Faithful Abstraction: Withdrawals and Simulacra in Late Medieval Nacre*

Abstracción fiel: Extracciones y simulacros en el nácar bajomedieval

Elina Gertsman
Case Western Reserve University
exg152@case.edu
ORCID: 0000-0002-1229-0119

Abstract

This essay explores a late medieval osculatory medallion in terms of abstraction, here considered in the medieval definition of the term: as withdrawal, both corporeal and intellectual. Carved from nacre and originally meant to be enclosed with a wax *agnus dei*, the osculatory embodies abstraction into a figurative, strikingly material object, only to withdraw that figuration and that materiality repeatedly. In and of itself, nacre constitutes a vestige of remotion— maternal matter from which the pearl was abstracted, made into a surface from which the image was abstracted through osculation. The medallion, moreover, spins phantasms around Christ's flesh: the wafer echoed in the *agnus dei*, the *agnus dei* echoed in the nacre plaque, and the image that claimed to represent the divine body in the wafer. To pry apart layers of such mimetic phantasms was to abstract: nacre from wax, wax from wheat, image from prototype.

Keywords: abstraction, withdrawal, nacre, pearl, divine.

Resumen

Este ensayo examina un medallón osculatorio tardomedieval en términos de abstracción, considerada aquí en la definición medieval del término: como retiro, tanto corpóreo como intelectual. Tallado en nácar y originalmente destinado a ser encerrado con un *Agnus Dei* de cera, el osculatorio encarna la abstracción en un objeto figurativo y sorprendentemente material, sólo para retirar esa figuración y esa materialidad repetidamente. En sí mismo, el nácar constituye un vestigio de remoción: la materia primera de la que se abstrajo la perla, convertida en una superficie de la que se extrajo la imagen mediante la osculación. El medallón, además, hace

girar espectros en torno a la carne de Cristo: la oblea reverbera en el *Agnus Dei*, el *Agnus Dei* reverbera en la placa de nácar, y la imagen que pretendía representar el cuerpo divino en la oblea. Separar las capas de estos fantasmas miméticos era abstraer: el nácar de la cera, la cera del trigo, la imagen del prototipo.

PALABRAS CLAVE: abstracción, extracción, nácar, perla, divino.

In 1989, the Metropolitan Museum of Art acquired a remarkable object: a small osculatory pendant from the treasury of the Benedictine Abbey of Saint Peter in Salzburg. The silver-gilt frame, engraved on the reverse with images of Saints Barbara and Ursula, contains a mother-of-pearl, or nacre, disc of about 8 cm in diameter (Fig. 1). [1] The center of this medallion features the Trinity configured as a scene of *compassio patris*. God the Father – bearded, unhaloed— gazes fixedly at the beholder, while firmly clasping his Son. The dove, missile-like, plunges beak-first into Christ's halo. Draperies held by surrounding angels swathe the scene, transforming it into a revelatory, theatrical moment, when the curtains, although drawn aside, remain present on the stage as an emphatically visible framing device. The pendant can be opened; it was originally made to hold a wax *agnus dei*, an object crafted from the paschal candles that burned at the Lateran basilica, which was subsequently stamped with the image of the Lamb of God. The nacre medallion was carved sometime in the 1420s, about seventy years before the pendant itself was made.

In this essay, I will explore the nacre medallion in terms of abstraction. The ontology of the Trinity has, in fact, been married to visual abstraction since at least the Carolingian era: we find it as early as the ninth century in the rectangular, nonrepresentational pink patches that cover images of the Godhead in the Ashburnham Pentateuch (Fig. 2), and as late as the fourteenth, in the complete evacuation of figuration from the reticulated grounds that accompany Angelic disquisition on the Trinity in Guillaume de Deguileville's *Pèlerinage de l'âme*. [2] Such images, which stand at the intersection of medieval conceptions of the abstract and abstraction as the modern category of art historical analysis, invite epistemological conflation that hinges on, and subsequently defies, pseudomorphosis. Not so with the nacre medallion. Indeed, at first blush, the osculatory does not engage with abstract forms in any obvious ways. There are no aniconic bands of color, no retreat from form, not even a gleam of the uncertain gold background. Instead, the medallion embodies abstraction into a figurative, strikingly material

object, only to withdraw that figuration and that materiality repeatedly. Here, I want to consider abstraction precisely as withdrawal: that is, to return to the very medieval, raw definition of the term.

***

Before the fifth century, the Latin term "abstrahere" described physical separation, an act of withdrawing one thing from another. In discussing a sea sponge, Pliny the Elder uses the term to refer strictly to this kind of a corporeal separation, abstraction: such as that of the creature from the rock to which it adheres.[3] In this sense, the mother-of-pearl carving evinces a series of just such withdrawals, or abstractions: of the mollusk from the sea; of the pearl from the mollusk; of nacre from the prismatic outer layer of the shell; and of minute elements of aragonite tablets from nacre in a subtractive gesture to produce relief. But by the fifth century, the term "abstrahere" became complicated, applied to perceptual and mathematical processes: it was conceived as a separation of the material from the transcendent, as a movement and a process—spiritual, intellectual, quantitative.[4] The term was finally distilled in the scholastic writings of Robert Grosseteste and Thomas Aquinas, for whom

Fig. 1. Osculatory, ca. 1490. Austrian, mother-of-pearl. Overall diam.: 7.9 cm (3 1/8 in). Metropolitan Museum of Art, acc. # 1989.80

Fig. 2. Creation, Ashburnham Pentateuch, 6th century, with 9th-century repainting. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS nouv. acq. lat. 2334, fol. 1v

---

[3] Pliny, *Naturalis historia* 9.69. Pliny's definition, as it happens, is picked up in the Oxford English Dictionary: to abstract, as a verb, is to "take away, extract, or remove (something); to move (a person or thing) away, withdraw".

