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Theories of the Nonsense Word in Medieval England

Kirk, Jordan

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THEORIES OF THE NONSENSE WORD IN MEDIEVAL ENGLAND

Jordan Kirk

A DISSERTATION
PRESENTED TO THE FACULTY
OF PRINCETON UNIVERSITY
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation is a study of medieval theories of the nonsense word. I establish how Aristotle's account of utterance underwent a major alteration in its transmission to the Middle Ages, such that the human voice came to be conceived of as in the first instance a non-signifying noise. I then examine the reception of this philosophical innovation in the logic, devotion, and poetry of fourteenth-century England. In chapters on Oxford logic, on the contemplative treatise the *Cloud of Unknowing*, and on Geoffrey Chaucer's dream vision the *House of Fame*, I uncover the philosophical stakes of what I take to be a fourteenth-century preoccupation with nonsense.

The first chapter establishes that the sixth-century Roman scholar Boethius introduced a new idea of *vox*, or utterance, as fundamentally nonsensical in his translations of and commentaries on Aristotle's *De interpretatione*. The second chapter traces the inheritance of this idea in the Oxford logic of the twelfth through fourteenth centuries, and shows how although logicians attempted to banish nonsense words from their discipline, they were forced to confront them in the phenomenon of what they called *material supposition*, when a term stands for itself in a proposition. The third chapter proposes that the technique of prayer described in the *Cloud of Unknowing* consists in the production of a nonsense word through repetition, and that this technique—foreign to the mystical tradition in which the treatise is usually placed—is an elaboration of possibilities disclosed in the logical materials discussed in the dissertation's first half. The fourth and final chapter, on the *House of Fame*, argues that Chaucer revises academic

theories of *vox* into a theory of *tydynges*, or rumors, in which it is nonsense that allows for speech to emerge from a state of dumbness proper to the poet.

Bu, ba, buf.
—Logica "Cum sit nostra"

Rum, ram, ruf.
—Chaucer

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My admiration for the writings of Daniel Heller-Roazen and Vance Smith will be evident to readers of the following pages; but I have also had the good fortune to have these scholars as advisers, and it is my pleasure to thank them here for their guidance and insight. This dissertation would not exist without them, needless to say. Andrew Cole kindly agreed to work with me when the project was already underway, and it is vastly better for his expert advice. I can only imagine how much poorer it would be without Rita Copeland and Sarah Kay. Conversations with Jeff Dolven, Sean Keilen, Nicola Masciandaro, and Eileen Reeves have strengthened the argument at crucial points. Emmelyn Butterfield-Rosen and Eva Kenny have been comrades-in-arms and ideal readers, as well as dear friends.

I am grateful for the support of my parents, Katy and Don Breazeal and Scott Kirk, and of my friends.

My greatest debt by far is to Christopher van Ginhoven Rey. This is for him, with my love.

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VOX SOLA

This dissertation is a study of medieval theories of the nonsense word. I establish how Aristotle's account of utterance underwent a major alteration in its transmission to the Middle Ages, such that the human voice came to be conceived of as in the first instance a non-signifying noise. I then examine the reception of this philosophical innovation in the logic, devotion, and poetry of fourteenth-century England. In chapters on Oxford logic, on the contemplative treatise the *Cloud of Unknowing*, and on Geoffrey Chaucer's dream vision the *House of Fame*, I uncover the philosophical stakes of what I take to be a fourteenth-century preoccupation with nonsense.

The first chapter establishes that the sixth-century Roman scholar Boethius introduced a new idea of *vox*, or utterance, as fundamentally nonsensical in his translations of and commentaries on Aristotle's *De interpretatione*. The second chapter traces the inheritance of this idea in the Oxford logic of the twelfth through fourteenth centuries, and shows how although logicians attempted to banish nonsense words from their discipline, they were forced to confront them in the phenomenon of what they called *material supposition*, when a term stands for itself in a proposition. The third chapter proposes that the technique of prayer described in the *Cloud of Unknowing* consists in the production of a nonsense word through repetition, and that this technique—foreign to the mystical tradition in which the treatise is usually placed—is an elaboration of possibilities disclosed in the logical materials discussed in the dissertation's first half. The fourth and final chapter, on the *House of Fame*, argues that Chaucer revises academic

theories of *vox* into a theory of *tydynges*, or rumors, in which it is nonsense that allows for speech to emerge from a state of dumbness proper to the poet.

The problem of nonsense that I recover in this project, although it is basic to Boethian logic and to medieval theory of language as a whole, has not been addressed by modern scholars. Neither was it given much direct attention in the Middle Ages themselves, persisting as a counter-tradition within a field that wanted very little to do with it. But in fourteenth-century England the problem was taken up with unusual intensity in the disparate fields that I consider here. In the Oxford logical materials, the line of transmission from Boethius is so direct as to be unmistakable: these logicians are working with terms and concepts that originate in his translations and commentaries. In the case of the *Cloud of Unknowing* and the *House of Fame*, the situation is different. These are not Latin but vernacular texts, a mystical treatise and an imaginative poem written outside of the discipline of logic and outside of the university more generally. I have focused on these two works—and not, say, any of the other vernacular works in which instances of nonsense appear—because they not only include nonsense words but also contain reflections on their nature and status. It is the wager of this project that the *Cloud* and the *House of Fame* contain elaborations of the Boethian nonsense word no less theoretical and no less sophisticated than those to be found in the logical treatises of their contemporaries at Oxford.

Nonetheless, I am not primarily interested in demonstrating a historically verifiable relation of influence on my vernacular authors by the Latin ones. As I will suggest shortly, Chaucer and the *Cloud*-author could hardly have been unfamiliar with the theories I analyze in the dissertation's first half, both because they would have encountered many of the specific texts in which these theories are worked out and because of their diffusion throughout medieval

literary culture. What interests me, though, is not source study but the way that some of the same questions—and some very different answers to them—occur to investigators, in disparate fields, of what Giorgio Agamben calls an *experimentum linguae* "in which the limits of language are to be found not outside language, in the direction of its referent, but in an experience of language as such, in its pure self-reference."[1] That said, the constraint of the scope of this investigation to fourteenth-century England is not arbitrary. At the beginning of the century, new possibilities of working with nonsense words were conceived in the field of logic; by its end, such words had been eliminated all but entirely from the curriculum. It is at the moment when logicians at Oxford cease to consider this problem that Chaucer and the *Cloud*-author put together their own theories of nonsense. What comes to light when these disparate materials are read alongside each other, then, is not the direct influence of the university texts on the vernacular writers but a more obscure form of transmission, in which a problem abandoned in one field is taken up simultaneously in another.

1. The problem of nonsense

My work on nonsense began as an attempt to understand the absence of an example. In the first pages of his second commentary on Aristotle's *De interpretatione*, Boethius distinguishes among four kinds of *locutio*, or word:

> Sive autem aliquid quaecumque vox significet, ut est hic sermo homo, sive omnino nihil, sive positum alicui nomen significare possit, ut est blityri (haec enim vox per se cum nihil significet, posita tamen ut alicui nomen sit significabit), sive per se quidem nihil significet, cum aliis vero iuncta designet, ut sunt coniunctiones: haec omnia locutiones vocantur.[2]

---

[1] Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron (London: Verso, 1993), 5.

[2] Boethius, *Commentarii in librum Aristotelis Peri hermeneias, pars posterior, secundam editionem continens*, ed. Carl Meiser (Leipzig: Teubner, 1880), 5. My translation.

> Whether an utterance signifies something, such as this word *man*; or signifies nothing at all; or can signify if it be assigned to something as its name, such as *blityri* (for while this utterance signifies nothing in itself, nevertheless when it is assigned to something as a name, then it will signify); or signifies nothing in itself, but does signify when it is joined with others, such as is the case with conjunctions—all these are called *words*.

He explains that there are utterances that mean something ("man"), utterances that mean absolutely nothing, utterances that mean something when you combine them with other utterances ("and"), and finally utterances that don't mean anything yet but could at any moment become the name of something (the nonsense word "blityri"). An example is provided for each of these varieties of utterance except for the second. Without remarking his omission, the commentator fails to give any indication as to what would count as *vox quae omnino nihil significat*. He gives neither an example of such an entity, nor an explanation of its specific nature beyond what is contained in its designation as signifying "nothing at all." All that he does is enumerate it as one of the four varieties of *locutio*.

When I encountered this omission, I did not know what to make of it. I soon came to suspect that I was not the only one for whom the passage presented difficulties, for I could find no discussion of the missing example in the scholarship. More surprising still, Boethius's readers seemed to have overlooked not only the surprising absence of an example of this type of utterance, but also the very inclusion of this type among the others. Following the commentator's own lead, his readers proceed as though there are not four kinds of *locutio* but three: the kind that means something in itself, the kind that means something in context, and the kind that will mean something once someone decides that it does. But it seemed to me that if Boethius had wished to divide *vox* into three kinds he would have done so; and moreover that the way this particular variety of utterance does not fit well among the others makes it all the more pressing to retain it. For the other three kinds of *locutio* have in common that, one way or another, they signify

something, whereas this one does nothing of the sort. Its inclusion entails that the *locutio* or word is not only a thing that exists in various relations to signifying something, but also contains in its most basic constitution the ability to signify "nothing at all."

All this led me no closer to discovering exactly what such an utterance might consist in. It occurred to me that the absence of an example might itself disclose something essential about this variety of utterance: that perhaps it is a kind of thing that can never be encountered in positive form. And this notion holds some attraction, for once you have before you a particular utterance, it would seem a relatively simple matter to declare that it is the name of something—that is, to "coin" it, or assign to it a meaning. But insofar as a word can be used in such a way, it belongs not to the category of words that signify "nothing at all" but rather, like *blityri*, to that of those words that are simply not *yet* meaningful. It is difficult to imagine how any utterance could ever not be susceptible to the possibility of coinage: that is, how any member of the set of words that mean nothing at all would not turn out, instead, to belong among those words that can one day become meaningful. Accordingly, it could be that the only way a *vox* could be said to mean absolutely nothing, to not even mean something potentially, is for it not to ever exist in actual—exemplary—instance.

Such speculation offers an explanation for the lack of an example, but it fails to account for why Boethius sees fit to include this variety among the kinds of *locutio* in the first place. Moreover, he gives every indication that he thinks the *vox quae nihil designat* exists alongside the other varieties, as one of the four basic kinds of *quaecumque vox*, of any utterance. Moreover, the notion of an "uninstantiated utterance" is deeply unsatisfying, given that to be an utterance a thing has to be uttered: nothing counts as *vox* that is not actually, as Boethius defines it, emitted from the mouth and windpipe of an animal. The problem remained. What is utterance

that signifies nothing at all, and that can never come to signify anything even if it is placed in a context or assigned by human will as a name? What actually counts as *vox quae nihil designat*, and how do you recognize it if you hear it? What would happen if you heard or spoke such a word? What, finally, does the inclusion of such an utterance among the other types of words have to do with the nature of the utterance as such? These were my questions on reading this opaque passage of Boethius. They were also—as this dissertation will demonstrate—the questions that arose for his medieval inheritors. As the translator and most prominent commentator of the Aristotelian logical texts for the medieval West, Boethius introduced a problem into the literary culture of the Middle Ages: the problem of nonsense.

2. Some examples of medieval nonsense

About the turn of the twelfth century, William IX of Aquitane composed a poem that has come to be known as his "fifth." The poet, sometimes called the first of the troubadours, explains that one day he encountered two women on the road, and they greeted him and asked him his business:

> Ar auziretz qu'ai respondut:
> anc no li diz ni "bat" ni "but,"
> ni fer ni fust no ai mentagut,
> mas sol aitan:
> "Babariol, babariol,
> babarian."[3]
>
> Now hear how I answered them: I said neither "bat" nor "but," I named neither metal nor wood, but only: "Babariol, babariol, babarian."

The poet's babbling response consists in a series of incomprehensible words. These words emerge in their specificity on the basis of a lack of identity between them and two other units of

[3] William IX, *Poesie*, ed. Nicolò Pasero (Modena: STEM Mucchi, 1973), 126. I follow the translation given by Heller-Roazen in "The Matter of Language" (cf. following note).

gibberish, *bat* and *but*. It is not only that he speaks in an indecipherable manner, but also that he produces utterances distinguishable from one another even as they remain indecipherable. The troubadour lays bare a level of utterance at which words can be differentiated from one another without reference to their signification, a differentiability that is rather the precondition of any signification. As Daniel Heller-Roazen has written, "the troubadour's speech displaces language from the register of its ordinary operation and, in expressing the signifying material by which language is capable of meaning *tout court*, articulates language's most original ability to signify."[4]

William was not the only poet who would mark out this domain of speech. Some two hundred years later, in the *Inferno*, Dante describes an encounter with the giant Nimrod. The giant, suffering the punishment of Babel, says:

Raphél maì amèche zabì almi[5]

This line, alongside that of Pluto (*Papé Satàn, papé Satàn aleppe*), has defied the efforts of interpreters to identify it as an instance of Arabic or Hebrew, Basque or Greek. Its purpose is not to reproduce any particular language, but to serve as an instance of a form of speech that cannot be assimilated to any known idiom.[6] As Virgil explains, the giant's speech is unintelligible to all

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[4] Daniel Heller-Roazen, "The Matter of Language: Guilhem de Peitieus and the Platonic Tradition," *MLN* 113, no. 4 (1998), 877.

[5] Dante Alighieri, *La Commedia secondo l'antica vulgata*, ed. Giorgio Petrocchi (Milan: Mondadori, 1966), XXXI.67. On this passage, cf. Peter Dronke, *Dante and Medieval Latin Traditions* (London: Cambridge University, 1989), 43–9; Henri Guiter, "Sur deux passages obscurs de Dante et de Jehan Bodel," *Revue des langues romanes* 77 (1967); Roger Dragonetti, "Dante face à Nemrod: Babel mémoire et miroir de l'Eden," *Critique* 387-88 (1979): 690-706. Dante also speaks of Nimrod and the confusion of tongues at *De vulgari eloquentia*, ed. Steven Botterill (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2005), 15.

[6] On barbarolexis, cf. Paul Zumthor, *Langue et techniques poétiques à l'époque romane* (Paris: C. Klincksieck, 1969), 83–111; Alexandre Leupin, *Barbarolexis: Medieval Writing and Sexuality* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1989). On medieval invented languages, cf. Jeffrey Schnapp, "Between Babel and Pentecost: Imaginary Languages in the Middle Ages," in

who hear it, just as the giant himself can understand no one else's speech.[7] *Raphél maì amèche zabì almi* announces a condition of absolute linguistic incomprehension, in which the experience of unintelligibility cannot be overcome by means of translation, explanation, or learning. The words Nimrod speaks belong to no known language, but they are not for that mere sound, as their accommodation to the formal demands of Dante's verse makes plain.

As Peter Dronke and others have indicated, Nimrod's "convincing line of spoken Babelese" participates in a wider medieval tradition of invented languages. The phenomenon is especially evident in the drama. A century before the composition of the *Inferno*, Jean Bodel included in his *Jeu de Saint Nicolas* a golden statue that comes to life long enough to say

> Palas aron ozinomas
> Baske bano tudan donas
> Geheamel cla orlaÿ
> Berec .he. pantaras taÿ[8]

—which is as incomprehensible as Nimrod's speech. The other play invariably cited in this connection is Rutebeuf's *Miracle de Theophile*, from about 1261, in which Salatin conjures the devil with the following invocation:

> Bagahi laca bachahé
> lamac cahi achabahé
> karrelyos
> lamac lamec bachalyos
> cabahagi sabalyos
> baryolas
> lagozatha cabyolas
> samahac et famyolas

Modernité au Moyen Âge: le défi du passé, ed. Brigitte Cazelles and Charles Méla (Geneva: Droz, 1990).

[7] "a lui ciascun linguaggio / come 'l suo ad altrui, ch'a nullo è noto." XXXI.80-1.

[8] Jehan Bodel, *Le Jeu de Saint Nicolas*, ed. Albert Henry (Brussels: Presses Universitaires de Bruxelles, 1965), 178. As Suzanne Akbari has noted, a parallel passage will be found in the Middle English *Romaunce of Richard Coer de Lion*. Cf. Akbari, *Idols in the East: European Representations of Islam and the Orient, 1100-1450* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2004), 212n25.

harrahya[9]

Incomprehensible incantations of this sort exist also in Latin liturgical drama, and appear widely in late medieval English plays.[10] In the Towneley *Judicium*, for example, the demon Tutivillus announces himself in a macaronic speech that combines English, Latin, and sheer nonsense:

> Mi name is Tutiuillus,
> My horne is blawen.
> Ffragmina verborum,
> Tutiuillus colligit horum
> Belzabub algorum
> Belial belium doliorum[11]

In the N-Town *Adoration of the Shepherds*, a shepherd, having heard *Gloria in excelsis Deo,* explains that he has understood it perfectly:

> I have that songe ful wele inum.
> In my wyt weyl it is wrought,
> It was "Gle, glo, glas, glum."[12]

And in *Mankynd*, the character Mischief reads aloud a writ copied out in an untidy hand, saying

> Here ys blottybus in blottis
> Blottorum blottibus istis[13]

---

[9] Rutebeuf, *Il Miracolo di Teofilo* (Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 2000), ll. 160–8.
[10] Cf. also the Latin *Officium stellae*, as noted by Albert Henry. Bodel, *Le Jeu de Saint Nicolas*, 275n1512. On medieval jargons, cf. Garapon, *La fantaisie verbale et le comique dans le théâtre français du Moyen Age à la fin du XVIIe siècle* (Paris: A. Colin, 1957). Cf. also Renzi, "Un aspetto del plurilinguismo medievale: dalla lingua dei re magi a papè satan aleppe," in *Omaggio a Gianfranco Folena* (Padua: Editoriale Programma, 1993), 61-73; Elwert, "L'emploi de langue étrangères comme procédé stylistique," *Revue de littérature comparée* 34 (1960): 409–37.
[11] Martin Stevens and Arthur Cawley, *The Towneley Plays*, EETS 13 (Oxford: Oxford University, 1994), XXX.249-52. On this passage, cf. Margaret Jennings, "Tutivillus: The Literary Career of the Recording Demon," *Studies in Philology* 74, no. 5 (1977): 1-95; Michael T. Peterson, "Fragmina Verborum: The Vices' Use of Language in the Macro Plays," *Florilegium* 9, no. 0 (1987): 155-67.
[12] This passage is discussed in Janette Dillon, *Language and Stage in Medieval and Renaissance England* (New York: Oxford, 2012), 41.
[13] Mark Eccles, *The Macro Plays: The Castle of Perseverance, Wisdom, Mankind*, EETS 262 (London: Oxford, 1969), ll. 680–1.

What comes to the fore in these fifteenth-century English examples are the comedic possibilities of incomprehensible or invented speech. The unknown dramatists who composed these lines of dog Latin take advantage of the absurdity of uttering what sound like words in a particular language but are not, or of uttering words in one language as though they were words in another, to provoke laughter. These passages of phonoaesthetic parody constitute a kind of *grammelot*, as Dario Fo calls his "method of producing the semblance of a given language without adopting real or identifiable words from that language."[14]

Though played for laughs, the magical and demonic associations of incomprehensible speech are also apparent here. And indeed another connection in which nonsense words appear with regularity is in discussions of the casting of spells.[15] Roger's Bacon's thirteenth-century account of the *species* of words, which I will examine in detail in Chapter Two, has been shown to derive in part from passages in the *De radiis* of al-Kindi, who discusses the power of unknown words in the work of enchantment.[16] *Nomina barbara* on the order of *abracadabra* are sometimes held to possess a greater force than known words. Charles Burnett has observed, of a prayer to be found in a twelfth-century work on talismans by Adelard of Bath, that its "words are mostly in the language of the speaker—i.e., fitted to his time and place, but include one word—*elaalem*—which is left in Arabic […]. Within a context in which Arabic is not used (i.e., Bath, in

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[14] Cited in Erith Jaffe-Berg, "Forays into Grammelot: The Language of Nonsense," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* no. 2 (2001), 3. For a treatment of the prehistory and theory of grammelot, cf. Alessandra Pozzo, *Grr...grammelot: parlare senza parole, dai primi balbettii al grammelot di Dario Fo*, Lexis 8 (Bologna: CLUEB, 1998).

[15] On *nomina barbara* in the ancient world, cf. Fritz Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1999), 218–32. On magical uses of nonsense in late antiquity, cf. Miller, "In Praise of Nonsense," in *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality: Egyptian, Greek, Roman*, ed. A. H. Armstrong (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 481–505.

