know how these things may come about, ask grace, not learning; desire, not understanding; the groaning of prayer, not diligence in reading; the Bridegroom, not the teacher; God, not man; darkness, not clarity; not light, but the fire that wholly inflames and carries one into God through transporting unctions and consuming affections" (7.6, p. 39). Affection should perhaps be seen, not to leave knowledge behind, but to thicken it, to make it felt as well as seen, in the way that fire is a fuller sensory experience than just light.[121]

Bonaventure emphasizes fullness over clarity and the verbal over the visual in another way when he closes by quoting scriptural declarations from Philip, Paul, and David of complete satisfaction in God and then adds a short prayer of his own: "Fiat, fiat. Amen" (So be it . . .). In one sense this anticipates the *Cloud*'s one-syllable prayers that condense every dimension of one's spirit. Yet Bonaventure invites not just heartfelt prayer but also a final act of understanding his treatise. He had introduced the three pairs of steps as corresponding, in reverse order, to the formula "Fiat, fecit, et factus est" ("Let it be made, He made it, and it was made"; 1.3, p. 6). *Fiat* is of course also the word by which God creates in Genesis 1, and Bonaventure's whole treatise begins with the same phrase as both Genesis and the Gospel of John, "In principio. . . ." Likewise, *amen* is almost the last word of St. John's Apocalypse (followed by "Come Lord Jesus"). Thus, in recollecting the whole course of the *Itinerarium*, Bona-

venture's simple prayer recalls the entire biblical narrative and every dimension of sacred history. Both in its content and in its use of Latin prose, the *Itinerarium* expresses and puts to compact, powerful use the poetics of enigma and the theology that embraces it.

LOOKING TOWARD THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY

This genealogy of the theological ideas most important to a distinctively medieval poetics of enigma has followed themes and texts that were important in their own times and remained influential in fourteenth-century England. In particular, as the chronological detour through the work of the *Cloud* author was meant to suggest, Denis's impact has hardly been greater at any other time and place. Toward the later Middle Ages, theologically ambitious uses of enigma shift from Latin to the vernacular and from the genres of theology to those of poetry and mysticism. A signal transition in all these kinds of writing happens between Bonaventure and Dante, who was born nine years before Bonaventure and Aquinas died.[122] Changes in the writing of theology, simultaneous with a host of other factors that have to do with the general rise of vernacular literature, left a sort of gap that vernacular literature could fill. And by filling it, this literature gained a new standing and new capabilities that would soon be turned to less obviously theological purposes. Making the transition from classic works in Latin by men writing with great theological authority to highly experimental works in the vernacular by writers lacking any position of authority calls for an attempt to clarify the theological inheritance of the poetics of enigma and how it might relate to fourteenth-century English texts.

As a theological idea, the enigmatic might best be defined as a style or practice of language that intensifies spiritual meaning by generating a metaphorical surplus while drawing attention to its inadequacy in the face of what it points to. It thrives within a metaphysics of participation in which words are seen to mediate real relations that follow, in a Christian version, from the creative and restorative action of God. The metaphorical transference from a literal to a figurative sense is seen to be fulfilled in an elevation or restoration of the mind, and this is best empowered not by just any metaphor or allegory but by one that engages the

cognitive effort and affective desire associated with enigma as rhetoric. In addition, a theology of participation supports a constant renewal of this process by asserting that there is always more significance to be found in the literal sense. The literal is illuminated by the spiritual, which in turn is informed by the literal. The mutually informing relation between the two remains open and productive while working from orthodox principles. Other criteria, such as physical reality of the literal sense or doctrinal correctness of the allegorical, are also required to secure the truth of such insights. What distinguishes enigmatic allegory, however, is the potential for ever-new understanding within the bounds of these criteria. Though the enigmatic significance is in one sense given, it is also always emergent from the equipoise between literal and figurative senses, neither sense taking control of the signifying relation and forcing interpretation to run in only one direction.