[4] See, e.g., the discussion of Paulinus of Périgieux who instructs his interlocutor that to glimpse a saint, in this case Saint Martin, requires an abstraction, or a move, away from the corporeal to the mental vision or of Cassiodorus who, in his *Institutiones*, discourses on

abstractive work—that is, the gradual withdrawal of the particular from the essential—was at the heart of intellective operation that allowed a human mind to understand the invisible and unseen work of Creation.[5]

Aquinas, in particular, developed the theory of abstraction as withdrawal based on Aristotle's pronouncement in *De anima* (III.7), "the soul understands nothing without phantasms". A sizeable section of the first part of *Summa theologiae* is dedicated to the development of this theory, which deploys the terms "abstrahere" and "abstractus" to designate removals and extractions of the phantasmic from the essential.[6] These terms are used when Aquinas stages hypothetical objections to his thesis on the ontology of visible objects ("material things cannot be understood by abstraction [*per abstractionem*] of the universal from the particular, which is the process whereby the intelligible species is abstracted from the phantasm [*quod est abstrahere species intelligibiles a phantasmatibus*])", and they are elaborated upon in his response as well:

> But to know what is in individual matter, not as existing in such matter, is to abstract the form (*abstrahere formam*) from individual matter which is represented by the phantasms. Therefore, we must say that our intellect understands material things by abstracting from the phantasms (*abstrahendo a phantasmatibus*). [...] The things which belong to the species of a material thing, such as a stone, or a man, or a horse, can be thought of apart from the individualizing principles which do not belong to the notion of the species. This is what we mean by abstracting the universal from the particular, or the intelligible species from the phantasm; that is, by considering the nature of the species apart from its individual qualities represented by the phantasms.[7]

Abstraction defined by its own limits, was, moreover, an essential operation not only to get at the nature of material things but also to understand things that are immaterial: "For since

---

mathematical abstractions of quantities, that is, numbers, in M. C. McNamee, "Early Romanesque Abstraction and the 'Unconditionally Two-dimensional Surface'", in *Abstraction in Medieval Art*, pp. 267-284.

[5] This is the so-called problem of the universals; see G. Klima, "The Medieval Problem of Universals", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, E. N. Edward N. Zalta (eds.) (winter 2017 edition), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/universals-medieval/. On Grosseteste in particular, see J. Rohmer, "La théorie de l'abstraction dans l'école franciscaine d'Alexandre de Halès à Jean Peckam", *Archives d'Histoire Doctrinale et Littéraire du Moyen Âge*, 3 (1928), pp. 105-84, as well as S. P. Marrone, *William of Auvergne and Robert of Grosseteste: New Ideas of Truth in Early Thirteenth Century*, Princeton, NJ., 1983, pp. 71-72; A. de Libera, *La querelle des universaux: de Platon à la fin du Moyen Age*, Paris, 1996, pp. 240-244; on the Aquinas's take on the problem of the universals, see De Libera, pp. 262-282.

[6] See, e.g., ST I.76.2: *Et ita erit individualiter numeratum, et intellectum in oitentia tantum, et oportebit abstrahere intentionem commune ab utroque, quia a quibuslibet diversis contingit abstrahere aliquod commune intelligibile* ("and consequently it will be reckoned as something individual, and be only potentially something understood; so that the common intention will have to be abstracted from both; since from things diverse something intelligible common to them may be abstracted").

[7] ST I.85.1, Objection 2: *Ergo res materiales non possunt intelligi per abstractionem universalis a particulari, quod est abstrahere species intelligibiles a phantasmatibus*, or Objection 4: *Sed abstrahere a phantasmatibus species intelligibiles non pertinent ad intellectum possibilem, sed recipere species iam abstractas* ("but it does not belong to the passive intellect to abstract the intelligible species from the phantasm, but to receive them when abstracted"). Response: *Cognoscere vero id quod est in material individuali, non prout est in tali material, est abstrahere formam a material individuali, quam repraesentant phantasmata. Et ideo necesse est dicere quod intellectus noster intelligit materialia abstrahendo a phantasmatibus.*

the nature of our intellect is to abstract the quiddity of material things from matter *(abstrahere quidditatem rei materialis a material)*, anything material residing in that abstracted quiddity can again be made subject to abstraction (*poterit iterato abstrahere*); and as the process of abstraction cannot go on forever, it must arrive at length at some immaterial quiddity, absolutely without matter".[8] To abstract, therefore, is not to separate or divide (the operations purposefully conflated by Grosseteste, for instance, who uses *dividere* to separate any object into a series of removable accidents and to achieve what has been called "universal predication") but to strip down: it is, for lack of a better term, an apophatic operation with neo-Platonic aims.[9] In point of fact, Aquinas turns directly to neo-Platonic thought when considering the process required to understand the immaterial entities that cannot be stripped of phantasms because they do not have any. Those entities—such as God, for instance—can be understood through likeness to "sensible bodies of which there are phantasms […] God, as Dionysius says (Div. Nom. i), we know as cause, by way of excess and by way of remotion".[10] Aquinas's other intellectual progenitor is the Cistercian Bernard of Clairvaux, whose concept of imagelessness is similarly based on the process of negation and withdrawal, as when the soul "may strip herself… of the images of inferior and corporeal objects […] to be able to contemplate truth without the help of material or sensible images".[11] In turn, Aquinas's intellectual descendant is the Dominican Meister Eckhart, who similarly engages with a metaphor of parsing, removing, and stripping in his sermon *Quasi stella matutina*, which imagines "the intellect pull[ing] off the coat from God and perceive[ing] him bare, as he is stripped of goodness and of being and of all names." [12] For Aquinas, this stripping stands at the root of abstraction as a process that, predicated on the sheer materiality of images, engenders a series of corporeal and intellectual withdrawals (or remotions, or parings) by way of comparisons (or semblances, or substitutions). How might this process function in the Metropolitan osculatory?