[16] Cf. Claire Fanger, "Things Done Wisely by a Wise Enchanter: Negotiating the Power of Words in the Thirteenth Century," *Esoterica* I (1999), 97-132.

the West of England), it becomes a non-significative word (a word with no meaning) which acquires its nature and effect directly from the celestial harmony."[17]

Vocal incomprehensibility emerges in the field of music as well. Emma Dillon's recent work on motets has underscored the way that the simultaneous production of multiple vocal lines in polyphony can obscure the particular sounds of any one of the lines, so that even as the words are heard their meaning cannot be discovered. Dillon speaks of the "extraordinary effect of the polytextual motet" as "a distinctive sound of words lost in the mêlée of music, a strange musicality brought about through a surplus of language."[18] Dillon builds on the work of Christopher Page, who writes that the motet "most candidly acknowledges the importance of verbal sound over verbal sense."[19]

Finally, this preponderance of sound over sense in the voice is marked in the constant appearance in medieval poetry of animal vocalizations, and of birdsong in particular. Lyric invocations of the twittering of the birds in the trees suggest a proximity between poetic speech and the non-signifying noises of animals. This proximity is considered at great length in "bird debates" such as the *Owl and the Nightingale* and the *Cuckoo and the Nightingale*, in which birds do not squawk, chirp, or hoot but produce meaningful and versifiable utterances. One such poem is Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls*, in which birds appear to speak no differently than do humans. Except, that is, for one moment in which some of them seem to speak otherwise:

> The goos the cokkow and the doke also
> So cryede kek kek kokkow quek quek hye

---

[17] Charles Burnett, "The Theory and Practice of Powerful Words in Medieval Magical Texts," in *The Word in Medieval Logic, Theology, and Psychology*, ed. Tetsuro Shimizu and Charles Burnett (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), 226.
[18] Emma Dillon, *The Sense of Sound: Musical Meaning in France, 1260-1330,* The New Cultural History of Music (New York: Oxford, 2012), 6.
[19] Ibid., 33; Christopher Page, *Discarding Images: Reflections on Music and Culture in Medieval France* (New York: Oxford, 1997), 85.

That thourgh myne eres the noyse wente tho.[20]

The status of these words is not made clear by the poem, and these same animals go on to speak in what is recognizably English. Does the poet mean to suggest that the other lines of bird speech consist in a kind of interspecies translation? Do the birds sometimes squawk and sometimes speak? Is this line onomatopoetic, as many readers will imagine? If avian speech can be recorded in this fashion, can human speech as well? In any case, any reading of the poem will have to reckon with the difference between this one line and all the others.

3. Some explanations of their occurrence

I have collected these examples of nonsense from medieval literary sources in order to suggest the extent to which the non-communicative aspect of *vox* provokes interest in the period between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries. Nonsense words appear with regularity in a variety of genres from the very beginning of literary production in the vernacular. Several matters of potential scholarly interest have already emerged in the course of this brief survey: seduction, post-lapsarian language, humor, the devilish, the diversity of languages, the distinction between song and speech, and that between animal and human vocalization. The phenomenon in which I am interested here might have been viewed through the lens of any of these concerns, some of which have more, and some less, currency among medievalists of the present day. I would like to pause over three matters of contemporary interest to which readers of earlier versions of this project have often drawn my attention: vernacularity, sins of the tongue, and animals.

The experience of incomprehension produced by nonsense words is akin to that produced by words in an unknown language.[21] In their use of nonsense, the works I have gathered here

[20] Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Riverside Chaucer," ed. Larry Benson et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), ll. 498–500.

seem to reflect on the fact of linguistic diversity by creating a form of speech that can be assigned to no particular language. Nonsense might offer an absolute version of the incomprehensibility of foreign languages: all the opacity of barbarian speech without any possibility of decipherment, translation, interpretation. Dante's Nimrod is the most pertinent instance here, insofar as between him and every other speaker lies an incomprehensibility never to be reduced. In the hands of vernacular poets, in short, nonsense might be a means of reflecting on the difference among idioms, and in particular the difference between grammatical and vernacular speech.[22] The inclusion of gibberish within Middle English poems, for example, seems to produce within the vernacular a kind of Latin that is no Latin at all, incorporating the distinction between grammatical and vernacular speech within the vernacular itself. Lodged within a particular language without being part of it, this "dog grammatica" might thus produce a kind of "minor literature" of nonsense.[23] In any event, one might profitably consider, especially in the cases of Dante and Chaucer, what nonsense has to do with the creation of a literary vernacular.

The absurd chatter of a Tutivillus can also be read within a tradition of classifying, and castigating, "idle talk" and other disorderly varieties of speech. Margaret Jenning's genealogy of Tutivillus, a demon who records linguistic errors, shows the close association of the scenes from *Mankynd* and *Judicium* cited above with a monastic and homiletic discourse of "sins of the tongue." One aspect of this discourse concerns the relation of a clergy whose Latin was not

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[21] Rabelais stages, to brilliant effect, the proximity of foreign languages to mere gibberish in *Gargantua et Pantagruel* II.9.
[22] The distinction is Dante's. Cf. his *De vulgari eloquentia*. On the emergence of literary vernaculars, cf. e.g. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne et al., *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280-1520* (University Park: Pennsylvania State, 1999).
[23] The term "minor literature" is from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: Unniversity of Minnesota, 1986).

always more than rudimentary to the textual practices of the church: the authorities debated whether the mangling of the words of a sacrament rendered it ineffective, whether the not infrequent incomprehension of the mass on the part not only of the congregation but of the priest as well compromised its religious power, and so forth.[24] Susan Phillips's recent work on "janglyng in cherche" has uncovered a preoccupation in late medieval England with the dangers of gossip and chatter.[25] The utterance of indecipherable words and phrases might emerge as the limit case of a network of recriminatory discourses that inveigh against *vaniloquium* and the vanity of loose talk and speech for its own sake. These treatises, rules, and sermons, in their opposition to empty talk, also allow it to emerge as an object of knowledge. They name varieties of unruly discourse, even as they attempt to reduce them to nothing. Perhaps unsurprisingly, such discourses can end up reproducing the unruliness of their object. This phenomenon is parodied to great effect in Chaucer's "Manciple's Tale," in which the advice to refrain from excessive speaking is itself repeated to wild excess. In short, just as nonsense might be understood to stage an absolute form of linguistic diversity, so might it also condense the emptiness, idleness, error, distraction, and disorderliness of *janglyng*.

The "Manciple's Tale," in which a crow cries "cokkow! cokkow! cokkow!," an utterance which is at once the "mute" cry of an animal and a recognizable word in a particular language (*cuckoo*, i.e. *cuckold*), leads me to the last approach I want to discuss: that of the current interest

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[24] On the performative felicity of sacraments, cf. Irène Rosier-Catach, *La Parole efficace: signe, rituel, sacré* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2004).

[25] Susan Phillips, *Transforming Talk: The Problem with Gossip in late Medieval England* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 2007). Cf. also Katherine Zieman, *Singing the New Song: Literacy and Liturgy in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2011); Edwin Craun, *Lies, Slander, and Obscenity in Medieval English Literature: Pastoral Rhetoric and the Deviant Speaker* (London: Cambridge University, 1997).

in so-called animal studies.[26] As I have suggested already, the vocalizations of animals, and birdsong in particular, provide a site in which the distinction between humans and other animals appears especially porous. According to medieval accounts of *vox*, human and non-human vocalization share in the same basic nature. Something like Chaucer's *kek kek kokkow quek quek* provides an occasion to consider what—if anything—differentiates the faculty of speech in humans from the noise-making faculties of the other animals. The appearance of avian nonsense words, the proliferation of bird poetry, and the presence of birds in lyric generally, has been of great interest to those scholars investigating the limits of the human in the figure of the animal.

If I have adopted none of these approaches, it is because I believe that the problem of nonsense can be separated from the problems of vernacularity, idle speech, and animals; and indeed that it underlies them all. At the root of the instances of gibberish I have collected here is a series of reflections that are philosophical in nature and that bear on the nature of language. In *raphél maì amèche zabì almi* there is not only invented language, in *kek kek kokkow quek quek* not only onomatopoeia, in *gle, glo, glas, glum* not only incomprehension of Latin. More fundamentally, these passages address themselves to the problem of nonsense, and they cannot be understood except in the light of it. Accordingly, I have sought to situate them with respect to the medieval tradition in which that problem was most explicitly theorized and most fully developed, that of Boethian logic.

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[26] Chaucer, "The Riverside Chaucer," 243. There is a great deal of interest among medievalists in this direction. I will confine myself to indicating the special issue of *New Medieval Literatures* devoted to the topic, and the very recent Susan Crane, *Animal Encounters: Contacts and Concepts in Medieval Britain* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2013). The fundamental work on medieval zoosemiotics is Umberto Eco and Constantino Marmo, *On the Medieval Theory of Signs* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1989). For a consideration of the relation between linguistic diversity and animal sounds in a thirteenth-century English domestic treatise, cf. William Sayers, "Animal Vocalization and Human Polyglossia in Walter of Bibbesworth's Thirteenth-century Domestic Treatise in Anglo-Norman French and Middle English," *Sign Systems Studies* 37, no. 3/4 (June 29, 2012): 525–541.

These texts provide answers to the questions with which I began: what is a word such that it can be considered apart from its significative function? Where is the limit to speech at which it is no more than noise? How does signification occur by means of words if words themselves are without signification? My suggestion is thus that the response of medieval literary gibberish to the logical tradition takes a specific form. As I see it, the medieval inventors of nonsense are attempting to supply the example of *vox quae nihil designat* that is missing from Boethius's commentary on the *De interpretatione*.

4. The specific object of this research

The object of this study is what Boethius called *vox quae nihil designat*, what his scholastic descendants knew as *vox non-significativa*, and what I have taken to calling the *nonsense word*. Before proceeding any further, I would like to define that object exactly. I will do so by explicating the three parts of Boethius's technical term in order: *vox*, *nihil*, and *designat*.

The word *vox*, in its technical usage in the medieval sciences, names a sound that issues from the mouth of an animal. It can refer to whatever is uttered, and I will most often render it as *utterance*. Because *vox* is the name of whatever is pronounced, insofar as it is pronounced, it is a very general heading under which words, groups of words, fragments of words, shouts and cries, sung notes, and any other vocalization all fall. Needless to say, medieval theorists had available to them more precise terms for each of these types of utterance. When they wished to distinguish the word from the syllable, the phrase, or any of the other types of *vox*, for example, they might call it by the name *vocabulum* or *locutio* or *verbum*. Nevertheless, the strong tendency of medieval scientific treatments of language is to avoid any of the more precise terms, when referring to the individual word, and to speak instead simply of *vox*. Boethius's *vox quae nihil*

designat, and the scholastic *vox non-significativa* into which it developed, are perfect examples of this tendency: in both, what is meant is not just any kind of *vox* but specifically an individual word. For this reason I refer to this same entity as the *nonsense word*. Although this imprecision might seem regrettable, it should by no means be eliminated. I have maintained the *vox* as the object of my research because the medieval sciences of the trivium—grammar, logic, and rhetoric—all considered themselves to be *scientiae vocis*, disciplines that bear on the voice.[27] Nonetheless, what interests me here is only nonsense at the level of the individual word. I will not be discussing the nonsense of sentences that are absurd but are made up of definable words, such as Chomsky's *colorless green ideas sleep furiously* or Rabelais's *quaestio subtilissima*, namely, whether a chimaera buzzing around in a vacuum can eat second intentions.[28] Nor will I discuss *nonsense verse* of the Victorian type, even in its medieval instances, except insofar as it sometimes contains the words in which I am interested.[29] The entity under consideration is a certain kind of word, that is, in theory at least something intermediate between syllable and phrase. But what is crucial here is not that the word be one in number but that it be nonsensical

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[27] *Vox* is basic to the self-understanding of medieval literary culture from the earliest period. In his ninth-century commentary on Donatus, Remigius of Auxerre declares that "vox is the foundation of all the arts." Cited in Martin Irvine, *Making of Textual Culture: Grammatica and Literary Theory 350-1100* (New York: Cambridge, 1994), 97.

[28] *Gargantua et Pantagruel* II.7.

[29] On medieval nonsense verse, cf. Paul Zumthor, "Fatrasie et coq-à-l'âne," in *Fin du moyen âge et renaissance: mélanges de philologie française offerts à Robert Guiette* (Antwerp: Nederlandsche Boekhandel, 1961), 5-18. The proceedings of a recent conference on the topic will be found in Marie-Geneviève Grossel and Sylvie Mougin, *Poésie et rhétorique du non-sens: littérature médiévale, littérature orale*, (Reims: Presses universitaires de Reims, 2004). Noel Malcolm, who locates the origins of nonsense verse in English in the seventeenth century, discusses medieval continental poetry in his important *The Origins of English Nonsense* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997). For theoretical treatments of the genre, cf. Susan Stewart, *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1989); Wim Tigges, *An Anatomy of Literary Nonsense* (Rodopi, 1988); Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *Philosophy of Nonsense: The Intuitions of Victorian Nonsense Literature* (London: Routledge, 1994).

as a word. There can be more than one nonsense word together, but insofar as they are nonsense words they will persist as separate words not formable into a sentence.

So much for *vox*. What about the *nihil* or nothing that it will signify? There are any number of way that a word could be said to signify "nothing," and as it happens many of these ways are at the center of important medieval philosophical debates. For instance, a word might mean "nothing" in the sense that its referent does not exist (e.g., *chimaera*), or no longer exists (*rose*, when all roses have died on the vine), or does not yet exist (*tomorrow's sea battle*). The word *nihil* or "nothing" itself might very well be argued to mean "nothing."[30] And in the debate over universals, there is always the position—laid usually at the door of Roscelin of Compiègne—that universal terms mean nothing, that they are mere *flatus vocis*. I have none of these things in mind. What I am talking about is a word to which no concept corresponds. The utterance of such a word does not express any thought in the mind of its speaker; nor does it produce any thought in the mind of its hearer. It does not name anything, not even a mere idea. It is an utterance from which, in the strictest sense, nothing at all can be gathered. The nonsense word is not a word like *chimaera*, to which an idea corresponds although no such thing exists, but one that does not allow you to have any idea on its basis. The *nothing* in question is thus a mental lapsus, the absence of a concept.

This specification leads me to the final aspect of the *nonsense word* or *vox quae nihil designat*: its signification, or lack thereof. The standard account of signification throughout the Middle Ages, drawn from Boethius, holds that *significatio* occurs when a concept is produced in

[30] Play on the word *nihil* forms the basis of a rich tradition of parody. Cf. Martha Bayless, *Parody in The Middle Ages: The Latin Tradition* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1996).

the mind.[31] To signify is *constituere intellectum*, to establish a concept. When a nonsense word is uttered, nothing occurs in the mind of its hearers: it does not cause any notion to form. To mean nothing is to produce no concept, or to produce a null concept.[32] The Boethian definition of signification as *constituere intellectum* was supplemented with Augustine's definition in the *De doctrina christiana* of a sign as *res praeter speciem quam ingerit sensibus aliud aliquid ex se faciens in cogitationem venire*, a thing of itself making something else, beyond the appearance that it brings to the senses, come into the mind.[33] The nonsense word is not a sign, in this sense, because it does not bring something besides itself into the mind. It does, however, bring itself there: what presents itself is the mere vocalization of the word. The nonsense word is in fact not only one of the varities of utterance but the most basic: as I show it to have been understood, the *vox quae nihil designat* is *vox sola*, "mere utterance" or "just voice." Instead of passing from the material of the utterance to the concept it bears, the mind of a person hearing such a word is retained in the mere utterance and thrown back on its own functioning.

This dissertation recovers a counter-tradition within medieval thinking of language in which a form of speech is conceived that participates neither in the fallenness of post-Babel discourse nor in the fullness of the divine Word. If the nonsense word exposes a limit to sense, it is not because beyond it would lie the ineffable. The nonsense word does not fail to communicate something beyond the capacity of human language to convey, for it does not participate in adequation. Neither does it communicate fully, without remainder; if anything, it is

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[31] This account came under attack, as I discuss at length in Chapter II, but is nevertheless always the backdrop of medieval discussions of *significatio*. On this topic, cf. Meier-Oeser, "The Meaning of 'Significatio' in Scholastic Logic," in *Signs and Signification*, ed. Gill Harjeet Singh and Giovanni Manetti (New Delhi: Bahri Publications, 2000).
[32] Much hangs on this distinction, to which I will return.
[33] Augustine, *De doctrina christiana*, ed. and trans. R. P. H. Green (New York: Oxford, 1995), 57.

itself only the remainder of sense, but a remainder made absolute. Instead, it *succeeds* in communicating nothing: it fully and effectively establishes a lack of a concept in the mind of its hearers.

5. Some further medieval authorities

I have assigned to Boethius the role of instigator of this line of thinking. But it should be said that he was by no means the only source for medieval speculation about the nonsense word. In a less programmatic but no less decisive manner, the other pillar of medieval linguistic thought, Augustine, also considers the dimension of the voice that does not signify. In Book X of the *De trinitate*, Augustine devotes a discussion to *temetum*, an archaic word for wine with which, he indicates, many readers would be unfamiliar.[34] Without knowing the signification of this *vocabulum emortuum* or dead word, a person encountering it would already know that it must mean something, that it is not merely a noise. *Temetum* exemplifies *vox* insofar as it is able to carry a signification but does not in fact do so. The experience of the dead word is at the heart of Augustine's whole program. As Agamben has remarked, "for Augustine, this experience of an unknown word (*verbum ignotum*) in the no-man's-land between sound and signification is the experience of love as will to know."[35] In the *De doctrina christiana*, as well, Augustine places emphasis on words whose signification remains withheld; I am thinking in particular of his dictum that "nothing is better to commit to memory than those types of words and phrases of which we are ignorant."[36] Although Augustine counsels the memorization of unknown words so

[34] Augustine, *De trinitate*, X.2.
[35] Giorgio Agamben, *The End of the Poem: Studies in Poetics*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University, 1999), 64.
[36] "Nulla sane sunt magis mandanda memoriae quam illa verborum locutionumque genera quae ignoramus." *De doctrina christiana*, II.51.

that they might be recalled at some moment in the future when their meaning might be discovered, there is also a very real sense in which it is the encounter with the word insofar as it continues to bear only a null signification in which Christian *doctrina* consists.[37]

Boethius and Augustine are only two of the three reigning medieval authorities on language and signification. The other is Priscian, a grammarian from the time of Boethius and the author of the enormous *Institutiones Grammaticae*. Together with Donatus, who was responsible for the more introductory textbooks, Priscian provided the Latin-speaking world with its foundational textbook in the field of grammar. Grammar, the so-called cradle of the sciences, was the discipline at the basis of all medieval learning. As the science of basic literacy, its principles and procedures underlie the most far-flung experiments in medieval thinking.[38] Discussion of the nonsense word is as basic to grammar as it is to logic. In fact, as we will see, logicians are constantly relegating nonsense words to the field of grammar, as though their own discipline could not exist unless they pawned nonsense words off on the grammarians. As we have seen Boethius do already, Priscian begins his exposition by distinguishing *vox* into species.[39] His purpose in this is to isolate from among all the kind of utterance only the kind that grammar takes as its object. In so doing, however, he provides names and a rubric for thinking about other sorts of utterance as well, even if he himself does not pursue any further inquiry into

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[37] In any event, the *Cloud of Unknowing* will develop one possibility of what it might look like to memorize a word insofar as its meaning would be unknown.

[38] As Rita Copeland writes, "certain codes and conventions of hermeneutical tradition are everywhere present as a 'macro-discourse' that regulates all disciplinary inquiries. In this sense, as I will argue, grammar itself becomes a master discourse, providing the means of access to all other knowledge in the insistently textual culture of the Middle Ages." *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages: Academic Traditions and Vernacular Texts* (New York: Cambridge University, 1991), 5.

[39] On the abstraction of the voice, cf. Daniel Heller-Roazen, "De voce," in *Du bruit à l'oeuvre: vers une esthétique du désordre*, ed. Juan Rigoli and Christopher Lucken (Geneva: Metispresses, 2013).

them. The grammarian indicates that besides vocalizations of the form *arma virumque cano*, that is, meaningful and writable human speech, there are to be discovered three other sorts as well.[40] These are the meaningful but non-writable utterance (e.g. a sigh), the non-meaningful and non-writable utterance (the muddled vocalizations of certain animals), and finally the non-meaningful but writable utterance (e.g. the "ribbit" of a frog). As Priscian writes, in the opening section of his *Institutiones grammaticae* under the heading *de voce*:

> Vocis autem differentiae sunt quattor: articulata, inarticulata, literata, illiterata. Articulata est, quae coartata, hoc est copulata cum aliquo sensu mentis eius, qui loquitur, profertur. Inarticulata est contraria, quae a nullo affectu proficiscitur mentis. Literata est, quae scribi potest, illiterata, quae scribi non potest. Inveniuntur igitur quaedam voces articulatae, quae possunt scribi et intellegi, ut: "Arma virumque cano," quaedam, quae non possunt scribi, intelleguntur tamen, ut sibili hominum et gemitus: hae enim voces, quamvis sensum aliquem significent proferentis eas, scribi tamen non possunt. aliae autem sunt, quae, quamvis scribantur, tamen inarticulatae dicuntur, cum nihil significent, ut "coax," "cra." Aliae vero sunt inarticulatae et illiteratae, quae nec scribi possunt nec intelligi, ut crepitus, mugitus et similia.[41]
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> There are four differentiae of utterance: *articulate*, *inarticulate*, *literate*, and *illiterate*. *Articulate* utterance is compressed, that is to say it is expressed in combination with a mental meaning of the speaker. *Inarticulate* is the opposite, namely utterance that does not originate in any mental affection. *Literate* utterance is that which can be written, *illiterate* is that which cannot be written. Thus one may find certain articulate utterances that can be both written and understood, e.g. *I sing of the weapons and the man*, some that cannot be written, but can be understood, e.g. the hisses and groans of humans: for although these utterances indicate some intention of the person who pronounces them, they cannot be written. But there are others that are called inarticulate because they do not signify anything, although they can be written, e.g. *ribbit, caw*. Others are both inarticulate and illiterate: they can neither be written nor understood, e.g. creaking, lowing, and so on.

