THE DISCOMPOSED MIND

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Abstract

*The Discomposed Mind* explores literary texts which explicitly seek to unsettle the mind of the reader. I begin by exploring the riddles of the *Exeter Book*, which, despite their frequently profane subject matter, often map onto theological problems and permit profound meditation upon them. The *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, a fifteenth-century romance, is considered in the second chapter with reference to its image-generating strategies as a penitential practice. The conflicting geometries of Andrew Marvell’s ‘The Definition of Love’ form a riddle strongly reminiscent of the Old English texts examined in the first chapter; the mathematical impossibility of the love object is imagined with counterintuitive detachment. The final chapter examines the unruly genres of the seventeenth century which imitate thought, focusing on Margaret Cavendish’s consideration of experimental science as a brain-altering jest wrought by Nature against the minds of men.

What these disparate texts share is a tendency to deploy arational literary strategies in order to effect strenuous alteration in their readers, and to isolate this alteration in order to apply it to different questions. In the monastic codices of the *Exeter Book* and the *Hypnerotomachia*, the problems addressed are at least in part theological. In the seventeenth-century texts, the engagement is with contemporary scientific thought and the imaginative models it generates. By isolating details and requiring the reader to rebuild the context from a place of alienation, these texts generate in the imagination not a reconstruction, but a new vision of surpassing wholeness.
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for Frank
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Introduction

The Islands of the Weird

Wulf is on iege, ic on oþerre.
Fæst is þæt eglond, fenne biworpen.

—Wulf and Eadwacer.

All I know about is the location of a certain uncharted cluster of islands on one of which is a map and a complete set of directions to the island of Baal...However, all these islands are inhabited exclusively by knights, who always tell the truth, and knaves, who always lie. Hence one has to be very cagey!

—Raymond Smullyan, What Is The Name Of This Book?

During the Fatherland Liberation War the brave uncles of the Korean People’s Army in one battle killed 374 American imperialist bastards, who were also brutal robbers. The number of prisoners taken was 133 more than the number of American imperialist bastards killed. How many bastards were taken prisoner?

—Mathematics problem from a North Korean second-grade textbook.

The riddle island is a dangerous place. On it, law is all: it is made of laws, though we cannot stop our imaginations from filling out the rest. It is a seed, and a creation myth, a chilling utopia; a place where there might be real magic, though what happens there—what must

1. Wulf is on one island, I on another. Fast is that island, surrounded by fens. (Translations mine unless otherwise specified.)
happen—happens because of the organising mind behind the scenes. It is a laboratory, whose subjects follow their own laws up to the limits of the island, of the coast, of the wilderness of ocean beyond. At the place where these sets of laws meet, the law of the island prevails, always.

What invents law, if not a borderline, a coast, a region of strife between chaos and definition? Laws are like words, in that the evolution of society demands them. Lawlessness and meaninglessness constantly encroach upon community, and are constantly kept at bay with the restatement of words and laws. This is how stability manifests over time, like the Heraclitean posset, a drink which separates if it is not stirred constantly. The illusion of a border emerges from a deferred location of strife, an actively-forgotten coastline. “Humans cannot live, nor live in security,” writes Deleuze, “unless they assume that the active struggle between earth and water is over …humans can live on an island only by forgetting what an island represents.”

In Islandology, Marc Shell summarises the intriguing etymology of “island” in terms of a thesis and an antithesis. The antithesis, he writes, is the older meaning, the Norse-originated “water-land”, which signifies not a separation but rather a mixing of water and land: the Old English “ieg” is related to Old High German “auwa”, meaning “watery”, “watered”, and when combined with “land” it signifies a “watered place”. The thesis, Shell continues, is

6. OED.
the later meaning, in which the French-derived “isle”—ultimately from the Latin *insula*—became conflated with the first part of “ie gland”, leading to a subtly altered meaning: the island becomes something separated from the water, rather than mixed with it; defined, that is, against the chaos of the ocean. In synthesis, these meanings yield, writes Shell, a “complex definition of island variably at work in speaking about islands and in the logic of speaking about them.”

This complex definition applies specifically to the Modern English “island”, which incorporates both Norse and Latin words; the various Old English words we translate as “island” are complex, too, but in different ways. In *Wulf and Eadwacer*, the nature of the islands upon which the poem’s action takes place is deliberately obscured, evoking the liminal and marshy fenland prior to its draining: “fæst” could mean “fortified”, in the sense of well-defended, but it could also mean fixed and firm, whether in opposition to the usual unfixed nature of the island that is *fenne biworpen*, surrounded by fens, or somewhat ironically—fixed for now, in the current situation, as the fen is temporarily configured as separated islands. “The washes of the fens,” writes Sarah Harlan-Haughey, “are exceptionally liminal—land at some times, fen at others, covered completely with water at others.” This instability, she continues, accounts for the poem’s “paranoid mood”. Further emphasising what Shari Horner calls the

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7. *OED*.
“impossibly obscure” descriptions of the landscape of *Wulf and Eadwacer* is the multiplicity of words for “island”; perhaps “ieg” implies a less stable island, and “eglond” makes clearer the mixing of water with land. The poem’s protagonist laments in curious isolation, in a text that is proximate—both in terms of genre and location in the *Exeter Book*—to the riddle.

The riddle island might alter topographically, but it does not evolve. It is a predetermined world upon which a set of laws, fully realised quite separately from those who must keep them, is imposed. Use does not govern their creation: they do not respond to the lived experience of the inhabitants, but rather to some organising intent beyond view. The world of *Wulf and Eadwacer*, as we have seen, is a marshy coastal plain whose changing waters yield a mutable archipelagic topography of profound disorientation; the yearning narrative is intimate, but the unyielding political situation is obscure. The sense of a hidden organising intent—of an excess of precision that seems at odds with the poem’s narrative concerns—is powerfully generative of that atmosphere of exile and indifference which seems to pervade the riddlingly elegiac poetry of this period.

The riddle island’s hidden intent is not always sinister, and the riddle is often intended as a game, or even a jest. Furthermore, mysterious islands are ubiquitous in recreational logic puzzles of many kinds. The third part of Smullyan’s *What Is The Name Of This Book?* is subtitled “Weird Tales”—presumably, given the subsequent narratives about zombies and vampires, this is in reference to the contemporary pulp magazine of the same name—and begins with a

series of interconnected island riddles. In them, a philosopher—for whom the reader stands in—must visit seven islands in his attempt to locate the map to Baal. The multi-part narrative logic puzzle in which Smullyan specialised, which often reads like proto-hypertext fiction, is a predecessor of a multitude of island-based adventure video games, from Myst and its sequel Riven in the 1990s to more recent games such as DEViCE6 and Proteus, both released in 2013. The former is a cross between a riddle-island game and a story experienced on an e-reader, with all its hypertext possibilities; the latter takes the impossible riddle-island a step further, generating a unique island world each time the game is loaded.

Narrative, in the cases just described, is not motivated by the desires of individuals but rather is governed by the machinery of the logic puzzle or the game. This implies a curiously inhuman justice in the various island landscapes which are so governed; it is a kind of world-building that calls upon some reality-simulating fabric to fill in the gaps between the physical laws generated by the puzzle. Cloaking a quantitative puzzle in narrative is a favourite strategy, too, of the school mathematics textbook: this can be wielded in reality, as well, in isolated political entities where a utopian dream of perfect control survives. North of the thirty-eighth parallel, south of the Chinese border, for example, on half a peninsula that might as well be an island, children solve mathematical problems that create an interactive fiction of the Korean

Strategies of estrangement and isolation are extraordinarily persistent at the intersection of the literary riddle and the narrative puzzle; so are uncanny geographical and political entities which are imagined and constructed, rather than evolved. Whether frantically maintained or wilfully subverted, clearly delineated or subject to mutation, the border that creates islands and laws and meanings is an ideal location to begin a project about unsettling genres and unquiet minds.

We began with riddle islands; let us continue by considering the riddle itself.

There are, essentially, two kinds of riddle with two distinct etymologies. The first is the puzzle: the artfully-posed question demanding ingenuity in response, from Old English *rædels*. The Old English word encompasses a range of meanings: as well as specifically relating to a dark saying, enigma or riddle, it signifies counsel, consideration, imagination and interpretation, or even the imaginative faculty itself. It is this form of *riddle* with which this project will be principally concerned.

However, it is worth considering the other noun form of *riddle*, which is etymologically unrelated, and noting its accidental proximity to the riddles and riddle-adjacent texts in what

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follows. This kind of riddle is a coarse-meshed sieve, separating particles of different sizes—sand from gravel, for instance, or ashes from cinders. The word *riddle* as it refers to the sieve—that device of separation—is an alteration of *ridder*, which, according to the *OED*, shares the same Indo-European base as the ancient Greek *krinein*—to separate, or decide—whence *crisis* and *critical*. *Crisis* is particularly interesting to keep in mind here: it is a critical point, a decisive moment. In pathology, it is the turning point, where sickness bends either to recovery, or to death. The sieve-riddle is emblematic of decision-making, a process that was just beginning to be understood and quantified by Pascal at the end of the historical period covered by this project.

The act of separation is a meeting-point between these two different types of riddle. A solution to a puzzle-riddle is often attained by a process of mental filtering—some element of a riddle-object is unexpectedly seen through another and thus forcibly isolated from its other characteristics. Furthermore, a puzzle-riddle may be used as an instrument of trial and, therefore, separation: it is frequently a prerequisite to the attainment of some kind of reward. The Sphinx of the Oedipus legend guards Thebes with a riddle: only those who can perform the necessary filtering, separating and reassembling involved in riddle-solving will pass through to the city. In Shakespeare’s *Pericles*, the king’s daughter will be won by the solver of the incest riddle; an incorrect solution, he says, is a death sentence, despite the paradox—and inevitable death—included in accusing the king of conducting an incestuous relationship. In the fifth
chapter of *The Hobbit*, ‘Riddles in the Dark’, Bilbo and Gollum engage in a riddle contest which, if lost, will result in death for the protagonist. Interestingly, it would be correct in several senses to say that these characters are being *riddled*, even though the verb form of *riddle* is more frequently derived from the sieve- rather than the puzzle-riddle: one *OED* definition is “to separate (a person, quality, etc.) from another or others, as if with a riddle; to test or examine (a person); to extract or reveal (something) by separation or examination.” The other verb form of riddle that might apply in the event of their failure, and the one in more frequent usage, has the sense of making a riddle of something—that is, to pierce it with holes. Yet the sieve-riddle itself isn’t riddled: it has suffered a reversal in this definition, as it consists, rather, of a mesh of crossed wires, not a previously coherent substance that has been violently perforated.

There is peril, then, in the riddle contest, but the violence of interest here is that which is inherent in the separation and trial of the riddle itself. The psychological process demanded of the reader who would solve the puzzle-riddle is a complex one which, in a way, opposes the sieve-riddle: the crucial thing, the solution, has been defamiliarised in the writing, separated from its recognisable characteristics. In entering the world of the riddle, the reader is placed under obligation to reassemble and recontextualise concepts—to restore perceptual predictability, that is; to place the cinders back among the ashes.
The perceptual disturbances involved in riddle-solving and the peculiar landscapes generated by their perverse laws unite the disparate texts discussed in this project. The first chapter is a study of the *Exeter Book* riddle 85, which is indisputably indebted to the Symphosius “fish and river” riddle, and has therefore been studied less thoroughly than its interesting content warrants. By considering the riddle within its monastic context, I suggest a new solution, which connects the text to other explorations of the Eucharist in the period.

The second chapter focuses primarily on the late fifteenth-century polyglot romance, the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, a strange and wondrous narrative of a dream-journey through silent ruins. I consider the enormous gap between the protagonist Poliphilo’s reported awe in the presence of this architectural decay, and the exhaustion of creation experienced by the reader who, like the solver of a riddle, must imaginatively reconstruct and recontextualise the ruins which, in their incomplete condition, are so meticulously described. These ruins are preserved and memorialised with a fetishistic attention to detail which seems to inhibit the possibility of experiencing their wholeness in a moment; wonder is necessarily deconstructed as the ruins are laboriously reassembled in the imagination, and then reconstructed by means of the movement between thorough comprehension and instantaneous absorption. I consider the *Hypnerotomachia*’s status as a monastic codex, like the Exeter Book, serving to exercise and energise the mind by causing it to become, as Emanuele Tesauro put it in 1654, ‘scherzevolmente
ingannato’ (playfully deceived); there is enjoyment in perceiving one’s own mind moving between deception and its opposite, but this perception is also useful in preparing the mind for theological meditation.

Andrew Marvell’s riddle-like poem ‘The Definition of Love’ is the main focus of the third chapter. The frequently obscure cartographical and astronomical references in this poem have confounded many critics, and by paying close attention to the fields of scientific inquiry upon which Marvell draws, I suggest a new interpretation of the poem’s infinite, parallel loves which cannot meet. Marvell is demanding of his reader, requiring a knowledge of celestial machinery and stereographic projection; the compensation is an extraordinary image of paradoxical reciprocity figured in conflicting geometries forced to infinity.

The final chapter situates Margaret Cavendish within the context of contemporary scientific puzzles, in particular Prince Rupert’s drops. These solidified drops of molten glass, which can withstand extraordinary force but have a weak point which, when broken, causes the whole drop to explode, perplexed many philosophers, including Cavendish herself. Resisting the experimental method, Cavendish made a deduction about the drops which, perhaps, owed something to the well-remembered violence of the civil wars and Cavendish’s own personal association with Prince Rupert, the famous Cavalier commander. Turning to The Blazing World, and its possible debt to the 1592 English Hypnerotomachia, I consider the ways in which Cavendish considers the mental discomposition wrought by novelty within the context of a

13. CITE
post-war England uniquely primed to imagine unruled and unruly realms. In her dazzling utopia, she asserts the preeminence of feminine creativity and imagines an immaterial future while occupying a landscape which demonstrates the counterintuitive impermanence of memorial and stone.

The danger of the riddle island is different from the dangers of its constituent parts. The island itself, as Deleuze imagines it, is emblematic of the unresolved struggle between earth and water. Inland life defers the problem of the ocean; island life must contend with it, perpetually—or, as Deleuze suggests, forgetfully, if one is to live in security. *Rounded with a sleep,* says Prospero of life—not preceding sleep, meeting it as continent to shoreline, but rounded with it, as island by ocean. To reinterpret both Prospero and Deleuze and point forward to the various literary-psychological deceptions and suspensions and compromises that characterise the subjects of this dissertation, we might say that though island life emblematises man’s daily renewal of self-deception, living inland requires this renewal as well. The only difference is that this renewal is not reenacted simultaneously by its physical surroundings.

If there is any consolation in all this, consolation in islands, it is that of crisis and immi-
nence, of the certainty of constant change. This is Heraclitean changelessness—you cannot step twice into the same river, as his most famous fragment has it. The fragment on the posset
makes the same point: it describes a drink whose continuing identity is dependent upon the constant change required to keep it in suspension. In a sense this is only an issue of language, of creating discrete units of meaning, some of which may refer to a range of phenomena in flux (a river, a posset, a human) and therefore offer the illusion of stasis, of fixed meaning. But then words are like islands, and so are laws: they are created and bounded by a crisis point, by decisiveness, by the device that separates the particular from the general. Island contends with ocean; a law is carved out by the coming-into-being of a particular transgression out of a general chaos of behaviour, as is a word by the demand for some mode of containment in a chaos of inexpressibility. Each lives by means of its perpetual contention with what it is not, with the wild waste of meaninglessness in which one thing can metamorphose into another without limit.

Chapter 1

In Every Part All

The Play of the Eucharist in the *Exeter Book*

We step and do not step into the same rivers; we are and are not.

—Heraclitus, frg. 49a

How is a riddle like a thaumatrope, and how are both like a ruin?

The thaumatrope is a nineteenth-century scientific toy, consisting of a cardboard disc with strings attached to either side. Typically, one side will pose a question beneath an incomplete image, and the other will present an answer beneath another incomplete image. When the strings are twisted and pulled, the disc spins rapidly and, because of the persistence of vision, the illusion of a composite image emerges. Reading both sides—question and answer—is therefore not enough; the experience of the resolution is in the concurrent seeing of both sides in one moment, through the ingenuity of the device.

The first encounter with a riddle text resembles the first look at one side of the thau-

1. A version of this chapter is forthcoming in *Neophilologus* as ‘Houseal and Hythplega: The Play of the Eucharist in the *Exeter Book*’.  
matrope. The uncanny is found in the familiar by means of the distortion that comes from focusing on severed details. The conspicuous absence of the uniting principle—the solution—interrupts the ordinary processes of perception. Once a satisfactory solution presents itself, the re-reading of the riddle emulates the spinning of the thaumatrope. It is not so much that the defamiliarised object becomes familiar again: rather, that one experiences, simultaneously, the object as known and unknown, familiar and unfamiliar; the riddle both with and without its solution.

This is the way in which riddles and thaumatropes are like ruins. They are suggestive of a strange epistemology, where knowledge is not acquired cumulatively, but rather is experienced concurrently with ignorance, or absence. The whole is peculiarly, uncannily, even horrifically severed. A ruin may suffer severance through natural disaster, neglect or violent destruction; it may be a picturesque sham ruin, “jest[ing] at scars that never felt the wound”, hinting at an impossible whole. A riddle forces the severance of constituent characteristics in the mind of the reader, actively disrupting the perception not just of the riddle text, but of the world itself.