<div align="center">* * *</div>

---

[8] ST I.88.2, *Respondeo: Cum enim intellectus noster natus sit abstrahere quidditatem rei materialis a materia, si iterum in illa quidditate sit aliquid materiae, poterit iterato abstrahere, et cum hoc in infinitum non procedat, tandem pervenire poterit as intelligendum aliquam quidditatem quae sit omnino sine material.*

[9] For Grosseteste's conflation of abstraction and division, see Marrone, 206. For Aquinas's treatment of abstraction, see C. Lafleur, J. Carrier, "Abstraction et séparation: de Thomas d'Aquin aux néo-scolastiques, avec retour à Aristote et aux artiens", *Laval théologique et philosophique*, 66-1 (2010), pp. 105-126; H. Smit, "Aquinas's Abstractionism", *Medieval Philosophy and Theology*, 10-1 (2001), pp. 85-118; and R. McInerny, J. O'Callaghan, "Saint Thomas Aquinas", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2018 edition), E. N. Zalta (ed.), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/aquinas.

[10] ST I.84.7, reply to Objection 3: *dicendum quod incorporeal, quorum non sunt phantasmata, cognoscuntur a nobis per comparationem ad corpora sensibilia* […] *Deum autem, ut Dionysius dicit, cognoscimus ut causam, et per excessum, et per remotionem; alias etiam incorporeas substantias, in statu praesentis vitae, cognoscere non possumus nisi per remotionem, vel aliquam comparationem ad corporalia.* Areopagite's theology clearly influenced Aquinas, who freely mixes positive and negative theology in his work; see B. Davies, "Aquinas on What God Is Not", *Revue international de philosophie*, 52 (1998), pp. 207-225.

[11] *Sed moriatur anima mea morte etiam (si dici potest) angelorum, ut praesentium memoria excedens, rerum se inferiorum corporearumque non modo cupiditatibus, sed et similitudinibus exuat, sitque ei pura cum illis conversatio, cum quibus est puritatis similitude.* Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermones Super Cantica Canticorum*, LII.5, in *Opera Omnia* 2:93, as translated in *St. Bernard's Sermons on the Canticle of Canticles*, S. Hickey (trans.), Waterford, 1920, vol. 2, pp. 95-96.

[12] Meister Eckhart, Sermon 9, "Quasi stella matutina", in *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher*, 258.

The osculatory is carved, as mentioned before, from nacre: a material that grows on the inside of a shell of certain mollusks. It is iridescent, translucent, and tremendously tough thanks to its unusual structure that alternates aragonite tablets with an organic mixture that cements them together.[13] Mother-of-pearl has been called "obstinate and brittle", arguably because it combines two qualities: extreme hardness and a tendency to break when overworked.[14] Visually, nacre is a striking substance, lustrous and kaleidoscopically shimmery, whose use remained rare in medieval objects until the fifteenth century, when trade with Asia by way of the Near East or northern Africa likely began bringing it in.[15]

In the Middle Ages as now, mother-of-pearl (*matrem perlarum*) was distinguished from the pearl itself (*margarita* or *unio*), although scholars tend to elide the two.[16] The elision submerges the semiotic complexity of the mother-of-pearl carvings and, pertinent to this argument, the ability of the material to perform a series of abstractions. Pearls (not nacre) played a vivid role in the medieval imaginary, their presence spanning lapidaries, romances, and works on natural philosophy. Understood as a queer mixture between animal and mineral, pearls were believed to be generated when the oyster opened at dawn to accept the light of the moon, the sun, and the stars, along with the morning dew. Isidore of Seville, in pursuit of the proper etymological origin of the pearl, had it born from a shellfish called "oceloe", a clear echo of celestial (*caelsesti*) droplets. Pearls were seen to be akin to bodies, their gestation dependent on the purity of the droplets (that is, the seed) the mollusks received; on the clemency of weather conditions that could affect and change their dispositions in their oyster "wombs"; on the way and amount of food they ingested. Indeed, Pliny, in his *Natural History*, went as far as comparing empty pearls with blighted ova: the "wind-pearls" that contain "an empty, insubstantial show".[17] Like humans, pearls "redden and lose their whiteness in the

---

[13] Under pressure, the organic compound moves to the unstressed areas, and as a result aragonite tablets stiffen, much like the concrete does.

[14] R. Koch, C. Sommer, "A Mother-of-Pearl Carving after the Master E.S", *The Journal of the Walters Art Gallery* 5 (1942), p. 122. The efflorescence of this material in medieval Europe seems to fall to the fifteenth century, when it was used in paxes, reliquaries, medallions, and various other objects. It has been argued that they were, at least, originally, carved in metalsmith workshops by printmakers. On mother-of-pearl objects, see S. Darell, *Late Medieval Mother-of-pearl Carvings, Making and Meaning: An Examination of a Material in Context from the Late Fourteenth to the Late Fifteenth Century in France, England and Italy* (Ph.D. diss., Courtauld Institute of Art, 2013); on a critique of Friedrich Ohly's *Die Perle des Wortes* and an examination of a mother-of-pearl reliquary, see B. Fricke "Matter and Meaning of Mother-of-Pearl," *Gesta*, 51-1 (2012), p. 39.