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[40] Various medieval grammatical schemas of the voice have been collected and admirably explicated in Elizabeth Eva Leach, *Sung Birds: Music, Nature, and Poetry in the Later Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 2007). Leach's important study shows the influence of grammatical treatments of *vox* on medieval music theory.

[41] Priscian, *Institutionum grammaticorum libri XVIII*, ed. Martin Hertz (Leipzig: Teubner, 1855), I.1–2. I have modified the translation that appears in Rita Copeland and Ineke Sluiter, *Medieval Grammar and Rhetoric: Language Arts and Literary Theory, AD 300-1475* (New York: Oxford, 2009).

In grammatical terms, Boethius's *vox quae nihil designat* is a *vox literata inarticulata*. Such a word can be written, but is "unarticulated"—that is, not joined with any intention to signify. The words that interest me here are those on the order of *coax* and *cra*, which I have translated *ribbit* and *caw*.[42] As far as Priscian is concerned, it is only in being nonsensical that these words differ from those that make up the *Aeneid*. In other words, nothing stops them from being written down, from rhyming or alliterating or scanning or in any other way accommodating themselves to the formal requirements of literature. This possibility, announced in the first pages of the most elementary medieval textbooks, is what Chaucer takes advantage of with his *kek kek kokkow quek quek*.

For every schoolchild learned in the first pages of the textbooks of the most basic discipline of medieval learning that there exist meaningless utterances of various kinds, and that these meaningless utterances have names, can be exemplified, and admit of classification.[43] Those students who pursued a formal education past the very most elementary training in literacy would have encountered further examples of nonsensical utterances, and a slightly different account of their nature and status, in the first pages of logical textbooks. In my discussions of the theory of the nonsense word what I am dealing with are not the arcana of an obscure scholastic pursuit, but the introductory remarks, propaedeutic formulations, and throat clearings essential to the constitution of disciplines that inform the thought and writing of every literate person in the Middle Ages.

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[42] For reasons that are perhaps obscure to the modern reader, certain kinds of animal noise (those of frogs and birds) allow themselves to be written, whereas certain others do not (those of cows).
[43] Martin Irvine has called Donatus "the most successful textbook ever written." Irvine, *Making of Textual Culture*, 58. On the relation of vernacular authors to grammatical training, cf. Christopher Cannon, "The Middle English Writer's Schoolroom," *New Medieval Literatures* 11 (2009), 19-38.

6. Some contemporary theories

If I was drawn in the first place to Boethius's *vox quae nihil designat*, and if I have gone on to pursue this inquiry into its medieval afterlives, it is no doubt because it anticipates a preoccupation among some thinkers of our own day with the nature of the human voice. Lurking in the background of this whole project is Agamben's suggestion that thought itself would consist in a search for the voice within language: "La recherche de la voix dans le langage, c'est cela la pensée."[44] In a formulation adopted from Gaunilo of Marmontiers, Agamben speaks repeatedly of a *cogitatio secundum vocem solam*, a thought according to the voice alone; and I have tried to reconstruct some lines of medieval thinking of the nonsense word as *vox sola*.[45] In what he has called his "unwritten work on the voice," Agamben calls attention to an "experience which is undergone only within language, an *experimentum linguae* in the true meaning of the words, in which what is experienced is language itself."[46] What is at stake here is an experience of the mere fact that there is language, one that would occur in the human voice as no longer a merely physical phenomenon of sound but not yet the carrier of any particular meaning.

Agamben is far from the only contemporary thinker to have given sustained attention to these matters. The medievalist Paul Zumthor has written that "il est étrange que, parmi toutes nos disciplines instiueés, nous n'ayons pas encore une science de la voix."[47] Strange not least of all because of the attention paid, from various directions, to the voice in its material "unutterability": "antérieure à toute différenciation," he writes, as an "indicibilité apte à se revêtir de langage, la

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[44] Giorgio Agamben, *La fine del pensiero/La fin de la pensée* (Paris: Le nouveau commerce, 1982). This passage has been quoted approvingly by both Jean-Luc Nancy and Mladen Dolar.
[45] Cf. e.g. Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities*, ed. and trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University, 1999), 42.
[46] Agamben, *Infancy and History*, 4.
[47] Paul Zumthor, *Introduction à la poésie orale* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1983), 11.

voix est une *chose*."[48] Zumthor draws inspiration in his discussion of oral poetry from the work of Michel de Certeau, whose pages on glossolalia come very near to some of the notions that I am working with here. Glossolalia, as he writes, "encloses in a linguistic simulacrum all that is not language and comes from the speaking voice."[49] Voice, for de Certeau, like "weeds between the paving stones" of propositional discourse, is what breaks up the field of statements. And glossolalia, which he links explicitly with the "poetry of nonsense," would be the phenomenon that "isolates and authorizes" that voice.[50] De Certeau's "vocal utopia" resumes, for its part, the utopia Roland Barthes calls "*la bruissement de la langue*." As Barthes writes, "in its utopic state, language would be enlarged, I should even say *denatured* to the point of forming a vast auditory fabric in which the semantic apparatus would be made unreal; the phonic, metric, vocal signifier would be deployed in all its sumptuosity, without a sign ever becoming detached from it."[51]

Very recently, Mladen Dolar has articulated what is perhaps the most comprehensive treatment of *vox sola*, which he calls *object voice*. In *A Voice and Nothing More*, Dolar elaborates a theory of voice as "an object which functions as a blind spot in the call and as a disturbance of aesthetic appreciation" on the basis of Jacques Lacan's *lalangue* and Martin Heidegger's *der Ruf*.[52] Dolar proposes a definition of *voice* as "what does not contribute to making sense. It is the material element recalcitrant to meaning, and if we speak in order to say something, then the voice is precisely what cannot be said […] it is the non-linguistic, the

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[48] Ibid.; emphasis Zumthor's.
[49] Michel de Certeau, "Vocal Utopias: Glossolalias," *Representations* no. 56 (1996), 31.
[50] Ibid., 30.
[51] Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 77.
[52] Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 4.

extralinguistic element which enables speech phenomena."[53] Dolar's book makes indisputably clear the crucial role that the voice plays in certain strains of twentieth-century thought.

Finally, and although his interest is not in the voice as such, Gilles Deleuze should be mentioned in this connection as well, inasmuch as he has directly addressed the question of nonsense words. Deleuze begins his *Logique du sens* with Lewis Carrol, and in a chapter devoted to nonsense draws a parallel between two of Carrol's invented words, *snark* and *boojum*, and a pair of Stoic nonsense words to which I will return numerous times in this dissertation, *blityri* and *skindapsos*. Like "voice" for Agamben, de Certeau, and Dolar, the nonsense in which Deleuze is interested is a kind of zero degree of sense: neither "absurdity" nor the outside of sense, but a meaning-to-say that does not intend anything in particular:

> Nonsense does not have any particular sense, but is opposed to the absence of sense rather than to the sense that it produces in excess—without ever maintaining with its product the simple relation of exclusion to which some people would like to reduce them. Nonsense is that which has no sense, and that which, as such and as it enacts the donation of sense, is opposed to the absence of sense. This is what we must understand by "*nonsense*."[54]

These are only some of the thinkers who have taken up the question of the voice in recent years.[55] I mention their names here to communicate the extent to which, in our own time, the nonsensical dimension of the human voice has been a crucial problem for philosophy, psychoanalysis, and literature. This dissertation emerges in the space opened up by their work. The thought of the last fifty years has opened a horizon in which a specifically medieval trajectory of thinking the nonsense word can become visible. But it is my hope that the medieval

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[53] Ibid., 15.
[54] Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester (New York: Columbia University, 1990), 71.
[55] A recent issue of *Champ Psychosomatique* appeared under the title *La Voix*. Cf. also Adriana Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression* (Stanford: Stanford University, 2005).

theories I have recovered will shed light, for their part as well, on the concerns of our own moment. It seems to me that to understand the decisive role of nonsense in the twentieth century it is necessary to look for the origins of our preoccupation with it. The suggestion of this work is that those origins might well lie in the fourteenth-century elaborations of an idea that had persisted at the margins of medieval linguistic thought since its introduction into the Aristotelian logical tradition by Boethius. Why the fourteenth century should have seen such a heightened interest in nonsense is a question beyond the scope of this project to answer. But it was then, at the end of the Middle Ages, that it acquired an urgency that it has not lost since. What seems crucial is that, from the first, the nonsense word poses a problem that belongs no less to philosophy than to literature, no less to mysticism than to grammar, and never to any one of them alone.

I

UT EST GARALUS:
BOETHIUS ON *VOX QUAE NIHIL DESIGNAT*

Dicimus enim vocem non esse
eorum que sunt res sed eorum
potius que proferuntur.[56]

In about the year 516—a decade before he was imprisoned, wrote his *Consolatio philosophiae*, and was put to death for treason—the Roman senator Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius set himself an ambitious project.[57] He would translate and write commentaries on all the works of both Plato and Aristotle, in order to demonstrate that despite their differences the teachings of the two philosophers could ultimately be reconciled.[58] For reasons that can only be guessed at, Boethius did not see this project through. He appears never to have begun his work on Plato at all, and to have neglected all of Aristotle's writings besides the logical works, although there are indications that he wrote a commentary on the *Physics* that has been lost. But although he did not

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[56] Petrus Helias, *Summa super Priscianum*, ed. Leo Reilly (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1993), 66.

[57] On Boethius's life, cf. John Marenbon, *Boethius*, Great Medieval Thinkers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[58] Cf. Boethius, *Commentarii in librum Aristotelis Peri hermeneias, pars posterior, secundam editionem continens*, ed. Carl Meiser (Leipzig: Teubner, 1880), 79–80. The project is discussed notably in L. M. de Rijk, "On the Chronology of Boethius' Works on Logic," *Vivarium* 2 (1964): 1–49; Sten Ebbesen, "Boethius as an Aristotelian Commentator," in *Aristotle Transformed*, ed. Richard Sorabji (Ithaca: Cornell, 1990), 375; L. Minio-Paluello, "Les Traductions et Les Commentaires Aristotéliciens de Boèce," in *Opuscula: The Latin Aristotle* (Amsterdam: Hakkert, 1972), 328–335. On precedents for the notion of harmonizing Plato and Aristotle, cf. Henry Chadwick, *Boethius: The Consolations of Music, Logic, Theology, and Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 125.

carry out his work in its projected entirety, what he did accomplish of it could hardly have been more decisive for the intellectual history of the Middle Ages.

Boethius translated all of Aristotle's six works on logic, the so-called *Organon*, except for the *Posterior Analystics*. His translations of the *Categories* and the *De interpretatione* (with Porphyry's *Isagoge*) were the only works of Aristotle's known in the West until the twelfth century. Alongside these translations circulated Boethius's commentaries, which were widely copied and authoritative. Beginning in the 1120s, Boethius's translations of the more advanced logical treatises of the *Organon* (the so-called *logica nova*, the newly recovered works of ancient logic) began to circulate as well.[59] It is no exaggeration to say that the Aristotelian logic of the Middle Ages was a Boethian logic, translated, commented, and supplemented by a single sixth-century scholar.[60]

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[59] That is, the *Prior* and *Posterior Analytics*, the *Topics*, and the *Sophistical Refutations*. Cf. Bernard Dod, "Aristoteles Latinus," in *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy from the Rediscovery of Aristotle to the Disintegration of Scholasticism 1100-1600*, ed. Norman Kretzmann, Anthony Kenny, and Jan Pinborg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 46; Henrik Lagerlund, "The Assimilation of Aristotelian and Arabic Logic up to the Later Thirteenth Century," in *Handbook of the History of Logic*, ed. Dov M. Gabbay and John Woods, vol. II: Mediaeval and Renaissance Logic (Amsterdam: North Holland, 2008), 283. Additionally, certain further Boethian logical works, not directly translations or commentaries of Aristotle, made up a great deal of the rest of the West's logical textbooks well into the thirteenth century. These are *On Division*, *Introduction to Categorical Syllogisms*, *On Hypothetical Syllogisms*, and *On Topical Differences*. Together with Aristotle's logical works, in Boethius' translations, and Cicero's *Topics*, they form what Sten Ebbesen has called "an extended Latin *Organon.*" Cf. Ebbesen, "The Aristotelian commentator," 36, where there will also be found a useful table of these works.

[60] So much is indicated by e.g. De Rijk: "while 'Aristotelian' logic is in many respects synonymous with 'Aristotelico-Boethian' logic, the question can be raised whether Aristotle himself was an 'Aristotelian.'" "Boethius on De Interpretatione (ch.3): Is He a Reliable Guide?," in *Boèce ou la chaîne des savoirs*, ed. Alain Galonnier (Louvain: Peeters, 2003), 207. It has been suggested that among the most important of the contributions made by Boethius's work on the *Organon* is the invention of a philosophical vocabulary into which he was forced. Until his time, as Ebbesen puts it, "philosophy had not come to Latium. It had to wait for Boethius. How little his predecessors had achieved may be gauged from the fact that he has no standard Latin equivalents for several elementary Greek terms." Cf. Ebbesen, "Boethius as an Aristotelian

In his transmission of logic to the Middle Ages, Boethius shaped what would become, with grammar and rhetoric, one of the three arts of the trivium, the linguistic training basic to medieval education. But his influence lies not only in his transmission of Aristotelian logic but also in the alterations he introduced into it. This chapter is a study of one such alteration. My intention is to show that Boethius's conception of *vox,* or utterance, is fundamentally opposed to Aristotle's own. The commentator, as I demonstrate, transmitted to the Middle Ages the notion that, in itself, the human voice is completely non-significative. The rest of this dissertation will examine what medieval thinkers made of this idea, in their various fields. In this chapter I lay out the Boethian doctrine of non-significative utterance as they received it.

This new conception of the utterance was introduced in Boethius's work on *De interpretatione*, which consists in a translation and two commentaries. By the time he began work on his translation, he had already translated almost all of the treatise twice, as lemmata in the commentaries.[61] The commentaries, composed in the second decade of the sixth century, are addressed to markedly different audiences, the first being a great deal shorter and more straightforward, the second longer and more involved.[62] It is with this second commentary that we will be concerned here. It has been established, based on his own acknowledgements, that

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Commentator," 374; Jean Isaac, *Le Peri hermeneias en Occident de Boèce à saint Thomas; histoire littéraire d'un traité d'Aristote* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1953), 22; John Magee, "On the Composition and Sources of Boethius' Second Peri Hermeneias Commentary," *Vivarium* 48 (2010): 8.

[61] Cf. de Rijk, "On the Chronology of Boethius' Works on Logic"; Magee, "On the Composition and Sources of Boethius Second Peri Hermeneias Commentary," 14; and Minio-Paluello in Aristotle, *Aristoteles Latinus*, II:xxxvi.

[62] Both of which edited in Boethius, *In Peri hermeneias*. The pertinent portions of this second commentary can be found translated in Hans Arens, *Aristotle's Theory of Language and Its Tradition* (Philadelphia: Benjamins, 1984). The commentary in its entirety has recently appeared in English translation as Boethius, *Boethius: On Aristotle on Interpretation 1-3*, trans. Andrew Smith (Duckworth, 2010). Both of these I have consulted in preparing the translations that follow, which are however my own. On their different lengths and levels of difficulty, cf. e.g. Isaac, *Le Peri hermeneias en Occident*, 20.

Boethius draws extensively on a lost commentary of Porphyry's.[63] It has also been suggested that his own commentary is entirely derivative, cobbled together from earlier glosses.[64] I am not concerned here with the originality of the commentary, which is important for my purposes insofar as it would go on to serve as a kind of textbook, not insofar as it represents the thoughts of any particular thinker. For Boethius's commentaries on the *De interpretatione* were widely read in the Middle Ages, as we will see in the following chapter. While, as Isaac has documented, the reproduction both of the treatise and of Boethius' commentaries fell off in the later Middle Ages, this should not be mistaken as a lessening of their importance. Boethius's ideas had been assimilated to such an extent that his commentaries themselves hardly needed to be read.[65]

In fact, in some ways the Boethian transmission of the *De interpretatione* is his most significant legacy to medieval logic, insofar as the matters discussed in the first chapter of the

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[63] As Sten Ebbesen remarks, "when Boethius speaks about signification in his second commentary on the Perihermeneias, all we can say is: some of the ideas involved must have originated in a non-Aristotelian context of the sort we call Neo-Platonic"—by which, as he goes on to say, he means specifically Porphyrean. Sten Ebbesen, "The Traditions of Ancient Logic-cum-Grammar in the Middle Ages--What's the Problem?," *Vivarium* 45 (2007): 140. Cf. also Sten Ebbesen, "The Odyssey of Semantics from the Stoa to Buridan," in *Greek-Latin Philosophical Interaction* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 24; Jonathan Barnes, "Meaning, Saying and Thinking," in *Dialektiker und Stoiker: Zur Logik der Stoa und Ihrer Vorläufer*, ed. Klaus Döring and Theodor Ebert (Stuttgart: F. Steiner, 1993), 47–61.

[64] This is the position of James Shiel, "Boethius' Commentaries on Aristotle," in *Aristotle Transformed*, ed. Richard Sorabji (Ithaca: Cornell, 1990). Shiel's hypothesis has not been generally accepted. While the originality of Boethius's ideas may be questioned, there is no doubt about the originality of his idiom: a translation of *De interpretatione* into Latin may have been made before his, by Victorinus, but this is improbable, and the Apuleian *Peri hermeneias* appears to have been unknown to him. His sources, Porphyry chief among them, are Greek.

[65] So also Cameron, who says that with the drop-off in the reproduction of the Boethian materials, his influence did not disappear completely, "but rather it was distilled—usually silently—into the texts that were produced by medieval thinkers." "Boethius on Utterances, Understanding and Reality," in *The Cambridge Companion to Boethius*, ed. John Marenbon (New York: Cambridge University, 2009), 98. Nonetheless use continues to be made of the commentary in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, by e.g. Albert, Thomas, and Ockham.

treatise, as they were explained by Boethius, became the point of departure for the new theory of terms that would be developed beginning in the twelfth century.[66] In a few short sentences at the beginning of the treatise, Aristotle sets out the relation between things, thoughts, spoken words, and written words. This passage, at 16a3-9, has been called "the most influential text in the history of semantics."[67] In J. L. Ackrill's translation, it reads as folllows:

> Now spoken sounds are symbols of affections in the soul, and written marks symbols of spoken sounds. And just as written marks are not the same for all men, neither are spoken sounds. But what these are in the first place signs of—affections of the soul—are the same for all; and what these affections are likenesses of—actual things—are also the same.

These condensed and difficult remarks were explicated, throughout the Middle Ages, with reference to Boethius's commentary, so much so that Boethius became the authority on the relation between thing, concept, spoken word, and written word. But in the last fifty years Boethius's contribution to the history of this text has been considered a kind of disgrace. Umberto Eco has called his translation the beginning of a "sad tale of confusion,"[68] largely on the basis of what Norman Kretzmann identified as an "obscuring" and an "obliteration" of Aristotle's actual teaching.[69] For Boethius uses a single word, *nota*, to translate what are two separate words in Aristotle's Greek: *symbolon* (symbol) and *semeion* (sign). Boethius' detractors, however, have provided no explanation of why he might have fallen into this grave error. In the first part of this chapter I propose one.

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[66] On this point, cf. infra, Chapter II.
[67] "Aristotle on Spoken Sound Significant by Convention," in *Ancient Logic and Its Modern Interpretations*, ed. J. Corcoran (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1974), 3. Nor has anyone ever seen fit to doubt this description.
[68] Umberto Eco, "Signification and Denotation from Boethius to Ockham," *Franciscan Studies* 44 (1984): 6.
[69] "Aristotle on Spoken Sound," 6; Norman Kretzmann, "History of Semantics," in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (MacMillan, 1967), 367.

1. *Semeion, symbolon, nota*

It is a matter of controversy among Aristotle's most recent readers whether his affirmation that "spoken sounds are symbols of affections in the soul, and written marks symbols of spoken sounds" should be considered as part of a general "philosophy of language" or "semantics" or "linguistic theory." Some twentieth-century commentators have maintained that the various remarks on utterances, signification, and language to be found spread throughout the Aristotelian corpus are ad hoc explanations that cannot be brought together into a systematic account. Richard McKeon, for instance, has argued that Aristotle "did not set up a philosophy of language or a science of symbols or signs."[70] Kretzmann makes an argument that has been influential, though not generally accepted, namely that the beginning of the *De interpretatione* has nothing to say about signification in general but serves only to establish a particular point within a very limited context.[71] Ackrill, for his part, is of the opinion that Aristotle did, in fact, attempt to set up a general theory of signification in the opening lines of the *De interpretatione*, although he was foiled by the theory's "grave weaknesses."[72] The recent studies of Deborah Modrak and Lambert-Marie de Rijk, however, taking into account the positions just mentioned, conclude along with most of Aristotle's readers that, although the first chapters of the *De interpretatione* "do not form an autonomous body of linguistic theory with no relevance to the rest of the treatise and the *Organon* in general," nevertheless "they should surely be seen as in fact containing Aristotle's general semantic views."[73]

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[70] "Aristotle's Conception of Language and the Arts of Language," *Classical Philology* 41, no. 4 (1946): 198.
[71] "Aristotle on Spoken Sound," 5ff.
[72] Aristotle, *Categories and De Interpretatione*, trans. J. L. Ackrill (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 113.
[73] *Aristotle: Semantics and Ontology*, vol. I (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 190. Cf. also Deborah K. W. Modrak, *Aristotle's Theory of Language and Meaning* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 23f.