In the later Middle Ages, three developments steer theology away from the enigmatic mode: specialization, the rise of what would come to be called modern theology, and growing theological pluralism. Specialization, already mentioned, is described by de Lubac as the "explosion of the three disciplines" from the spiritual senses of scripture and, more basically, the separation of theory from practice and experience, so that theology and its subfields are viewed as academic subjects rather than a way of life.[123] A tribute to Hugh of St. Victor in Bonaventure's *On the Reduction of the Arts to Theology* shows both the continuing vision of a synthesis and the lines along which specialization would divide. Bonaventure recommends, among the fathers, Augustine as the chief teacher for the allegorical sense, Gregory for the moral, and Denis for the anagogical. "Anselm follows Augustine, Bernard follows Gregory, Richard (of St. Victor) follows Denis, for Anselm excels in reasoning, Bernard in preaching, Richard in contemplation, but Hugh, in all three."[124] Growing specialization of the disciplines that Hugh's *Didascalicon* had sought to coordinate (including the discipline of the letter that would become philology) enabled greater precision and rigor but discouraged theological writing in Latin that crossed these disciplinary boundaries. Although less specialized exegesis did not come to an end, increasing elaboration and technical terminology tended toward doctrinal didacticism and esoteric inaccessibility.[125] Dante's *Commedia* marks a shift toward vernacular

works that use literary means, including the enigmatic, to encompass all of these kinds of theological thinking at once.

At the same time, another kind of specialization focused on experience, which could either intensify the enigmatic or pull it toward the esoteric, accompanied the rise of what has been called the new mysticism around 1200. Bernard McGinn identifies several characteristics that define the new mysticism, all of which also apply to enigmatic literary works: a shift of authority away from the clerical elite and especially to women; use of vernacular languages and with them different literary genres, including visions and personification dialogues; and an emphasis on mystical experiences both visionary and bodily. Francis's vision on Mount Alverna became a paradigm of both kinds of experience. Bonaventure, by casting his whole *Itinerarium* as a gloss on Francis's vision, embeds experience in theology while leaving it as a sign of passing beyond. Thus he avoids making it an instance of mere esoteric gnosis, wholly incommunicable to the uninitiated, yet neither does he merely allegorize the vision by replacing it with a conceptual explanation. Bringing exegesis and vision, theology and symbolism together, he writes a kind of treatise that is unclassifiable according to the developing categories of specialized discourse. The result, like a good riddle or poetic image, both opens the mystery of its subject and points to its limitless depths. Nonetheless, an emphasis on experience tends to divorce it from interpretability and therefore from theology.[126]

Specialization, particularly the application of sophisticated logic, enabled the fourteenth-century emergence of so-called modern theology, the intellectual cutting edge that would sever the relations integral to the theology of participation and the view of the world and of Christian life that goes with it.[127] As a result of this and several interrelated factors to be considered in more detail at the beginning of chapter 6 below, a gulf began to open up between the natural, conceived on its own as the realm of reason and science, and the supernatural, conceived over against the natural as the realm of faith, grace, revelation, and theology rather than as the ground of nature's being. The consequences of these changes for conceptions of God and humanity are often called voluntarism to indicate the focus on will as opposed to intellect or reason. God's grace takes the form it does simply because God has willed it to be so, and its operation

is not accessible to reason. It must be believed simply as an act of will, aside from rational persuasion or contemplative understanding, an approach to faith known as fideism. More important, the freedom of God is now conceived of as absolute in an arbitrary sense rather than as part of the transcendental infinity of God's unity, truth, goodness, and beauty. Likewise, human freedom comes to be seen as the fundamental autonomy of the will, familiar to the modern outlook, rather than as a participation in divine freedom that involves both willing and knowing. Seen in this modern way, divine and human agency tend to be conceived as displacing each other. Whereas the theology of participation, of the creation as the gift of God's infinite love, had removed the possibility of God being in rivalry with anything that is, voluntarism brings new sophistication to the original human inclination to see God as a rival. Institutional authority, too, comes to be seen less as a means of participation in a cosmic hierarchy and more as something imposed by the collective will of the institution over the autonomous will of the individual. This extrinsic rather than intrinsic view of institutional authority no doubt has to do also with increasing externalization of authority in written documents and the gradual movement away from the "communal, non-individualistic, and authoritarian" orientation of oral cultures.[128] When church authorities are seen less as mediators within a hierarchy that participates in divine action and more as human and juridical, church authority also becomes increasingly separate from the authority of scripture itself, now seen more as the voice of God accessible directly to individuals.[129]