[15] See R.-H. Bautoer, "Les relations économiques des occidentaux aves les pays d'orient, au moyen age", in *Sociétés et compagnies de commerce en Orient et dans l'océan Indien*, M. Mollat (ed.), Paris, 1970, pp. 264-331, at p. 296. He, however, mentions pearls but not the mother of pearl. See also K.-H. Spiess, "Western Objects and Western European Court Culture in the Middle Ages", in *Artistic and Cultural Exchanges: Artistic and Cultural Exchanges between Europe and Asia, 1400–1900: Rethinking Markets, Workshops and Collections*, M. North (ed.), Burlington, VT, 2010, pp. 9-28. The only native European source would be the freshwater pearl mussel, which is oblong—the wrong shape, in other words, for round objects like this one that was likely sourced from a pearl oyster, *Pinctada margaritifera*, also called *Meleagrina margaritifera*, rather more round in shape and with a distinctive hinge.

[16] In Salzburg, where the osculatory was carved, the pearl would be called "perle", but the mother-of-pearl would be referred to as "perlinmuoter" or "perilmuoter" or "matrem perlarum". On mother-of-pearl objects, see S. Darell, *Late Medieval Mother-of-pearl Carvings, Making and Meaning: An Examination of a Material in Context from the Late Fourteenth to the Late Fifteenth Century in France, England and Italy* (Ph.D. diss., Courtauld Institute of Art, 2013).

[17] *Pearl: Text and Translation*, J. Beal (ed. and trans.), Peterborough, 2020, p. 165.

sun" and "get yellow with age and doze off with wrinkles, and the vigor that is sought after is only found in youth". Albertus Magnus, in *De animalibus*, similarly does not equivocate when comparing pearls to seed when discussing the possibility that if the oyster—much like a human mother, *inter lineas*—is "in a state of fear from lightning, hail, or some other reason while the seed-pearl is developing, the final pearl will be somewhat flattened" and changed in color.[18] A similar description, this time versified, is to be found in Marbod of Rennes's *De lapidus*, where the author speaks of pearls' conception (*ex quibus orbiculi candentes concipiuntur*), their growth as a "fetus", and the possible "abortion" by thunder.[19] The devotional connection between the pearl and the seed/ovum is established in the fourteenth-century Ethiopian epic *Kĕbra Nagast* (The Glory of the Kings) that traces the genetic path of the pearl lodged in Adam's body by God himself: "Your salvation was created in the belly of Adam in the form of a Pearl before Eve. And when He created Eve out of the rib He brought her to Adam, and said unto them, 'Multiply you from the belly of Adam'. The Pearl did not go out into Cain or Abel, but into the third that went forth from the belly of Adam, and it entered into the belly of Seth".[20] The Pearl, like the divine seed, or egg, passes from righteous man to righteous man, through David and Solomon, until it ends up in the loins of Hanna, Mary's mother, where it is gestated, or hatched.

Indeed, throughout, the allegorical, exegetical, and theological significance of pearls was unequivocally tethered to purity and virginity, and particularly to Virgin Mary. The purportedly celestial origin of these zoo-minerals inspired comparisons between the pearl generation and virginal conception in scores of lapidaries and bestiaries copied between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries: the Peterborough Lapidary, for instance, or the Philippe de Taon's French bestiary, which claims that the mollusk shell symbolizes Virgin Mary who said "Ecce ancilla Domini," and whose body opened and closed at conception and birth without rupture, just as a shell opens and closes without a break.[21] In one bestiary (Bodl. 602, fol. 34r), the Virgin and Child are pictured next to the illustration of an opened and subsequently closed oyster shell, linked by the light of a star (Fig. 3). Theologians concurred; among some of the most striking passages in Honorius Augustodunensis's *Sigillum Beatae Mariae*, for instance, has Christ described as "the precious pearl" who comes from "the joints of [the Virgin's] thighs".[22]

---

[18] *De animalibus*, p. 361.

[19] MARBOD OF RENNES, *De lapidus*, C. W. KING (trans.), J. RIDDLE (ed.), Wiesbaden, 1977, p. 84.

[20] *The Queen of Sheba & her only son Menyelek* (*Kĕbra Nagast*), E. A. W. BUDGE (trans.), London, 1922, chapter 68, pp. 110-111.

[21] See F. McCulloch, *Medieval Latin and French Bestiaries* (UNP, 1962), p. 154-155. The trope of purity similarly comes to the fore in literary works such as the fourteenth-century Middle English poem Pearl that features Pearl-Maiden in the retinue of Christ the Lamb; see *Pearl: Text and Translation*. Albertus Magnus suggests that "when ground to a powder and taken as medicine, pearls… fortify the chastity of those who wear or eat them": ALBERT THE GREAT, *De animalibus*, J. SCANLAN, (trans.), New York, 1987, p. 361. Albertus also outlines that the pearl is conceived not by the union of a shell and a dew drop but by the oyster and the dew. Pearls' medicinal properties, too, were seen to purify and heal; they were believed, according to Bartholomeus Anglicus, to cleanse and strengthen bodies by purifying them after other medicines cause "excessive bodily discharge" (*De proprietatibus rerum*, J. TREVISA (trans.), M. C. SEYMOUR (ed.), 3 vols, Oxford, 1975, vol. 2, p. 856.