Solving the riddle—any riddle—is akin to Eucharistic remembering, which itself implies the violence of dismembering by being its opposite. This likeness is especially apparent in the texts discussed here. This chapter examines some of the riddles and riddle-like poems of the Exeter Book—a codex which is itself, though to say so has become a critical cliché, something

3. Romeo and Juliet, II.ii.1.
of a ruin. Its fire damage and the consequent partial ruining of a riddle-like poem therein, *The Ruin*, has invited, writes Thomas A. Bredehoft, “many a facile observation about the degree to which *The Ruin is a ruin*.” However, my consideration of remembrance and ruin in the *Exeter Book* has little to do with the present condition of the codex. I argue that the poems contained therein frequently make alogical demands of the mind, encouraging rapid motion between binaries rather than a logical process from one position to another. I consider the ways in which the riddles effect alteration in the reader, intellectually as ergodic texts which actively disrupt categories of perception, and physiologically as ludic texts—instances of *byhtplega*, joyful play—which generate shock, wonder, and, often, laughter. I examine this alteration especially with reference to Eucharistic interpretations of the riddles, and, by considering it in the context of Ælfric’s homiletic writing on the Eucharist, I suggest an alternative solution to the “fish and river” riddle, number 85.

...it is not possible to step twice into the same river, nor is it possible to touch a mortal substance twice in so far as its state (*hexas*) is concerned ...®

—Heraclitus, frg. 91a?, [91b].

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Water is like a thaumatrope: its ‘solution’, a perceived consistency of substance, is actually in constant flux. Water’s transformative nature is a central concern in the Exeter Book: its alterations are sometimes ecological, sometimes theological, and often both. In the form of an iceberg in Riddle 33, water is “hetegrim” (“hate-fierce”), capable of destruction; in Riddle 41, it is the life-giving “moddor monigra cynna” (“mother of many kins”). In the riddle-like poem Wulf and Eadwacer, as we have already seen, an island landscape made impossibly unstable by the movement of water finds its ‘solution’ in the mutable topography of the flooded fens. Life as an exile’s journey is a metaphor familiar from The Wanderer and The Seafarer, but in the “laguflode” (“ocean floods”) of Cynewulf’s Christ II it becomes, as Thomas D. Hill argues, a paradox of journey-in-progress and already-having-arrived; the keel-cut water is as boundless-seeming and yet as tightly bounded as finite human life.

Water is part of the solution to Riddle 85, but it is described somewhat more obliquely than in the examples cited above. This is because the solution, “fish and river”, is a compound one. The clues focus on two interdependent entities, and the idea which is to be isolated and interrogated is not anything particular to either of these, but rather the fact of their interdependence. Unlike, for example, riddles 33 and 41, each of which has “water” as its solution, the riddle does not encourage the reader to reimagine the nature of water in itself; the key to the solution is to grasp the characteristics of the river’s relationship with the silent

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speaker living within it, a fish.

The “fish and river” solution has gained decisive scholarly consensus, on account of its similarities, as noted by Dieter Bitterli, Patrick Murphy, and others, to Symphosius’s Aenigma 12.


Est domus in terris clara quae voce resultat.

Ipsa domus resonat, tacitus sed non sonat hospes.

Ambo tamen currunt, hospes simul et domus una.

[There is a house on earth, which echoes with a clear voice. The house itself resounds, but the silent guest makes no sound. Yet both the guest and the house run on together.]

By the time of the compilation of the Exeter Book, as Bitterli argues, the swimming fish riddle would have been very well known; the reader schooled in enigmata would certainly recognise the silent guest in the unsilent house of Riddle 85:

Nis min sele swige,  ne ic sylfa hlud

ymb * * * ;  unc dryhten scop

sip ætsomne.  Ic eom swiftre þonne he,
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þragum strengra; he þreochtigra.

Hwilmicme reste; he sceal rinnan forð.

Ic him in wunige a þenden ic lifge;

gif wit unc gedælað, me bið deað witod.

[My hall is not silent, nor am I myself loud about [...] the lord has created for us a journey together. I am swifter than he, at times stronger; he more enduring. Sometimes I rest; he must run forth. I dwell in him, while I live; if we separate, death is decreed unto me.]

This riddle is not a mere translation of the Latin source, as Bitterli goes on to explain: the Old English poet “explores [his source’s] imagery more extensively by adding a vivid description of the common journey (3-5) and by making the dumb fish the speaker of the riddle—a paradox in itself.”

In his edition of the Exeter Book riddles, Craig Williamson cites as particular evidence of W. P. Ker’s genius the latter’s likening of the Old English riddle-writers to the metaphysical poets. Ker reads in both the riddles and the metaphysical poems the presentation of a simple idea, unnamed and not paraphrased, in which the conceit is imaginatively worked out, not merely described in ornamented language. The Dark Ages:

Though it is only a game, it carries the poetic mind out over the world: as not unfrequently with the Metaphysical poets, the search for new conceits will land the artist on a coast beyond his clever artifices, where instead of the vanities of False Wit there are the truths of imagination …

This is not a likeness frequently explored, but it is particularly present in the case of Riddle 85. The text’s elaboration of the common journey of the intertwined subjects is crucial because of the riddle’s double solution; in describing a relationship rather than an object, the language functions more like that of a metaphysical conceit. As has been noted, water in this riddle is not described with the same vividness as it is elsewhere in the Exeter Book; the same is true of the language describing the fish, which is far more abstract than that of the other riddles dealing with underwater creatures, such as 77 (oyster) and 78 (lamprey), which require special knowledge of the specific behaviours of such creatures. This kind of relational solution creates a text unusually suitable for contemplative use: it provides an opportunity to meditate upon some pair of disparate things with unexpected, even paradoxical qualities which are particularly noticeable when the two are imagined together.

Riddle 85 does not only present a paradox: it is also dense with enigmatic misdirection. It begins with negations, in the verb “nesan” (to not be), the adjective “swige” (silent), and the conjunction “ne” (nor), such that parsing the opening line is not completely straightforward.

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Craig Williamson observes that the riddle remains very close to the Latin source in its first two and a half lines, but while this is true of the thematic content, these knotty negations are not present in the declarative language of the Symphosius enigma. The Exeter riddle is much more obscure, even at the very beginning. The paradox of the silent speaker, present here and in a number of other Exeter riddles, is established in the opening, but its strangeness is further emphasised in the description of the journey that follows: as Williamson notes, “while the swift one rests, the slow one runs on.” But this is not the only difficulty in the journey description. The two sentences beginning at the third half line could just as well be spoken by the unsilent river as by the unloud fish. If the speaker is “þragum strengra” (at times stronger), it follows that the other half of the poem’s dual subject is also “þragum strengra”; if the fish “[h]wilum” (sometimes) rests, it follows that it will sometimes run forth (“rinnan forð”), like the river. The speaker’s companion is “þreohtigra” (more enduring), but in the mutable world of the Exeter riddles, well-established by the time we reach number 85, comparatives with regard to permanence seem inherently paradoxical. Water is always subject to alteration in the Exeter Book, and though creatures die in these poems, their deaths are rarely true endings. Finally, though the last two lines of the riddle express the fish’s inability to outlive the river, it is worth recalling Riddle 74, which describes its subject’s ability to be “deaf under yþe, dead

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mid fiscum” (“deaf under the waves, dead among fishes”). Though 74 is frequently solved as “ship’s figurehead”, “water”—first proposed by Moritz Trautmann and convincingly defended more recently by Thomas Klein—is an appealing solution. Water is alive when soaring above with the birds (“fleah mid fuglum”, l. 3) but dead when it sinks beneath the waves; the river need not always outlive the fish.

Riddle 85, then, presents a compound solution whose two parts are not only interdependent, but also, to an extent, interchangeable: the complexities and misdirections the poet adds to the enigma of Symphosius suggest more than the “fish and river” solution. Bitterli reads in this riddle a Christian rewriting of the Symphosius text: its conclusion, he writes, is “almost gnomic”, considering the inevitability of death in the context of Creation’s divine order. This reading, however, is dependent only upon the poem’s statement that the common journey was created by the Lord (“unc dryhten scop siþ ætsomne”, ll. 2-3). A more comprehensive theological counterpart to the “fish and river” solution is “body and soul”: this is “more edifying,” writes John D. Niles, though it suffers from the problem that “rivers and seas never cease from movement, whereas a body sometimes sleeps.” Patrick Murphy suggests “soul and body” as a “metaphorical focus”, rather than a solution, to this riddle of the silent guest in the unsilent

He explains this position thus:

The speaker is the silent soul, which dwells inside the hall of the body. The Lord shaped them both for a journey together. The soul is swifter and at times stronger than the body, but not always, since the demands of the flesh are unflagging. But if the body gives up the ghost, the soul experiences death.

Murphy goes on to argue that the language of the journey in Riddle 85 is strongly echoed by the Exeter Book poem *Soul and Body II*, and by Riddle 43, which, he writes, is “universally solved as ‘soul and body’.” Clearly, Murphy’s reading of the riddle’s metaphorical focus has merit, and given the evident poetic interest in the body’s relationship with the soul elsewhere in the *Exeter Book*, there is precedent for considering Riddle 85 as a tool for meditating upon these intertwined entities. However, aspects of this reading are unsatisfactory, beyond those raised by Niles in 2006. The idea of the soul does not entirely seem to align with the speaker of Riddle 85, which is, in the usual “fish and river” reading, a fleeting creature within an enduring river; furthermore, if this poem is a Christian reworking of Symphosius’s enigma, it seems unlikely that it would conclude with an anticipation of the soul’s death. As Klein has argued, there is therefore not a direct but only a partial correspondence between this metaphorical focus and the solution of Riddle 85. I suggest that there is an alternative secondary solution, or focus,
to this riddle, which, like “soul and body”, provides an opportunity for theological meditation
and which involves the paradoxical meeting of material and immaterial. Though “fish and
river” is the primary solution, I propose to categorise this riddle with the other Eucharistic
riddles, secondarily solving it as “the housel inside the body”.

There are multiple ways of reading Riddle 85 as “the housel inside the body”. The simplest
and most general is to consider the speaker as the host, silent inside the loud hall of the human
body. The Lord created the common journey of body and host—Christ’s commandment to
the apostles that they do this in remembrance of him. The host makes a passage through
the human body, perhaps being, in this way, sometimes stronger; the body is more enduring,
as it eventually breaks down and digests the host. The host must be eaten and digested—it
depends upon being inside a living body for its purpose, which is interrupted if the body dies.
Furthermore, given the notoriously obscene riddles elsewhere in the *Exeter Book*, it would
surely not be beyond the imagination of the riddle-poet to be considering alternative afterlives
of partially-digested matter becoming separated from the body.

So far—apart, perhaps, from the matter of the Lord creating the common journey—
this might just refer to mundane digestion, though, so how is the “housel in body” solution
any different? This is where the seeming interchangeability of the two parts of the solution,
described above, becomes important: the misdirections in the riddle echo the mutual inhering,
each one within the other, of Christ and mortal human in the Eucharist. In consuming the
host, the communicant engages in an act of literal remembrance, the constitution from its
members of the body of Christ, the Church. So we might read the speaker of Riddle 85
alternatively as the silent member of this body, the communicant, who participates in a journey
of the faithful decreed by the Lord, and is doomed to eternal death if separated from that body.

A closer look at the riddle’s language provides more support for this reading. The poem’s
concluding lines are crucial to the “housel inside body” solution, because they read like a partial
paraphrase of John 6:56, “qui manducat meam carnem et bibit meum sanguinem, in me manet,
et ego in illo” (he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood, lives in me, and I in him):

Ic him in wunige  a þenden ic lifge;
gif wit unc gedælað,  me bið deað witod.

[I dwell in him, while I live; if we separate, death is decreed unto me.]

For the “fish and river” solution to work, the dative pronoun “him” must stand in for an absent
masculine noun for river, “eastream” or “wæterstream”, for example, or, as Niles suggests,
“flod”. However, it might also be read as a personal pronoun, possibly even referring back
to “dryhten” in line 2—only in the case of Christ can the “dryhten” who created the journey
also participate in it, by means of both Incarnation and Eucharist. John 6:56 is inserted
parenthetically into Ælfric’s partial quotation of John 6:54 in his Sermon on the Sacrifice on
Easter-Day:

25. “him” is masc and neut dative, but the “he” earlier indicates masc nom
...and we beoð geclænsode þurh ðæs halgan husel-ganges, swa swa Crist sylf cwæð on his godspelle, “Soð soð ic eow sece, næbbe ge lif on eow, buton ge eton min flæsc and drincon min blod. Se ðe et min flæsc and min blod drincð, be wunað on me, and ic on him, and he hæð þæt ece lif, and ic hine arære on ðam endenextan dæge ...

[...and we shall be purified by partaking of the holy housel, as Christ himself said in his gospel, “Verily, verily I say unto you, ye have not life in you, unless ye eat my flesh and drink my blood. He that eateth my flesh and drinketh my blood, be dwelleth in me, and I in him, and he shall have everlasting life, and I will raise him at the last day ...”]

“Wunian”, which is usually translated as “to dwell” but can also suggest “to remain” or “to continue”, is the verb used in the penultimate line of Riddle 85 to express the fish’s continued presence in the river, even as it flows in flux; it is also the verb Ælfric uses to translate the Latin “manere” (whence “permanent”, “remain”). The riddle’s concluding line continues to echo Ælfric’s translation of John 6:54, but it does so with a negation, not a declarative assurance of everlasting life. In Ælfric’s quotation, the recipient of the housel “hæfð þæt ece lif” (“has eternal life”); in Riddle 85, if the poem’s intertwined subjects separate (“gif wit unc

(“me bið deað witod”). The consequence is the same—
mutual inherent dwelling ensures life—but the riddle expresses this negatively, in terms of the
consequence of separation.

Solving the riddle as “the housel in the body” might imply more than the relationship,
both physical and spiritual, between communicant and Christ: it also explores the strange
mutability of the host itself both before and during the processes of hallowing and digestion.
Shortly after quoting John in his sermon, Ælfric goes on to explain the dual nature of the
hallowed host:

\[\text{Soðlice se hlaf and þæt win, ðe beoð ðurh sacerda mæsan gehalgode, ðeð ðing}
\]
\[\text{hi æteowiað menniscum andgitum wiðutan, and ðer ðing hi clypiæ wīðinnan}
\]
\[\text{geleaffullum modum. Wiðutan hi beoð gesewene hlaf and win, ægðer ge on hiwe}
\]
\[\text{ge on swæcce, ac hi beoð soðlice, æfter ðære halgunge, Cristes lichama and his}
\]
\[\text{blod þurh gastlicere gerynu.}
\]

[But the bread and the wine which are hallowed through the mass of the priests,
appear one thing to human understandings without, and cry another thing to
believing minds within. Without they appear bread and wine, both in aspect
and in taste; but they are truly, after the hallowing, Christ’s body and his blood
through a ghostly mystery.]

28. Thorpe, The Homilies of the Anglo-Saxon Church: The First Part Containing the Sermones Catholici, Or
Even before consumption, the consecrated host causes a perceptual split, forcing the simultaneous endorsement of conflicting evidence. Rather than explicating—beyond deeming it a “gastlicere gerynu”—the precise way in which the host can be more than one thing, Ælfric focuses on the effect of its duality on the human mind; he then goes on to consider the journey it takes within the human body:

Þæt husel is hwilwendlic, na ece; brośniendlic, and bið stícmaelum tođæled; betwux toðum tocowen, and into ðam buce asend: ac hit bið þeah-hwæðere, æfter gastlicere mihte, on ælcum dæle eall.

[The housel is temporary, not eternal; corruptible, and is distributed piece-meal; chewed betwixt teeth, and sent into the belly: but it is, nevertheless, by ghostly might, in every part all.]²⁹

Mary Hayes argues that Ælfric’s aim here is to “[designate] receiving communion as an interpretive act”; the communicant contemplates the mystery (“gerunu”) of the Eucharist while the process of digestion “suggests the visceral activity that underlies ruminative reading.”³⁰

Yet what Ælfric seems to be expressing in both these excerpts is that the host is not linearly converted into something spiritual in the same way that food is converted into energy through digestion, but rather that it can exist simultaneously for the perceiving senses and the digestive


system as bread, and for the believing mind as the body of Christ, without contradiction or mutual negation. This simultaneous seeing is characteristic of riddles with multiple solutions: with regard to the notorious onion/phallus riddle, number 25, Victoria Symons draws attention to “the sense of the uncanny that accompanies the moment in which one’s perception of the world suddenly shifts ... These realities exist simultaneously, with neither one negated by the other.” Writing on the other food-item/phallus riddle, 45 (“dough”), Winfried Rudolf extends this double seeing to a Eucharistic interpretation: he considers the possibility that the riddle may refer either to an interaction between Sarai and her handmaid Hagar regarding the unborn Ishmael, or between Mary and Elizabeth regarding the unborn Christ, the panis vivus of John 6:15, thus returning to that first solution, “dough.” With so much theological content packed into one obscene riddle, one can see why would-be solvers of the Exeter riddles “need both ludic creativity and sound theological judgement.”