The loss of participation is accompanied, to be sure, by what might be called the discovery of nature and the empowering of individuals, changes that would lead to modern science, political liberty, and even to the opening of literature as an autonomous sphere of individual creativity. Yet perhaps these need not come at the cost of the sense of identity that arises from Aquinas's metaphysics, as expressed by Balthasar: "It is precisely when the creature feels itself to be separate in being from God that it knows itself to be the most immediate object of God's love and concern; and it is precisely when its essential finitude shows it to be something quite different from God that it knows that, as a real being, it has had bestowed upon it that most extravagant gift—participation in the real being of God."[130] The poetics of enigma could, in the work of Dante

or Langland, Julian of Norwich or Catherine of Siena (or, for that matter, John Donne or George Herbert, Bob Dylan or Marilynne Robinson), help critique institutions and express individuality while conserving an ideal of participation in social and cosmic harmony. It would also, in the cultural space left on the secular side of the new chasm, serve the literary exploration, by Chaucer and many others, of immanent, human mystery.

Finally, the poetics of enigma enables resistance to the third development, which follows from the previous two: increasing theological pluralism and rivalries between schools of thought. A growing perception of pluralism and division into camps precedes the late fourteenth-century outbreaks of heresy coming now not from a charismatic fringe, as with the Waldensians, but from the most learned, such as Wyclif and Hus.[131] Kathryn Kerby-Fulton has shown how the atmosphere of controversy added "opportunities for the creation of ambiguity" among poets and other authors of "revelatory genres."[132] Enigmatic language holds the great advantage for theology of being able to maintain a productive tension between seemingly opposed concepts or positions that shape much of Christian theology: faith and works, predestination and free will, justice and mercy, divine sovereignty and human agency, understanding and love, concept and experience, contemplation and action, the hierarchical and the individual. These issues have been only at the periphery of this discussion of the participationist theology behind enigma, precisely because this theology does not depend on any particular, doctrinal resolution of them but rather moves beyond the terms of controversy to their resolution in mystery. Part of the appeal and authority that made Augustine's work a continual resource for a theological synthesis negotiating these tensions was his literary genius as both scriptural interpreter and theological writer. Similar literary skills contributed also to the success of Bonaventure's rearticulation of the Augustinian synthesis, not just in the *Itinerarium* but in texts such as his version of a Scholastic *summa*, the *Breviloquium.* Aquinas's alternate version of Augustine's synthesis does not avail itself of such literary means, but the overall structures of his two great *summa*s, based on Denis's Neoplatonic theology of the creation proceeding from and returning to God, enact in a different way the theoretical importance of the enigmatic in his work and serve to rise above matters of controversy.[133] Debates over theological positions have never

been lacking, but after the age of the *summa*s, they dominate the theological landscape. Association of theological controversies with ecclesiopolitical rivalries, greater reliance on the tools of logic, and erosion of the metaphysics of participation all contribute to the hardening of theological positions. *Piers Plowman*, on the other hand, probes theological controversies of its time and uses the poetics of enigma not so much to resolve them as to find a way to move onward within the tensions between them.

Two brief discussions of 1 Corinthians 13:12 from closer to Langland's time and place show the combined effects of specialization, the loss of participation, and theological pluralism in two powerful late medieval trends: affective mysticism and vernacular religious instruction. Neither explicitly opposes the enigmatic style, or the theology of participation behind it, but they show how these can simply drop out in the pursuit of an esoteric mystical experience, on the one hand, or, sharp, didactic, catechetical distinctions on the other.