[22] HONORIUS AUGUSTODUNENSIS, *Sigillum Beatae Mariae*, A. CARR (trans.), *Vox Benedictina* 8.2 (Winter 1991), 200. I thank Avital Heyman for this reference.
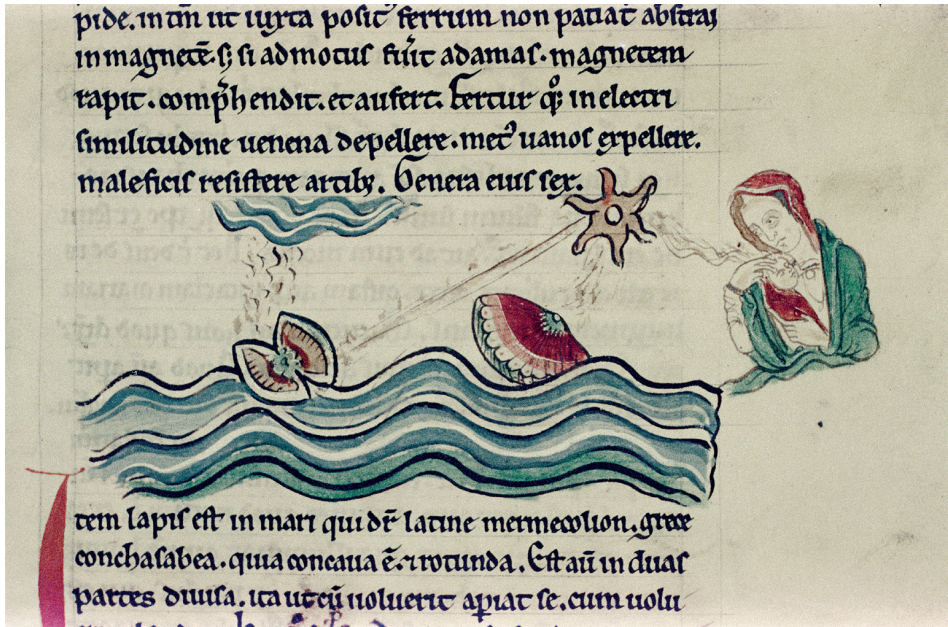
Fig. 3. The formation of the pearl in an oyster shell, and the Virgin and Child. Bestiary, Bodleian Library, Bodl. 602, fol. 34r, England, 13th c

These sources make it evident that the pearl is defined not only by its white color but also by its ovum-like shape and its flesh-like pliability. None of this can be said about nacre, its shimmery, hardy substance flatly adhering to the exoskeleton of a mollusk. Now we understand that pearls are formed from nacre that oysters accumulate to protect themselves from parasites, foreign bodies, or wounds. Not so in the Middle Ages: in fact, Albertus Magnus specifically distinguishes between shells "lined with a pearly iridescence" and pearls themselves that are formed by the oysters' absorption of the dew. Same is true for Arabic sources. In 1325, Muhammad ibn Abi Talib al Dimashki clarified the difference between the pearls themselves and the inner layers of the shell that "*resemble* the pearls and are called the root of the pearl or nacre" and claimed that these layers have "furnished numerous images to the poets, theologians, and philosophers."[23] In inventories and accounts of the late Middle Ages, the two are also clearly distinguished although semantically related.[24] Nacre is always different from the

---

[23] Emphasis mine. See MUHAMMAD IBN ALI TALIB AL DIMASHKI (DIMISHQI), *Manuel de la cosmographie du moyen age*, A. MEHREN, (ed.), Paris, 1874, chapter 2, section 7, p. 90.

[24] *Comptes de l'argenterie des rois de France au xive siècle*, L. DOUËT-D'ARCQ (ed.), Paris, 1851, p. 313: "for two pitchers, one in the shape of a rooster, another of a hen, whose belly is made of nacre (*coquille de perles*)", etc. (for year 1353); see also a list of *coquilles d'une perle* [*despeciée*], for the same year, pp. 320-321; see further on nacre salt shakers (*salieres de coquilles de perles* [or *coquilles de pelle*]) in *Inventaire de l'orfevrerie et des joyaux de Louis I, duc d'Anjou*, H. MORANVILLE (ed.), Paris, 1903, pp. 276-282.

pearl because it is defined by the pearl's lack—or, differently put, by its remotion. In order to harvest the pearl, the shell with its nacre has to be cast aside.

***

To attribute the meanings of pearls in the Middle Ages to the mother-of-pearl is therefore a mistake: Christological semiotics of the pearl cannot be directly read into the material significance of nacre. But semiotics of withdrawal and substitution can be. As a substance, shell nacre is a phantasm *par excellence*. In and of itself, it is a material remnant, a vestige of withdrawal—maternal matter from which its seed, the pearl, has been abstracted. *A priori*, then, every mother-of-pearl object signifies lack: it gestures to a pearl, and, although it no longer contains it, it can serve as a convincing simulation. This mechanics of such connotative simulation has been exploited since the early Middle Ages: we see it already in the sixth-century imperial mosaic at St. Vitale in Ravenna, where Theodora wears a pearl-encrusted diadem, rendered materially out of thin mother-of-pearl medallions; the same encircle her shoulders. Here, nacre is made to stand for the pearl, to simulate and signify it, to be emphatically and blatantly *like it*—the only material used to such an effect in a mosaic that is otherwise composed of regular glass, stone, and ceramic tesserae.

Nearly one thousand years later, made into an osculatory, nacre was brought into play in a rather more complicated catena of echoes and substitutions. The pale round plaque inserted into a metal frame, translucent and marked by the divine image, simulates the contents of the pendant—the wax *agnus dei*, similarly round and similarly marked with the image of the divine.[25] The *agnus dei* itself, in turn, simulated the wheat wafer of the Eucharist, echoing it not only through shape, color, and mode of production (by stamping), but also through the semiotics of its material composition, where paschal candle wax signified Christ's body.[26] In fact, larger osculatory tablets and medallions that were kissed by the priest during the consecration of the Eucharist and subsequently circulated to the congregation during the dissemination of the Kiss of Peace[27], were to be treated akin to Christ's body itself, if we are to believe the words of Geert Grote who insisted that osculatories be received "as the body of Christ" and enjoined the congregation to prepare yourself so that even though you are not up to eating the sacrament carnally you may eat it spiritually".[28] The Metropolitan pendant, much like other small

---

[25] On *agnus dei* objects, see S. Wilson, *The Magical Universe: Everyday Ritual and Magic in Pre-modern Europe*, London, 2000, pp. 464-465; C. W. Bynum, *Christian Materiality: an Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe*, New York, 2011, p. 147; I. G. Cooper, "Investigating the 'Case' of the Agnus Dei in Sixteenth-Century Italian Homes", in *Domestic Devotions in Early Modern Italy*, C. Maya, F. Marco, M. Alessia (eds.) Leiden, 2019, pp. 220-243.