In any event, among medieval scholars there was no hesitation as to their scope and authority. In combination with a small number of other sources—notably Priscian's *Institutiones*, and to a lesser extent Augustine's *De doctrina christiana*—Aristotle's remarks on things, concepts, spoken words, and written words are the basis of every scholarly medieval discussion of the nature of language.[74] Nonetheless, from the earliest commentators until the present day the *De interpretatione*, and 16a3-9 in particular, has been seen as unusually difficult to understand, even by the standards of the Aristotelian corpus. Boethius, for instance, considers it the most difficult of the philosopher's works, explaining that many commentators agree in finding it an *inexplicabilis caligo*, or inexplicable fog.[75] Twentieth-century commentators have their own favored epithet for the treatise, *elliptical*.[76] It may be exactly this opacity that is responsible for the influence of 16a3-9: insofar as there is no agreement as to what it actually says, and to what end it is said, it can be made to agree with any number of conflicting positions.[77] Still, there are certain aspects of these remarks that seem more or less unambiguous, and they should be mentioned here.

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[74] Cf. e.g. Alain de Libera and Irene Rosier, "La pensée linguistique médiévale," in *Histoire des idées linguistiques*, ed. Sylvain Auroux, vol. II: Le développement de la grammaire occidentale (Brussels: Mardaga, 1992), 122; Ebbesen, "The Traditions of Ancient Logic-cum-Grammar," 144; John Magee, *Boethius on Signification and Mind* (Leiden: Brill, 1989), 8.

[75] Cf. Boethius, *In Peri hermeneias*, 294. The formula found in Cassiodorus and Isidore of Seville is: *Aristoteles, quando Perihermenias scriptitabat, calamum in mente tinguebat*. John of Salisbury cites this formula and adds that any of the schoolmen of his own day could teach its subject matter both more intelligibly and more succinctly (*Metalogicon*, III.4).

[76] Ackrill speaks of Aristotle's "dangerously elliptical forms of expression" (Aristotle, *Categories and De interpretatione*, 149), Modrak declares the treatise to be "on the most charitable reading, compressed and elliptical" (*Aristotle's Theory of Language and Meaning*, 13), Lorenzo Chiesa calls it "ce passage elliptique, peu sûr et problématique" ("Symbole et signe," 203), Simon Noriega-Olmos makes repeated use of the phrase "highly elliptical" ("Language, Thought, and Reality"), and de Rijk grants its "almost unparalleled elliptical manner of expression" (*Aristotle: Semantics and Ontology*, I:191.)

[77] A similar point is made in Magee, "On the Composition and Sources," 8.

The most prominent of these is the fact that what Aristotle is describing consists of four parts: things, passions in the soul, the things in the utterance, and the things that are written. These "four semantical elements posited by Aristotle," as John Magee calls them, are usually understood to be synonymous with *things in the world*, *concepts in the mind*, *spoken words*, and *written words*.[78] The importance of this passage lies first of all in dictating what is to be under discussion in an account of signification. For it is not obvious why there shouldn't be more elements of signification than these four, or fewer; nor is it perhaps necessary that the elements be just these. The Stoics, for example, would include an element foreign to the Aristotelian schema: the *lekton*, or expressible.[79] But although these other ideas survive into the Middle Ages—in Augustine's little-read *De dialectica*, for example; or as mentioned in Boethius's commentary—it was Aristotle's fourfold schema that would underlie later reflections on signification.[80]

The second and far less unambiguous aspect of 16a3-9 that I will emphasize is that the passage identifies, in addition to these four elements, the relations among them. Aristotle claims that written words "symbolize" spoken words—that is, they correspond to them conventionally rather than naturally—and these spoken words in turn symbolize concepts, or "impressions in the mind." These mental impressions, however, for their part do not symbolize but are likenesses of things in the world. There are thus two distinct modes by which the elements of signification are linked together. Concepts in the mind resemble actual things, whereas spoken words do not resemble concepts but instead symbolize them by convention. This difference gives rise to

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[78] In Magee's phrase. Ibid., 67.
[79] The third prominent doctrine of signification in the ancient world, the Epicurean, has its own distinct elements. Cf. on this point Barnes, "Meaning, Saying and Thinking."
[80] Cf. Augustine, *De Dialectica*, ed. Jan Pinborg (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1975).

another, which is that a likeness is shared by all people, but a symbol can be different for different groups or individuals.

What Aristotle seems to mean is that, for instance, both a barbarian and a Greek, in looking at a hippopotamus, have an identical impression in their minds of it, that is, they share the same concept of hippopotamus; but when the barbarian speaks the word corresponding, in his own language, to that concept, it will be something else than the Greek's *hippopotamos*; and likewise when he goes to write the word down. Written inscriptions correspond arbitrarily or by convention to utterances, which correspond arbitrarily to concepts; but concepts correspond naturally and universally to the things that they conceive.[81]

But a third kind of relation is introduced as well. It would seem that spoken words do not only *symbolize* mental impressions, as they themselves are symbolized by written words, but also *signify* them. For Aristotle speaks first of *symbola* of the mental impressions, and then of *semeia* of them: utterances are *symbola* of concepts, he declares, and they are also *semeia* of these same concepts. As we will see, it cannot be ruled out that the words "symbol" and "sign" are not simply synonymous in Aristotle's usage. But many twentieth-century commentators, following Kretzmann, have distinguished them. According to Kretzmann's reading, by "signification," and in contradistinction to "symbolization," Aristotle means to indicate that, while spoken words "encode" concepts, just as written words encode spoken words, more fundamentally they simply make known the fact that their speaker is thinking at all.[82] In other words, the mere fact that an

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[81] Modrak describes this position as a "middle ground" between the extreme forms of naturalism and conventionalism taken up in the *Cratylus*. Cf. her *Aristotle's Theory of Language and Meaning*, 19. On *De interpretatione* as a response to the *Cratylus*, cf. also Ineke Sluiter, "The Greek Tradition," in *The Emergence of Semantics in Four Linguistic Traditions: Hebrew, Sanskrit, Greek, Arabic*, ed. Wout Jac. van Bekkum (Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1997), 192; Kretzmann, "Aristotle on Spoken Sound," 13.

[82] This is the thrust of his "Aristotle on Spoken Sound."

utterance occurs at all is an indication—and in this sense a "sign"—that there is some concept or other in the speaker's mind to which it corresponds. To resume the example from above, the Greek may not know that the barbarian's unfamiliar utterance corresponds to the same idea as does his own *hippopotamos*, but he does at very least understand that the barbarian is thinking *something*, just because he is speaking. As Kretzmann summarizes, "spoken words are […] related to the mental modifications, first of all as *symptoms*, or natural signs (semeia), of them—that is, of the presence of mental modifications in the speaker."[83] As a sign rather than a symbol, the utterance is to the concept as smoke is to fire. A given utterance will also happen to symbolize, that is, encode and potentially transmit a particular concept, but apart from its doing so it already indicates by its very nature that some concept—whatever it might be—exists in the speaker's mind. The utterance as sign can become a symbol as well, although it needn't do so, but there is no utterance that is not already a sign.

Kretzmann's reading has its champions, notably in Umberto Eco.[84] Jean Pépin comes independently to a similar conclusion about the distinction to be drawn between the two terms.[85] But, apart from those readers who consider *semeion* and *symbolon* to be in fact wholly synonymous, a consensus seems to have emerged over the past decades that the difference between them is less stark than Kretzmann makes it out to be.[86] Magee has made an exhaustive

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[83] Kretzmann, "History of Semantics," 362.
[84] Cf. e.g. his "Signification and Denotation from Boethius to Ockham," 4; and *On the Medieval Theory of Signs*, 6: "words are symbols of concepts, but the fact that words are uttered is an *index*, a *proof* or a *symptom* that there exist concepts in the soul of the utterer." Cf. also Giovanni Manetti, *Theories of the Sign in Classical Antiquity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 72.
[85] In his "Symbola, Semeia, Homoiomata. A Propos de De Interpretatione 1, 16a3-8 et Politique VIII 5, 1340a6-39," in *Aristoteles Werk und Wirkung. Paul Moraux Gewidmet. Band I: Aristoteles und seine Schule.*, ed. Jurgen Wiesner (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1985).
[86] The literature on this question is extensive, to put it mildly. Supporters of the total synonymy of *semeion* and *symbolon* include Hans Arens, 888 Jackson, and Modrak. Taki Suto provides a

case that Aristotle meant not that utterances are "in the first place" signs of concepts but that they are signs of what he calls "first thoughts" or in other words primary, pre-cogitative apprehensions of things in the world. He concludes that *semeion* and *symbolon* should be understood as synonyms.[87]

These recent debates about how to understand Aristotle's brief remarks bear rehearsing here because one thing is never in doubt in them. Utterance, for all of these readers of the *De interpretatione*, is always in some relation to a concept in the mind of its speaker. And this is as it should be: whether Aristotle means to distinguish technically between *semeion* and *symbolon* in this passage or not, he does believe that every utterance corresponds to a concept. He makes this clear by referring, just after the remarks in question, to a passage in another of his works, the *De anima*. As he writes, "these matters have been discussed in the work on the soul and do not belong to the present subject."[88] In the *De anima*, he maintains that while utterance is a sound produced by an animal insofar as it has breath, not every sound produced by an animal is utterance:

> Not every sound, as we said, made by an animal is utterance (even with the tongue we may merely make a sound which is not utterance, or without the tongue as in coughing); what produces the impact must have soul in it and must be accompanied by an act of imagination, for utterance is a sound with a signification, and is not the result of any impact of the breath as in coughing.[89]

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useful survey of the various opinions on the matter in 888 *Boethius on Language, Mind, and Reality: A Study of Boethius' Commentary on Peri Hermeneias* (Saint Louis University, 2008), 13ff. Her own position is the intermediary one taken by e.g. Weidemann and Chiesa, that their relation is one of genus to species.

[87] Noriega-Olmos arrives at a conclusion similar to Magee's, that "first" refers to the thoughts themselves and not to an order that would obtain between them. Cf. his "Language, Thought, and Reality."

[88] Aristotle, *Categories and De Interpretatione*, 16a8.

[89] *De anima* 420b29-421a1.

Aristotle's reference to this passage serves to establish that utterance is inherently significative: there is no utterance without a signification, for such a thing would not be utterance at all but—for instance—mere coughing. As Mark Wheeler summarizes, "every vocal sound, by its very nature, is accompanied by an act of imagination which is its signification."[90] It can be debated just what the signification of utterance might consist in, but however the matter is decided utterance will be significative. Whether Kretzmann is correct that Aristotle is using *semeion* and *symbolon* at 16a3-9 as distinct technical terms or not, he is correct in arguing that Aristotle does believe in the distinction between signification and symbolization, and more importantly for my purposes that he does believe that utterance is by definition significative.

Whatever Aristotle's intention may have been, *semeion* and *symbolon* were not treated as separate technical terms in the Middle Ages. Aristotle's medieval readers did not make this distinction for a very good reason: the treatise circulated exclusively in its translation by Boethius, and Boethius translates both *semeia* and *symbola* by a single word, *notae*.[91] His rendering of 16a3-9 is as follows:

> Sunt ergo ea quae sunt in voce earum quae sunt in anima passionum notae, et ea quae scribuntur eorum quae sunt in voce. Et quemadmodum nec litterae omnibus eaedem, sic nec eaedem voces; quorum autem hae primorum notae, eaedem omnibus passiones animae sunt, et quorum hae similitudines, res etiam eaedem.[92]

> Now those things that are in the utterance are signs [*notae*] of impressions in the soul, and those things that are written are signs of those things that are in the utterance. And just as letters are not the same for all men, neither are utterances. But what utterances are in the first place signs [*notae*] of—impressions in the soul—are the same for all; and what these impressions are likenesses of—actual things—are also the same.[93]

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[90] "Semantics in Aristotle's Organon," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 37, no. 2 (1999): 202.
[91] This is not to say that medieval scholars were unaware of the possibilities of non-symbolic vocal signification, as we will see in Chapter II.
[92] *Aristoteles Latinus*, II:5.
[93] Boethius, *On Aristotle on Interpretation*, 27–8.

So influential was the Boethian rendering that even when another translation was undertaken by William of Moerbeke in the 1260s, one that distinguished between these usages, its immediate user Thomas Aquinas did not preserve William's more accurate use of *symbola* and *signa* in place of Boethius's two instances of *notae*, and retained the explanation to be found in Boethius' commentary of this misleadingly single term.[94] Indeed, even when those texts of the Aristotelian corpus that had been unknown to the Middle Ages were translated into Latin in the twelfth century, the introductory logical treatises that had always been known in the West continued to be read in Boethius's translations and were not reworked in light of the recent discoveries.

Boethius has not gone unreproached for his apparent error of translation. As I have said, the rendering of both *semeia* and *symbola* by *notae* alone has been called an "obscuring" and an "obliteration" of Aristotle's intentions, and the translator has been blamed for causing a "sad tale of confusion." Such criticisms fail to give any reason why Boethius might have made such an unfaithful translation. And in fact it is difficult to imagine him doing so. The translator whose most vociferous critic will admit is "otherwise faithful"[95] is by all accounts the *fides interpres* translating "word for word" that he calls himself.[96] The precision of Boethius's translations is universally allowed, so much so that it has been suggested more than once that his Latin is

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[94] Cf. Isaac, *Le Peri hermeneias en Occident*, 6, 26: "sa traduction boécienne, très exacte en general, deviendra un texte stéréotypé, à tel point qu'elle ne pourra être détrônée par la version de Guillaume de Moerbeke et qu'elle se maintiendra comme la suele authentique jusqu'à la renaissance." Cf. also Magee, *Boethius on Signification and Mind*, 1989, 18; Kretzmann, "Aristotle on Spoken Sound," 19n6; Pépin, "Sumbola, Semeia, Homoiomata," 35n42. Pépin suggests that the fact that William's translation correctly distinguishes between the two terms should not be taken to mean that William himself considered them to differ in sense.

[95] Kretzmann, "History of Semantics," 367.

[96] In his second commentary on *Isagoge*: *cum verbum verbo expressum comparatumque reddiderim.* 888

pushed too violently toward Greek in its desire to render exactly the difficult Aristotelian prose.[97] There is a "literal and exact quality of his translations" that is the result of the fact that he "had to consider every word of the *Peri Hermeneias*, in order to translate and then comment."[98] For Boethius undertook the translation only after having produced two commentaries of it, commentaries where he pays extremely close attention to the passage in question and gives every indication that he sees it as a crucial moment of the treatise and worthy of special care. In short, it is hardly creditable that his use of *notae* to render two separate Greek words constitutes a mere oversight.[99] The question is why Boethius chooses to obscure the distinction between them. I will suggest that his decision follows from a basic difference of opinion he has with Aristotle, and that accordingly his translation is not the result of negligence but of disagreement. The word *notae* is at the heart of an argument about the status of utterance.

2. *Vox*

[97] E.g. by Ebbesen: "The translations of the basic texts are extremely faithful to the originals which are rendered word by word and morpheme by morpheme with a supreme contempt for normal Latin sentence structure" ("Boethius as an Aristotelian commentator," 375); or, as he puts it elsewhere, "Boethius' translations of Aristotle keep as close to the Greek as the Latin language would allow, sometimes a bit closer" ("The Aristotelian commentator," 38); and by Isaac, *Le Peri hermeneias en Occident*, 18: "il remplit sans aucun doute son office de traducteur avec une scrupuleuse fidélité. Il manifeste, en effet, son souci d'exactitude à plusieurs reprises."
[98] Magee, "On the Composition and Sources," 14.
[99] As Magee, *Boethius on signification and mind*, 53, concludes, "the case for using only *notae* must therefore appear all the more evident to him." Taki Suto has provided the fullest explanation of why Boethius might have used *notae*. Cf. her *Boethius on Mind, Grammar and Logic: A Study of Boethius' Commentaries on Peri Hermeneias* (Brill, 2011). Suto's focus is on Boethius's motivation for choosing *notae* in particular, whereas mine is on his decision to collapse the distinction between *semeion* and *symbolon* in the first place.

After a brief preamble, Boethius begins his commentary with a far-reaching claim whose basis in the Aristotelian text is not at all obvious.[100] "Prius igitur," he writes, "quid uox sit definiendum est. Hoc enim perspicuo et manifesto omnis libri patefiet intentio."[101] "It is first of all necessary, therefore, to define what *vox* is. With this clear, the intention of the whole book will become apparent." The *intentio* of a work is one of the basic matters customarily addressed in the introduction to a commentary, roughly *what it is about*, so that Boethius follows the conventions of the commentary tradition by speaking in his opening remarks about the *intentio* of *De interpretatione*, along with its title, authorship, and utility.[102] In the next sentence, he gives a definition of *vox*:

> Vox est aeris per linguam percussio quae per quasdam gutturis partes, quae arteriae uocantur, ab animali profertur.
>
> *Vox* is a percussion of the air by the tongue, one that is emitted by an animal by means of certain parts of the throat called the windpipe."[103]

Vox is something pronounced, or uttered; I will translate it as *utterance*.[104] It is only when this definition has been established, says Boethius, that the *intentio* of the treatise can emerge. But the entity defined here is not itself that *intentio*.[105] As Aristotle announces in his work's first line, he intends to discuss "what a noun is, and what a verb, what negation and affirmation and

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[100] This feature of Boethius's commentary has drawn little commentary, a notable exception being Arens's dismissive appraisal.
[101] *In Peri hermeneias*, 4.
[102] On Boethius' introductory remarks in their relation to the tradition of didascalica, cf. Magee, "On the Composition and Sources of Boethius Second Peri Hermeneias Commentary," 27–9; *Boethius on Signification and Mind*, 1989, 67. General discussion of that tradition is to be found in Hadot, "Les introductions aux commentaires exégétiques" and Jaap Mansfeld, *Prolegomena: Questions to Be Settled before the Study of an Author, or a Text* (Leiden: Brill, 1994).
[103] *In Peri hermeneias*, 4.
[104] On various possible translations of this word, cf. supra, Introduction.
[105] Note that the recent English translation of this passage obscures the at least grammatical non-coincidence of "hoc" and "intentio," identifying "what utterance is" as the intention itself of the book rather than as what will render that intention apparent. Cf. Boethius, *On Aristotle on Interpretation*, 15.

enunciation and oration are"; and it is not immediately clear what any of these should have to do with a production of the tongue and windpipe. For Boethius, though, the indispensable precondition of an understanding of the *De interpretatione* is this definition of the physical aspects of utterance.

Boethius proceeds to subject *vox* to distinctions, as his medieval inheritors would do in their turn. As Aristotle had specified in the *De anima,* not every emission from an animal's throat constitutes *vox*, but only that which is articulated by the tongue, so that a cough, untouched by the tongue, is mere sound, *sonus*. The intervention of the tongue makes a mere breath into an utterance:

> Sunt enim quidam alii soni, qui eodem perficiuntur flatu, quos lingua non percutit, ut est tussis. Haec enim flatu fit quodam per arterias egrediente sed nulla linguae impressione formatur atque ideo nec ullis subiacet elementis, scribi enim nullo modo potest. Quocirca uox haec non dicitur sed tantum sonus.[106]
>
> For there are certain other sounds that are produced by the same breath but that the tongue does not strike, such as a cough. For a cough is produced by a breath proceeding from the windpipe, but is not formed by any intervention of the tongue and thus is not made up of letters, and so it is completely unwritable. Therefore it is not called *utterance* but merely *sound*.

If the tongue intervenes in a particular way, so that the utterance is "ended" and "contained" (*terminatus et circumscriptus*), the result is not just utterance but *locutio*, an articulated utterance. What this means is that it can be spelled out, that its constituent parts corresponds to letters and thus that it is writable. And if such articulation takes place because the utterance is pronounced in order to communicate a mental image, the *locutio* becomes an *interpretatio*. This taxonomy of *percussio aeris* runs as follows:

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[106] Boethius, *In Peri hermeneias*, 4–5.

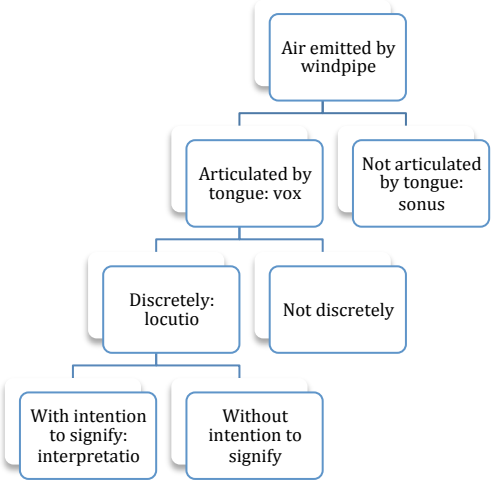


Fig. 1

The purpose of these distinctions is to isolate the *interpretatio* from all the other sorts of utterance. "Interpretations" are utterances that are formed by the tongue in such a manner that they are divided into individual, writable words, and these words are possessed of an intention to signify. Boethius now declares that all of the matters that Aristotle had proposed to discuss—nouns, verbs, negation, affirmation, enunciation, and oration—fall under this heading of *interpretatio*; and that the treatise is called *De interpretatione* accordingly.