In the chapter on contemplation that ends his *Emendatio Vitae*, a treatise on spiritual progress beginning with conversion, the hermit and mystic Richard Rolle (ca. 1300–1349) acknowledges the tradition based on reading but sets it aside in favor of an approach, more typical of his works, predicated on a disjunction between natural effort and the supernatural gift of affective experience. The *Emendatio Vitae*, probably Rolle's last work in Latin (dated after 1340), survives in over a hundred manuscripts as well as seven independent Latin translations, making it the most popular work of the English mystic who was by far the most widely read through the end of the fifteenth century.[134] Its initial division of contemplation into reading, prayer, and meditation resembles Hugh of St. Victor's but probably comes, like the similar one in the *Cloud of Unknowing*, from the influential *Ladder of Monks* by Guido II.[135] Rolle prefers instead, however, a focus on joy, sweetness, and song, affective themes found throughout his writings, for which solitude and utter detachment from worldly desires are the requirements. He cites the first part of 1 Corinthians 13:12 to indicate merely the cognitive obscurity that affective experience moves beyond, even at the height of contemplation: "The sight of the soule is taken up and biholdeth gostli thinges as it were in a schadewe and not cleerly. For as long as we gon bi feith we seen not but

as it were thoruh a mirrour and a liknesse. For thouh the eye of understondinge be bisy for to biholde gostly light, nevertheles the light as it is in itself he may not yit see. And yit he feeleth wel that he hath ben there as longe as he holdeth the savour and the fervour of the light with him."[136] Seeing through a mirror in an enigma is simply a cognitive limit, not a means to a continual deepening of understanding. But feeling is not as limited as sight; the light can be felt but not seen. The next part of the verse appears a couple of pages later, embedded in a quotation from the Song of Songs that uses the language of a kiss to convey the contemplative's greatest anticipation of eternal consummation: "And therfore for she is so delicatly fed al with inward delices, no wunder thouh she be reised up in desire and seye: 'Who shal yive me thee, my brother, that I may fynde thee withoute and kisse thee?' That is: That I mai be departed fro this dedly flesh, and so fynde thee, and seen thee face to face, and be festened to thee withoute ende; 'and thanne shal no man despise me.'"[137] Rolle's language of ravishment and of a revelation in joy and sweetness that overpasses the limits of reason moves away from active cooperation of reason. Even will and feeling seem passive in much of Rolle's imagery.

The mysticism of the Pseudo-Dionysian treatises tends, as seen above, toward an esoteric focus on cognitive difficulty to the extent of intensifying it in a transcendent suspense—a suspense softened and made more accessible in the practices taught by the *Cloud.* Rolle, however, gives little place to cognitive difficulty at all. He is not esoteric through excess obscurity—in that sense he is quite populist in minimizing the value of learning. But minimizing the elevating effect of meditation on words and symbols risks an elitism of affective experience reserved for those who also pass a high threshold of purity. Rolle's own experiments with language, such as the densely alliterative Latin prose of his *Melos amoris*, have a paradoxically similar effect, according to Bernard McGinn: "Thus, he tries to unsay ordinary language about God and love of God through the strategy of creating a surfeit of words that overwhelm the reader and lead her to a state in which words as signifiers become irrelevant and music is all."[138] A poetics of enigma, by contrast, by deepening and intensifying the significance of each word, each sign, embraces a conjunction between the exercise of mind and heart and, even more, between active interpretive exertion and reception of divine revelation and grace.