[26] On stamps and seals in relation to the Eucharist, see B. Bedos-Rezak, "Medieval Identity: a Sign and a Concept", *The American Historical Review*, 105-5 (2000), pp. 1489-1533, at p. 1527: "Seals allowed simultaneous presence and representation. Their mode of signification was through incarnation".

[27] On this ritual, see K. Petkov, *The Kiss of Peace: Ritual, Self, and Society in the High and Late Medieval West,* vol. 17, *Cultures, Beliefs, and Traditions*, Leiden, 2003. It was not the only object to be obliterated in this way: the same priest, for example, would kiss the image of the cross, painted in his missal, at the opening of the canon of the Mass (*Te igitur*). On kissing liturgical books see M. Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture*, New York, 1991; on osculatories inserted into books of civic oaths, K. Rudy, *Postcards on Parchment: The Social Lives of Medieval Books,* New Haven, 2015, p. 288.

[28] *Devotio moderna: Basic Writings*, J. van Engen (ed.), New York, 1988, p. 72. On the equivalence between the pax and the Eucharist see E. Muir, *Ritual in Early Modern Europe*, New York, 1997, p. 172.

osculatories that show signs of wear and that were made to contain the *agnus dei*—such as a marvelous example from the Schnütgen Museum that now houses an eighteenth-century wax medallion—was likely reserved for private use, but the significance still holds.[29] Yet, unlike the consecrated wafer that *was* Christ's body, the wax medallion—much as it could have miraculous and apotropaic powers—was a *sacramental* but not a *sacrament*: in other words, it was a substitute, whose power waned over time, and which had to be re-blessed by the Pope at least every seven years. The osculatory spun phantasms around Christ's true body: the *agnus dei* that echoed the wafer, the nacre plaque that echoed the *agnus dei*, and the image of the Trinity carved on the nacre that claimed to represent the divine body in the wafer. The truth of things slipped away under this web of likenesses. To pry apart layers of mimetic phantasms was to abstract real things from them, in the scholastic interpretation of the term: nacre from wax, wax from wheat, image from prototype.

The process by which the mother-of-pearl medallion simulates Christ's body and simultaneously indexes the withdrawal of this body as reified by the abstracted pearl grounds the meaning of the nacreous image of the divine. In Christian theology, the image of God rests on divine unavailability as a result of a series of withdrawals: withdrawal of God's visible form from humanity's gaze after the Fall, withdrawal of his incarnated form from the terrestrial plane after the Crucifixion. Until the *facie ad faciem* promise of the beatific vision, spelled out in 1 Corinthians 13:12, God is only knowable through simulation, and humanity remains locked in the world of phantasms, corrupted and warped, imprisoned in a region of dissemblance that defined humanity's postlapsarian trajectory.[30] This trajectory, characterized by the loss of the ability to behold God in whose image and likeness humanity was created, and the subsequent spiritual blindness it acquired, assured that the divine could only be perceived through vestiges and placeholders: that is, images, simulacra.[31] These images were never true: God's invisibility was absolute and what is invisible, to quote saint Ambrose, cannot be painted.[32] In representing the unrepresentable divine, medieval artists often resorted to

[29] On the Schnütgen Museum osculatory capsule with the *agnus dei* (Inv.-Nr. B 118), and particularly on its private use, see A. Büttner, "Die Kinder des Taus. Spätgotische Perlmutterreliefs in den Museen der Stadt Köln", *Wallraf-Richartz-Jahrbuch*, 61 (2000), pp. 69-98, esp. pp. 80-82 for the capsule and pp. 82-87 for nacre paxes; see further *Museum Schnütgen. Handbuch zur Sammlung*, M. Woelk, M. Beer (eds.), Köln, 2018, p. 320, no. 214.

[30] The specifics of the beatific vision (whether one would see God's face for the first time right after death or during the Last Judgment) — were hotly debated by theologians. The question lay in the precise moment of the revelation of God's face, whether it took place after the Last Judgment or immediately after one's death; see L. F. Sandler, "Face to Face with God: A Pictorial Image of the Beatific Vision", in L. F. Sandler, *Studies in Manuscript Illumination, 1200-1400*, London, 2008, pp. 197-215; B. McGinn, "*Visio Dei*. Seeing God in Medieval Theology," in *Envisaging Heaven in the Middle Ages*, C. Muessig, A. Putter (eds.), New York, 2007, pp. 15-33; and C. Trottman, *La vision beatifique: Des disputes scolastiques a sa définition par Benoit XII*, Rome, 1995. The controversy was settled in the 1336 Benedictus Deus, which affirmed that the purified souls "have seen and see the divine essence by intuitive vision and even face to face, with no mediating creature" directly after death and long before the Last Judgment and the resurrection of their bodies: see H. Denzinger, *Enchiridion symbolorum, definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum*, Friburg, 1932, p. 198.

[31] See R. Javelet, *Image et ressemblance au xiie siècle. De saint Anselme à Alain de Lille*, 2 vols., Paris, 1967, and J.-C. Schmitt, "*Imago*: de l'image à l'imaginaire", in *L'image - Fonctions et usages des images dans l'Occident medieval*, J. Baschet, J.-C. Schmitt (eds.), Paris, 1996, pp. 29-37, esp. pp. 31-33.