This much had been simply stated outright in the lesser commentary: the title of the work announces its *intentio*, Boethius says there, and *interpretatio* can be defined (somewhat differently) as *vox significativa per se ipsam aliquid significans*. But he proceeds differently in the commentary addressed to more advanced students, and he explains why he does so. In his introductory remarks about the *intentio* of the work, he not only says that it is first of all necessary to define what utterance is, he says that it is necessary, *therefore*, to do as much: *prius igitur quid vox sit definiendum est*. This *igitur* follows from a declaration that *De interpretatione* is the most difficult text in an already difficult corpus, the most confoundingly condensed and

opaque of all Aristotle's works.[107] As such, Boethius continues, it will demand more work to explicate: and thus it is necessary to start with the definition of the utterance. In other words, his procedure of moving from the physical contraptions for the production of vocal sound, the tongue and windpipe, to the elements of a logical proposition is a requirement, as he sees it, if the opaque text is to be fully understood. The nature of *interpretatio* will not emerge unless something more primitive than it will have done so first. Although the *intentio* of the *De interpretatione* is *interpretatio*, and not *vox*, the key to everything Aristotle wants to say will be found, according to the commentator, in the definition of *vox* insofar as it is distinguishable from *interpretatio*. And if this is the case, then the initial process of distinguishing *interpretatio* from the other sorts of *vox* should be attended to closely.

Boethius's opening remarks are more complex than they might appear. They contain a number of apparent contradictions, one of which is that, as it turns out, writable utterances are not simply either *significative* or *non-significative*, as fig. 1 above would suggest. Although he declares that *locutio*, i.e. *vox* with the differentia *articulata*, is of two types, he soon amends that position to say that, in fact, it divides into four:

> Sive autem aliquid quaecumque vox significet, ut est hic sermo homo, sive omnino nihil, sive positum alicui nomen significare possit, ut est blityri (haec enim vox per se cum nihil significet, posita tamen ut alicui nomen sit significabit), sive per se quidem nihil significet, cum aliis vero iuncta designet, ut sunt coniunctiones: haec omnia locutiones vocantur, ut sit propria locutionis forma vox conposita quae litteris describatur.[108]
>
> Whether an utterance signifies something, such as this word *man*; or signifies nothing at all; or can signify if it be assigned to something as its name, such as *blityri* (for while this utterance signifies nothing in itself, nevertheless when it is assigned to something as a name, then it will signify); or signifies nothing in itself, but does signify when it is joined with others, such as is the case with conjunctions—all these are called *words*.

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[107] *Pace* Arens, who calls it "a sudden statement (though he says 'igitur')" that utterance must be defined." Arens, *Aristotle's Theory of Language*, 212.

[108] Boethius, *In Peri hermeneias*, 5.

In this more elaborate classification, a *locutio* does not just signify or not signify, but does one of four things: it can signify something; it can signify nothing at all; it can signify potentially but not actually; and it can signify in combination but not alone. If Fig. 1 is modified to reflect this alteration, it looks like this:

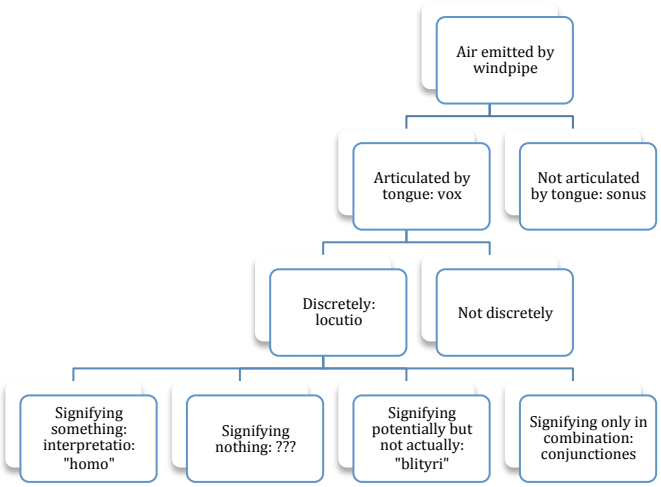


Fig. 2

The first of these four varieties of utterance is the same thing as *interpretatio*, says Boethius: a word like *homo*, or "man," that is *per se significativus*. The movement from two types of *locutio* to four does not, therefore, modify the definition of *interpretatio* already established, and so it would seem to have no bearing on the *intentio* of the treatise. What changes is something else: the kinds of utterances that are not to be the subject of the treatise turn out to be three in number rather than one. There are utterances that signify nothing at all in themselves, and yet do signify something when they are joined with other utterances (*cum aliis vero juncta*): such, he says, are conjunctions. A word like *and* has no signification unless it be combined with words that signify *per se ipsas*, the first sort just mentioned. However significative they may become in combination with other words, conjunctions are not themselves *interpretationes*, he says, and

thus are excluded from treatment in *De interpretatione*. Another type of utterance signifies nothing just now, but *will* signify if only it be assigned to something as its name (*haec enim vox per se cum nihil significet, posita tamen ut alicui nomen sit significabit*). As an example of this utterance that is potentially but not actually significative, Boethius gives *blityri*.

3. *Blityri* and *skindapsos*

Along with its pair *skindapsos*, which Boethius employs elsewhere, *blityri* enjoyed widespread currency in the commentary tradition.[109] It is apparently of Stoic origins, first attested in Diogenes Laertius,[110] and long before Boethius' time had come to serve as a stock example of non-significative utterance, much as *homo* serves more often than not as the example of a significative one.[111] In Stoic logic a distinction is made between *lexis* and *logos*, that is, the word as significative and as a mere sound-shape. This distinction is preserved in the *De dialectica* of Augustine, largely unknown in the Middle Ages, although Roger Bacon—whom we will

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[109] Cf. e.g. the slightly earlier commentary by Ammonius, where he indicates that "not every word is a name or verb, for meaningless words like '*blituri*' and '*skindapsos*' are neither of these." Ammonius, "On Aristotle On Interpretation 1-8," ed. David Blank (London: Duckworth, 1996), 26. On *blityri* and *skindapsos* generally, cf. especially Wolfram Ax, *Laut, Stimme und Sprache: Studien zu Drei Grundbegriffen der Antiken Sprachtheorie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986), 195–99; Stephan Meier-Oeser and W Schröder, "Skindapsos," *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, 1996.

[110] *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. M. A. Hicks (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950), VII.57. "Speech again differs from a sentence or a statement, because the latter always signifies something, whereas a spoken word, as for example *blityri*, may be unintelligible—which a sentence never is."

[111] As in Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Logicians*, II.130–135: "But [truth] will not exist in that which has no significance, such as the words "Blituri" and "Skindapsos"; for how is it possible to accept as true a thing which is not significative?" Cf. also Eduardo Sinnott, "El Peri Phones de Diógenes de Babilonia y Sus Fuentes Aritotélicas," *Stromata* 57 (2001): 246–7.

encounter in the following chapter—knew it well. *Blityri* and *skindapsos* are each meant to be a *lexis* that is not also a *logos*.[112]

Nor is their use restricted to the field of logic, as they provide both Artemidorus[113] and Galen[114] with instances of empty names.[115] Paul the Deacon would give them as the Greek equivalents of *titibilicium* in one of the earliest appearances of what would later become, in the form *Tutivillus*, the name of the nonsense-spouting demon in the Towneley *Judicium*.[116] Thus *blityri* and *skindapsos* are exemplary non-significative utterances. But, in fact, both words seem to have been less—or more—than strictly non-significative. *Skindapsos* is held to have been the name of a kind of lute,[117] and to have developed a use as a placeholder for any other noun (cf. *thingamajig*, *whatchamacallit*). For its part, *blityri* appears to have been an onomatopoeic formation naming the noise of a stringed instrument (cf. *zing*, *twang*), and to have referred by extension to any non-significative sound.[118] Even later, and still in many Romance languages, it comes to be used much as *skindapsos* had been, as a non-specified "something or other" and

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[112] On Stoic theory of language, cf. Sluiter, "The Greek Tradition," 200f. On its afterlives, cf. Marcia Colish, *The Stoic Tradition from Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages* (Leiden: Brill, 1985).

[113] "Law and custom are not simply names in themselves like 'blityri' and 'skindapsos,' but it is understood that a law or a custom has a reference to something else." *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. Robert White (Park Ridge: Noyes Press, 1975), 187.

[114] *Opera Omnia*, ed. C. G. Kühn, vol. VIII (Leipzig: C. Cnobloch, 1824), 662.

[115] Not to mention Clement of Alexandria, Gregory of Nyssa, and (omitting for the moment the middle ages) Malebranche, Leibniz, and Deleuze.

[116] As Margaret Jennings writes, "The definition in Festus' *De Verborum Significatione*, cited from Paulus Diaconus—'titibilicium—nullius significationis est, ut apud Graecos *blityri* et *skindapsos*"—follows directly in the line of Plautus' use of the word." Margaret Jennings, "Tutivillus: The Literary Career of the Recording Demon," *Studies in Philology* 74, no. 5 (1977): 38.

[117] It is the name of an instrument mentioned by Athenaeus and by Pollux. Cf. Mathiesen, *Apollo's lyre*, 284–5; Martha Maas and Jane McIntosh Snyder, *Stringed Instruments of Ancient Greece* (Yale University Press, 1989), 185–6. Cf. also Aelian, *De Natura Animalium*, Bibliotheca Scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Teubneriana (Berolini ; Novi Eboraci: De Gruyter, 2009), XII.44.

[118] Liddell and Scott have "the twang of a harp-string; hence of a significationless sound."

eventually "a person of no worth, a scoundrel."[119] Insofar as *blityri* resembles *zing* and *skindapsos* first means *lute* and then *thingamajig*, neither of them would appear to be truly "not yet significative," for they signify already, even if what they signify is itself a kind of non-significative sound. Nonetheless, Boethius uses them to exemplify *vox per se cum nihil significet, posita tamen ut alicui nomen sit significabit*, and he does so because they are the traditional examples that he has inherited from earlier commentators. Still, he recognizes their weakness as examples, as he indicates later in the commentary when he introduces his own example alongside them:

> ….scindapsos vel hereceddy. Haec per se nihil quidem significative, sed si ad subiectae alicuius rei significationem ponantur, ut dicatur vel homo scindapsos vel lapis hereceddy, tunc hoc quod per se nihil significative positione et secundum ponentis quoddam placitum designabit.[120]
>
> *skindapsos* and *hereceddy* signify nothing in themselves, but if they are imposed so as to signify some underlying thing, so that *man* is called "skindapsos" or *stone* "hereceddy," *then* this thing that signifies nothing in itself *will* signify by its imposition and according to the particular desire of the impositor.

Apparently of his own invention, hereceddy is unattested elsewhere. It is a nonce word that, unlike *skindapsos* and *blityri*, really does appear to be "not yet imposed."

Hereceddy, while for the time being it means nothing at all, would become the name of something as soon as someone "imposed" or coined it, for instance by declaring that a hippopotamus will be known from now on as a *hereceddy*. In that case, a sentence on the order

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[119] E.g. fr. *bélître*, sp. *belitre*, ital. *biltri* or *blittri*. There is an extensive literature in Italian on the etymology of *blittri* : Piero Camporesi, "Biltri, Blittri," *Lingua Nostra* 13, no. 3 (1952): 70–2; G Carabelli, "Blictri: Una Parola Per Arlecchino," in *Eredità dell'Illuminismo*, ed. A Santucci (Bologna, 1979), 231–257; C Gianelli, "Ancora a proposito di blittri," in *Studi in onore di Angelo Monteverdi*, vol. I (Modena, 1959), 269–77; Leo Spitzer, "Parole Vuote (a Propositio Di Blittri)," *Lingua Nostra* 16 (1954). Cf. also Sten Ebbesen, "The Chimera's Diary," in *The Logic of Being* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1986), 118; Walter de Sousa Medeiros, "Biltris & Cindapsos: Dois Hapax Helénicos em um Passo Obscuro de Filinto Elísio," *Humanitas* 6 (1958): 149–63.

[120] *In Peri hermeneias*, 59. Emphasis mine.

of "that hereceddy is wallowing in the mud" would be perfectly intelligible. That it is unlikely anyone will go around calling a stone *hereceddy* is of no importance: it is entirely possible that someone could. The only reason *hereceddy* is not yet significative is that it has not been imposed. Boethius's account of signification, which he would pass on to the Middle Ages, is that a word signifies (*significat* or *designat*—he seems to use these terms interchangeably for the sake of variation)[121] whatever it is *imposed* to signify. Imposition occurs when a word-shape is assigned to a concept as its name. It is the fact that they are susceptible of being imposed that makes non-significative utterances like *blityri, skindapsos,* and *hereceddy* fall under Boethius' third species of utterance, that which signifies only potentially but not actually.

The point is not just that made-up utterances could come to signify as do more familiar ones: all significative words, Boethius makes very clear, have taken on their signification in the past in just the same way as *hereceddy* might one day come to do. As he says,

> Nomen vero quamquam subiaceat elementis, prius tamen quam ad aliquam subjectae rei significationem ponatur per se nihil desigat, ut cum dicimus scindapsos vel hereceddy.[122]
>
> A name, although it admits of being written [*subiaceat elementis*: literally "is submitted to letters," i.e., constitutes a *locutio*], nevertheless in itself signifies nothing until it is imposed on the signification of an underlying thing.

Imposition, in other words, is the operation by which all words, not excluding *homo*, come to correspond to a *significatio*. The commentator is unequivocal: although the utterance can potentially be assigned to the concept of a thing so as to signify it, and in any given instance may well already have been so assigned, it is first of all thoroughly non-significative. The

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[121] Cf. Magee, *Boethius on Signification and Mind*, 1989, 61.
[122] Note that the force of Boethius' "although" (*tamen*) is to distinguish sharply between two senses of "articulata" current and at times effectively combined: namely, *writable* and *conjoined with a signification*. These are, respectively, the usages of the grammarians Donatus and Priscian. Cf. Introduction, supra.

fundamental tenet of the doctrine of imposition is that originarily the utterance signifies nothing at all. And this is why, as Sten Ebbesen summarizes, "a fully fledged word may be devoid of sense," for words "acquire their signification by a human act of will: somebody decides to assign a certain phonetic word to a certain piece of reality of which he has formed a concept."[123]

The basic presupposition of Boethius's doctrine of signification is thus that *vox*, insofar as it is not yet imposed, does not signify. But this notion is in direct opposition to Aristotle. As we have seen, for Aristotle the mere presence of an utterance allows you to gather that the person making it is thinking something: even a yelp entails (and thus "signifies") the thought, however nascent, of pain. From this ineradicable signifying aspect of any utterance, Aristotle distinguishes the conventional, "symbolic" designation of particular concepts. Boethius does no such thing. For the commentator, there is only one way that an utterance can signify, and that is by imposition. In the absence of imposition, utterance simply does not signify.

Boethius is explicit on this matter:

> Nec si voces sint mox intellectus esse necesse est. Plures enim voces invenies quae nihil omnino significent.[124]
>
> Nor if there are utterances is it necessary for there to be thoughts. For you will come across many utterances which signify nothing at all.

For an utterance to signify *omnino nihil* is for it not to signify as the symbol of some particular thought, but it is also for it not to signify as the sign of some bare thinking. The force of his invocation of *blityri*, *skindapsos*, and especially *hereceddy* is to make clear that the mere presence of the utterance has no significative function whatsoever, that it bears no relation to mental events except insofar as it is imposed upon them. This is a repudiation of the doctrine that

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[123] "Boethius on the Metaphysics of Words," in *Boèce Ou La Chaîne Des Savoirs*, ed. Alain Galonnier (Louvain: Peeters, 2003), 262.
[124] Boethius, *In Peri hermeneias*., 21-2.

the utterance is in its basic constitution already a non-symbolic sign. If Boethius fails to maintain the distinction between *semeion* and *symbolon*, it is because he does not believe that any such distinction should be drawn. His translation of two terms by only one is not a mere negligence but a revision of Aristotle. *Nota* is what signifies by convention alone, because there is no other relation possible between utterances and concepts.

What this means, moreover, is that even once an utterance has been imposed on a concept, its occurrence still does not allow you to say anything about the presence of that concept in the utterer's mind. The utterance signifies only the concept, and not its presence or absence or anything else about it. As Boethius has it, *praeter intellectum namque vox penitus nihil designat*, "besides a concept an utterance signifies absolutely nothing."[125] If it can only signify a concept and beyond that signifies absolutely nothing, when utterance is without reference to a particular concept it really does, for Boethius, signify nothing at all. *Vox* is something that can be either significative or non-significative, something originally non-significative that can take on a signification by the operation of imposition. It is the difference between these states, given by imposition, that renders nouns and verbs and statements out of the vocal material. This is why Boethius insists that it is only when the definition of the utterance, *quid vox sit*, has emerged with clarity that the *intentio* of Aristotle's treatise will become apparent. For nouns and verbs and their combination, the subject matter of the *De interpretatione*, are the product of the difference between significative and non-significative utterance, that is, of imposition. Their nature cannot be understood, as Boethius sees it, if it has not been understood already that what is susceptible of imposition is not an inarticulate but already significative sound, such as a howl of anger, but an already articulate but still totally non-

[125] Ibid., 21. The importance of this claim will emerge below.

signifying vocal production: *blityri*. And, while all this may or may not clear up the *intentio* of the *De interpretatione*, it is in fact to turn Aristotle on his head.

4. The fourth species of utterance

The utterance first of all awaits its being assigned a particular signification, and while it remains in this pre-significative state it signifies nothing at all. With his example of *herecceddy* Boethius demands that his readers encounter the utterance while it remains still unassigned to a signification; and in describing how it might be said to signify *stone* he describes the mechanism of imposition by which it can abandon its original non-significativeness and become a *nota*. That is, he makes clear that every member of the species *utterance that doesn't yet signify but could if imposed* is susceptible of being transformed into a member of the species *utterance that signifies* provided only that it be imposed. The nonsense word *herecceddy* functions to signal both the pre-imposed utterance and its susceptibility to imposition.

But there is a fourth and final species of utterance.[126] There is an utterance that signifies absolutely nothing, *omnino nihil*. What exactly would count as a member of this species is far from immediately clear. For reasons he does not explain, Boethius gives an example of each of the other three varieties of *locutio* (*homo*, *blityri*, *conjunctiones*), but he neglects to give one of the *vox significans omnino nihil*. But the fact that it constitutes a species distinct from the others allows it to be defined negatively. First of all, it does not in itself signify something, as *homo* does. Nor, like a conjunction, does it signify when it is combined with other *locutiones*. Finally, it also will not signify even it is imposed as the name of something in the future, for then it would be a member of the same species as *blityri* and *skindapsos*. And this means that the *vox*

[126] Cf. fig. 2 supra.

significans omnino nihil would have to be unimposable. But how can a *locutio* be unimposable? That is, if *herecceddy* can be imposed, presumably any other newly invented word could be as well. It is easy to imagine that Boethius's reticence to give an example stems from a recognition that any instance he might set down could immediately be assigned a signification and thus prove to have been, like *herecceddy*, a member of a different species altogether. In fact, it is a real question, given the apparent imposability of every utterance, what would distinguish the two species from each other. But in that case, why would he name this fourth species at all, if it is apparently either just a reduplication of another species, or (alternatively) incapable of having a member? Boethius doesn't say. He gives no example and he makes no further indications.

Or, at any rate, he does not do so quite yet. I will suggest that he ends up giving an example later in the commentary, although without announcing that he is doing so. What I would like to emphasize for the moment is that what Boethius does when he wishes to make the whole *intentio* of the treatise he is commenting clear is to identify *vox* as a genus. "Vox" is the name of something admitting of four differentiae: wholly significative, wholly non-significative, significative by combination, and significative by future imposition. The reason that he divides the utterance into parts is that Aristotle had not, after all, said anything about the utterance itself in his remarks at the beginning of *De interpretatione*; he had spoken, rather, and in a mystifying formulation, of "the things that are in the utterance," *ea quae sunt in voce, ta en te phone*. The things in the utterance, says Aristotle, are the signs of the passions of the soul. But what are the things in the utterance? What is utterance that it has things in it?[127] By identifying the utterance as a genus, Boethius provides one of a number of possible explications of Aristotle's mysterious formulation: utterance is a genus, and as such what is *in* the utterance are species. Moreover, he

[127] On the fragmentation of the utterance into its elements, cf. Heller-Roazen, "De Voce."

goes on, if Aristotle spoke not of *vox* but of *ea quae sunt in voce* it is because he meant to refer only to *one* of the vocal species, only one of the things in the utterance. That is, to *interpretationes*: to utterances consisting of nouns and verbs. Aristotle, says Boethius, did not want to speak about the utterance except insofar as it is writable and significative, and so he limits the scope of his discussion to certain things *in* the utterance and excludes the utterance itself from discussion.

And yet for his part Boethius does not say that when it is clear what *ea quae sunt in voce* are, then the *intentio* of the treatise will be manifest. He says rather that this will happen when *quid vox sit*, when the nature of the utterance as the genus of its various species is able to emerge. In other words, he explains why Aristotle had limited the scope of his inquiry to a particular sort of vocal entity but does not see fit to limit his own inquiry accordingly. The reason for this lies in what constitutes the heart of his own theory of utterance, an elaboration of Aristotle's four elements of signification into what Boethius calls *orandi ordo*.