In *The Prick of Conscience*, a disjunction between divine and human action and between this world and the next leads instead to didactic excess. This nearly ten-thousand-line poem in four-stress couplets, once attributed to Rolle but now thought to have been written by an unknown contemporary, seems to have been the most popular Middle English poem (judging by manuscript survival; *The Canterbury Tales* is second, *Piers Plowman* third). It takes to a certain extreme the program of doctrinal instruction initiated by the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215—another major driver of specialization in theological writing witnessed abundantly in both Latin and the vernacular, both prose and verse. *The Prick*, as its name implies, is about motivating confession and obedience. It thus shares Rolle's affective emphasis more than does, say, a simple treatise on the seven deadly sins, but works by teaching confidently and at great length about the wretchedness of human nature and this world and, especially, about last things: death, purgatory, judgment, the pains of hell, and the joys of heaven. A comment on the vision of God in heaven uses 1 Corinthians 13:12 to express the clarity of contrast that governs this entire text:

> In this lyfe here men sese him noght
> Bot anely thurgh ryght trowth in thoght,
> Als thurgh a myroure by lyknes,
> Bot thare sall men se him als he es.
> Here men him sese gastly thurgh grace,
> Bot thare sall men se him face tyll face,
> And that syght thare sall all men have
> Withouten ende, that sall be save.[139]

The value of the enigmatic for contemplation is elided entirely in favor of doctrinal correctness, "ryght truth in thoght." This world and its history, sources of hidden meaning under the guidance of scripture for authors from Augustine to Bonaventure, Dante, and Langland, are merely to be despised.

The Prick begins, after an invocation of all three Persons of the Trinity, with an easy-to-digest explanation of Trinitarian doctrine and what the creation owes the Creator. *Piers Plowman* begins with puzzles:

In a somer sesoun, whanne soft was the sonne,
I shop me into shroudes as I a shep were,
In abite [habit] as an ermyte unholy of werkis,
Wente wyde in this world wondris to here.
But on a May morwenyng on Malverne Hilles
Me befel a ferly [wonder], of fairie me thoughte.
I was wery ofwandrit and wente me to reste
Undir a brood bank be a bourne [stream] side;
And as I lay and lenide [leaned] and lokide on the watris,
I slomeride [slumbered] into a slepyng, it swiyede so merye.
Thanne gan {me} mete a merveillous swevene—
That I was in a wildernesse, wiste [knew] I nevere where.
Ac [But] as I beheld into the est an heigh to the sonne,
I saigh [saw] a tour on a toft triyely imakid. . . .
(A.Pr.1–14/B.Pr.1–14, cf. C.Pr.1–15)

We do not know what kind of poem this is going to be or what kind of authority its narrator claims. His clothing is famously ambiguous: Is he literally wearing wool to signify a choice to become a hermit, like Rolle? Or is he a figurative sheep? Either way, is he sincere, like the audience one imagines for *The Prick*, or just putting on? These opening lines invite associations with various genres—romance, dream vision, religious allegory—all of which and more will figure, to varying degrees, into the poem's relentlessly puzzling form. The play of language itself, echoes of the participation of words in the Word, is Langland's favorite way into truth. That the tower is made "triyely" could be, in addition to puns on words meaning excellently and truly, a reference to the Trinity.[140] The doctrine of the Trinity will be everywhere behind the poem's visions, but approached primarily by analogies drawn from common experience and, in turn, giving it significance.

This prologue continues with a rather didactic sorting of the sinners from the righteous, yet it ends with a crowded street scene described without analysis. The B text further complicates questions of judgment by adding, before the street scene, an allegorical drama about royal authority and parliamentary debate, one that cuts close to recent events and controversies and invites more careful reflection, not just on the poem,

but on history itself. Such engagement with possibilities of how daily realities participate in a theologically meaningful narrative will eventually call forth the poem's translation and quotation of 1 Corinthians 13:12 in order to name what it is doing and the mode of its authority.

The chapters that follow assemble some basic components of the poetics of enigma from which *Piers Plowman* is constructed, riddle forms and rhetorical principles, and consider examples that illustrate their particular contributions, playfulness and an ideal of persuasion. In both cases, the enigmatic will be pulled in the direction of the didactic on one side and the esoteric on the other—or, perhaps more accurately, will emerge from such prior sorts of play and rhetoric by converting them to a purpose more like participation. Participation will thus remain a guiding principle throughout the coming chapters and will return to prominence in the final two, where the scope of examples will broaden from *Piers Plowman* to other major medieval works.