As noted above, there is a likeness between riddle-solving and Eucharistic remembering, which implies and commemorates the violence of its opposite, both linguistically and in terms of its proximity to the Crucifixion. Ælfric notes this proximity in a recollection of a grisly passage from the Vitae Patrum in his Easter-Day sermon:

twegen munecas bædon æt Gode sume swutelunge be ðam halgan husle, and æfter

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33. Ibid., p. 524.
the appearance of the Christ Child at the altar was a commonly attested miracle, and the possibility of this grisly concurrent seeing is reminiscent of the Vercelli Book poem the Dream of the Rood, in which the dreamer sees a cross shift from jewelled to bloody and back:

hwilum hit wæs mid wætan bestemed,
beswyled mid swates gange,  hwilum mid since gegyrwed.

[at times it was wet with moisture, stained with blood, at times adorned with treasure.] 

Through the repetition of “hwilum”, the starkly contrasting cross images are forced together in time, so that “wæta-” (“moisture”, “blood”) is linked as closely as possible with “sinc-” (“treasure”); furthermore, the bloody sweat (“swat-”) corresponds in the alliterative scheme to “sinc-”, reinforcing the shock of the dreamer’s double seeing. A similar strategy appears in Riddle 85: “Hwilum ic me reste; he sceal rinnan forð,” says the speaker, implying that the reverse must also be true. The word “hwilum” is usually translated as “sometimes” or “at times”, though its range of meaning is quite well-expressed by the now-archaic “whilome”, noted in the Bosworth-Toller Anglo-Saxon dictionary as one of its English descendants. “Whilome”, in addition to “at times”, can signify some distinct period of time, usually past but sometimes future. In doing so, it specifies this period, not some other one, but (as with remembering) it naturally draws attention through its particularity to what it does not express—what about, one paradoxically asks, the other occurrences, outside of this particular one? In the case of Riddle 85 and the Dream of the Rood, “hwilum”—though, of course, translatable as “sometimes”—expresses something akin to the paradoxical simultaneity of the consecrated host’s multiple natures, as bread, ghostly presence, and, sometimes, grisly dismemberment.

Riddle 85, then, like many of the Exeter Book riddles, enables the reader to maintain without negation the simultaneous perception of contradictory things, thereby preparing the mind for the contemplation of the gerynu (“mystery”) of the Eucharist; as with viewing a thaumatrope, the “simple binary of proposition and solution” noted by Klein is blurred when

both sides are perceived together, on account of rapid motion. What remains is to consider the mode of moving from one side to the other, to move between such distances with such rapidity as to seem to compress them utterly and mix disparate entities. In order to do this, let us move to another theological paradox, that of the Ascension, the subject of Cynewulf’s *Christ II*. Early on in *Christ II*, this paradox is established in a speech which recalls Eucharistic mutual indwelling:

“Gefeoð ge on ferððe! Næfre ic from hweorfe,
ac ic lufan symle læste wið eowic,
ond eow meaht giefe ond mid wunige,
awo to ealdre, þæt eow æfre ne bið
þurh gife mine godes onsien.
...

*Ic eow mid wunige,*

forð on frofre, ond eow friðe healde
strenðu stæolfæstre on stowa gehware.”

[Be glad in your souls! Never will I leave you, but I shall attend to you with love forever, and give you power, *and dwell with you*, always and forever, that through my grace you will never lack any good.

38. Emphasis added.]
...I will dwell with you, henceforth as a comfort, and keep you in peace, and steadfast strength in every place.]

The disciples—Christ’s servant-thanes (“þegnas”)—are told that Christ will dwell with them forever, only moments before he departs from them. The consolation comes towards the end of Christ II, when the entirety of Christ’s life is described as a series of six leaps: the Incarnation, the birth, the Crucifixion, the descent to the grave, the descent into hell, and finally the Ascension. The leaps are joyful, recalling the erotic energy of the Song of Solomon, 2:8: “behold, he cometh leaping upon the mountains, skipping upon the hills”; the final leap is described as a “haliges hyhtplega”, a holy frolic, using a word (hyhtplega) which also occurs in one of the sexual riddles, number 20. After describing these leaps, Cynewulf follows with advice on how to model mental processes after them:

þæs her on grundum godes ece bearn
ofere heahhleoþu hlypum stylde,
modig after muntum. Swa we men sculon
heortan gehygdum hlypum styllan
of mægne in mægen, mærþum tilgan
þæt we to þam hyhstan hrofe gestigan
halgum weorcum ... (744-750)

[thus as here on earth God’s eternal child over high hills jumped with leaps,
noble-minded over mountains, so we men should in the thoughts of our hearts leap leaps from power to power, striving to greatness, that we to the highest roofs may mount up with our holy works …]

The leap, writes Oliver J. H. Grosz, “becomes metaphorical for the sudden change from one level of existence (or thought) to another without rational explanations, but rather in mystery.” Leaps of thought are crucial to meditating upon theological questions; they are also inevitable in the contemplation of riddles.

As they step into the same rivers, different and [still] different waters flow upon them.

—Heraclitus, frg. 12.40

As we will see in the next chapter, language itself is a kind of ruin, in perpetual decay and deterioration even as it records what would otherwise have been forgotten. It spins in the imagination between remembering and forgetting, like a thaumatrope, and the mind’s eye, unless subjected to forceful and decisive separation, sees it as a strange composite of the two. Riddle 85 is so close to its Latin source that it seems to have decayed in the critical

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imagination through familiarity; perhaps this is why it has received relatively little scholarly attention, beyond the few readings of its undisputed ‘fish and river’ solution as an allegory of the body and the soul. However, as I have demonstrated, it reimagines the Latin riddle while providing an opportunity for the vivid simultaneous contemplation of a ruined and bloody body, a communion of the faithful, and a host to be digested. Through leaps of thought reminiscent of the spinning thaumatrope, the riddle-reader is able to grasp this alternative solution, not by a rational process but rather by the mystery of concurrent seeing.
Chapter 2

The Workshop of my Imagination

Penitential Remembering in the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*

9 In accordance with all that I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle and of all its furniture, so you shall make it.

10 They shall make an ark of acacia wood; it shall be two and a half cubits long, a cubit and a half wide, and a cubit and a half high.

11 You shall overlay it with pure gold, inside and outside you shall overlay it, and you shall make a molding of gold upon it all around.


The above-quoted verses from the Book of Exodus open the first of two sections—chapters 25-31 and 35-39—which are comprised of detailed instructions for the construction of the Israelites’ wilderness sanctuary, the Tabernacle. This structure, composed of gold- and linen-adorned frames of acacia wood precisely measured in terms of an inherently imprecise unit, is described in lengthy, dizzying detail, even though the unit of construction and certain other omitted details preclude the possibility of an accurate reconstruction. With the labelled di-

3. Ibid., p. 193.
agram of the Tabernacle in the eighth-century Codex Amiatinus at hand. Bede produced a commentary on Exodus 25–40 which, writes Ann Meyer, “initiated a rich medieval tradition of allegorical interpretations of the ancient Hebrew structures.” In *The Craft of Thought*, Mary Carruthers describes the Amiatinus tabernacle picture as a kind of “cognitive chart” which enables rhetorical *ductus*, the “movement within and through a work’s various parts”. Despite the impossibility of reconstruction, the description in Exodus allowed for a tradition of monastic mental exercise which was both energising and penitential in nature.

The late fifteenth-century polyglot romance, the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, is extraordinarily attentive to architectural details, connecting it—as many scholars have observed—with the genre of the architectural treatise, and with the work of humanist antiquarians writing about ancient Rome. By thinking with the tradition of medieval commentary on the Tabernacle, I consider instead the status of the *Hypnerotomachia* as a text of self-willed exile and penitential mental exercise. Poliphilo’s dream narrative, written by the Dominican monk Francesco Colonna, is after all a “product of monastic rhetoric”, as Raffaella Fabiani Giannetto notes.

As Carruthers argues,
Monasteries are visionary places, a double meaning well understood by the monks themselves. They provide places where “visions” can occur, and they enable one to “see” those visions. They are also built because of a vision …

The Hypnerotomachia takes place in a similar location, a visionary place through which Poliphilo makes a strange and wondrous dream-journey. The aspect of most significance in this chapter is the enormous gap between the protagonist Poliphilo’s reported awe in the presence of magnificent architectural decay, and the exhaustion of creation experienced by the reader who, like the solver of a riddle, must imaginatively reconstruct and recontextualise the ruins. Through extensive and precise description reminiscent of that in Exodus, these ruins are preserved and memorialised with a fetishistic attention to detail which inhibits the possibility of experiencing their wholeness in a moment. If wonder derives from, as Giannetto argues, “a mixture of ignorance and knowledge, of certitude and uncertainty” it seems that the reader is barred from experiencing it even as it constantly overwhelms the hero. The instantaneous impression of the magnificent ruins is necessarily deconstructed in the laborious attempt to reassemble them in the imagination; the attempt to fix the ruins in the mind with exhaustive detail seems to expose the futility of the antiquarian impulse, while methodically redirecting and dismantling the erotic energy of the questing protagonist.

An abiding concern of this project as a whole is the idea of the arational literary experience

11. Fabiani Giannetto, “Not before either known or dreamt of”: The Hypnerotomachia Poliphili and the craft of wonder.
as a mode of effecting alteration in a reader: this chapter considers the *Hypnerotomachia* as a text which attempts this in a way that is both descriptive and generative. Through close attention to the methods by which the *Hypnerotomachia* forges mental images, I consider the ways in which this text generates both difficulty and ease in the imagination, and meditates upon the power of the ruined and the incomplete. Wonder, argues Giannetto, has a specific use in the *Hypnerotomachia*: it is “an energizing tool that activates cogitation and keeps the mind focused and on track so that it can eventually grasp God (or any other concept) as the ultimate goal.” It also serves to exercise and energise the mind by causing it to become, to use Emanuele Tesauro’s phrase, *scherzelvolmente ingannato* (playfully deceived) there is enjoyment in perceiving one’s own mind moving between deception and its opposite, but this perception is also useful in preparing the mind for theological meditation.

The questing hero Poliphilo is a fetishist of architecture—and advantageously so, as far as his elusive beloved, Polia, is concerned. When he is finally reunited with the object of his quest, he reports the agnoising sensation of almost-fulfilled desire:

...I was mad with greed to satisfy myself utterly with my own desired game ...My

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13. Aristotelian Telescope
ready-witted Polia noticed this dishonorable condition of blinded love, and seeking to dampen so importunate a fire and to break it off for a while, she came to my rescue as my only saviour and said to me gently: “Poliphilo, my best-beloved, I am well aware that you are extremely fond of looking at the works of antiquity. You might well use this interval ... to go and admire these deserted temples ... Take your pleasure in looking at these ...”

Here, Poliphilo presents Polia as his saviour, a ready-witted woman who provokes but also provides relief from the torture of love. Like anxious Petrarch and gloomy Boethius, each rescued from unhappy introspection by gorgeously dressed, exceptionally beautiful and impossibly ancient women in My Secret Book (Lady Truth) and The Consolation of Philosophy (Lady Philosophy) respectively, Poliphilo acquires some self-control and relief by following his beloved’s advice. Petrarch, “wide awake with anxiety,” sees a woman “from a time and of a splendour impossible to describe ... By her clothes and general appearance she was a maiden ... I was stunned by such unaccustomed radiance.” Similarly, recording his “gloomy thoughts”, Boethius becomes aware of “the figure of a woman whose look filled me with awe ... while her complexion was as fresh and glowing as that of a girl, I realized that she was ancient and that nobody would mistake her for a creature of our time. Her dress was a miracle of fine cloth and meticulous workmanship ... she had woven it herself.”

rescue is a double one: Polia is at risk of sexual violence, and must come up with a method of deferring Poliphilo’s desire. By recommending an appraisal of ruins—rather than of the beauty of her own body—she is able to save both herself and Poliphilo from the torments of his mad greed. This scene is in part a comical retelling of Petrarch’s and Boethius’s apparitions, but Polia’s request that the adoring pursuer depart to pleasure himself alone in deserted temples is a peculiar one. As an object of desire, Polia is not only aligned with but also willingly re-placed by the wondrous, ancient and empty structures of the dream-landscape. Furthermore, Poliphilo by no means interprets his beloved’s suggestion as a coy deferral or slight. To him, the substitution seems utterly, astonishingly reasonable: it is “[w]ithout another thought” that he “[leaves] Polia’s side and [comes] to these out-of-the-way mounds of vast, lofty heaps and ruins.”

Broken buildings rescue both lover and beloved.

The ruins with which Polia is aligned are a distracting, appealing alternative, certainly, but they act as a substitute for her as well, in which Poliphilo can just as easily “[r]ake [his] pleasure”. The double duty of the ruins at this moment reflects the multiplicity within the beloved herself. Poliphilo’s etymological definition is fixed—he is the lover of Polia, his motion fixed upon her. Yet she herself is an unfixed point. “Polia” is polysemic—that word contains her name—we hear also polis, city, and unite her with Rome and its wondrous ruins. In The End of the Poem, Giorgio Agamben reads polios, polia as “the gray woman, the old woman” (and consequently Poliphilo as “he who loves the old woman”), therefore relating Polia to a specific

ruin of Rome: brought to life by Poliphilo’s dream, she “is old (language), dead (language)”. The desired human being in the Hypnerotomachia, then, is etymologically sublimated into the artificial, the extra-human: into ruins and dead language, into unused buildings and words. Like Petrarch’s Truth and Boethius’s Lady Philosophy, Polia is ancient, though she appears as a maid. The powerful fantasy of reconstruction implicit in Poliphilo’s fetishistic attention to detail is in part a fantasy of use, a fantasy of converting ruined monuments back into useful architecture, and converting unused language into speech. Death, love and imagined, much-desired revival are central—hence, perhaps, what Agamben calls the “generally tomblike impression” of the text.

Discussing Dante’s bilingualism, Agamben discusses the vernacular in similar terms: it is that which “can follow only ‘use,’ not ‘art’; and is, therefore, necessarily transient and subject to continual death”. Love of a human, like speaking the vernacular, is transient, paradoxical, constantly created and destroyed: it demands action. It demands use. Love of antiquity, like learning a dead language, aspires to permanence while it fixates on something in straightforward decline: it dreams of revival, and—in the impulse to memorialise—demands art. These two loves are curiously conflated in the Hypnerotomachia: at first, the fetishistically detailed descriptions of ruins are a stand-in for Polia, but in the above-quoted scene Polia herself is

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18. Ibid., p. 43.
19. Ibid., pp. 53-4.
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replaced by the ruins, in a penitential redirection of desire. The tension between immediacy and deferral exists not only as part of Poliphilo’s internal struggle but also as an essential aspect of two important image-creating methods in the text. The dichotomy here is not unlike that explored in the previous chapter, between epic and essay, method and aphorism. The love of antiquity in the Hypnerotomachia is associated with narrative, with attempted reconstruction, line and form, description in the form of laborious instruction, and the pleasures of the intellect. The love of Polia is more readily associated with colour, radiance, description of easily imagined objects, and the pleasures of the senses.

The Hypnerotomachia is copiously illustrated with woodcuts, but these illustrations in a sense work against some of the image-creating literary techniques in the book. That the woodcuts are not generally satisfactory in illustrating the complex images described by the text in fact invites the reader to become an illustrator, initiating a process of laborious image construction. As Carruthers has argued, “measuring the pattern’ of the Tabernacle-Temple was in itself a visionary, penitential act, ‘intending’ one’s emotions and mind to prayerful reading,” something similar may be at work in the Hypnerotomachia. The impulse to annotate and illustrate is unavoidable in certain passages, and the existence of annotated copies and augmented woodcuts in later translations of the work demonstrate that this impulse has been shared by its many readers. For example, A. W. Johnson draws attention to the profuse annotations in Ben Jonson’s copy of the Hypnerotomachia, “presumably by Thomas Bourne, who

purchased it in 1641 and appears to have used it as an Italian primer”: he also discerns “a second, more judicious, hand throughout the volume—glossing Greek words, hieroglyphs, or *sententiae* in a light-brown ink, and occasionally marking the margins with the flowers and hands that are characteristic of Jonson’s annotations”.

To these difficulties of idiosyncratic language are added passages of description which defy any kind of immediacy of visualisation, and which demand a process of reconstruction. They are presented in the form of instructions, reminiscent not only of the passages describing the construction of the Tabernacle in Exodus, but also of Alberti’s diagrams which illustrate the construction of perspective in *On Painting*. Perhaps the most notable instance of this invitation to visualise through reconstruction is the description of the triumphal portal Poliphilo observes before his encounter with the dragon:

> I came, then, to this ancient portal of splendid workmanship, marvellously constructed with exquisite regularity and art, and magnificently decorated with sculpture and varied lineaments. I was inflamed with the pleasure of studying and understanding the fertile intellect and sharp intelligence of the wise architect; and thus I made this careful scrutiny of its dimensions, its lineaments, and its practical aspects.