5. *Orandi ordo*

The "sequence" or "arrangement of speaking" is the name Boethius gives to the configuration by which thing, concept, utterance, and letter are put into relation with one another:

> tribus his totus orandi ordo perficitur: rebus, intellectibus, uocibus. Res enim ab intellectu concipitur, uox uero conceptiones animi intellectusque significat, ipsi uero intellectus et concipiunt subiectas res et significantur a uocibus. Cum igitur tria sint haec per quae omnis oratio collocutioque perficitur […] quartum quoque quiddam est, quo uoces ipsae ualeant designari, id autem sunt litterae. Scriptae namque litterae ipsas significant uoces. Quare quatuor ista sunt, ut litterae quidem significent uoces, uoces uero intellectus, intellectus autem concipiant res, quae scilicet habent quandam non confusam neque fortuitam consequentiam sed terminata naturae suae ordinatione constant. Res enim semper comitantur eum qui ab ipsis concipitur intellectum, ipsum uero intellectum uox sequitur sed uoces elementa id est litterae.[128]

[128] *In Peri hermeneias*, 20–21.

> The whole *orandi ordo* is achieved in these three things: things, concepts, utterances. For the thing is conceived by the concept, and the utterance signifies the notions and concepts, and these same concepts both conceive the underlying things and are themselves signified by the utterances. Besides these three things through which all speech and conversation is achieved there is also a fourth thing, by which utterances themselves are signified, namely letters. For written letters signify the utterances themselves. Thus there are these four, so that the letters signify the utterances, and the utterances signify the concepts, and the concepts signify the things, and thus they have a certain sequence that is neither jumbled nor by chance but consists in a natural order. For things always accompany the concept that is formed of them, and the utterance follows the concept, and the elements, that is the letters, follow the utterance.

The commentator goes far beyond Aristotle's mentioning of the several relations among things, what is in the mind, what is in the utterance, and letters, for he gives to the overall disposition of these elements its own name and consistency. The *orandi ordo* is an implacable force drawing its four elements together in traversability, a sequence in which every utterance is implicated. Boethius claims that the order in which the four elements from *res* to *littera* are placed in the Aristotelian schema reflects an ontological priority that arranges them in the same fashion. Things precede the concepts formed of them in people's minds, concepts in turn precede the utterances by which they are signified, and utterances for their part precede the letters that will make up their written form. "They form a sequence," he says, "neither jumbled nor by chance but in the fixed order of their own nature." This sequence is a chain of causation. Every single thing that exists, Boethius maintains, naturally and necessarily gives rise to a concept of itself. As de Rijk puts it, "everywhere there is a thing, there is also the idea of that thing, if not among men, at least with God."[129] This ineluctable causal force extends throughout the *orandi ordo*. For every concept, in turn, naturally and necessarily produces a spoken word; and likewise, every spoken word produces the possibility of its existing also in written form, even if the orthography

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[129] "Boèce logicien et philosophe: ses positions sémantiques et sa métaphysique de l'être," in *Atti del Congresso Internazionale di Studi Boeziani (Pavia, 5-8 Ottobre 1980)*, ed. Obortello Luca (Genoa: Accademia Ligure di scienze e lettere, 1981), 144.

of a given word or of the idiom in which it emerges remain for the moment unachieved. In short, for Boethius, if there is a thing, it will be conceptualized; if there is a concept, there will be an utterance by which it is signified; and if there is an utterance, that utterance will be writable by means of letters.[130]

In all his discussion of the *orandi ordo*, Boethius does not speak of *interpretationes* or of *voces significantes* but simply of *vox*. That is, although he has already indicated that, for Aristotle, it is only certain of the things *in* the utterance—nouns and verbs—that signify the mental concepts, in his own schema it is the utterance as such that stands in relation with the concept on the one side and with letters on the other. No doubt this can be explained by the fact that within the doctrine of the *orandi ordo* the *voces* that emerge do so exclusively insofar as they are bound together in traversability with thoughts and things; so that any utterance possible in this context must be the *effect* of a concept, itself the effect of a thing. But this explanation will not withstand closer examination. For although Boethius shows no signs of doubting the pertinence and strength of his schema, he takes pains to show that each link in the chain of signification is breakable, if not already broken, even as he insists on the unassailable integrity of the chain as a whole. Each of its derivabilities, he takes care to explain, is in principle unreliable. For it is easy enough to imagine a concept to which no thing corresponds—a chimera, for example. He is also familiar, he says, though he does not wish to say any more about it, with a Stoic doctrine according to which a concept corresponds not to a thing but to something else, a *lekton* or sayable. In any event, he takes pains to show that it is always possible that the link between thing and concept might have been severed. He makes the same point about the link

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[130] The fullest exposition of the *orandi ordo* is Magee, *Boethius on Signification and Mind*, chap. 3. On its medieval afterlife, cf. Stephan Meier-Oeser, "Walter Burley's 'propositio in Re' and the Systematization of the 'ordo Significationis'," in *Philosophical Debates at Paris in the Early Fourteenth Century*, ed. S Brown, T Dewender, and T Kobusch (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 483–505.

between concept and utterance: given a concept, he says, it is not possible to arrive at any specific utterance, because of the evident variability of idioms: since words are imposed according to the will of different peoples, the same concept might be signified by any number of different utterances, changing over time and space and indeed whenever anyone decides to call a stone *herecceddy* or a hippopotamus *stone*. And the same is true of *litterae*: since they are established according to will and custom and are thus multiple and infinitely variable, the same vocal sounds can be written in Greek letters as well as in Roman ones, or even—as he says—in an altogether new alphabet just now invented.

Perhaps then the *orandi ordo* is to be upheld from the other direction. For while the sequence running thing–concept–utterance–letter is given in that order by a law of causation, he goes on, the sequence is experienced backwards by someone who hears an utterance (*audiens*): among those who share a language, letters will be vocalizable, their vocalization will give rise to a concept, and that concept will indicate a thing. And indeed Boethius says that while according to nature the four elements of signification run thing-concept-utterance-letter, for *cognition* it is just the reverse: you can in fact be given a written word and, if you know the alphabet in which it is composed, you can generate from it a spoken word; given a spoken word, if you are a speaker of the language you will know the concept it refers to; and then concepts just correspond adequately to things. But he no less painstakingly than before dismantles this chain of derivations one by one. Letters can be placed together in a manner that is not susceptible of vocalization, he says; a word can be vocalizable and yet not signify anything; and it remains easy enough to imagine a concept that corresponds to no real thing.

It is thus unclear in what sense the elements of the *orandi ordo* can be said to be ordered with respect to each other at all. Boethius insists that any and every one of the four elements that

have to come together in strict sequence in order for signification to take place at all might simply remove itself from the sequence. This emphasis on the breakdown of his own model is puzzling. It could well be no more than the result of Boethius's combination of multiple and at times conflicting sources, in which case it would be vain to seek a single and consistent Boethian model of signification amidst its contradictions. But the doctrine of *orandi ordo* is the centerpiece of the first part of his commentary and these oddities are an integral part of it.[131] The *orandi ordo* is constituted out of its own breakdown because it organizes not a specific kind of utterance—i.e., *locutiones*—but utterance as such. And what this means is that the *orandi ordo* is operative not only in the field of logic: it concerns the *vox* insofar as it exceeds the domain of the *De interpretatione*.

6. *Ut est garalus*

What matters to Boethius is the ordinating force that seems to draw together the four elements of signification despite their inoperativity. It is insofar as they constitute links in this chain that *res*, *intellectus*, *vox*, and *littera* emerge at all; but, that being said, they always also maintain the possibility of withdrawing from their relation altogether. Boethius does not acknowledge the strangeness of this situation. He is perfectly content to indicate the existence of concepts that have no reference to things (chimaera) and of unvocalizable letters (*xvjrtff*, or a word in an invented alphabet) even though these might well seem to threaten the functioning of the *orandi*

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[131] Eileen Sweeney shares the sense that the breakdowns of the *ordo* are integral to its operation: "While giving an account of the relationship and distinction between word, thought, and thing as they are in human language, Boethius notes both the possibility of their complete separation and their perfect unity. These extremes help locate the middle ground that Boethius is mapping and function as a cautionary note about the limitations of human language, its imperfect correspondence to things." *Logic, Theology, and Poetry in Boethius, Abelard, and Alan of Lille: Words in the Absence of Things* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 12.

ordo. He says no more about them than that they obviously can and do exist. But when he comes to the utterance to which no concept corresponds he proceeds differently. He seems to indicate that a treatment is not only possible but that it already exists and in fact constitutes a science of its own, albeit one distinct from that in which he is engaged. Here is what he says:

> Vox enim quae nihil designat, ut est garalus, licet eam grammatici figuram vocis intuentes nomen esse contendant, tamen eam nomen philosophia non putabit, nisi sit posita ut designare animi aliquam conceptionem eoque modo rerum aliquid possit.[132]
>
> The utterance that signifies nothing, such as *garalus*, although the grammarians, paying attention to the shape of the word, claim that it is a noun, nevertheless philosophy will not consider a noun, unless it be imposed to signify some concept in the mind and in this way be able to designate an aspect of the things.

Although he does not mark the fact, and although it appears to have gone unnoticed by his readers, I believe that Boethius here provides at last the example of *vox significans omnino nihil* that was missing so conspicuously from his initial classification of *locutio*. That example is *garalus*. With an example provided, it becomes possible to determine how Boethius considers *garalus* to differ from a word like *blityri* or *skindapsos*. The second part of the sentence just cited restates a matter familiar from the first pages of the commentary: philosophy concerns itself only with a particular sort of utterance, the utterance that has been imposed to signify something. Thus, if and only if the nonsense word *garalus* is assigned a signification will it constitute a suitable object for the science of philosophy. But in the first half of the sentence Boethius has introduced a new idea. While philosophy rejects such a word, grammar does not. Grammarians, he claims, find in the unimposed word a suitable object of study and do not wait for it to be given a signification. This is for Boethius to gesture in the direction of an elaboration to be made of the *vox quae nihil designat*, a possible treatment: there is more to be said about the non-significative utterance than there had seemed to be. But he locates this possibility outside of the realm of

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[132] *In Peri hermeneias*, 32.

logic, so that his initial reticence to provide an example or otherwise describe this species of utterance appears to have been an insistence, in his introductory remarks, on proceeding in a manner in keeping with the logical nature of the subject matter.

Garalus is not just any non-significative string of vocalizable letters. Although in Latin just as much as in English it "doesn't mean anything," at least two further things must be said about it. First, although *garalus* is indeed a made-up word, it is unlike *herecceddy* in that it resembles so nearly as to be unmistakably an alteration of it another word, namely *garrulus*. Now *garrulus* is a word even a philosopher could love, for there is no question that it has been imposed on a *significatio*. It means, not unlike its English descendant, "chattering, babbling, rustling, chirping."[133] It is, in other words, a significative utterance that designates *non-significative utterance*. Such would make it of a piece with *skindapsos* and *blityri*, which seem, despite their usage, to be significative words, insofar as they are names for non-significative sound.

The reading *gargulus*, found in Migne, has contributed to a belief among some writers that Boethius's coinage *garalus* is, like *garrulus*, a word that means "babbling."[134] It is then taken as a *description* of an utterance or utterer (as babbling) rather than as itself an utterance—in other words, as a term "used" rather than "mentioned." This is a misunderstanding. If *garalus* is not of a different order than *garrulus* or *blityri*, what Boethius says about it cannot be construed. And *garrulus* is not the word that Boethius writes. Although *garalus* has been taken

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[133] The use of the word for avian and avianesque vocalization will become important in Chapter III.

[134] Cf. Desmond Paul Henry, *That Most Subtle Question (Quaestio Subtilissima): The Metaphysical Bearing of Medieval and Contemporary Linguistic Disciplines* (Manchester: Manchester University, 1984); John Trumper, "Slang and Jargons," in *The Cambridge History of the Romance Languages*, ed. Martin Maiden et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 660–681.

to be no more than a mistranscription of this word *garrulus*—as Arens writes, "'garalus' would be a unique invention, and I do not believe in it"—they are not and cannot be the same. [135] For there is no reason philosophers would not admit *garrulus* as a noun, whereas Boethius has them reject his own invention *garalu*s in no uncertain terms; this is indeed the whole reason it is mentioned at all, to be cast out of the field of philosophically admissible utterances. The force of *garalus* lies in its non-coincidence with the significative word it so nearly resembles. For the commentator, it seems, there is a great difference between "chattering" and "chotering," "babbling" and "bawbling." It is exactly because it is garbled or "misspelled" that *garalus* is prevented from being assimilated to a very similar word that does signify something (even something like "non-signifying speech"); and yet because it remains only a fatuous form of *garrulus* it is retained within that word's field of influence so strongly that it does not seem to admit its being imposed in another connection instead.

Second, and more importantly by far, *garalus* terminates in such a way that it resembles a certain group of words, those ending in *-lus* (*garrulus* among them), belonging to a single part of speech: the noun.[136] This is what Boethius means by the *figura vocis* to which he says grammarians attend, the shape or stamp of the utterance that marks its belonging to a particular word class. A suitable equivalent of *garalus* "in" English might be *slibologist* or *yolification*, words I have just made up and would be hard-pressed to define but which I would not hesitate to identify as nouns. Or would not hesitate if I were a "grammarian," in the acceptation of that term Boethius gives here. As Taki Suto rightly notes, this passage should not be read as a description

[135] Arens, *Aristotle's Theory of Language*. 217.
[136] A category that includes what we think of as adjectives.

of the actual activities of grammarians.[137] It identifies rather a mode of apprehending utterance that attends to the *figura vocis* as sufficient to render the utterance a single word, and calls that mode *grammatical*. This grammatical operation finds in *garalus* what Suto calls a "noun-like shape."[138] As Ebbesen points out, this *figura* cannot be a "complete phonetic shape," because unlike this specific termination *–lus* "plenty of morphological structures are not unique to one word-class."[139] It constitutes, rather, a kind of "general stamp, a *typos*" that any word will have insofar as it belongs to a class, to a part of speech. An utterance marks its grammatical function by means of a morphological quality that is more or less, but not entirely, identifiable as its ending. As a grammarian, I may not know what *sladdiest* means but I can assure you that it is a superlative adjective, that as such it can modify a noun but not a conjunction, and so forth. "Grammarians" do not await—and this is their sole characteristic as grammarians—the imposition of an utterance like *garalus* to mean something; they have already begun speaking about it just as they would any other word that they submit to their procedures.

To proceed grammatically in this sense is to dismantle the anticipatory structure in which an unimposed utterance is "not yet" imposed, leaving it merely non-significative. "Grammatically," *garalus* continues to signify nothing but has ceased to await, as *hereceddy* does, its being assigned something to signify. That is, to resume my favored example, even if I were to declare that a hippopotamus will now be called a *garalus* rather than a *hereceddy*, this

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[137] Concerning a parallel passage in Boethius's *Introduction to Categorical Syllogisms*, she concludes that "we should take the statement as Boethius' belief about what grammarians should do rather than about what they were actually doing." "Logic and Grammar in Boethius: A Logical Analysis of the Parts of Speech," in *The Word in Medieval Logic, Theology and Psychology*, ed. Shimizu Tetsuru and Charles Burnett (Brepols: Turnhout, 2009), 72. Indeed, Priscian, the preeminent grammarian, will decisively and explicitly exclude writable but not signifying utterances from the grammarian's domain, limiting it to that of utterances on the order of *arma virumque cano*. Cf. Introduction, supra.

[138] *Boethius on Language, Mind, and Reality*, 131.

[139] "Boethius on the Metaphysics of Words," 270.

will make no difference whatsoever to the grammatical identity of the word *garalus*, whose only consideration is its sound-shape. This is why I believe that in *garalus* we have the missing example of *vox significans omnino nihil*. *Garalus* doesn't signify anything; it doesn't signify anything in combination with another word; and—at least grammatically—it won't even signify anything if I declare that is the name of this or that. It signifies absolutely nothing at all. What prevents its being annexed by the field of significative utterances is that it subsists in the realm of grammar. This is the realm in which its *figura* suffices for it to be recognizable as a part of speech, indeed for it to be able to do all of the things that a noun is called upon to do grammatically. For the Boethian grammarian does not concern himself with imposition.

Resembling the existing word *garrulus* without being identical to it, *garalus* is maintained by its grammaticality in a state of unimposability. It exactly does not signify the same thing as *garrulus* does, nor does it signify anything else. The absurdity of this barbarism or pun helps Boethius make his point that *garalus* is constituted as a *locutio*, a full-fledged word, not lexically but by the mere *figura vocis*. Boethius's fourfold specification of utterance responds to what he takes to be the actual existence of a word answering to the description of *garalus*. That is, if an utterance really can be totally without signification it is *insofar as* it is marked as belonging to a word-class within a given language but does not occur in that language's lexicon. In this sense, the absolutely and permanently non-significative word is lodged more firmly within a particular language than is a word like *herecceddy*, which various languages might at any moment appropriate. "Signifying nothing" is a morphological characteristic ensured by the presence of a suffix that figures an utterance that has not been imposed, and it is only the fact that it has the ending *-lus* that prevents *garalus* from being imposed at any given moment. In short, it is only possible for an utterance to be totally non-significative within a given language.

But Boethius's indications should be taken further. As already noted, every utterance, not just those that signify *omnino nihil*, has to be imposed to signify something and thus is originarily in the position of *hereceddy*. But the example of *garalus* shows that any such word, to the extent that it is recognizable as *terminable*, is already fully grammatical before its imposition and remains, for the "grammarian," no different after its imposition than before. Grammar, here, is just the possibility of apprehending every word in a language as *garalus*.

Nevertheless, if for logic the unity of a word is given by its *significatio*, and for grammar by its *figura,* the object of their inquiry is single, for Boethius declares that logic and grammar, as sciences of language, share the same *materia*.[140] "Though logic gives a deeper understanding of language than grammar," as Ebesen summarizes, "it cannot replace grammar, for they study the subject from different points of view."[141] Utterances on the order of *garalus* will be refused by the logicians, as Boethius says, but it remains the case that *garalus* is a *vox*, and as such shares in the nature of what logicians will in fact study. He himself, that is to say, although he refrains from giving an example, such as *garalus* would be, of the *vox significans omnino nihil*, nonetheless considers it a necessary prolegomenon to his logical commentary to name that species of utterance among the others. These others (*homo*, *blityri*, conjunctions) can be invoked even though only one of them is included, as Boethius explains, in the subject matter of the treatise he is commenting. *Conjunctiones* and even *blityri*, which are to be excluded from consideration, are nonetheless easily taken up; but *garalus* poses a problem.

The problem with *garalus* is that it produces an affliction in the mind. As Boethius says later in the commentary,

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[140] Boethius, *Introduction to Categorical Syllogisms*, 762c.
[141] "Boethius on the Metaphysics of Words," 258.

> Si quis vero huiusmodi vocem ceperit, quae nihil omnino designet, animus eius nulla significatione neque intellegentia roboratus errat ac vertitur nec ullis designationis finibus conquiescit.[142]
>
> If anyone hears an utterance of this sort, which signifies nothing at all, his mind—not strengthened by any signification or understanding—will wander and twist around on itself, and not come to rest at the limits that would be provided by a signification.

In the absence of signification, the mind is thrown back on its own functioning. As Boethius presents it here, this is to undergo an experience of confusion with no conceivable end. If you hear a nonsense word, it will not just pass by your ears as an unrecognizable sound with no claim to make on your attention. Instead, it will harass you, provoking you to cognize it but providing nothing that can be cognized, so that your mind is sent off on a search for a signification that it will never discover. Although Boethius devotes only a single sentence to the incessant wandering of the mind that a word like *garalus* will inflict, he registers in the most certain terms the fact that the nonsense word has its own unpredictable itinerary. It is the experience of non-cognition identified here that will become, eight hundred years later, the subject of the *Cloud of Unknowing*.

7. Besides thought absolutely nothing

I would like to return by way of conclusion to a point addressed earlier in this chapter. Boethius is universally considered to have taught that words signify concepts as over against things. His authority was invoked in support of this position in the Middle Ages, as we will see in the following chapter, and scholars in our own day continue to consider it his central legacy to medieval theory of language. This position is the consequence of his eliding the difference between *semeion* and *symbolon*: for words signify concepts and these concepts in turn are

[142] *In Peri hermeneias,* 74.

likenesses of things, but words do not themselves refer directly to things.[143] As we have seen, he states this position programmatically:

> Rerum enim semper intellectus sunt, quibus iterum constitutis mox significatio vocis exortitur. Praeter intellectum namque vox penitus nihil designat.[144]
>
> Thoughts are always of things, and when they have been established there arises the signification of the utterance. For besides a concept the utterance signifies absolutely nothing.

But this does not mean, as it is usually taken to, that utterance always signifies a concept. It means that, insofar as an utterance is not imposed to signify a concept, it signifies nothing at all. Every utterance, whatever else it may do, signifies this *penitus nihil praeter intellectum*—a nothing at all that is other than a concept. *Garalus* signifies absolutely nothing because it does not even signify the concept of "nothing" or "non-signification." As I see it, Boethius has a deeper legacy than that of his notion that words signify concepts rather than things. He locates a capacity of the utterance to withhold itself from signification that is a problem for logic as a *scientia vocis*. Boethius relegates *garalus* to the realm of grammar, but he also knows that the constitution of logic as a discipline depends on this gesture, and that *garalus* is therefore indispensable to logic as what it must exclude in order to come into being.

Garalus has no history. Boethius invents it and it is never, to my knowledge, picked up by any of his medieval readers, despite their reliance on the commentary in which it is found. Modern scholars have mentioned it or questioned its reality but have left it more or less alone.