[32] Ambrose, *In epistolam b. Pauli ad Colossenses*, *PL*, col. 446C: *Quod invisibile est pingi non potest*. On divine (un)representability, see essays in *Histories of the Hidden God: Concealment and Revelation in Western Gnostic,*

Fig. 4. Portable Altar of Countess Gertrude, c. 1045 Lower Saxony. Gold, cloisonné enamel, porphyry, gems, pearls, niello, wood core. Overall: 10.5 x 27.5 x 21 cm (4 1/8 x 10 13/16 x 8 1/4 in.). Cleveland Museum of Art. Gift of the John Huntington Art and Polytechnic Trust 1931.462

non-figurative or downright empty spaces: mineralogical surfaces of portable altars such as the tenth-century porphyry altar of Gertrude (Fig. 4), or outlined blank spaces such as the one we find in the twelfth-century Peterborough Annals, where sacred space is structured through a series of inscribed rectangles and circles enclosing an empty mandorla—a striking space of divine withdrawal (Fig. 5).[33] God has been abstracted from this world as a pearl from a nacreous

---

Esoteric, and Mystical Traditions, A. D. DeConick, G. Adamson (eds.), New York, 2016 as well as in *Seeing the Inivsible in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, G. Nie, K. F. Morrison, M. Mostert (eds.), Turnhout, 2005, and esp. H. Kessler's "*Hoc Visibile Imaginatum Figurat Illud Inivisibile Verum*: Imagining God in Pictures of Christ" therein. See also D. Méhu, "L'évidement de l'image ou la figuration de l'invisible corps du Christ (ixe –xie siècle)," *Images Re-vues*, 11 (2013), http://imagesrevues.revues.org/3384.

[33] BL, Harley MS 3667, fol. 7v. Méhu, pp. 27-28, suggests that the copyist left the image of Christ out of the mandorla even though it may have been present in the original. On the image, see also P. S. Baker, "More Diagrams by Byrhtferth of Ramsey," in *Latin Learning and English Lore: Studies in Anglo-Saxon Literature for Michael Lapidge*, K. O'Brien O'Keffe, A. Orchard (eds.), Toronto, 2005, vol. 2, pp. 53-73, at pp. 58-59. On empty spaces as generators of meaning, see E. Gertsman, *The Absent Image: Lacunae in Medieval Books*, University Park, PA, 2021, and Eadem, "Phantoms of Emptiness: the Space of the Imaginary in Late Medieval Art," *Art History*, 41-5 (2018), pp.

Fig. 5. *Diagram of creation, Portion of the annals of Peterborough Abbey*, Peterborough, 1125-50, London, The British Library, BL Harley MS 3667, fol. 7v

shell—as Christ from Mary's womb—leaving behind semblances, traces, signs of his presence, from the *achiropiite* to the miraculous images—all of which remained images nevertheless, temporary proxies such as the one figured in the mother-of-pearl medallion: not the real Trinity but its phantasmic simulacrum.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

In order to attain the universal essence of the Trinity veiled in the nacre medallion, such phantasms, to return to Aquinas, had to be abstracted: the truth behind the image was only available by the remotion of this image. The abstractive process finds different iterations in the vast literature of the Middle Ages—too vast to summarize here—from St Gregory, who wished for the mind's eye "to turn away from the phantasms of earthly and celestial images (*terrenarum atque caelestium imaginum phantasmata*), and to reject and deny" falsehoods presented by corporeal senses to Jan van Ruusbroec who imagined a visionary habitat for God's Unity as "bare and devoid of images" quite simply because "God is a spirit whom no one can properly represent through images". [34] Certainly, Ruusbroec admits that the devout "should make use of good images, such as our Lord's Passion […] in possessing God, however, a person must descend to that imageless bareness which is God himself." But there is a difference between St. Gregory's prescriptive moralizing about denying images, or Ruusbroec's anagogic musings about divine unions, and the Aquinian concept of abstraction, which is steeped not in didactics or mysticism but logic, and which re-imagines the process of remotion precisely as a process—the kind that finds striking (dis)embodiment in the nacre osculatory, made, it would seem, expressly to be stripped of the images it bears, to have its meaning abstracted from phantasmic representation through corporeal erasure that reflects an intellectual one as laid out in countless theological tracts.

Elsewhere, I have written about the way such erasure functioned in illuminated manuscripts, where the process of figurative de-incarnation reflected and engaged in a dialogue with theology of God's progressive invisibility, ongoing withdrawal from the world: first from Adam and Eve's sight, then from the sight of all at the time of Christ's death.[35] By kissing and thereby erasing the image of Christ from the pages of a book of hours, the devout reduced this image to a vestige, eventually barely discernable: a vestige of the visible to index the vestige of the invisible god. This erasure is an apophatic gesture, theological dissimulation made tangible, a realization of the language of unsaying in the pious practices of the late Middle Ages, which strived to describe the indescribable God—"empty and free in himself",

---

800-837. On geometry and the divine, see H. KESSLER, "Medietas / Mediator and the Geometry of Incarnation" in *Image— and Incarnation: The Early Modern Doctrine of the Pictorial Image*, W. MELION, L. P. WANDEL (eds.), Leiden, 2015, pp. 17-75, and J. HAMBURGER, *Diagramming Devotion. Berthold of Nuremberg's Transformation of Hrabanus Maurus's Poems in Praise of the Cross*, Chicago, 2020.

[34] S. GREGORY THE GREAT, *Homiliae in Hiezechihelem prophetam*, ed. Marcus Adriaen, CCSL CXLII, Turnhout, 1971, p. 282; J. VAN RUUSBROEC, *The Spiritual Espousals, The Sparkling Stones, and Other Works*, Mahwah, NJ, 1986, pp. 264, 157.