> I measured diligently the squares beneath the columns, which were two on either

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side, and understood from this measurement the whole symmetry of the portal, which I will run through with a brief explanation. A four-sided figure, ABCD, divided by three equidistant straight lines and three transverse lines, will become sixteen squares. Next, a figure half the size is added to it, and when this added figure is divided in the same way, twenty-four squares are to be found. ...Now two diagonals are drawn across the first figure ABCD, and then a straight and a transverse line, intersecting one another, making four squares. Then in the space above the equal-sided one the four median points are marked, and the lines joining them constitute the rhombus ...(c1v)

There is a depiction of the portal in one of the original Italian woodcuts, but to understand its proportions from Poliphilo’s narrative, the reader must—unless he is reading the French translation of 1546 (the first of several French translations) which includes a very helpful diagram (reproduced in Figure 2.2)—laboriously decipher the instructions in order to construct a visual representation of the arch’s proportions within the mind. As Efthymia Priki observes, ...in the 1499 Italian edition, there seems to be a tendency to enigmatize through the blankness of the woodcuts and to provoke the reader to use his imaginative energy to complete the visual gaps and solve the “puzzles.” On the contrary, in the Jean Martin 1546 edition, there is an attempt to fill in the visual gaps and

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elucidate the story rather than leaving it up to the reader’s imagination.

This enigmatising of Poliphilo’s dream-landscape enables the reader to participate productively in its reconstruction. Andrew Hui suggests that Colonna is here directing his reader towards absurdity: “[b]y inventing nonexistent building types that are impossible to create in reality, Colonna spoofs the careful, methodical approaches of antiquarians such as Cyriaco D’Ancona, Giovanni Marcanova, and Poggio Bracciolini.” This may well be the case, though as we can see from the French woodcut, the four-sided figure Poliphilo describes can at least be constructed. Perhaps in addition to spoofing antiquarian approaches, Colonna is generating in the reader a simultaneously energising and penitential experience of fixing something impossible in the mind. “[S]tudious painters,” writes Alberti, “should ...understand that the more care and labour they put into studying the proportions of members, the more it helps them to fix in their minds the things they have learned.” Such care and labour is required also of the studious reader of the Hypnerotomachia, and the fixing it involves is connected to the fantasy of reconstruction discussed above.

Reading and annotating the Hypnerotomachia involves serious work, then, not only on paper but also in the mind, in the transference of the magnificent structures Poliphilo encounters to the flimsy world of mental images. In her study of the imagination and its response to liter-

Figure 2.1: Triumphal portal in the original Hypnerotomachia.
Figure 2.2: Diagram of the same triumphal portal in the French *Hypnerotomachia*. 
nature, *Dreaming by the Book*, Elaine Scarry says of reading that it involves the creation, under authorial instruction, of mental images which “approximate the ‘givenness’, hence vivacity, of our actual perceptual world.” Scarry’s study is based on a combination of literary analysis and an assessment of experiments in cognitive psychology: taken together, these avenues of exploration yield a theory of what we are good at imagining, and what we are not. As Scarry’s astute close readings of butterfly identification manuals and flower catalogues demonstrate, the mind is particularly receptive to rarity, finding it easy to picture objects in motion which are themselves on the border of immateriality: it is especially good at visualising light (radiant ignition), which, being even less substantial, can be transferred with ease into the mind.

Knowing what the mind is best able to recreate and carefully juxtaposing such objects is a method of transmitting sensation to a reader used by the sensory writers Scarry explores in depth, particularly Flaubert, Hardy and Emily Brontë.

Scarry’s study is useful to keep in mind in this reading of the *Hypnerotomachia*. This chapter began with the alignment of two loves with two languages, and with a further development of distinct categories of imagining, roughly modelled on the temporal progression of narrative in one category and immediacy of image in the other. To these categories we may add two additional components: to the former, that which is a challenge to the imagination, and to the latter, that which is easily and swiftly transferred into it. The question of ease of transference is made more interesting (not to mention complicated) by the fact that the

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CHAPTER 2. THE WORKSHOP OF MY IMAGINATION

Hypnerotomachia—as well as being a mausoleum, a manual of sorts, and a romance—is an account of a strange, multi-layered dream, in which Poliphilo’s imagination, as we shall see below, becomes a workshop for the forging of images. The dream is a uniquely fertile location for creativity, understood in the Renaissance, argues Maria Ruvoldt, as “a mechanism for invention”; creative dreaming has a long history, which S. K. Heninger traces back to Pythagoras:

Within the framework of Pythagorean metaphysics, which dichotomizes reality into a conceptual world and a physical world, a dream is seen quite simply as an intrusion of the conceptual into the physical. A truth which would otherwise remain ineffable is thereby made conscious in the dreamer and rendered knowable.

For Poliphilo, whose dream-self traverses a landscape entirely contained within his own mind, the dream-mind is easily invaded because its boundaries are less rigid: glutted with copious stunning objects, Poliphilo is frequently overcome by extreme weakness brought on by exposure to too much beauty. “What protection can the unquiet soul have,” he asks, before falling asleep and beginning his dream, “when it is unarmed, yet assailed with many a surprise.

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attack and surrounded by hostile forces, especially when the battle takes place within it, and is hampered by novel, unstable and insistent thoughts?” (a2v). Upon entering the first dream-world, the pathless forest, he says of his initial confusion: “Obscurity was already invading my mind, and clouds enveloping my senses, so that I did not know which choice to make” (a4). In the sections which follow, his receptivity having been established, Poliphilo is daunted by sensory overload: he is “seized with an unexpected joy” (a7v) as he approaches the obelisk; beholding the portal “greatly tired [his] eyes and diluted the spirits of [his] other senses” (a8); and viewing Eleuterylida’s dazzling palace, he falls into a “stunned and senseless reverie” (f2v). There are many other examples of Poliphilo’s mind being overcome by the objects he beholds. But the reader, unable to participate in the dream, cannot be invaded in the same way. The intrusion Heninger identifies between dream and reality must be achieved differently. Words must create images, transfer them into the imagining mind of the reader, and somehow fix them there, in an attempt to replicate and memorialise the experience of the dream.

Fixing architectural images involves considerable difficulty, and is one reason why this book has been described as “un-read” and “unreadable”. Following the beginning of Poliphilo’s journey through magnificent and deserted ruins, the reader must share with the author the “palpable labor” involved in creating images. We have already seen the kinds of descriptions

33. [33.]Scarry2001
which seem to demand illustration, though the woodcuts do not always provide it. Without annotation, mentally constructing the spaces through which Poliphilo travels is like engaging in one of the experiments in cognitive psychology described by Scarry, in which the imaginer must “[rotate] geometric figures in the air, moving the image closer or farther away.”

Harbison argues that the purpose of the “tedious precision” of the descriptions is to give the reader the illusion he could reconstruct them himself ... to win for the book the authenticity of a recipe. Dreaming the fantastic is not enough; it must be lived. Everything is objectified to be fixed in the memory, and the objects are memory devices, automatic history as characters are not. Intense fear of loss or forgetting makes the fixing itself a central act.

But the creation of memory devices and the process of fixing demands reading and rereading, precluding the immediacy and sensory overload that allow Poliphilo to suffer the beauty of architecture as he would the beauty of a woman.

Harbison is certainly correct that fear of forgetting motivates some of the intricacies of the Hypnerotomachia’s descriptive techniques. However, beyond the authenticity he discerns as the purpose of such attention to detail, a paradox is evident. Poliphilo attempts to represent the “spatial crowding” of his visual field with an excess of detail, but the reader cannot use this

34. Ibid., 35.
to emulate the experience of seeing *for the first time*. Reconstruction of architecture is possible, and so is memorising, but sensation generated by an initial encounter with architecture is ephemeral: Poliphilo reports, reconstructs and attempts to fix but, in so doing, destroys surprise and wonder. One of the intriguing claims Fisher makes in *Wonder, the Rainbow, and the Aesthetics of Rare Experiences* is that “memory and narrative are antagonistic to an aesthetics of wonder”.

Fisher elaborates on this idea later in the book:

> Aesthetics is part of the mobility of attention, interest, and delight. Its lingering over the widest range of details so as to prolong its pleasurable contact with the object is one clue to the connection of wonder to science. In the attention brought about by wonder, the capacity to notice the actual details of the object is a strategy on the part of pleasure that seeks to last as long as possible. The substitution of fear and relief, the world of signs and meanings, just where aesthetic delight seems most spontaneously elicited, makes clear the connection of fear to memory and to a kind of obsessive, fixed focus of attention.

Poliphilo fears forgetting the ruins, and paradoxically destroys the pleasurable wonder he experiences in their presence. The fantasy of converting ruined monuments back into something useful encounters this spectacular failure, then, transferring the “continuous and familiar death” of human love onto the attempt to imagine and experience ruined architecture. We

38. Ibid., p. 39.
began with a double rescue: here is a double ruin, a ruin of a ruin. Furthermore, this collision of sensation and stone in a narrative of constantly deferred unfulfillable desire is part of the dialogue between the Hypnerotomachia and other literary evocations of the wondrous ruins of Rome. In a letter to Giovanni Colonna, Petrarch, like Poliphilo reconstructing ruins, describes Rome at length, fixing and reconstructing and yet finding himself at a loss: “where shall I end?” he asks. “Can I really describe everything? What else may be said?” This sense of impossibility draws together the two loves in the Hypnerotomachia: reconstructing an experience of either of them in narrative form is a challenge. Later in the letter to Colonna, Petrarch notes the passing of a privileged, attentive moment of visual immediacy between friends, which can now only be approximated by “silent words”. Language is laborious; seeing is instantaneous.

The painter, Alberti argues, is not a mathematician: he does not “measure the shapes and forms of things in the mind alone and divorced entirely from matter” (On Painting, 1:1). He is concerned with “things that are visible”. The first book of On Painting contains descriptions and diagrams which together instruct the painter in matters of vision, proportion and perspective: these disappear in the creation of an image of that which is material and visible. Conversely, for the reader of the passages of the Hypnerotomachia discussed above, method does not become invisible: it is necessary to participate in the work which creates the image. This is the sense in which language is laborious. But the discussion above has focused entirely on the way in which architecture is described in the Hypnerotomachia. What about different
classes of objects entirely, such as hair, plant life and clothing? Scarry’s study suggests that these are the kinds of objects the mind is good at visualising. When faced with such objects as these, what is the nature of the work demanded of the Hypnerotomachia’s reader-as-artist?

In On Painting, close observation is recommended for the accurate depiction of hair, branches and garments, in order to endow them with an appropriate appearance of effortlessness:

Let it twist around as if to tie itself in a knot, and wave upwards in the air like flames, let it weave beneath other hair and sometimes lift on one side and another. The bends and curves of branches should be partly arched upwards, partly directed downwards; some should stick out towards you, others recede, and some should be twisted like ropes. Similarly in the folds of garments care should be taken that, just as the branches of a tree emanate in all directions from the trunk, so folds should issue from a fold like branches ...let all the movements be restrained and gentle, and represent grace rather than remarkable effort (2:45).

Naturally, the depiction of the grace and ease of these objects requires great labour from the painter, as does the depiction of accurate perspective in architecture. But while in the Hypnerotomachia the imagining of monuments demanded that the reader participate in the labour of accurate depiction, the imagining of lighter, rarer and more ephemeral objects comes

as close as anything in this text to the immediacy of seeing. Perhaps the best example is the banquet of Queen Eleuterylida: rare and radiant objects are present in abundance, images of matter at the borders of immateriality which are ideally suited, according to Scarry's assessment, to being transferred into the mind. Line and form are relinquished in favour of colour and radiance; memorialisation is superseded by immediacy.

It is a dazzling passage. The walls of the palace are “covered with plates of pure, lustrous gold” (f4); plants and flowers are either made from corruscating gemstones (f5v) or, like the “amethyst-coloured violets” at the banquet (f8v), are reminiscent of them; the Queen herself wears a thin, “crocus-yellow” blouse (f8v) and seems to be made of light. The glittering pyrites in the lapis lazuli of the pilasters (f4v) are recalled by the “blue silk beautifully interwoven with a golden weft” worn by the comely servants (g4); later, looking through the limpid waters of the river at the isle of Cytherea, it seems the brightness of the “gold-bearing sand” (t8v) of the river-bed recalls something of the solid, bright blue stone shot through with a dusting of gold. All the while, the marginal nature of these rare and bright objects, hanging as they do between solidity and radiant immateriality, is emphasised by the presence of multiple doors and doorkeepers: having already passed through the intricately described triumphal portal, Poliphilo encounters not only the palace’s grand propylaeum (f3) but the three portresses, or guardians of the curtains; after his audience with the Queen, Poliphilo faces a choice between three portals, as he continues his onward and inward journey of increasing visual intensity. As
Harbison observes, the imagery “gets increasingly dense, and the materials more precious until we are overloaded by the same things exemplified again and again, more and more dazzlingly with perfect security that we will not guess the creed which fits the ritual”.

Perhaps seeing is too immediate. Alberti recommends that the painter set up a veil between the objects to be depicted and the eye, such that surfaces may be rendered less variable: this method overcomes the difficulty of painting “something which does not continually present the same aspect” (*On Painting*, 2:31). The text of the *Hypnerotomachia* behaves like this veil for the reader, but for Poliphilo, there is no such framing and distancing effect. Subjected to imagery which grows more and more vital, and perhaps consequently more and more difficult to grasp and to distinguish, Poliphilo becomes anxious about the reader’s imaginative capabilities. As with the earlier invitation to reconstruction, he continues to place the responsibility for creativity in the imagining mind of the reader, not merely in his own ability to describe what he sees. However, faced with such dazzling things, he fears that he has attempted to present the unimaginable. His doubt recalls that of Petrarch in the above-quoted letter, but rather than expressing a lack of confidence in his ability to describe everything, to say everything and to complete his work, he asks “Who could conceive ...? Who could believe ...?” (g7). Later, defying Logistica in his choice of portal, he says, “Let he who can imagine these things judge what voluptuous pleasure they gave me” (m6v).

The imagination of the reader has its limits—this much is clear. “Things that are known

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40. Harbison, *Eccentric space*, p. 82.
are not comprehended according to how knowable they are,” writes Boethius in *The Consolation of Philosophy*, “but rather according to the ability to know of those who are doing the knowing.”

Poliphilo loses confidence in the ability of his real-world reader as he gains confidence in his own imagining power: as dreamer, he becomes an ideal reader, appropriating as well as receiving, transferring images with ease from the furthest reaches of his dream-boundaries to his own intellectual centre. His susceptibility to mental invasion has already been noted, but later this passivity is eclipsed by a kind of aesthetic martyrdom, in a torturous vision of the imagination’s generative power:

But more hurtful and far more iniquitous and vexing were the elusive and wandering thoughts caused by this valiant lord: they were expert inquisitors in such a matter, skilled adepts at forging from fire and flames such sweet torment, such a worshipful idol, such a comely image and such a beautiful shape in the workshop of my imagination ...(s2).

Poliphilo’s mind has become a forge for images, rather than a location of invasion: his ability to see objects in his mind is painfully limitless.

But seeing is not the same as knowing. Images are composed of obstructions; the painter’s domain is the understanding of “the borderlines of surfaces and their proportions” (1:12). In Alberti’s account of vision, extrinsic rays, median rays and the centric ray stretch between the

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eye and these surfaces, and

move rapidly with great power and remarkable subtlety, penetrating the air and rare and transparent bodies until they encounter something dense or opaque where their points strike and they instantly stick (1:6).

It is as well that they do stick, remarks Boethius, because if they did not stop at dense surfaces, the beauty even of an Alcibiades would be a disgusting heap of guts and organs. It isn’t the human body, then, that is attractive, but only the weakness of human vision that makes it seem so.

The “beautiful shape” of Polia is the impenetrable limit of Poliphilo’s ability to see: this is the torment of seeing, not knowing, that a shape denotes a boundary, the limit of the eye and thus the limit of the dream-self’s power.

The broken buildings that protect Polia from Poliphilo provide more than visual pleasure, to both hero and reader: though wonder generated by a first encounter with architecture has been shown to be elusive in the Hypnerotomachia, appraisal of ruins offers an antidote to the torment of seeing. The antidote is not strictly a departure from the human—observing the triumphal portal, Poliphilo apprehends “the fertile intellect and sharp intelligence of the wise architect” (c1v). Fixing wondrous architecture in the mind provides access to the creator’s mental prowess, offering an alternative to the paradoxes inherent in bodily desire, and

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42. Slavitt, Boethius: The Consolation of Philosophy, p. 78.
the illusions such desire generates. The task of the reader is to enact a memorial of work, specifically, the work of the architect: the woodcuts—one wonders, deliberately?—provide little assistance. The *Hypnerotomachia* subverts expectations of a manual of architecture, with magnificent structures insufficiently illustrated; in testing a reader’s ability to imagine and to know, it exposes some paradoxical word-image relations that go beyond the literal interaction of woodcut and text on the page.

Deeply impressed by Scarry’s study of the imagination, A. S. Byatt assesses the poetry of John Donne on similar terms, relating cybernetics to metaphysical conceits. She recalls a scientist who suggested that “we delight in puns because the neurone connections become very excited by the double input associated with all the stored information for two arbitrarily connected things or ideas.” Byatt argues that if puns produce such a sensation, then “complex metaphors [must produce] infinitely more subtle versions of this excitement and pleasure.” Samuel Johnson found this kind of conceit—when “the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together”—distasteful in the extreme, but for Fisher, the “act of violence” involved

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44. Ibid.
in joining remote clusters of experience provides a favourable sensation of wonder.  