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[143] So e.g. Magee: "The legacies of Ammonius and Boethius appear still to influence those interpretations which find sketched in *Peri Hermeneias* 16a3-9 a theory of signification, for the most traditional view of this passage takes from the ancient commentators the idea that Aristotle makes spoken sounds significative primarily of things that arise in the soul, and secondarily of things outside of the soul. This was the view frequently expounded in the medieval schools, where, for centuries, Boethius' were the only available translations and commentaries for the treatise." *Boethius on Signification and Mind*, 1989, 17–8.

[144] *In Peri hermeneias*, 21.

But it is a possibility inhering in medieval logic at its very basis. Henceforth, it is the ineluctable nature of the utterance to be *garalus*. Boethius transmits a revised version of Aristotelian logic in which *vox* is not the natural production of an animal but something radically unknowable from which nothing can be gathered. In so doing, he introduces to the Middle Ages the possibility of a vocalization without any corresponding thought. This part of his legacy has been overlooked, by his medieval readers no less than by modern scholars. But it remained, as a counter-tradition within medieval logic and as a possibility to be elaborated in other fields as well. In subsequent chapters I will show how I take the implications of the theory of *vox quae nihil designat* to have been considered outside of the realm of logic, in poetry and devotion. But in the following chapter I wish to show what became of the nonsense word in medieval logic, a field from which Boethius himself had already banished *garalus* with the very gesture in which he invented it.

II

BUBA EST DISYLLABUM:
OXFORD LOGICIANS ON MATERIAL SUPPOSITION

But trusteth wel, I am a Southren man;
I kan nat geeste "rum, ram, ruf" by lettre.[145]

The *De interpretatione*, in Boethius's translation and accompanied by his commentaries, circulated widely in the Latin-speaking world in the millennium after the Roman senator's death. Known as early as the ninth century, it was studied closely in the eleventh and began to be commented on again at the beginning of the twelfth. By the thirteenth century, at both Oxford and Paris anyone wishing to become a *magister artium* would have had to hear the *De interpretatione*, along with the other works of the old logic, twice; and explication of the treatise had become, at least at Paris, a requirement of logical study.[146] From the beginning of this period, Boethius's commentaries circulated alongside the treatise itself, and although in the later

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[145] *Canterbury Tales*, X.1.42-3

[146] On the history of the reception of the *De interpretatione* and of the *Organon* more generally, cf. Jean Isaac, *Le Peri hermeneias en Occident de Boèce à saint Thomas; histoire littéraire d'un traité d'Aristote* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1953); Margaret and John Marenbon Cameron, "Aristotelian Logic East and West, 500-1500: On Interpretation and Prior Analytics in Two Traditions," *Vivarium* 48 (2010): 1–6; John Marenbon, "Medieval Latin Commentaries on Aristotelian Logical Texts, before c.1150 AD," in *Aristotelian Logic, Platonism, and the Context of Early Medieval Philosophy in the West* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000); Deborah L. Black, "Aristotle's Peri Hermeneias in Medieval Latin and Arabic Philosophy: Logic and the Linguistic Arts," in *Aristotle and His Medieval Interpreters*, ed. Richard Bosley and Martin Tweedale, 1992; H.A.G. Braakhuis and C.H. Kneepkens, *Aristotle's Peri Hermeneias in the Latin Middle Ages: Essays on the Commentary Tradition* (Groningen: Ingenium, 2003). On the survival of Boethian logic through the Middle Ages, cf. Osmund Lewry, "Boethian Logic in the Medieval West," in *Boethius: His Life, Thought, and Influence*, ed. Margaret Gibson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981), 90–134.

Middle Ages the copying of these commentaries dropped off, Boethius remained the authority invariably adduced on the many points of difficulty that arose in interpreting Aristotle's *inexplicabilis caligo*.[147] Likewise, and as I have explained in the previous chapter, the Boethian translation itself was such an established text that even after William of Moerbecke undertook a new translation in the 1260s, this more accurate rendering in no way replaced the familiar textbook, which was retained for centuries more.[148]

Together with Porphyry's *Isagoge* and the only other work of Aristotle's known in the Latin-speaking world until the twelfth century, the *Categoriae*, the treatise was one of the textbooks at the heart of the logical curriculum.[149] By the eleventh century, the curriculum contained not only these three works but also their associated Boethian commentaries. All of these works began to be known as the *logica vetus* or old logic after Boethius's translations of Aristotle's more advanced treatises were rediscovered and began to circulate, under the heading

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[147] Cf. Boethius, *Commentarii in librum Aristotelis Peri hermeneias, pars posterior, secundam editionem continens*, ed. Carl Meiser (Leipzig: Teubner, 1880), 294. Isaac's table of manuscripts of Boethius's continuous translation and first and second commentaries is updated by Lewry, who summarizes the data as follows: "If the surviving copies are a reliable indication, it is evident that there is a great increase in the copying of the continuous version in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, with the beginning of university studies. The first commentary is most copied in the tenth century, and no witnesses survive from centuries later than the thirteenth; while the second is found from the tenth, but reaches a peak in the eleventh, and is still much in vogue in the twelfth, with a few witnesses down to the end of the Middle Ages." Lewry, "Boethian Logic in the Medieval West," 103.

[148] As Isaac writes, "le *Peri hermeneias*, —avec les *Catégories*, — sera le seul ouvrage d'Aristote qu'on lira durant le haut moyen âge, et sa traduction boécienne, très exacte en général, deviendra un texte stéréotypé, à tel point qu'elle ne pourra être détrônée par la version de Guillaume de Moerbeke et qu'elle se maintiendra comme la seule authentique jusque'à la renaissance." *Le Peri hermeneias en Occident*, 25.

[149] I will use the word *logic* and its derivatives to translate both *logica* and *dialectica*, although these are not, strictly speaking, always identical. On the history of these terms and of their overlapping use, cf. Pierre Michaud-Quantin, "L'Emploi des termes logica et dialectica au moyen age," in *Études sur le vocabulaire philosophique du Moyen Age* (Rome: Edizioni dell'Ateneo, 1970).

of *logica nova*, in the 1120s.[150] By the beginning of the thirteenth century, both the old and the new logic had come to be known as the *logica antiquorum*, the logic of the ancients, because of the proliferation of new treatises addressing themselves to questions that Boethius and Aristotle had not considered. These new treatises, which form the basis of the great thirteenth-century *summulae* of William of Sherwood, Peter of Spain, and Roger Bacon, are devoted to the theory of the properties of terms.

This new, "terminist" logic takes as its starting point the remarks on *littera*, *vox*, *intellectus*, and *res* at the beginning of the *De interpretatione* that were the subject of the preceding chapter. Perhaps its most immediately noticeable innovation with respect to the logical curriculum is to begin with a discussion that until then would have been properly postponed until the student had arrived at the third treatise of the *Organon*. Following what Jean Isaac has called a "nouveau plan," the authors of the *logica modernorum* grant to a discussion of *vox* pride of place at the beginning of their treatises.[151] The study of logic henceforth rests on a firm understanding of the nature of *vox*. This rearrangement is due partly to the fact that the new logic

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[150] That is, the *Prior* and *Posterior Analytics*, the *Topics*, and the *Sophistical Refutations*. On the division of old and new, cf. Bernard Dod, "Aristoteles Latinus," in *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy from the Rediscovery of Aristotle to the Disintegration of Scholasticism 1100-1600*, ed. Norman Kretzmann, Anthony Kenny, and Jan Pinborg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 46; Henrik Lagerlund, "The Assimilation of Aristotelian and Arabic Logic up to the Later Thirteenth Century," in *Handbook of the History of Logic*, ed. Dov M. Gabbay and John Woods, vol. II: Mediaeval and Renaissance Logic (Amsterdam: North Holland, 2008), 283; Lambert-Marie de Rijk, *Logica Modernorum: A Contribution to the History of Early Terminist Logic* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1967), I.14–5.

[151] "Ces manuels […] offrent une particularité remarquable; au lieu de commencer, en effet, en suivant l'ordre habituel, par les questions examinées dans l'*Isagogè* et les *Catégories*, ils n'abordent ordinairement l'étude des prédicables et des predicaments qu'après un exposé des notions qui font l'objet du *Peri hermeneias*: son, parole, nom, verbe, phrase, proposition, oppositions." Isaac, *Le Peri hermeneias en Occident*, 57–8. Margaret Cameron has referred to the same phenomenon as "a new decision, which is followed by nearly every text-book in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries." Margaret Cameron, "What's in a name? Students of William of Champeaux on the vox significativa," *Bochumer Philosophisches Jahrbuch für Antike und Mittelalter* 9, no. 1 (2004): 96.

grew out of a confluence of grammar and logic.[152] Because they considered their discipline, along with those of grammar and rhetoric, to be a *scientia vocis* or *scientia sermocinalis*, a science of utterance, the *moderni* believed it to be a necessary prolegomenon to their labors and instruction to define the object of their science.[153] But the authoritative treatment of *vox* was not to be found in the *Isagoge* or in the *Categoriae*, nor in any of the more recently discovered of Aristotle's logical works, but in the few lines at *De interpretatione* 16a3-8—and, no less, in their explication by Boethius.

Aristotle's doctrine of *vox*, in its Boethian form, not only provided the newly conceived discipline of logic with its point of departure. It was also the occasion of a fierce dispute among the schoolmen. Writing in the 1260s, Roger Bacon speaks of "a quarrel, not small, among well-known men" (*non est modica contentio inter viros famosos*). Some forty years later, John Duns Scotus uses still stronger terms, invoking a "great dispute" (*magna altercatio*) over the same matter.[154] The *magna altercatio* was over the status of *vox*: does it signify concepts in the mind

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[152] Cf. William Courtenay, *Schools and Scholars in Fourteenth-Century England* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1987), 221.

[153] Cf. e.g. William of Sherwood, *Introduction to Logic*, trans. and ed. Norman Kretzmann (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1966), 21. On this point, Black, "Aristotle's Peri Hermeneias in Medieval Latin and Arabic Philosophy: Logic and the Linguistic Arts."

[154] Cf. Roger Bacon, "De Signis," ed. K. M. Fredborg, Lauge Nielsen, and Jan Pinborg, *Traditio* 34 (1978): 132; John Duns Scotus, *Opera omnia: iussu et auctoritate Pacifici M. Perantoni.* (Vatican City: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1950), 197. The literature on the *magna altercatio* is extensive. Cf. e.g. Ana María Mora-Márquez, "Peri hermeneias 16a3-8: Histoire d'une rupture de la tradition interprétative dans le bas moyen âge," *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger* (2011): 78; Giorgio Pini, "Species, Concept, and Thing: Theories of Signification in the Second Half of the Thirteenth Century," *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 8 (1999): 21–52; Giorgio Pini, "Signification of Names in Duns Scotus and Some of His Contemporaries," *Vivarium* 39, no. 1 (2001): 20–51; Alan Perreiah, "Orality and Literacy in the De Interpretatione Tradition," in *Aristotle's Peri Hermeneias in the Latin Middle Ages*, ed. H.A.G. Braakhuis and C.H. Kneepkens (Groningen: Ingenium, 2003); Umberto Eco, "Signification and Denotation from Boethius to Ockham," *Franciscan Studies* 44 (1984): 1–29; Stephan Meier-Oeser, "The Meaning of 'Significatio' in Scholastic Logic," in *Signs and Signification*, ed. Gill Harjeet Singh

or things in the world? The authority in this matter was Boethius. In his schematic reconstruction of the relation between written inscriptions, spoken utterances, concepts in the mind, and things in the world (*littera, vox, intellectus, res*) mentioned at *De interpretatione* 16a3-8, Boethius had assigned to *vox* an unvarying position in the *orandi ordo*.[155] The elements of this "sequence of speech" are arranged like links in a chain, and between *vox* and the *res* to which it refers there is always a mediating *intellectus*. As Boethius transmitted Aristotle, in other words, for a word to signify a thing it must first signify the thought of that thing in someone's mind. To put it more programmatically, Boethius was (and is) considered to have taught that words do not signify things in the world but thoughts in the mind. And indeed the commentator was adamant on this point, specifically denying that *vox* could signifying anything outside the mind: as he writes, "other than a thought, an utterance signifies nothing at all" (*praeter intellectum namque vox penitus nihil designat*).[156]

Boethius's position was overwhelming accepted by the readers of *De interpretatione* in the first two centuries after it began to be seriously studied again. Thomas Aquinas is only the most prominent proponent of a traditionalist view that sometimes refined but did not abandon what is sometimes called the Boethian "semiotic triangle": as Aquinas concludes, "it was therefore necessary for Aristotle to say that *voces* immediately signify the conceptions of the intellect and signify *res* by the mediation of the concepts" (*ideo necesse fuit Aristoteli dicere quod voces significant intellectus conceptiones immediate et eis mediantibus res*).[157] Not

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and Giovanni Manetti, vol. II (New Delhi: Bahri Publications, 2000); Philotheus Boehner, "Ockham's Theory of Signification," *Franciscan Studies* 6 (1946): 145–70.

[155] This paragraph summarizes material discussed in Chapter I, *supra*.

[156] Boethius, *In Peri hermeneias*, 21.

[157] Thomas Aquinas, *Expositio libri Peryermenias*, Opera Omnia iussu Leonis XIII P.M. edita (Rome-Paris: J. Vrin/Commissio Leonina, 1989), 10–11. My translation. On Thomas's role in the *magna altercatio*, cf. especially Pini, "Species, Concept, and Thing."

everyone was convinced, however. Already in the twelfth century there are authors who suggest that words might refer to things without such mediation. Peter Abelard motions in this direction.[158] The *Ars meliduna*, from the third quarter of the century, indicates that a word is "imposed," or assigned as a name, in order not to signify but to appellate, that is, it is given as the name of a thing rather than a thought.[159] But the crucial figure in this connection is Roger Bacon. As Bacon argues in the mid thirteenth-century, it is absurd to say that words signify things, for the meaning of a word is decided by the intention of its speaker, and if a speaker wishes for his utterance to refer to a thing, then that is what it will do. Bacon attempts to reconcile his new, intentionalist account of the signification of words with Boethius, claiming that the latter had meant merely that the fact that someone is speaking is a natural indication that she must be thinking something as well. But although that had been Aristotle's view, it was certainly not Boethius's. Bacon's step away from the Boethian doctrine was decisive, and was taken up by his contemporaries and successors: John Duns Scotus would devote a great deal of attention to this point; and in the fourteenth century William Ockham would develop in his own direction the idea that written, spoken, and mental terms all refer to things directly, without intermediary.

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[158] Cf. Jean Jolivet, *Arts du langage et théologie chez Abélard* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1969), 63–77. Peter Abelard, *Philosophische Schriften. I. Die Logica "Ingredientibus"* (Münster: Verlag der Aschendorffschen Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1921), 112. On this point, cf. in addition to the *Ingredientibus* an anonymous *De interpretatione* commentary that de Rijk has said "shows many resemblances to" it: *Logica Modernorum*, II.1 210–12.

[159] "Notandum tamen quod institucio vocum non fuit facta ad significandum, sed tantum ad appellandum, quipped cum appellacio vocum magis sit necessaria ad loquendum de rebus subiectis quam significacio." de Rijk, *Logica Modernorum*, II.1.294. On this point, cf. Joël Biard, "Semantique et ontologie dans l'Ars meliduna," in *Gilbert de Poitiers et ses contemporains aux origines de la logica modernorum*, ed. Jean Jolivet and Alain de Libera (Naples: Bibliopolis, 1987); H.A.G. Braakhuis, "Signification, Appelation and Predication in the Ars Meliduna," in *Gilbert de Poitiers et ses contemporains aux origines de la Logica modernorum*, ed. Jean Jolivet and Alain de Libera (Naples: Bibliopolis, 1987).

Medieval logicians can be divided into two camps according to the position they adopt in what Bacon called the *difficilis dubitatio utrum vox significet species apud animam an res*.[160] And indeed everyone seems to agree—the medieval partisans in the dispute no less than their modern interpreters—that there are only two possible positions to take on the matter: an utterance will signify, in the first instance, either a concept or a thing. And yet the logicians were well aware that there are instances in which it does neither. Sometimes an utterance simply does not signify at all.

As I have shown in the previous chapter, the basis of Boethius's logic is the notion that *vox* is in itself devoid of signification. This notion can be discerned even in his most vociferous defense of the primary signification of concepts rather than things, as cited above: "besides an *intellectus*, *vox* signifies absolutely nothing" (*praeter intellectum namque vox penitus nihil designat*). Boethius declares here that *vox* does not signify anything besides *intellectus*, but he has nothing to say about whether it does in fact signify. His dictum restricts the field of possible significates of *vox* to one, without however ruling out the possibility that signification will not take place at all. And taken in a stronger sense, this programmatic sentence can be understood to mean that, whether or not it signifies an *intellectus*, in any event *vox* will also—"besides" the presence or absence of signification—signify nothing, or not signify. In other words, all utterances, even meaningful ones, retain an originary nonsensical aspect. Boethius bases his whole system on the idea, Stoic in origin and fundamentally incompatible with the letter of Aristotle's remarks on *vox* here and in the *De anima*, that human utterance is by nature independent of signification, and only ever joined to a particular meaning in the most tenuous fashion.

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[160] Bacon, "De Signis," 132.

This notion underlies and precedes what has always been considered his main accomplishment (or failing), the codification of the idea that words signify concepts rather than things in the world. But the history of its reception remains to be written. This chapter is a contribution to that history. I examine the use of what the medievals called *voces non-significativae* in logical writings from the beginning of the twelfth to the end of the fourteenth century. My focus is England and Oxford in particular, where interest in such words remained constant throughout this period in a way that it did not on the continent. At Oxford, the theory of terms remained dominant even as it was overshadowed, at Paris, by *grammatica speculativa,*[161] a system whose emphasis on the isomorphism between language and reality left little room for a consideration of nonsense.[162] The *vox non-significativa* was a matter of controversy throughout this period. In this chapter I trace a shifting series of answers to two questions: *is there such thing as a nonsense word?* and *if there is, does the discipline of logic deal with such a word?* In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the first of these questions is most often answered in the

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[161] For the reasons cited, I do not consider *grammatica speculativa*, to which the best guide is Irène Rosier, *La grammaire spéculative des Modistes* (Lille: Presses Universitaires de Lille, 1983).

[162]"Oxford as compared to Paris for a long time remained a provincial university, which because of a certain conservatism retained most of the achievements of terminist logic as developed in the period before 1250. This would mean that it is hardly relevant to look for a specific Oxford tradition in the first part of the 13th century. In the second half it is perhaps different. Oxford did not go along, at least not the whole way, with the Parisian Aristotelians. The English seem to have preferred authors from the earlier period who were not so strongly committed to the elaborate theory of isomorphism and abstraction, which were so eagerly developed in Parisian logic and grammar. I believe I have established that the tradition embodied in the textbooks of terminist logic was not broken in Oxford, as it virtually was at the University of Paris." Jan Pinborg, "The English Contribution to Logic before Ockham," *Synthese* 40 (1979): 37. On the eclipse of supposition theory at Paris from 1270-1310, cf. Sten Ebbesen, "OXYNAT: A Theory About the Origins of British Logic," in *The Rise of British Logic*, ed. Osmund Lewry (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1985), 1–2. As Ebbesen writes, "the fourteenth-century English approach to logic looks much more like a continuation of the approach we find in the twelfth century, but which apparently lost its impetus in Paris when the *Organon* and the Aristotelian ideal of demonstrative science became the centre of interest and study."

affirmative, without further discussion. But after the recovery of the *De anima*, in which Aristotle says unmistakably that *vox* in itself does in fact signify, logicians began to stake out new positions on the matter.[163] Certain writers maintained, as Aristotle might well have done but as Boethius certainly did not, that it is not possible to produce a thoroughly meaningless utterance. As I see it, this shift is more fundamental than the one that prompted the *magna altercatio*. Every discussion of what a word signifies rests on a prior decision as to whether it signifies at all.

No matter how they responded to my first question, from the earliest period (though with a notable exception to which we will soon turn) logicians are in agreement as to the second: whether or not there are words that have no meaning, logic does not concern itself with them. In fact, these authors mention nonsense words only so as to exclude them from consideration. They are interested in them only insofar as these words exemplify what it is they will *not* be treating: *homo* can appear in a proposition, but *bufbaf* cannot. Nonetheless, despite their insistence that such words can have no part in logic, the exponents of the theory of terms soon found themselves dealing with a peculiar kind of sentence from which they could not seem to exclude nonsense words after all. The troublesome propositions were those in which words refer to themselves, such as *man is a monosyllable*, and in which nonsense words seem to act no differently than do regular ones: for what difference would it make to write *buf is a monosyllable* instead? In the phenomenon of self-reference, which the medievals called *suppositio materialis,* logicians were

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[163] The *De anima* had begun to be read again in Paris by 1225. On its reception there, cf. Charles Lohr, "The New Aristotle and 'Science' in the Paris Arts Faculty (1255)," in *L'enseignement des disciplines à la Faculté des arts (Paris et Oxford, XIIIe–XVe siècles)*, Studia Artistarum 4 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1997), 251–70. In his important commentary, Albert the Great asks whether *vox est per se significans* and decides, as does Aristotle, that it is: *vox est sonus aliquid significans.* Albert the Great, *Opera Omnia* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1951), VIII.888.

forced to articulate a response to the possibility that logic does in fact have to deal with nonsense words.