[35] See E. GERTSMAN, *Absent Image*, Chapter 3, and EADEM, "Iconography and the Loss of Representation", in *The Lives and Afterlives of Medieval Art*, P. PATTON, H. D. SCHILB (eds.), University Park, PA, 2021, pp. 127-159. On the traces left in these sites previously inhabited by the divine, see G. DIDI-HUBERMAN, *L'Homme qui marchait dans la couleur*, Paris, 2001, pp. 19-20.

to quote Meister Eckhart, in whom "nothing other than infinity is found," as Nicholas of Cusa would have it.[36]

The mechanics of erasure are built into the nacre medallion itself: withdrawal and wearing down of the image were the predicate of its function. The cyclical nature of the Christian ritual in which the use of the osculatory was grounded would ensure repeated acts of kissing. And, in fact, the nacre was specifically prepared for these acts. Unlike the majority of fifteenth-century mother-of-pearl medallions, this one bears no sign that it has ever been painted—conservation shows no traces of pigment or gilding, or of gesso that could be used as a substrate for those materials[37]. Other nacre medallions, which were not meant to be kissed away, may look unpainted now, but that is deceptive; for instance, a disc now in the collections of the Cleveland Museum of Art, which was clearly meant for display, bears, in addition to adhesives, traces of reds, greens, browns, and gold (Fig. 6). Not so with the osculatory: expressly made to be handled, it remained bare of surface decoration.

Nacre, because of its unusual biomineral composition, is resistant to fracture but yields to scratching: in other words, it might be tough to break but it is easy to wear off. This wear is visible in the Met medallion, where signs of erasure have already set in. God the Father—whose delightfully bald head gleams, clearly polished by eager lips—is well on his way to lose his facial features, which are all but obliterated already in the image of his Son. Christ's torso is a blank expanse of nacre, his hand blends with the cloth held in front of him, his nose and his forehead are worn away. Unrecognizability sets in: the image, intimate and familiar, held close to the heart and to the mouth, begins changing, transforming.[38] As the likeness withdraws, so does familiarity; as the artifice of the phantasm is erased, the essence emerges through the visual deceit.

The erasure accomplishes several things. One, it effaces the distinction between the three persons of the Trinity that are necessary in figurative representation: eventually, the figures of the three would become kissed away into a single pearlescent silhouette—the very dogma of the Trinity performed by the celebrant's lips, enacted by the devotee's touch. Two, in the obliteration of the Trinity's figurative form, the erasure confirms the image as an unstable, temporary simulacrum. Three, it abstracts the material from the immaterial, both returning nacre to its original state, to the raw substance of its iridescent surface, and removing

---

[36] M. Eckhart, *Die deutschen und lateinischen Werke*, 11 vols., Stuttgart and Berlin, 1936-, vol. I, pp. 39:1 – 41:7, trans. in B. Milem, *The Unspoken Word: Negative Theology in Meister Eckhart's German Sermons*, Washington, D.C., 2002, p. 73; Nicholas of Cusa, "*De docta ignorantia*," in *Nicholas of Cusa: Selected Spiritual Writings,* H. L. Bond (trans.), Mahwah, 1997, p. 126. On the reinvention of apophatic theology in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, see introduction and essays in *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation*, O. Davies, D. Turner (eds.) Cambridge, 2004.

[37] I am extremely grateful to Andrew Winslow at the Metropolitan Museum of Art for confirming, with the conservator, that the nacre disc is completely devoid of any signs of painting or gilding, and that any visible traces constitute only dust and dirt accretions. Personal correspondence, February 10, 2021.

[38] On this "technique of estrangement" see See V. Shklovsky, "Искусство как приём" ("Art as Device"), in *Сборники по теории поэтического языка*, *Вып.* II, Peterburg, 1917, pp. 3-14; on the related notion of *différance*, see J. Derrida, "Cogito and the History of Madness," in *Writing and Difference*, A. Bass (trans.), London & New York, 1978, pp. 31-63.

Fig. 6. Calvary, c. 1450.
Germany, Middle Rhine (?).
Mother-of-pearl. Diameter:
12.1 cm (4 3/4 in.). Cleveland
Museum of Art, Norman
O. Stone and Ella A. Stone
Memorial Fund 1968.240

the Trinitarian phantasm and displacing it into the realm of the unseen. In this way, corporeal abstractions give way to spiritual ones, and material remotion spurs on a mental one.

<p style="text-align:center">* * *</p>

The title of this contribution riffs on the title of Herbert Kessler's "Faithful Attraction" (published in this journal a few years ago), which in turn riffs on the title of the 1987 thriller "Fatal Attraction".[39] Kessler's essay offers a nuanced analysis of San Marco's frescos within the framework of medieval writings about beauty, and particularly Virgin Mary's beauty. And while the lurid desire that Glenn Close's Alex experienced towards Michael Douglas's Dan has little in common with the passionate adoration that the devout experienced towards the Virgin—aside, perhaps, from its intensity and its steady amplification—I hope that my own essay shares in Kessler's concerns, evident in the many years of his scholarship, with the representation, and representability, of the ineffable.[40] Indeed, abstraction as withdrawal—visual, discursive, corporeal, and mental—stands at the crux of figuring this ineffability, conceived through the mechanics of remotion: a phantasmic sign, a dissimulative process, a subtractive image-(un)making in the service of the invisible truth.

---

[39] *Codex Aquilarensis*, 35 (2019), pp. 59-84.

[40] See in particular essays gathered in *Spiritual Seeing: Picturing God's Invisibility in Medieval Art*, Philadelphia, 2000.