In concluding this discussion of the *Hypnerotomachia*, I venture to take Byatt’s analysis a little further. What the above focus on images and boundaries demonstrates is that the *Hypnerotomachia* is a powerfully synaesthetic narrative. Though this sense of synaesthesia invited the mockery of Rabelais, it shares something with what Fisher isolates as a “genuinely poetic act of thought” in Aristotle: his categorisation of echoes, rainbows and reflections within the same genus. In joining together these manifestations of light and sound, Aristotle draws attention to their fundamental similarity in a way that “does exactly what we always speak of metaphor doing: captures the inner similarity of things different in appearance and remote from one another in our ordinary associations”. Fisher associates this act of thought with rhetoric, and continues: “We would be wrong not to see these acts as being among the most profound examples of metaphor, metonymy, synchdoche, and chiasmus ever produced within either thought or poetry”.

Byatt speculates that the puzzle of metaphysical wordplay excites neurone connections with multiple, disparate inputs. I suggest that something similar is happening in the *Hypnerotomachia*: what we might term spatial punning, an impossible overloading of the imagination, and the creativity—the necessity to reassess one’s very concept of the possible—that results from this. The effort involved in following Poliphilo’s detailed instructions in order to transfer

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47. Ibid., pp. 93, 97.  
48. Ibid., p. 119.
them as images into the imagination has something of the delight in puzzling Byatt associates with reading Donne; the intensity and increased interiority of the dream-narrative reveals a highly-structured but synaesthetically confusing sensory world, the boundaries of which are the flimsy stuff of the narrator’s subconscious. The *Hypnerotomachia* plays with space as metaphysical poets play with words: the result for both is at once perplexing and puzzling, but ultimately rewarding to the well-trained and willing mind.

In *Polyphilo, or, The Dark Forest Revisited*, Alberto Pérez-Gómez reimagines the perplexing journey of the *Hypnerotomachia* occurring in a very particular, singular, uncanny place:

Polyphilo travels westward through the homogeneous space of our scientific universe: he is constantly in motion but arrives nowhere. And time is suspended, always the day’s breaking lights. He is always in the same place yet visits magical architectural objects pregnant with meaning, works that constantly question the assumption of a universal, geometric space as the place of human existence. His time is therefore always the present, catching up with the time of his departure, the simultaneity of simulacra; yet it is always sunrise, a privileged time of day that propitiates the fictional articulation of human temporality...

Airborne over a spinning planet and living every paradox that entails, Poliphilo experiences the dreamlike world of the *Hypnerotomachia* reimagined for the peregrinations of the twentieth-

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century traveller. After all, what could be more artificial, more isolated, more vacant and perplexing, more rule-governed and more absurdly torturous than an airport?
Chapter 3

Upon Impossibility

Fatum Mathematicum and ‘The Definition of Love’

The frontispiece (Figure 3.1) of Robert Recorde’s 1556 work on astronomy, The Castle of Knowledge, shows the eponymous structure in the centre, flanked by Fate in the guise of Urania, Muse of astronomy, on the left, and Fortune on the right. Fate, “whose gouernour is Knowledge”, stands firm on a cube and carries the Sphæra Fati, which is an armillary sphere, or, as it is described in the text, an “Armylle or Ring sphere”; Fortune, “whose ruler is Ignoraunce”, blindfolded and precariously balanced on a globe, wields the Sphæra Fortune, the wheel of Fortune. The verse in the centre of the frontispiece proclaims the victory of Urania over Fortune, remarking that despite Earth’s honouring of the latter,

The heauens to fortune are not thralle,
These Spheres surmount al fortunes chance.

The text that follows is a dialogue between a Scholar and a Master, within which a short

Figure 3.1: Frontispiece to Robert Recorde’s *The Castle of Knowledge*.
digression by the latter provides a gloss for the frontispiece. The Scholar wonders why dice, which are emblematic of chance, are not globes, like that upon which Fortune balances in the frontispiece; the Master reflects upon the transformation of chance into certainty after the die is cast:

the thing that is ones done, can neuer againe be vndone, although it may be altered, and so constancy in that appeareth most certein. for as your chance on the dice beyng ones caste, you muste be content to stand to it: so fortune when it is paste, can not bee altered. And that is the cause why all men vse to saye, when they expresse their stay in lyuing: Suche is my fortune. Yet many learned men put difference between chaungable chaunce, and stable fortune, callying the firste Fortuna, and the other Fatum: so that destiny is stable, though fortune chaung right often.

The difference between Fate and Fortune, according to Recorde’s Master, seems to be a matter of perspective. Fate is “stable fortune”, with the certainty of that which has already occurred and cannot be changed; Fortune is “chaungable chaunce” and encompasses the unpredictability of events from the earthly perspective. The heavens are unaffected by the alteration of time and therefore by Fortune: Recorde explains this in the above-quoted lines from the frontispiece and also in the ‘Preface to the Reader’, in which he describes the consumption of all earthly

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things by time and contrasts this with the heavens, which “not only gouerne time it selfe, but
utterly stande cleere from all corruption of time.”⁶ Fate can only be truly grasped on Earth in
retrospect; in the domain of the heavens, however, it is the only reality.

Fate is the chief antagonist in Marvell’s ‘The Definition of Love’, and like Recorde’s Fate
in *The Castle of Knowledge*, she yields an armillary sphere. Franziska Rehlinghaus argues that
the version of Fate depicted in Recorde’s frontispiece is *fatum mathematicum*, or mathematical
fate—mathematical, that is, in the sense of astrological.⁷ This term was introduced by Justus
Lipsius almost thirty years later in the *De Constantia* of 1583; applying it to Recorde might be
anachronistic, but to Andrew Marvell, whose Neostoicism and debt to Lipsius have been well
documented, this component of the latter’s fourfold taxonomy of Fate would have been very
familiar. *Fatum mathematicum* is described as follows in John Stradling’s 1595 translation of
*De Constantia*:

> I call MATHEMATIGAL destinie, that which tyeth and knitteth firmelie all actions

> and euentes to the power of the Planettes, and dispositions of the Starres: Of which

> the Chaldeans & Astrologians were the first authors. ...In this foolish opinion

> are not onely the common crue of Astrologers, but (I shame to speake it) some

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Lipsius's purpose in bringing up *fatum mathematicum* is, argues John Sellars, to “explicitly distance his own conception of fate from it”; it is associated with idolatry, as Walter Charleton insists almost seventy years later, being a practice which interprets the heavens by spelling those Characters, which the Planets in their Conjunctions, Oppositions, and other Apparitions seemed to make, into words and sentences perfectly signifying, to the exact and intelligent observer, the intent of God ...

Marvell, however, finds much poetic potential in the conjunctions and oppositions dictated by *fatum mathematicum*; ‘The Definition of Love’ uses the imagery of astrology, astronomy and geometry to describe a love whose parents are despair and impossibility. In this chapter, I argue that Marvell uses models from these three fields perversely, seeking out their failures and distortions and exploring the limits of what they are capable of representing. He takes the details which must be removed in a limited model and forces them back in to create convulsing earths and swelling halls; he imagines shapes extended to infinity, where they cannot be defined, and implies an imperceptible definition within the resultant distortion. His metaphors operate in a similar fashion, literalised to the point of absurdity to demonstrate that

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language, like geometry, is necessarily embodied and is therefore incapable of true definition.

‘The Definition of Love’ is preoccupied with the limits of being and representation, and with the unseeable self; it rages against unyielding Fate, and the impossibilities contained in the despair of embodied love.

‘The Definition of Love’ is an extraordinarily riddle-like poem. “The metaphors which define this love are all, in a sense, riddles,” writes Ann Evans Berthoff. “One riddle therefore only begets another.” Noting the poem’s seriousness of theme but absurdity of execution, Bruce King goes so far as to say that the poem is more riddle than definition: it is “similar to Old English riddles, and part of the pleasure that it gives results from our puzzlement at the clues that are offered.” Much of the criticism has concerned itself with discovering a solution to the riddle of the “[t]wo perfect loves” which Fate jealously insists on separating; this solution-hunting has in some cases focused on identifying the “strange and high” object of the poem’s love, and in others has attempted to solve the geometrical, astronomical and cartographical problems the poem introduces. Bateson’s note appended to Greenwood’s article ‘Marvell’s Impossible Love’ comments upon the change from first person singular to plural in the last four stanzas, and suggests that the addition to the speaker is

[a] girl who must be of the same level of reality—a girl of flesh and blood, one who might be historically identifiable! She is his social superior, an ‘object strange and

In *My Ecchoing Song*, Colie refers to “the situation in which poet and lady find themselves”. Toliver argues that the assumption that the object of love is a Petrarchan mistress “falls short of exhausting the possibilities but is never proved wrong.” However, Berthoff supposes a different solution: drawing on Plotinus as a possible source for Marvell, she takes the “highly intellectualized” imagery and the “reserved expression” as evidence that this poem’s subject is “the love of the embodied soul for its heavenly counterpart.” Paul Hammond’s suggestion is that the genderlessness of the poem’s lovers—frequently noted as an aspect of the poem’s abstraction—indicates either a homosexual or an autoerotic passion, demonstrative of Marvell’s fascination with the Narcissus myth. “A precise parallel,” writes Hammond, with reference to the imagery of the penultimate stanza of ‘The Definition of Love’,

would require two lovers of the same gender, or, even more precisely, a lover and his own parallel reflection in the water which he can never meet without destroying. ...[the poem] makes very good sense as a definition of the impossible love of one man for another, or of one man for himself.

My reading expands upon these two, suggesting that the autoerotic inclination Hammond

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identifies is closely related to the paradox of the embodied soul’s yearning for its heavenly self described by Berthoff; Marvell draws partly on the imagery of spherical geometry and partly on Neoplatonic thought such as Ficino’s in the *Symposium* commentary to express the paradox of a necessarily self-annihilating, yet perfectly reciprocated love.

The first two lines of ‘The Definition of Love’ have usually been interpreted as a description of the love object:

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My love is of a birth as rare
As 'tis for object strange and high ...
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That is to say, the adjectives “strange” and “high” are generally read as applying to the object; “[m]y love” and the object have been considered to be in apposition. However, reading the opening in this way causes confusion later in the poem; “love” is not, I think, a synonym for “lover” or “beloved” here or in subsequent stanzas. I read “strange and high” as applying to the two reciprocal loves in this poem: that which the speaker directs towards the object, and that which the object directs towards the speaker. This love’s strange genealogy is emphasised in the next two lines:

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It was begotten by Despair,
Upon Impossibility.
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B. J. Sokol has suggested that this is an ironic inversion of Diotima’s account of love in Plato’s

Symposium, which describes love as the child of Resource and Need; Marvell, writes Sokol, “restat[es] the position that love per se has only aspects of want.” Sokol takes this allusion to Symposium—along with the use of geometrical imagery later in the poem—as evidence that Marvell is attempting to define a Platonic ideal of love; as T oliver writes, “Socratic irony lies at the heart of the poem.” My suggestion is that Marvell is even more specific, attempting to define a perfectly reciprocated love which, according to Ficino in the commentary on the second speech of Symposium, implies the annihilation of the self:

It also often happens that the lover wishes to transform himself into the person of the loved one. This is really quite reasonable, for he wishes and tries to become God instead of man; and who would not exchange humanity for divinity? ...It also happens that those snared by love alternately lament and rejoice in their love. They lament because they are losing, destroying and ruining themselves; they rejoice because they are transferring themselves into something better.

This love is paradoxical: to lose the self is a source of despair, as it might remove the joyful contemplation of the object, but this joyful contemplation is only possible in despairing separation. As Berthoff writes,

Magnanimous Despair and the Love it creates forms a dialectical unity, just as the

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CHAPTER 3. UPON IMPOSSIBILITY

Drop of Dew represents in itself the incomparable joy of contemplation of heaven and despair of the life that makes such contemplation possible.

Hope can provide no help in this scenario: it is “feeble”, Marvell continues in the second stanza, and could not have shown the speaker “so divine a thing”. The “thing” in question, which Berthoff implicitly identifies as the soul, is not necessarily the love object: it might rather be the love itself, which draws the person who loves towards divinity but contains the promise of a transformation that is not desirable, not to be hoped for.

Figure 3.2: A simple diagram of an armillary sphere, from Recorde’s *The Castle of Knowledge*, p. 57.

The third stanza introduces the first of Fate’s methods of separating the two loves: by driving iron wedges between them and “crowd[ing] itself betwixt.” This imagery raises many

22. Ibid., pp. 96-7.
questions: “[i]s it the (rather inappropriate) shears of Fate, the sword of a tyrant, or the bars of a prison or fence?” asks Davison. Isabel MacCaffrey traces the use of “wedges” in this stanza to Chaucer’s Treatise on the Astrolabe, and suggests that Marvell is here referring to Fate’s instruments which keep the two loves apart.

I am in agreement that this is a reference to astronomical equipment, but rather than a flat astrolabe—that appears later in the poem—I think Marvell is here referring to something three-dimensional, because Fate is forcing space between speaker and object. I suggest that Marvell is thinking instead of the axis of an armillary sphere, such as the one Fate holds in the frontispiece of The Castle of Knowledge (Figure 3.1), or the more ornate version in Blagrave’s The Mathematicall Jewel (Figure 3.3).

Recorde includes a simple diagram of an armillary sphere in the Second Treatise of The Castle of Knowledge (Figure 3.2) and explains its construction: latitude rings represent the polar circles, the tropics and the equator, and an oblique circle represents the ecliptic (the plane of the apparent path of the sun around the earth); two longitude rings, the colures, divide this “Persed sphere” into quarters. Blagrave’s armillary sphere is more detailed, and shows another oblique circle in addition to the ecliptic: this is the horizon, which assumes a particular position on the globe, and shows the appearance of the celestial sphere in relation to that position. The whole apparatus rotates about the poles, to which the speaker and the object are relegated in

stanza five of ‘The Definition of Love’. Sokol is not specific when he remarks that the “second half of Marvell’s poem is filled with damaged or endangered spheres—armillary, mathematical, projected onto a plane, and cosmic”; however, Fate’s armillary sphere with its iron wedges is, I think, present already in stanza three.

Figure 3.3: An armillary sphere from the frontispiece of Blagrave’s The Mathematicall Jewel.

Stanzas five and six continue the language of astronomical machinery:

And therefore her decrees of steel

Us as the distant Poles have placed,

(Though Love’s whole world on us doth wheel)

Not by themselves to be embraced:

Unless the giddy heaven fall,

And earth some new convulsion tear;

And, us to join, the world should all

Be cramped into a planisphere.

In the fifth stanza, the loves are imagined in three-dimensional space as the poles of “Love’s whole world”—that is, they are located at two points on a sphere that are the furthest possible distance from each other. This continues the armillary sphere imagery introduced in the third stanza: perhaps the decrees of steel refer to the metal of the rings and the axis of the sphere. Some of these rings are able to embrace others—the oblique rings of the ecliptic and the horizon, for example, intersect with the equator and the tropics—the polar circles, however, are completely isolated.

In stanza six, the speaker introduces with “[u]nless” a hypothetical situation in which the poles could be united: by projecting the three-dimensional globe onto a two-dimensional plane and creating a planisphere. The language here indicates that Marvell has an astrolabe in mind, as it reflects that of Thomas Blundeville in the 1594 *Exercises*, as he introduces the astrolabe described by Blagrave in *The Mathematicall Jewel*.²⁷

²⁷. Appendix 1, a transcript of “the manuscript inventory of books owned by Henry Fairfax, the uncle of
This wordes Astrolabe is as much to say as the handle or instrument of the Starres, by helpe whereof the manifolde motions and apparences of the heauens and of the Starres therein contained are known, and it is called of some a planispheare, because it is both flat and rounde, representing the Globe or Spheare, hauing both his Poles flatte both together.

Marvell’s hypothetical compression of the poles is violent. The imagined overthrow of the tyrant Fate would cause the earth’s vivid convulsions, which recall the undignified image of conflating geometries in the seventh stanza of *Upon Appleton House*:

Yet thus the laden house does sweat,

And scarce endures the Master great:

But where he comes the swelling hall

Stirs, and the square grows spherical .

This image, as we will see, echoes the language of Edward Wright’s description of the distortions created by the Mercator projection of the globe; the joining of the loves in ‘The Definition of Love’, however, imagines a different projection, which comes with distortions of its own. In both cases, Marvell takes a form of limited geometrical representation and crowds it with more reality than it is designed to depict; this is a distinctive feature of Marvell’s imag-

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CHAPTER 3. UPON IMPOSSIBILITY

ination, which is, as MacCaffrey has argued, “devoted to the exploration of limit”.

There has been much critical debate about the planisphere in stanza six; this has focused primarily on the question of whether the poles to which Marvell refers in the fifth stanza are terrestrial or celestial, and whether the planisphere in question is a two-dimensional representation of the earth or of the stars. Pierre Legouis first proposed the celestial interpretation, and Davison argued for this in 1955. Dean Morgan Schmitter made a case for a terrestrial interpretation in 1961, causing Legouis to make a partial amendment to his own thesis. However, the argument for the celestial sphere has been more generally accepted, as Timothy Raylor notes in his useful summary of scholarship on the cartography in this poem. Schmitter’s insistence that the planisphere is terrestrial, Raylor argues, is based on insufficient evidence that a celestial planisphere would have been less familiar to Marvell’s contemporaries, as well as on an erroneous assumption that the lovers’ distinctiveness is sufficiently depicted by circular lines of latitude on a polar stereographic projection of the earth. Raylor discounts Berthoff’s suggestion that Marvell has a geographical astrolabe in mind—“an instrument in which a skeletal, planispheric star chart is superimposed over a planispheric map of the earth”—on

31. Davison, Marvell’s ‘The Definition of Love’.
the poem’s imagery. I am inclined to agree with Raylor here; a study of some contemporary accounts of projection provides yet more support for the celestial interpretation.

In his 1635 book *Geographie delineated forth in two booke*, Nathanael Carpenter summarises two chief methods of projecting a globe onto a two-dimensional plane: the plain chart and the planisphere. The plain chart is a cylindrical projection like that used by Mercator in his famous map of 1569: the terrestrial sphere is “inscribed in a Cylinder, euery part thereof swelling in Longitude and Latitude, till it apply it selfe to the hollow superficies of the said Cylinder.”

Carpenter is clearly drawing on the 1599 work of the mathematician Edward Wright, *Certaine Errors in Navigation*, in his description of the projection; Wright’s distinctive imagery was paraphrased not only by Carpenter in 1635 but also by John Gregory in his 1650 work *Gregorii Opuscula* and by John Newton in his *Institutio mathematica* of 1654. Wright explains the curious distortion of the polar regions in this kind of projection thus:

> Let this Sphaerical superficies swel like a bladder, (whiles it is in blowing) aequally alwayes in every part thereof (that is, as much in longitude as in latitude) till it apply, and joyn it self (round about, and all amongst also towards either pole) unto the concave superficies of the cylinder ...

The popular image of the swollen bladder, along with an expanding sphere distorting as ge-

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ometries conflate, might be a source for the “swelling hall” of Upon Appleton House, which “[s]tirs, and the square grows spherical”. Marvell may also have this projection in mind when he discusses the parallel lines that never meet in the penultimate stanza of “The Definition of Love”: the polar distortion in the plain chart comes from forcing the lines of longitude, which in a sphere meet at the poles, to become parallel.

Distortions are inevitable in any projection: “a flat superficies,” writes Blagrave, “cannot be equally answerable to a globes Superficies in all points (nay scant in any point) for that there is no affinitie or proportion of a streight line to a crooked, nor of a globe to a plaine.” The plain chart creates distortion at the poles, as we have seen; the alternative is the planisphere. As Carpenter explains, the most common stereographic projection used to create a terrestrial planisphere—for example in William Grent’s 1625 A New and Accurate Map of the World—is an equinoctial, or equatorial stereographic projection, which can show either the eastern or the western hemisphere, and in which the lines of the parallels (latitude) and meridians (longitude) are curves which cross each other. The polar stereographic projection, to which Marvell is clearly referring in stanza six, is less frequently used in a terrestrial planisphere; in it, the circles so described will be the true Parallels: This kinde of proiection, though more vnusuall, yet wants not his speciall vse in describing the parts of the earth

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40. William Grent, A new and accurate map of the world (1625).
neere the Pole, which in our ordinary kinde of Tables proiected after the other manner, cannot suffer so large and proportionall a Description.\[41\]

Carpenter supports his explanation with the two illustrations reproduced in Figure 3.4, one showing the appearance of the meridians and parallels in an equatorial stereographic projection, and the other showing their appearance in a polar stereographic projection. Though I have suggested that the plain chart’s distorting parallels might be part of the imagery of the penultimate stanza, I think the concentric circles of the polar projection fit Marvell’s metaphor more closely.

Figure 3.4: The left illustration shows the appearance of the meridians and parallels in an equinoctal (equatorial) stereographic projection; the right shows the same in a polar stereographic projection.

Carpenter’s explanations of projection are specific to the earth; let us return to Blagrave’s,

\[41\] Carpenter, *Geographie delineated forth in two bookes*, p. 183, emphasis added.
which provide further evidence that Marvell has the celestial sphere in mind. Drawing on the work of Johannes Stöffler and Gemma Frisius, Blagrave illustrates the method by which a single point of perspective enables the plotting of a three-dimensional globe onto a plane (Figure 3.5): the polar circles, tropics and equator are parallel lines in the first picture and concentric circles in the second; the oblique lines of the horizon and the ecliptic become offset circles. Blagrave's projection provides a visual analogue for Marvell's penultimate stanza:

As lines so loves oblique may well

Themselves in every angle greet:

But ours, so truly parallel,

Though infinite, can never meet.

Often in the literature on astronomy in this period, “oblique” refers to a horizon—which is to say, the plane that intersects with the globe from the perspective of the observer. If the observer is at the pole, the horizon would be identical to the equator; if the observer is at the equator, the horizon would be perpendicular to it; at any other position on the earth, it is oblique. Perhaps Marvell is here contrasting his universally ideal reciprocal but separated love with the love that is permitted to unite with beloved at a particular position. The “oblique” loves of stanza seven might be visualised as the oblique horizon in Blagrave's projection, which is the line PQ in the first picture and the circle PQ (the larger of the offset circles) in the second; the polar circles, as we have already seen in the discussion of the armillary sphere,
Two problems remain. One is that the stereographic projection, though it solves the problem of distortion at the poles, can only show one hemisphere: though Marvell imagines the violent compression of the armillary sphere, his planisphere actually hints at a far more profound separation of the polar regions than has hitherto been noted. The other is the question of infinity in the penultimate stanza. As I have demonstrated and as many others
have observed, the parallels Marvell describes are best imagined as the concentric circles of a polar stereographic projection which cannot intersect with each other. But in what sense could these be said to be infinite? Schmitter's explanation is nonsensical: “[l]ines of latitude,” he writes, “are not only parallel and therefore infinite, but they are also represented as circles, the perfect geometric form.” Parallel does not imply infinite: the circles in all the images presented here are finite. What does Marvell have in mind with his parallel, infinite lines in stanza seven?

To answer this question, we need to study more closely the distortions incurred in a stereographic projection, and the reason why it can only depict one hemisphere. As demonstrated in the diagram in Figure 3.6, a polar stereographic projection of the northern hemisphere uses as its projection point the south pole. Any point on the sphere except the projection point can be projected onto the planisphere, by drawing a straight line which connects the two points. The projection will be accurate for points between the north pole and the equator; it becomes increasingly distorted the nearer it gets to the south pole, which is why astrolabes of the northern hemisphere are typically bounded by the tropic of Capricorn. The line which projects the north pole is perpendicular to the planisphere and thus plots the north pole in the centre; the lines projecting points as they approach the south pole become closer and


closer to parallel to the planisphere. Plotting the south pole—the projection point—itself is impossible: there is no second point to define the direction of the line, so we would have to imagine infinite lines of infinite length emanating from the pole, yielding an infinite circle. As we saw on the cylindrical projection of the plain chart, both poles are distorted by making the lines of longitude parallel; the cost of an accurate projection of one pole on a planisphere is the infinite distortion of the other.

![Diagram](image)

Figure 3.6: In this diagram, points on the sphere are projected onto the planisphere—the large circle which intersects with the equator—by drawing lines from the south pole, S. For simplicity, I have placed the example points in the same longitude plane on the sphere. The point N is plotted in the centre of the circle; the point Q is on the equator and so intersects with the planisphere already; the point P appears on the planisphere between the two. Note that if we use the south pole, S, to attempt to project points in the southern hemisphere, for example R, they will appear distorted because they intersect with the planisphere outside the equator. It is impossible to plot the projection point, S, itself on the planisphere: theoretically this would create an infinite circle.

Of course, the practical solution is to project the southern hemisphere from the north pole and to create a double-faced planisphere, in which the poles are forced together: Marvell
encourages us to imagine this as a violent convulsion in stanza six. But he dispenses with the celestial machinery and convulsing Earth in the seventh stanza, turning to a poignant image of impossibility illustrated by the unyielding truth of mathematical objects. In a polar stereographic projection, which must be what Marvell has in mind with the planisphere of stanza six, the poles cannot truly be forced together in two dimensions: it is impossible to project the entire globe from a single point. It is my suggestion that Marvell was aware of this paradox of the impossibility of projecting two poles onto the same planisphere, and had this in mind when imagining infinite parallels in the seventh stanza: he is writing about a love which aspires to place itself on the same plane as the beloved, but despairingly laments the impossibility of this. The two loves can meet physically by being “cramp’d into a planisphere”, but this is imperfect as the two hemispheres are still separate, and necessarily finite: the only way of truly connecting them on the same plane is by having one be a single point, and the other an undefinable, infinitely distant circle. The oblique lines—the ecliptic and the horizon—can, as we have seen from Blagrave’s illustrations, be projected accurately onto a planisphere; oblique loves can exist simultaneously on one plane. This is not true, however, for the poles.

This impossibility brings us back to the Narcissus story, which, as Hammond explains, was extraordinarily appealing to Marvell, drawing together such topics as

the homoerotic gaze, self-absorption, the natural setting as the mediator of desire,

and the disempowered voice. There were other interpretations of Narcissus which
Marvell might well have pondered. In Neo-Platonic writers (including Plotinus and Ficino) his story was taken as an allegory of man failing to distinguish material from spiritual beauty, mistaking the transitory world for the true world and so condemning the soul to confinement in the body. Others saw Narcissus as an emblem of irresponsible retirement from public life.

There is a likeness between the single point of perspective in the polar projection and the gaze of Narcissus into a reflected, inverted hemisphere below; the surface of the water becomes the planisphere, and the eye of the “I” in ‘The Definition of Love’ becomes the pole, projecting an image on the surface. The second hemisphere is an illusion, of course: the poignancy of the Narcissus story is in the necessary annihilation of the beloved as it is approached; to enter the illusory world is to destroy it. The embodied eye can only ever perceive its equal and opposite in a reflection; it cannot look at itself, just as it is impossible for a pole to project itself onto the same planisphere as its opposite. The planisphere becomes an emblem of the impossibility of perfect vision, like that observed by Jane Partner in Marvell’s poem ‘Eyes and Tears’:

the disembodied eye ...articulates the poignant impossibility of achieving geometrically precise vision on earth ...Marvell presents us with a melancholic fantasy of the perfect clarity of vision that could only be commanded by a disembodied soul.

It is also emblematic of the impossibility of perfect reciprocity in earthly love.

To conclude this discussion of ‘The Definition of Love’, I turn to Nicholas of Cusa, who, like Marvell, was very interested in both the impossibility of perfect vision (in De Visione Dei) and the exaggeration of geometry as a rhetorical strategy (in De Docta Ignorantia). Isabel MacCaffrey has noted Marvell's familiarity with Cusanus, suggesting that the “holy Mathe-maticks” of Upon Appleton House owe something to Cusanus’s extensions of finite shapes to infinity. Yet it is Cusanus’s depiction of the limits of embodied vision in De Visione Dei that is of particular significance to ‘The Definition of Love’:

For I am confronted by the wall of absurdity, which is the wall of the coincidence of creating with being created, as if it were impossible for creating to coincide with being created ...So long as I conceive a creator creating, I am still on this side of the wall of paradise. And so long as I imagine a creatable creator, I have not yet entered, but I am at the wall. But when I see you as absolute infinity to whom is suited neither the name of creating creator nor that of creatable creator, then I begin to behold you in an unveiled way and to enter the garden of delights.

In a characteristically tautological move, Cusanus depicts the absurdity of conceiving a creator creating, or a creatable creator. The attempt to define leads the thinker to a “wall of absurdity”, where language’s temporality veils understanding, and demonstrates its limits when the attempt

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is made to define something infinite and disembodied. Marvell reaches a similar paradox in ‘The Definition of Love’; true definition would permit the coincidence of embodied soul and heavenly counterpart, which is impossible.
Chapter 4

Crack’d Wits

Margaret Cavendish and Nature’s jesting housewife

For like as a man’s disposition is never well known till he be crossed, nor Proteus ever changed shapes till he was straitened and held fast; so the passages and variations of nature cannot appear so fully in the liberty of nature, as in the trials and vexations of art.

—Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, Book II.

Novelty discomposes the mind, but acquaintance settles it in peace and tranquility.

—Margaret Cavendish, *The Blazing World*.

Much perplexity ensued when, in 1661, five *Lacrymæ Batavica*—Batavian tears—were wept upon the gentlemen of the Royal Society. These ‘tears’, formed by rapidly cooling drops of molten glass in water, were introduced to England by former Cavalier commander Prince Rupert of the Rhine, son of Elizabeth Stuart, the Winter Queen, and thus first cousin of

the recently restored King Charles II. This is how they came to be known, also, as Prince Rupert’s drops. In an account of the investigation of these at Gresham College, appended to Christopher Merrett’s translation of Antonio Neri’s *The Art of Glass*, the chief paradox of these tadpole–shaped glass drops is described thus:

> A blow with a small hammer, or other hard tool will not break one of the Glass Drops made in water, if it be touched no where but on the body. Break the tip of it, and it will fly immediately into very minute parts with a smart force, and noise, and these parts will easily crumble into a coarse dust.  

It is an object, then, with seemingly contradictory properties: extraordinarily resistant to force except in one area, the tail, which is easily broken to explosive effect. These contradictory properties were extremely attractive to many natural philosophers of the time: here was a puzzle, a novelty, a jest, a riddle, something simultaneously compact and self-contained but also hauntingly mysterious. Many a man would “beat his brains”—to borrow Margaret Cavendish’s expression in *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*—in the attempt to solve it. By beginning with Prince Rupert’s drops, and their curious connection not only with the Royal Society but also with the recent English civil wars, I situate Cavendish in the context of this period’s taste for scientific novelties, in order to examine her own understanding of the creative mind under stress.

6. Cavendish, *Observations upon experimental philosophy to which is added The description of a new blazing world*, p. 103.
By the time of the Royal Society investigations, Constantijn Huygens had already requested Cavendish’s opinion on the drops in their correspondence of 1657. In her response Cavendish likens the breaking of the tail to the discharging of a firelock, reasoning that despite its cold and inert exterior, the drop must contain either “oylye Sulphur” or “vittral spirritts”, forming “a cold dead fire.” Cavendish is resistant to the experimental method practised by Huygens and others, insisting on rationalistic deduction over intervention and observation, but neither her theory nor those of the philosophers to whose superiority she nominally defers—“for it were A presumption,” she writes, “to giue my Oppinion, after these famous and lerned phylosophers, as those which are in ëance”—prevailed. As Grant argues, this was no disgrace; Cavendish was in illustrious company in her error, and besides, the solution had to wait another three centuries to be revealed.

Cavendish insists that it is her “Outward sense” that provides her with the information required to reach a conclusion on the nature of Rupert’s drops. That this conclusion has to do with a resemblance between the drops and firearms might, however, owe something to other aspects of the historical context. The resemblance is not restricted to the drops’ explosive

10. Douglas Grant, Margaret the first: A biography of Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, 1623–1673 (University of Toronto Press, 1957).
12. Akkerman and Corporaal, Mad Science Beyond Flattery: The Correspondence of Margaret Cavendish and Constantijn Huygens.
nature, as an examination of the method of their production as described in *The Art of Glass* demonstrates:

They are made of *green-glass* well refined ... The best way of making them, is to take up some of the Metall out of the pot upon the end of an Iron rod, and immediately let it drop into cold water, and there lye till it cool.

There is another object which can be produced in almost the same fashion: lead shot. In Robert Hooke’s *Micrographia*, published in 1665, this method is credited to the same Prince Rupert:

lay two bars of Iron ... upon a Pail of water, and place upon them a round Plate of Copper ... the hollow whereof is to be about three inches over, the bottom lower then the brims about half an inch, pierced with thirty, forty, or more small holes; the smaller the holes are, the smaller the shot will be ... The bottom of the Trencher being some four inches distant from the water in the Pail, lay upon it some burning Coles, to keep the Lead melted upon it. Then with the hot Ladle take Lead off the Pot where it stands melted, and pour it softly upon the burning Coles over the bottom of the Trencher, and it will immediately run through the holes into the water in small round drops ...

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14. in the index, *His Highness Prince Rupert’s way of making Shot*.
Hooke’s description is inserted into Observ. VI. Of Small Glass Canes, and is followed, in Observ. VII. Of some Phænomena of Glass drops, by an account of Prince Rupert’s drops. Bullets and Rupert’s drops are thus strongly associated with each other; perhaps Cavendish, like Hooke, was aware of this resemblance when she was considering the cause of the drops’ explosiveness. She was certainly very interested in firearms: in the romance “Assaulted and Pursued Chastity”, first published in 1656, the protagonist wounds her would-be rapist with what Lois G. Schwoerer assumes to be “a small, short gun, commonly called a dag, that was easily concealed”. Furthermore, Prince Rupert was an excellent marksman and was thought to be shot-free, that is, bulletproof. William and Rupert were well acquainted before Margaret’s marriage to the former, having been defeated together while commanding the Royalists in the Battle of Marston Moor.

Rupert’s drops recalled the violence and gunfire of the civil wars, then, at least for Cavendish; they also satisfied the public appetite for scientific puzzles in this period. Circle-squaring was perhaps the most notorious of these: Hobbes famously attempted it, and Marvell might have been referring to Hobbes’s debate with Wallis on the matter when he wrote, in Upon Appleton

It appears that Rupert’s drops shared a similar ubiquity. In 1663, Samuel Butler satirised philosophers’ attention to them in *Hudibras*:

Honour is like that glassy bubble  
That finds philosophers such trouble,  
Whose least part crack’d, the whole does fly  
And wits are crack’d to find out why.

The word ‘bubble’, which implies emptiness and contains an echo of ‘bauble’, suggests a perception of futility and frivolity in such puzzles as these: they are mere curiosities, novelties, amusements, which divert minds that might be better employed elsewhere. The wits of line 288 might be synonymous with the philosophers of line 286, or they may refer to the mental faculties; “crack’d” could simply be read as puzzling something out, but it also implies minds made unsound and deranged by excessive attention to the drops, or indeed to similar puzzles. They are emblematic not only of remembered violence, then, but also of the curiosities of seventeenth-century experimental science, and of the grotesque transformations often in-
involved, in which some singular element from the baffling multitude of phenomena is selected, isolated, and placed under stress so that the observer may gain some understanding of the world. These elements are forced into “trials and vexations”, as Bacon puts it in *The Advancement of Learning*, such that nature can be better understood than it is when it is in liberty; for Bacon, this is the mythical metamorphosis of Protean alteration, but for Cavendish, it is a diversion, a mere jest enjoyed by Nature who, in the *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, is imagined as an excellent housewife. Rupert’s drops are one such diversion: they are instances of peculiarly isolated and vexed matter which undergo violent transformation under certain conditions. They are reminiscent, too, of the minds that conceive of these experiments: resilient for the most part, but susceptible to cracking with the right provocation.

The pierced plate of copper Hooke describes in his account of Prince Rupert’s method of making lead shot is a riddle in the second sense—a sieve designed for separating one continuous substance—in this case, molten lead—into a multiplicity of discrete objects. This copper riddle causes a violent severance of matter, and the discrete objects it creates go on to do the same, wrecking destruction upon flesh. This kind of riddle, as we have seen, is related to *crisis*, and therefore implies separation and decision, or a pathological turning point. Its decisiveness

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connects it back to the riddle in the first sense, the puzzle: isolation of the riddle-object and consequent defamiliarisation puts the object as well as the reader on trial, responsible for recreating the severed context. As an account of creativity this shares much with seventeenth-century accounts of the advantages of the genres of essay and aphorism; Cavendish, as we will see, builds worlds within this context but from a very different perspective. Before discussing Cavendish and *The Blazing World* in more depth, I turn to Montaigne and Bacon, to examine the relationship between incomplete parts and the surpassing wholeness to which they aspire to grow.

Memorialising, for Montaigne, is best achieved in incompletion, in parts: hence the attraction of the essay. This is surprising—we might expect epic to provide a superior monument to personal glory, or at least autobiography. The essay seems a strange choice, as it cannot possibly aspire to completeness: instead, it is a location for small units of precise and lifelike observation. Anticipating his own death, Montaigne remarks that his friends may find in the essays after his passing “some lineaments of [his] conditions and humours, and by that means reserve more whole, and more lively foster the knowledge and acquaintance they have had of [him].”24 The essay is conceived, then, as a venue for *visibility*, to use Leonard Barkan’s terminology:25 Montaigne’s insistence on bringing his defects to life promises a pictorial truth that a portrait, which suggests authenticity but may be altered by flattery,26 cannot possibly offer.

26. Ibid., p. 18.
Promising that the essays can do this work of particular portraiture is an intriguing move: Montaigne does not suggest that they will merely represent him but that perhaps they will even surpass him in their visibility. More whole, he says, and more lively will his friends’ acquaintance with him be, by looking for him in the essays; this suggests that he is less than whole in life, prior to this posthumous reconstruction and increase of him in other minds. Montaigne’s insistence on the essays’ ability to surpass him in reality might be because the genre affords opportunities for the mind to become free to move in unanticipated directions and grow, rather than to be constrained by planning and design. That this is the attraction of the form is Greenblatt’s suggestion, and he writes, in his introduction to the Florio translation, that

\[\text{[t]he genius of the essays is bound up with [Montaigne’s] realization that he should trust the apparently random motions of his mind, not forcing them into coherent order but “enregistering” them as they passed. He allowed himself to “try out” his mind’s faculties—the French word “essai” means a trial—by recording whatever struck him and made him “muse and rave.”}^{27}\]

Cavendish, who has a similar commitment to the creation of reality-surpassing immortality in her literary works, also considers freedom from the urge to order and control as a crucial aspect of imagination; she expands upon this idea in the *Grounds upon Natural Philosophy* as

well as in her *Philosophical Letters*, as Anne Thell has pointed out:

> fancy is a voluntary acceleration of the motion of the mind that occurs independently of contextual factors. In other words, imagination occurs when the mind has time to relax—or to “desist from patterning” or perceiving external objects—and can “work upon its own parts,” recombining ideas and images at will to produce novelty.²⁸

The idea of non-perceptual, internal processes being generative of new ideas is treated with some ambivalence in *The Blazing World*, as we will see; it connects Cavendish with Montaigne and also with Bacon, who finds in the aphorism advantages which are very similar to those Greenblatt points out with reference to the essay.

In the first book of Bacon’s *Advancement of Learning*, the aphorism is identified as a location suitable for the encapsulation of a knowledge still in growth, staving off the premature “reduction of knowledge into arts and methods”:

> as young men, when they knit and shape perfectly, do seldom grow to a further stature; so knowledge, while it is in aphorisms and observations, it is in growth; but when it once is comprehended in exact methods, it may perchance be further polished and illustrated, and accommodated for use and practice; but it increaseth

Bacon’s comparison between aphorism as a venue for growth and method as a venue for polished and completed knowledge recalls the contrast Greenblatt suggests between the essay and the epic:

Where the epic is governed by an overarching design, the essay embraces contingency; where the epic invokes gods and heroes, the essays deal with a private individual in a world without supernatural intervention.

We see in this account oppositions being posited between contingency and design, multiplicity and the fixed object, expansiveness and completion, equivocation and orthodoxy, and even particularity versus immutable Being—Greenblatt seems to suggest in the essay form itself the limits of Platonism in this period. For Bacon—who, as Peter Pesic writes, “wanted a new kind of natural philosopher who would not merely gaze respectfully at nature, but would engage her in an intense mutual trial”—the crucial aspect of the aphorism is its emphasis on incompleteness and severance. The move from respectful looking to interrogative observing has an analogue in what Mary Crane terms—perhaps drawing upon Dedre Gentner’s account of complex metaphors as structure-mappings—a move from qualitative to structural metaphor.

in the innovations of the metaphysical poets. Recalling Greenblatt’s account of Montaigne’s attraction to the essay alongside Bacon’s defence of the aphorism, it is clear not only that the essay and aphorism share a *qualitative* likeness but also that they share a relational likeness to epic and method respectively. Simply put, essay is to epic as aphorism is to method. Bacon expands on the nature of delivering knowledge in aphorisms in the *Advancement*’s second book, in a way that is very similar to Montaigne’s account of trial:

> For first, it *trieth* the writer, whether he be superficial or solid: for Aphorisms, except that they should be ridiculous, cannot be made but of the pith and heart of sciences …Methods are more fit to win consent or belief, but less fit to point to action …Aphorisms, representing a knowledge broken, do invite men to enquire farther; whereas Methods, carrying the shew of a total, do secure men, as if they were at furthest.

Knowledge in aphorisms is broken by pruning, as of a sprawling overgrown shrub whose extraneous matter is cut off: all avenues of exhaustiveness and completion are closed in favour of that seed of investigation, observation. Method, like epic, is persuasive and rhetorical and provides the security of completeness, an unbroken coherent world in writing which invites exploration closely guided by the author. Armed with observation alone, the reader of aphorism and essay can strike out into the unknown—much like Montaigne’s friends, who read in

34. Bacon, *The major works*, pp. 234-5.
the essays Montaigne’s observations of his own mind under trial and complete for themselves an unanticipated portrait. Unanticipated because unseen in life, that is, but nonetheless a true and lively acquaintance, based on “some good quantity of observation” and explicitly exempt from too much authorial guidance.

Cavendish wrote essays and aphorisms, notably in *The Worlds Olio*, and Mihoko Suzuki has explored her debt to Montaigne and Bacon in depth. However, her vision of the kind of literary afterlife inspired by Bacon’s writing is rather different from his own metaphor of pruning leading to better growth. She writes vividly and grotesquely about the generative capacity of Bacon’s writing in the *Sociable Letters*:

> his Works or Writings have been very Propagating and Manuring other mens Brains; the truth is, his Works have proved like as some sorts of Meats, which through Time, or mixture of some Flatuous, or Humid Substance, Corrupt, and Breed Magots or Worms; so his Writings have produced several other Books.

Suzuki partially quotes this section of the letter in support of her argument for Cavendish’s closer proximity to Bacon than to Montaigne, which, given the former’s interest in natural philosophy, essay and utopia, is convincing. However, Suzuki omits the gruesome imagery of the full quotation and considers what she does quote as praise; conversely, Lara Dodds reads

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35. Mihoko Suzuki, “The essay form as critique: Reading Cavendish’s *The world’s olio through Montaigne and Bacon* (and Adorno),” 1999.
37. Suzuki, “The essay form as critique: Reading Cavendish’s *The world’s olio through Montaigne and Bacon* (and Adorno),” p. 3.
Cavendish’s reference to ‘Lord B.’ here as a statement of disapproval regarding Baconian natural philosophers. This seems more likely, and might even be putting it mildly. Bacon died in 1626, so in addition to punning slyly on his name in her depiction of rotting meat, Cavendish draws attention also to his corpse; she likens the books propagated by his wisdom to maggots and worms. This reference to spontaneous generation recalls Cavendish’s account of the mind working upon its own parts but it describes, instead, a thoroughly material process; unlike the immaterial increase of Montaigne in his friends’ minds by means of the essays, Cavendish imagines corrupted meat increasing through the generation of worms, and therefore dismisses the Baconians as materialist maggots.

In *The Blazing World*, Cavendish moves from *de*composition to *dis*composition: “[n]ovelty discomposes the mind,” she writes, “but acquaintance settles it in peace and tranquility.” The context of this remark is a description of the protagonist’s rapid acquisition of the language and customs of the Blazing World’s people, and her consequent happiness. Acquaintance is clearly something desirable here: when discomposed, the mind is “tormented with doubts and fears” whereas once settled and convinced of its safety, it is capable of rejoicing in

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38. Lara A Dodds, *The literary invention of Margaret Cavendish* (Duquesne University Press, 2013).
40. Ibid.
the beauty of its surroundings. Yet Cavendish seems to employ a strategy in her dazzling
descriptions that is similar to the exhaustive attempts to fix and memorialise wonder in the
_Hypnerotomachia Poliphili_: even as the protagonist’s mind is settled, the reader’s is forced into
disarray as copious novelties are introduced with no chance of prolonged acquaintance and
consequent tranquility. Amidst the splendour of the imperial city, the protagonist retains
composure: perhaps it is her acquaintance with her own spectacular self that permits, in this
glittering world, a composed mind accustomed to magnificence. Those she meets are inclined
to venerate her as a deity, including the Emperor, who marries instead of worships her once
he is convinced that she is indeed a mortal, albeit an otherworldly one.

In _A True Relation of My Birth, Breeding and Life_, Cavendish insists upon her “natural
stupidity towards the learning of any other language than [her] native tongue”; if this remark
is to be believed, the original _Hypnerotomachia Poliphili_ would certainly have been inaccessible
to her. However, in 1592 Robert Dallington published a partial English translation of
this text, and I suggest that his version might have been a source for _The Blazing World_.
Like anxious Poliphilus, glutted with splendour which he thinks must be inconceivable to his
reader, Cavendish’s narrator insists upon the difficulty of describing the world through which
her protagonist travels. An armada of golden ships transports the soon-to-be-Empress to the
imperial city’s magnificent inland archipelago, where day and night are figured in gemstones
on the glittering walls of the Emperor’s apartment; the “noble, stately and magnificent” archi-
tecture is described with reference to the imagined experience of walking through it, “because the pillars were so just opposite to one another, that all the adornments could not be seen at once.” Cavendish’s narrator interrupts a discussion of an array of gemstones to note that “it surpasses [her] skill to enumerate them all”; later, the depicted discomposition of the narrator’s mind is such that she “cannot all remember” the novel variety of the animal men who inhabit the Blazing World. Poliphilus, whose mind seems perpetually discomposed by novelty, passes through a series of doors and curtains to approach the residence of Queen Eleutherillida, which is magnificently jewelled:

The bewtiful and precious Pauement within a checkered compasse going about the same, there was a space of sixtie foure Squadrates of three foote, the dyameter of everye one: Of the which one was of Iasper, of the colour of Corall, and the other greene, powdered with drops of blood not to bee woorne away: and set together in manner of a Chesse-boord. Compassed about with a border, the breadth of one pace of a rare invention of worke, with small pieces of stones, of divers colours, and so compacte together, as if it had beene a straunge paynted worke euenly cut and set by rule, that you could not perceiue the ioyning, but smoothe and shyning, and so well framed by the Lybell and Squadrate, that no circulating or sphaericall Instrument woulde mooue to either sides without forcing.

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41. BW, p. 13.
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid., p. 16.
About this, lastly was an other marueylous kynde of Pauing of three paces broad, in knottes of Iasper, Praxin, Calcedonie, Agat, and other sortes of stones of price.

Dallington emphasises here the perfect joining of a multitude of gemstones, in order to evoke with precision the smooth surface of the pavement. He does not identify the red-flecked green stones of Eleutherillida’s palace, but they sound like bloodstones; in her description of the imperial room of state, Cavendish’s green stones are diamonds:

it was paved with green diamonds (for in that world are diamonds of all colours)
so artificially, as it seemed but of one piece; the pillars were set with diamonds so close, and in such a manner, that they appeared most glorious to the sight ...

The mosaics in both the Blazing World’s imperial room of state and the residence of Eleutherillida are characterised by such fine workmanship that they seem to be a single, seamless piece. This is both decoratively appealing and defensively sound, particularly in the case of Cavendish’s description: as Pamela Hammons has noted, building with diamonds creates “especially permanent, durable real estate.”

The imperial city is a fortress, accessible only by a narrow clef in a rock which, like its diamond walls, “seemed to be all one piece,” the fantasy of an impregnable and beautiful palace owes something to Eleutherillida’s residence, but also to the

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47. *BW*, p. 10.
Cavendish’s return, following the Restoration, from continental exile to their partially ruined microrealms of Welbeck and Bolsover.

Presenting an extremely self-assured protagonist in contrast with a self-doubting narrator is part of Cavendish’s characteristic performative humility, and prepares the reader for the eventual introduction of Cavendish herself—described ironically as “a plain and rational writer” who has nonetheless just depicted at length impossible and impossibly elaborate objects—as a character in the story. However, the confidence of the protagonist is diminished as the story progresses. Early in her reign, the Empress decides to make certain improvements to this already exemplary society, notably the conversion of the people of the Blazing World to her religion. After learning that priests in this society are eunuchs so that they will not get married and encounter the “disturbance both in Church and State” that women create, the Empress heads a “Congregation of Women” and preaches her religion’s divine truth; she is successful, due in part to the “quick wits, subtile conceptions, clear understandings, and solid judgments” of women. But this and the earlier remark about mental discomposition wrought by novelty foreshadow the ways in which the novelty of the protagonist herself discomposes the state she rules as Empress:

For, said she, although this World was very well and wisely order’d and governed at first, when I came to be Emperess thereof; yet the nature of Women, being much delighted with change and variety, after I had received an absolute Power

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48. Ibid., p. 61.
from the Emperour, did somewhat alter the Form of Government from what I
found it; but now perceiving that the world is not so quiet as it was at first, I am
much troubled at it ...

Cavendish explicitly connects a delight in novelty with femininity here; Carrie Hintz argues
that the Empress is in this situation because she “acts as an Eve-like figure, showing impatience
with the political order to which she has been newly introduced.” The Duchess—Cavendish
herself, as a character in the story—simply advises her friend the Empress to restore the origi-
nal form of government, and to dissolve the various societies, such that the “Controversie and
Quarrelling” which are an inevitable consequence of learning might be reduced. This con-
versation recalls a discussion of experiments in *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, to
which *The Blazing World* is added:

they are but Natures bastards or changelings, if I may so call them; and though
Nature takes so much delight in variety, that she is pleased with them, yet they
are not to be compared to her wise and fundamental actions; for Nature, being a
wise and provident Lady, governs her parts very wisely, methodically and orderly;
also she is very industrious, and hates to be idle, which makes her imploy her

time as a good Huswife doth ...for she has numerous imployments, and being
infinitely self-moving, never wants work, but her artificial works are her works of

49. Ibid., pp. 121-2.
delight, pleasure and pastime: Wherefore those that imploy their time in Artificial Experiments, consider onely Natures sporting or playing actions; but those that view her wise Government, in ordering all her parts, and consider her changes, alterations and tempers in particulars, and their causes, spend their time more usefully and profitably; and truly to what purpose should a man beat his brains, and weary his body with labours about that wherein he shall lose more time, then gain knowldg? But if any one would take delight in such things, my opinion is, that our female sex would be the fittest for it ...

As Dodds has noted, this is an unusual conceit: while Nature is often represented as a woman in this period, Cavendish expands this representation to include the image of the good housewife. Like the Empress, delighted by change and variety, Nature is imagined as a woman who finds delight in the pleasing variety which artificial experiments generate; however, this pleasure in change and variety is countered by an innate propensity to good government, which women learn, argues Cavendish, through household management (and which the Empress learns from Cavendish herself). Experiment only reveals Nature at play; the suggestion that man “beat[s] his brains” in the interpretation of this play is reminiscent of Butler’s insistence on the philosophers’ cracked wits as they attempt to understand Prince Rupert’s drops. Excessive attention to nature’s response to experiment is equivalent to the misinterpretation of a

jest, a vexing of the mind that wastes time and does nothing to advance knowledge.

Cavendish concludes *The Blazing World* with an assurance of literary immortality which recalls that anticipated by Montaigne. In the *Epilogue to the Reader*, she is just as dazzlingly, imperially self-confident as her Empress was at the beginning of *The Blazing World*:

> By this Poetical Description, you may perceive, that my ambition is not onely to be Empress, but Authoress of a whole World; and that the Worlds I have made, both the Blazing- and the other Philosophical World ...are framed and composed of the most pure, that is, the Rational parts of Matter, which are the parts of my Mind; ...and if any should like the World I have made, and be willing to be my Subjects, they may imagine themselves as such, and they are such, I mean in their Minds, Fancies or Imaginations; but if they cannot endure to be Subjects, they may create Worlds of their own, and Govern themselves as they please.

This closing appeal to the reader-creator who would, too, inhabit worlds composed by and of Mind, ensures the immortality of authoress and reader, of empress and subject. The strange worlds Cavendish proposes inhabiting, even after death, are utterly imaginary, but they nonetheless grow out of an England primed for imagining and reimagining paradoxically unruly and unrulied realms. Restoration England retained in recent memory realmless princes in exile, as well as the princeless realm of the Commonwealth; the Cavendishes in Antwerp
were well aware of this. In the fourth part of her 1667 biography of her husband, Cavendish recalls a conversation with William:

My Lord being in Banishment, I told him, that he was happy in his misfortunes, for he was not subject to any State or Prince. To which he jestingly answer'd, that as he was subject to no Prince, so he was a Prince of no Subjects.

It is an intriguing recollected scene of consolation between wife and husband. Naturally, it refers to a literal, political state of affairs—the continental exile of William Cavendish and his consequent loss of aristocratic identity—but it also recalls the guarantee at the close of *The Blazing World*, which finds power and freedom in the dissociation and reassociation of ruler and realm. In what is, perhaps, another characteristic move of performed humility, Margaret puts into her husband’s mouth—and in the form of a throwaway, witty jest, no less—the idea that lies at the philosophical and imaginative core of her world-building, as summarised in the epilogue of *The Blazing World*.

It is an idea at once meaningless and profound. In one sense, it is merely a piece of wordplay, a logical trick exposing the emptiness of the consolation: without subjects, anything one says about one’s royal status can be deemed trivially true. Cavendish explored this absurdity in *The Comedy of the Apocryphal Ladies*, exposing the empty folly of the Creating Princess as contrasted with the sanctity of the nobility, and of real aristocratic power. But in *The Blazing World*, Cavendish, *The life of the thrice noble, high and puissant prince William Cavendishe, Duke, Marquess and Earl of Newcastle* (1667).
World, though the satirical edge is never far away, the consolation-guarantee of the epilogue may be intended entirely earnestly. William, in his jesting response to Margaret, demonstrates the aristocratic male’s lack of use for the profundity of tautology: he wields literal, earthly, political power that a woman—however aristocratic—cannot, and so his remark remains a witty riposte. Margaret’s expansion of its implications permits infinite, immortal creativity that is more godly than kingly.

In the frontispiece which appears on several of Cavendish’s works (Figure 4.1) we see a visual representation of the strange simultaneity of impotence and infinite creativity which is proposed at the end of The Blazing World. The frontispiece demonstrates a significant tension between the kind of observation demanded by the image itself, and the fleeting glance recommended by the verse—the tension is depicted by means of a visual paradox inherent in the image. Cavendish herself, crowned and robed, stands within a central alcove, her gaze clearly focused upon the viewer: she is lifelike, draped in gorgeously textured fabric, with elaborately curled hair about her shoulders. Flanking her are two caryatids, one depicting Apollo, identified by his laurel crown, lyre and staff, and the other Minerva, identified by her helmet, spear and Gorgon-emblazoned shield. The symbolism of these gods is not particularly mysterious: Cavendish stands confidently at the intersection of poetry and wisdom, an eccentric, inimitable, singular woman of supreme self-confidence.

The paradox lies in the fact that it is not clear where the lines between reality and rep-

54. The Worlds Olio (1655), Poems (1668), Poems and Fancies (1653), Plays (1662, 1668), Natures Picture (1671).
Figure 4.1: Frontispiece to various works by Margaret Cavendish.
resentation are drawn. Let us start with what is obvious: one indisputable line is between the viewer and the image on the page. Another is between the reality of the scene within the frontispiece and the sculptural depiction of the two gods. They are caryatids, incorporated into the columns; clearly the gods’ lived reality is at two removes, now, from the viewer. What we cannot know is where Cavendish herself is positioned within these layers of reality. Apollo and Minerva are statues, but they display the same lifelike qualities as Cavendish herself: there is no appreciable difference in realism—apart, of course, from the fact that they are only torsos—between them and Cavendish. On the one hand, this makes the depiction of Cavendish more statue-like. On the other, it has the odd effect of troubling the divisions between the real and the represented within the tableau itself, and the depiction of it within the frontispiece.

Already we have looked at this scene too closely, if we are to take seriously the command of the engraved verse at Cavendish’s feet:

Here on this Figure Cast a Glance.
But so as if it were by Chance,
Your eyes not fixt, they must not Stay,
Since this like Shadowes to the Day
It only represent’s; for Still,
Her Beauty’s found beyond the Skill
Of the best Paynter, to Imbrace,
Those louely Lines within her face,

View her Soul’s Picture, Judgment, witt,

Then read those Lines which Shee hath writt,

By Phancy’s Pencill drawne alone

Which Peece but Shee, can justly owne.

Stone memorialises—its nature is to be fixed, and to permit much more looking than an unfixed glance allows; yet we are told to do otherwise. The experience of looking, the verse says, should emulate the imperfection of shadowy representation—or at least, should not be expected to deliver anything more than that. The verse continues to express the imperfection of the painter’s skill when faced with a subject of such great beauty, which fits with the implicit deification of Cavendish by placing her between and above two gods. However, that would be to assume that “Figure” here refers to the depiction of Cavendish: perhaps, rather, it is referring to the frontispiece itself, in which there is only a multiplicity of representations that are at once static and in flux.

In conclusion, I return to the opposition between method and aphorism posited by Bacon and echoed in Greenblatt’s analysis of epic and essay, and to the surpassing wholeness of the literary afterlife. The essay is a genre which claims to imitate thought so as to centre the
self without being autobiographical; the responsibility to reconstruct the author is with the reader. The aphorism applies this dream of reconstruction from an isolated particular to an entire philosophical endeavour, rather than just an individual. As Ann Imbrie argues,

the Renaissance essay is essentially mimetic, taking as the object of imitation either the individual mind and the processes of its thought (Montaigne) or the “collective” mind and the value of its wisdom (Bacon).  

Imbrie is referring to Bacon the essayist here, but her remark is applicable, too, to the latter’s claims about the aphorism’s generative capacity. The aphorism, Bacon hopes, will “invite men to enquire farther” It is suggestive of an afterlife, but not that of a single individual.

Cavendish acknowledges this in her account of the propagating tendency of Bacon’s writings but not without some disdain. The books which have grown like maggots from the rotting meat of Bacon’s archive are unquestionably copious, but that is all Cavendish has to say about them. Her omission is notable and loaded with silent disapproval, yet her analysis of experiment in the Observations is gentler. The experiment is akin to a joke, and while it is not useful in itself, it is acceptable as a diversion, as a way of appreciating the multiplicity of Nature’s personality.

In The Blazing World, the Empress is full of disapproval when she learns from the bear-
men of the visions their telescopes show them. Convinced that the telescopes do not lead to knowledge, but rather only to quarrels and disputes, she commands that the bear-men destroy them, for the health of the state. The bear men,

being exceedingly troubled at her Majesties displeasure concerning their Telescopes, kneel'd down, and in the humblest manner petitioned that they might not be broken; for, said they, we take more delight in Artificial delusions, then in natural truths. Besides, we shall want imployments for our senses, and subjects for arguments; for were there nothing but truth, and no falsehood, there would be no occasion for to dispute, and by this means we should want the aim and pleasure of our endeavours in consulting and contradicting each other; neither would one man be thought wiser then another, but all would either be alike knowing and wise, or all would be fools; wherefore we most humbly beseech your Imperial Majesty to spare our Glasses, which are our onely delight, and as dear to us as our lives.\footnote{58. \textit{BW}, p. 29.}

The Empress relents; she learns that the telescopes are a source of pleasure to the bear-men, and realises that as long as they continue to be treated as such, they will not be harmful to the state. In this fantasy, the power of the Baconians is dissipated, reduced to a mere game played out within the confines of the academic sphere. In Cavendish's vision, observations made
by instruments or experiment are rendered impotent, stripped of their propagating power and relegated to the merely ludic. Natural truth cannot be accessed by means of artificial delusions, however amusing they may be; like the afterlife Cavendish imagines for herself and for her transhistorical community of immaterial Platonic friends, it remains free from decomposition.
**Conclusion**

**The Wall of Absurdity**

Mec feonda sum feore besnyþede,  
woruldstrenga binom ...  
Heard mec siþþan  
snað seaxses ecg ...  

[A certain enemy took from me my life, stole my world strength ... afterwards the hard knife's edge cut me ...]

—Riddle 26, “Bible”.

The tortured and transformed animal whose hide is converted into the vellum pages of the holy book of Riddle 26 speaks, impossibly; impossibly because posthumously, but also because in life this was a creature without speech. This animal has suffered the trial of death and a subsequent forced separation into parts; it has been inscribed with what the poet calls *fugles wyn*, which is a kenning, a riddle within a riddle which literally translates as “bird’s joy”—a feather—but here suggests a pen. In addition to the dark tracks of ink on vellum, the hide is *gierde ... mid golde*—girt with gold—wondrously decorated by the work of smiths. This partial corpse comes to propagate knowledge by transforming not into the rotted meat so viscerally imagined by Margaret Cavendish in her account of the Baconian literary afterlife, but rather
into a literal book. This is a riddle which chronicles metamorphosis while wreaking it in the reader’s mind, transforming the technology of the book back into its constituent living parts and making those parts into a whole. Frequently in the Exeter riddles, writes Dieter Bitterli, “the holy book refigures the martyred body of the holy saint”.

suffering is conceived as the path to holy wisdom, and the materiality of the grotesquely altered body—like natural objects isolated and transformed in experiment—is essential evidence which, upon observation, leads to knowledge.

In Old English (as in modern German) there is an active verb meaning “to be silent”: swigan. As Jordan Zweck has argued, when swigan appears in the riddles it is indicative of “a choice (taken consciously or not), not a passive state of being.” It is difficult for the modern English speaker to conceptualise the active performance of what seems to be a negative state of being. However, in making the attempt, we can begin to approximate the way in which Old English poets infuse inanimate objects with life and intention, and convert muteness into decisive activity. If nonspeaking entities are given the ability to speak, their not speaking becomes not evidence to the contrary but rather an activity, a deliberate construction of the silences that would otherwise seem unremarkable. This imposes an enormous sense of potential upon mundane things. Silence, as well as stillness, whether in reality or representation, can be indicative of activity, not just absence.

To consider an example of active, meaningful stillness, let us recall Narcissus, gazing down from the reflected hemisphere upon his beloved self in an inverted world below. To depict Narcissus in a static image is to create dazzling verisimilitude which permits the image to surpass the usual disadvantage of being unmoving; this is because the love Narcissus directs towards his reflection is dependent upon perfect stillness, which is depicted best not in life but on a two-dimensional surface, at a remove from reality in motion. For Narcissus to conceive of himself as another, he must be utterly still: he must not make the association between his own motions and those of the spectacular youth within the pool. Therefore, there is no decay of verisimilitude in any painting of this famous scene: its stillness is rendered active, because it is more perfect than any stillness in life, and it is responsible for the tragic, impossible love of a frail illusion. In this case, an image is of surpassing verisimilitude, then: its stillness disrupts the truth of the illusion and permits the belief that Narcissus really has mistaken his reflection for somebody else.

How can the artist make a depicted thing seem real? By depicting what it really is. The redundancy here is actually profound, as in the tautologies of Cusanus and also, as we saw in the fourth chapter, of Cavendish’s frontispiece. The skill of the artist is in making the disadvantage of the selected medium—whatever it is about it that persistently disrupts verisimilitude—one of the very subjects of the depiction. This is the strangest alteration and the most incremental but powerful distortion. But the collapse of redundancies present in tautology might also
be a source of delight, laughter and wonder. In his 1654 treatise on rhetoric, *Il cannocchiale aristotelico*, Emanuele Tesauro writes:

> Egli è dunque vna segreta & innata delitia dell’Intelletto humano, l’auuedersi di essere stato *scherzeulmente ingannato*: perche quel trapasso dall’inganno al disinganno, è vna maniera d’imparamento, per via non aspettata; & perciò piaceuolissima.\[61\]

[it is a secret and innate delight of the human intellect to find that it has been playfully deceived; because the passage from illusion to disillusion is an unexpected and therefore most pleasant kind of learning.]

Tesauro’s subject here is metaphor: it ought to work, he suggests, by sustaining and subsequently undermining impossibilities, expanding a suspension of reason until the obvious—or the possible, at the very least—returns with astonishment, and perhaps, also, with a shock of laughter. Perceiving the surprising collapse of seemingly remote and contradictory psychological states within one’s mind while nonetheless remaining at something of a remove is generative, writes Tesauro of secret delight. It also seems to recall the description of wonder in Francesco Patrizi’s 1587 work *La deca ammirabile*, which Raffaella Fabiani Giannetto quotes: wonder is something new and sudden and unexpected which appears before us, creates a

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movement in our soul, almost contradictory in itself of believing and not believing.
Of believing because the thing is seen to exist; and of not believing because it is sudden, new, and not before either known or dreamt of.\footnote{Fabiani Giannetto, “'Not before either known or dreamt of': The Hypnerotomachia Poliphili and the craft of wonder,” p. 112 n. 12.}

Patrizi depicts a movement between reason and disbelieving belief, a state of motion between contradictories like that described by Tesauro with regard to metaphor. Both writers are describing a mental sensation similar to the perception of a thaumatrope: the mind perceives itself being deceived, and finds pleasure or wonder in the perception of its own power. Considering Patrizi’s Longinian (as opposed to Aristotelian) poetics, Peter Platt describes this account as “a wondrous state between reason and emotion that thrives on an absence of absolute knowledge ...the place where wonder and reason constantly destabilize each other, where contingency reigns.”\footnote{Peter G Platt, “'Not before Either Known or Dreamt of': Francesco Patrizi and the Power of Wonder in Renaissance Poetics,” The Review of English Studies 43, no. 171 (1992): pp. 392, 394.} This is a state which is defined by constant flux; its instability and lack of dependence upon absolute knowledge seems to anticipate Keats and negative capability.

Along with Tesauro’s enjoyment of the mind’s playful deception, Patrizi’s wonder also anticipates Freud’s theory of certain types of jokes. When accounting for the “economizing on psychical expenditure” which occurs as part of the “enjoyment in a joke when the use of the same or a similar word takes us from one sphere of ideas to another, remote one”, Freud notes that
[o]ur pleasure in a joke afforded by a ‘short-circuit’ of this kind also seems to be the greater the more alien the two spheres of ideas that are brought into connection by the same word are to each other …

“[I]n Renaissance fiction,” writes Platt, “knowledge claims are routinely destabilized by wondrous events that do not always have a rational, coherent explanation.” I suggest that this generative destabilisation of knowledge is a strategy that all the texts discussed in this project have in common. The Old English riddles destabilise the reader’s assumed wisdom by isolating a clue and recontextualising it in an unfamiliar way. The Hypnerotomachia Poliphili unsettles the mind by demanding laborious image-generating strategies. Andrew Marvell draws on contemporary mathematical and astronomical knowledge to create a description of reciprocal love that can only be imagined by initiating the motions into which paradox puts the mind. And Margaret Cavendish, finding in the experimental science evidence of Nature’s sense of humour, directs her imperialist imagination towards the creation of other worlds, through which her mind, even after death, can move.

In closing, I return to the strange boundaries with which we began, the contested divisions which create borders between definition and meaninglessness, chaos, or ocean. The island, I have argued, bears a resemblance to a word, and to a law; the riddle finds this landscape, with its persistent proximity to paradox, an effective topography upon which to puzzle. I

65. Platt, “‘Not before Either Known or Dreamt of’: Francesco Patrizi and the Power of Wonder in Renaissance Poetics,” p. 388.
conclude with Nicholas of Cusa, who posits a border at the wall of paradise which is “the wall of the coincidence of creating with being created” it is a “wall of absurdity”, beyond which discursive thought cannot go. The attempt to scale such a wall is made in each text discussed here, whether with the aim of accessing God or penetrating what Rosalie Colie in *Paradoxia Epidemica* calls “the self’s infinite labyrinth”. At the limits of reason, this is possible only with a discomposed mind.

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