In the following pages, I show the interimplication of the problems of *suppositio materialis* and *vox non-significativa* in English logical texts from the twelfth to the fourteenth century. I begin by laying out the problems as they were posed in early terminist writings, from the anonymous *Logica "cum sit nostra"* to the *Introductiones in logicam* of William of Sherwood. I then focus in succession on three texts associated with Oxford University that, over the course of about a century, paid these matters particular attention. These three texts are the *Compendium studii theologiae* of Roger Bacon, from 1292, but reprising material written some decades earlier; the *Commentarius in Peri hermeneias* of Walter Burley, from the first decade of the fourteenth century; and the *Logica magna* of Paul of Venice, composed in the 1390s. At the broadest level, this is a story about how Oxford logicians subjected the Boethian doctrine of the fundamentally nonsensical nature of *vox* to repeated challenges over the course of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and finally reached a consensus that was in direct opposition to it at the end of the fourteenth. By the time of Paul of Venice, it had become a commonplace that not only are nonsense words beyond the purview of the discipline of logic, they are also an impossibility: there can be no such thing.

But at the center of this story stands an exception. One of our authors, Walter Burley, maintains the outmoded idea that there can be true nonsense words. More unusual still, he appears to be uniquely untroubled by the thought of *voces non-significativae*, and to think that logic can deal with them without difficulty. Accordingly, I devote disproportionate attention to his *De interpretatione* commentary, insofar as he points out the possibility, however unrealized, of a science of nonsense. And although Burley was and remained exceptional in this regard, I

suggest in closing that at the same time as his line of thinking was definitively rejected by his fellow logicians, it came to be elaborated in another realm entirely.

1. Early terminists

For as long as they studied the *De interpretatione*, medieval readers took an interest in Boethius's nonsense words. The oldest extant medieval commentary on Aristotle's treatise, the *Introductiones dialecticae* attributed to Peter Abelard's teacher William of Champeaux and composed toward the end of the eleventh century, distinguishes in its opening lines between *vox significativa* and *non-significativa*, giving as examples of "non-significative utterance in the wide sense" *centaur*, *chimaera* and *litterae.* None of these examples would answer to the description of *vox non-significativa* as it would be developed in the decades to come: *centaur* and *chimaera* are words to which a concept corresponds, even though that concept does not correspond to any actually existing thing; and *litterae* are not, strictly speaking, *voces* but the *elementae vocis*. But Margaret Cameron has suggested that *litterae*, in this instance, may be a scribal error for *blityri*: a form of that word appears, in any case, in the corresponding passage of the associated *Introductiones dialecticae secundum G. Paganellum*, where the examples are *chimaera, blictrix*, and *hircocervus*.[164] Along with *skindapsos*, *blityri* is a stock example among late antique commentators of what in Stoic terms had been called a *lexis* that is not also a *logos*: a word-

[164] Both of the *Introductiones* are edited in Yukio Iwakuma, "The Introductiones dialecticae secundum Wilgelmum and secundum magistrum G. Paganellum," *Cahiers de l'Institut du Moyen-Âge Grec et Latin* 63 (1993): 45–114. For these passages, cf. 57 and 88. The first *Introductio* is discussed at length in de Rijk, *Logica Modernorum*. Cameron's suggestion that *litterae* is a mistranscription of *blityri* will be found in her Cameron, "What's in a name?," 106n39. On these early accounts of *vox*, cf. Irène Rosier-Catach, "Vox and Oratio in Early Twelfth Century Grammar and Dialectics," *Archives D'histoire Doctrinale et Littéraire Du Moyen Âge* 78, no. 1 (2011): 47–129.

shape that carries no meaning.[165] As Boethius, who transmitted both of these words and added to them his own invention, *herecceddy*, had explained, they are words that are meaningless for the time being, but could be imposed to signify in the future. In its earliest surviving medieval appearance, in these treatises associated with William of Champeaux, *blityri* or *blictrix* seems to have been assimilated to a class of utterances from which Boethius would have distinguished it: names for imaginary things (*chimaera*), rather than mere word-shapes (*figurae vocis*) to which no *intelletus* corresponds.

But the first terminist logicians used the word as Boethius had done; and although they did not preserve the other ancient nonsense words,[166] they supplemented *blityri* with a set of phonetically related instances of their own invention that would eventually replace *blityri* altogether. Words on the order of *buba* and *bufbaf* appear with regularity in the twelfth- and early thirteenth-century treatises collected in Lambert-Marie de Rijk's *Logica modernorum.* The *Ars emmerana* adduces *blictrix* and *sindiarsis* as examples of *vox quae nichil significat*; the *Ars burana* has *blictrix* alone. In the *Introductiones parisienses* the example is *buba*. The *Logica "ut dicit"* gives *buba* and *plectrix*; the *Ars meliduna biltrix* and *buba*; and various manuscripts of the *Logica "cum sit nostra"* contain the following examples: *bon*, *bau*, and *beltrix*; *buba* and *bultrix*; *bon*, *bau*, and *bletrix*; *bou*, *bau*, and *beltrix*; and *bu*, *ba*, and *buf*.[167] In the treatises that do not mention *vox non-significativa* specifically, *vox significativa* is discussed in a manner that presupposes familiarity with the distinction between the two. Finally, in the *Introductiones*

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[165] On *blityri* and *skindapsos*, cf. Chapter I *supra*.

[166] With the exception of the *Ars emmerana,* whose *sindiarsis* I take to be a mangled transliteration of *skindapsos*. I have suggested that it is in the word *garalus* that Boethius invests the weight of his system. This word, however, has no afterlife. As far as I have been able to gather, it never appears again, and is of no interest to the medieval readers of the commentary.

[167] The *Logica "cum sit nostra"* is of particular interest for my purposes, given that Walter Burley appears to have produced an adaptation of it and thus would have known it closely.

montane minores and *Abbreviatio montana,* rather than some variation of *buba* the example given of *vox non-significativa* is the letter or syllable: insofar as it forms part of the word *sorex*, the syllable *rex* does not signify (i.e. *king)* on its own.[168]

Buba and *bufbaf* appear in the same place in all of these treatises: at their very beginning, in preliminary discussions of the nature of *vox*. Their function will be seen from the use William of Sherwood makes of them in the opening chapter of his *Introductiones in logicam*, an influential logical textbook from the mid-thirteenth century that reprises the doctrines found in the treatises just cited. William invokes *buba* for the same reason as does everyone else, in the same context and in almost exactly the same language:[169]

> *Prius autem agendum est de nomine quam de verbo, quia est principalior pars quam verbum. Ideo ab eo inchoandum est. Et quia omne nomen est vox et omnis vox est sonus, ideo a sono tamquam a primo inchoandum est. Est autem sonus proprium sesibile aurium. Et dividitur sic: Sonus alius vox, alius non vox. Sonus vox est vox, ut quod fit ab ore animalis. Sonus non vox, ut strepitus pedum, fragor arborum et similia. Vox sit dividitur: Alia significativa, alia non significativa. Vox significativa est, quae aliquid significat; non significativa, quae nihil significat, ut: 'buba blictrix.'*[170]
>
> The noun ought to be considered before the verb because it is a more important part than the verb, and so we must begin with it. And since every noun is an utterance and every utterance is a sound, we must begin with sound. Sound is the property to which the ears are sensitive; it is divided into vocal and nonvocal. Vocal sound is an utterance such as is made by an animal's mouth. Nonvocal sound is footsteps, the crashing of trees, and the like. Utterances are divided into significant and nonsignificant. A significant utterance is one that signifies something; a nonsignificant one signifies nothing; e.g, 'buba blictrix.'

William declares that he will begin by defining *sonus* because nouns and verbs, the elements of the proposition, are varieties of *sonus*, and more specifically of that variety of *sonus* called *vox*.

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[168] "Que est vox non significativa? Ut littere, sillabe, que sunt partes vocum significativarum et ipse nichil significant." de Rijk, *Logica Modernorum*, II.2 11 and 78. On the history of treating the syllable as non-significative, cf. Chapter III infra.

[169] Cf. e.g. Peter of Spain, *Tractatus; called afterwards Summule logicales*, ed. Lambert-Marie de Rijk (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1972).

[170] William of Sherwood, "William of Sherwood, 'Introductiones in Logicam,' Critical Text," ed. Charles Lohr, Peter Kunze, and Bernhard Mussler, *Traditio* 39 (1983): 222–3; William of Sherwood, *Introduction to Logic*, 22–3.

William then proceeds on familiar Boethian lines, arriving at the object of the discipline of logic by means of a series of distinctions moving from genus to species. He begins with sound. Sound is of two sorts: vocal and non-vocal. Vocal sound is the sort that comes out of the mouth of an animal, whereas non-vocal sound is the sort that doesn't, such as the crashing of trees or the tread of feet. William now leaves aside non-vocal sound, and explains that for its part too *vox* admits of division into two kinds: *significativa* and *non-significativa*. Significative utterances signify something, whereas non-significative utterances do not: and here we find *buba* and *blictrix*. Only the species of sound that is both vocal and significative can attain to the status of the noun, and thus serve as the object of logical science.

Nonsense words appear in these treatises, in short, for a single purpose: so that they can be cast out of the realm of logic altogether. As is announced in the first lines of the early Oxford logic called after its incipit *Cum sit nostra*, the *materia* of the discipline of logic is *vox significativa*, and this is to say specifically that nonsense words can have no place there:

> *Cum sit nostra presens intentio ad artem dialeticam, primo oportet scire quid sit materia artis dialectice. Materia artis dialectice est vox significativa, quia de voce non significativa nullus intellectus ageneratur in animo alicuius.*[171]
>
> Since our present concern is the discipline of logic, it is appropriate in the first place to know what is the material of the discipline of logic. The material of the discipline of logic is significative utterance, since no concept is produced in anyone's mind by non-significative utterance.

Buba and *bufbaf* exist and circulate solely in order that the actual subject matter of logic, words like *homo*, may be identified more exactly by being distinguished from them. The instances of their appearance are, so the logicians declare, exceptions: no more will ever be said about them than that they will not appear again. Their repetition in the prefatory remarks to the arts of logic is an almost apotropaic act, meant to ward off their incursion into the treatises any further than

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[171] de Rijk, *Logica Modernorum*, 417.

their threshold. But for this very reason these words are decisive in the constitution of the field. The gesture by which *homo* is distinguished from *buba* is that by which logic secures the object of its research. If it failed to do so, it would not be logic at all.

The danger that logic would fail to qualify as logic at all was felt to be a real one. Logicians would not make the mistake of treating a mere sound, but they could easily fall into the trap of including a word with no meaning in a proposition. Such a proposition would be strictly indeterminate with respect to its truth or falsity: there would be no way of even beginning to decide whether *buba is on the mat* is true or false. Given that logic is the study of the truth of propositions, or of speaking truthfully (*vere loqui*),[172] as soon as it begins dealing with a proposition containing a nonsense word it has ceased to be logic at all. In short, an encounter with *vox non-significativa* spells the end of logic, and the ban on that encounter marks its beginning.

The danger to be avoided is not merely that logic would cease to be logic but that in so doing it would become something else, namely grammar. Grammarians, as Boethius had declared,[173] are those who are content to manipulate words on the basis of their endings without respect to whether these morphemes (e.g., *-ing*, *-logist*) are attached to an imposed, lexically identifiable root. Insofar as their concern is with vocal *congruitas* rather than *veritas*, grammarians are said to have no objection to *buba is on the mat* just as long as they take *buba* to be a singular noun in the nominative case and thus in agreement with its predicate. This Boethian articulation of the difference between grammar and logic on the basis of the nonsense word is reflected in a passage in the *Ars meliduna* in which *biltrix* is subjected to grammatical manipulation:

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[172] William of Sherwood, "Introductiones in Logicam," 222.
[173] Cf. Chapter I, supra.

> *Amplius queritur utrum hec vox 'biltrix' modo sit hec vox 'biltricis'. Quod necessario dicendum videtur. Nam hec vox 'biltrix' instituetur cras ad significandum et tunc declinabitur: 'biltrix, biltricis', nec alia vox erit 'biltricis' quam 'biltrix', sed eadem.*[174]
>
> Additionally, it is asked whether this utterance *biltrix* is the same as this utterance *biltricis* [i.e., whether the latter is just the former in the genitive case]. Which it must be said to be. For this utterance *biltrix* will be imposed tomorrow to signify, and then it will be declined: *biltrix, biltricis*; and *biltricis* will not be a different utterance than *biltrix*, but the same one.

Although the Melun master writes that the word will allow itself to be declined only "tomorrow," once it has been imposed to signify, in fact he shows that its declension is possible already "today" in the absence of any such imposition. *Biltrix* is a word that has no meaning but is already susceptible of grammatical analysis.

Any logic able to contend with *vox non-significativa* would find itself to be in fact a grammar and not a logic at all. It should be said that the historical distinctions between grammar and logic were always shifting. As Sten Ebbesen and Irène Rosier-Catach have pointed out, the limits between them are largely mythical: "le trivium est en partie mythique. Derrière ce mythe, véhiculé notamment par les classifications des sciences, la réalité montre un lien étroit entre grammaire et logique."[175] What is at stake here, as I have said with respect to Boethius's parallel remarks above, is not the actual practices of grammarians as distinguishable from those of logicians, but a certain movement within the field of logic by which it marks its own limits. The nonsense word is a limit case by which logicians understand the difference between their own

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[174] de Rijk, *Logica Modernorum*, II.1.294.

[175] "Le trivium à la Faculté des arts," in *L'enseignement des disciplines à la Faculté des arts (Paris et Oxford, XIIIe–XVe siècles)*, ed. Olga Weijers and Louis Holtz, Studia Artistarum 4 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1997), 97. On the historical relations between logic and grammar cf., in addition to the article just cited, Karin Margareta Fredborg, "The Unity of the Trivium," in *Sprachtheorien in Spätantike und Mittelalter*, ed. Sten Ebbesen (Tübingen: Narr, 1995), 325–38. For a grammarian's use of *biltrix* and *buba*, cf. C.H. Kneepkens, *Het Judicium Constructionis: Het Leerstuk van de Contructio in de 2de Helft van de 12de Eeuw*, vol. III (Nijmegen: Ingenium, 1977), 181.

discipline and that of the grammarians. It is no wonder, then, that the phenomenon that would force the logicians to deal with the same nonsense words they had refused to entertain was called, by the author of the *Fallacie parvipontane*, a *transumptio grammaticorum*, a mere metaphor of grammarians.[176] For despite all their assurances and best efforts, *buba* and *blictrix* did not remain at the threshold of their treatises but reappeared at a crucial moment in the elaboration of the theory of supposition on which the new logic was based.

The new developments in logic take as their point of departure a peculiarity of Aristotelian logic: the fact that it is a logic of terms, and more exactly of categorematic terms. As we have seen with William of Sherwood and with Boethius before him, although the object of the science of logic is *vox*, it is not utterance as such but only a highly specified variety of utterance. Boethius calls this entity *interpretatio*: it is a *vox* that is also a word (*locutio*), a word that is also significative, and a significative word that signifies not in combination but in itself. These specifications occur in order to isolate the categorematic term, that is, a term that can occur as both subject and predicate in a proposition. The reason for this is that the Aristotelian syllogism depends for its functioning on the repetition of the same term now as subject, now as predicate. It is the categorematic term, i.e, a noun or verb rather than an adverb, preposition, or conjunction, that has the ability to function in this way.

As medieval logicians present them, *buba* and *bufbaf* are *voces non-significativae*, that is, they are distinguished from *all* significative utterances, terms and non-terms, categorematic and syncategorematic alike; and yet they seem always to be the negative form of the categorematic

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[176] de Rijk, *Logica modernorum* I.139; 152; 561f. [888] On this passage, cf. Egbert Bos, "Speaking about Signs: Fourteenth-Century Views on Suppositio Materialis," in *"Der muoz mir süezer worte jehen": liber amicorum für Norbert Voorwinden*, ed. Sjaak Onderdelinden (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997), 76.

term in particular. To all appearances, it goes without saying that if *buba* were to become significative it would be as the name of something; there is never any question of its being a kind of unknown preposition, for example. But this ambiguity resumes a pervasive imprecision to which I have alluded in the Introduction: namely, that medieval logicians, especially before the fourteenth century, insistently use the word *vox* in contexts where one would expect to find *terminus*. Despite the fact that they are explicitly interested only in the utterance insofar as it is a term, logicians routinely address their remarks to *vox* without further specification. This terminological imprecision has consequences that are not merely terminological. It is the reason why, as we will soon see, *voces significativae* pose such a problem: twelfth- and thirteenth-century logic is not as different from grammar as it sometimes claims, given that its object is a *vox* that both is and is not a term, an utterance at once grammatical and logical. That said, medieval logicians do distinguish sharply between how an utterance *acts* as a term and how it acts otherwise. This distinction, familiar to earlier logicians but never before formulated technically, became the basis of the new "terminist logic" or "supposition theory" that was developed beginning in the twelfth century.

The new, which is to say post-Boethian, logic draws a sharp line between *significatio* and *suppositio*, which anticipate the Fregean *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*, or sense and reference.[177] The difference between signification and supposition, familiar to earlier logicians but never before formulated technically, is the basis of the new logic. It is one thing, the terminists teach, for a word to signify something: it signifies whatever it is "imposed on," that is, whatever it is

[177] Cf. Gottlob Frege, "Über Sinn und Bedeutung," in *Kleine Schriften*, ed. I Angelelli (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1990), 143–62.

assigned to as a name.[178] Thus *homo* signifies the mortal, rational animal: the *significatum* of a word is, effectively, its definition. But when a word comes to be used in a proposition, although its *significatio* does not vary it can refer to (or "supposit for") a number of discrete things. Whereas its *significatio* is what it means when it is considered in isolation, the *suppositio* of a term is the way that it stands for something in a particular proposition. As Peter of Spain writes,

> *Differunt autem suppositio et significatio, quia significatio est per impositionem vocis ad rem significandam, suppositio vero est acceptio ipsius termini jam significantis rem pro aliquo.*[179]
>
> Supposition is distinct from signification, in that signification consists in the imposition of an utterance to signify a thing, whereas supposition consists in the reference of a term that already signifies a thing to something in particular.

In the following sentences, which are the classical examples, the word *man* supposits for three distinct things and in three distinct manners, even though its signification remains unaltered:

> *Homo currit*. (A man is running.)
> *Homo est species*. (Man is a species.)
> *Homo est nomen*. (Man is a noun.)

For the most part, medieval logicians agreed in calling the reference of the subject terms in these propositions *simple*, *personal*, and *material*, respectively. Supposition theory tries to account for the fact that, while the signification of words seems to be relatively stable (words signify what they are imposed to signify), the same word will pick out different things in different contexts.

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[178] On imposition, cf. Chapter I. As many commentators have pointed out, *significatio* never received a clear definition in the Middle Ages, as opposed to *suppositio*, which was minutely described. As Joël Biard remarks, "la signification reste peu thématisée, surtout dans les grands texts du XIIIe siècle, tells que les traits de Lambert de Lagny ou de Pierre d'Espagne à Paris, ceux de Guillaume de Sherwood ou la logique *Cum sit nostra* à Oxford. C'est la supposition […] qui se trouve au coeur des débats, tandis que la signifcation semble tenue hors du champ de réflexion ainsi ouvert, simplement posée comme un arrière-fond sur lequel se découpent les variations de référence des termes." Joël Biard, *Logique et théorie du signe au XIVe siècle* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1989), 15.

[179] Peter of Spain, *Summule logicales*, 80.

The purpose of the theory is to classify and thereby control for the way that the truth of a proposition depends on the variable usage of words in contexts.[180]

Although supposition is distinct from signification, they are not entirely separable. A word can signify without suppositing, for example if it is uttered by itself outside of a proposition, but it cannot supposit without first signifying. As this principle, common to all the early treatises, is formulated in the *Cum sit nostra*, a term supposits only when placed in a sentence; whereas it signifies whether it is placed in a sentence or outside.[181] Signification is essentially prior to supposition: in order for an utterance to pick out a particular thing, it must have first become a meaningful word. This is, effectively, a theoretical rationale for the expulsion of nonsense words from the domain of logic that has simply been asserted at the beginning of the treatises.

And yet there seems to be an exception to this rule: the third and strangest form of supposition, material.[182] *Suppositio materialis* is what takes place in a sentence on the order of

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[180] As Sten Ebbesen has written, terminism is the name of "a theory describing how the structure of a sentence indicates what kind of items its terms 'stand for' *(stant pro)* or 'suppone for' *(supponunt pro).* The notion of supposition is a genuinely Western invention." "The Dead Man Is Alive," *Synthese* 40, no. 1 (January 1, 1979): 45.

[181] "Terminus supponit quando ponitur in oratione; terminus significat sive ponitur in oratione sive extra oratione." de Rijk, *Logica Modernorum*, II.2.446.

[182] A series of important articles on material supposition have appeared in the last decades, beginning with Elizabeth Karger, "La Supposition materielle comme supposition significative: Paul de Venise, Paul de Pergula," in *English Logic in Italy in the 14th and 15th Centuries*, ed. Alfonso Maierù (Naples: Bibliopolis, 1982), 331–41. Cf. Stephen Read, "How Is Material Supposition Possible?," *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 8, no. 01 (1999): 1–20; Claude Panaccio, "Tarski et la suppositio materialis," *Philosophiques* 31, no. 2 (2004): 295; Claude Panaccio and Ernesto Perini-Santos, "Guillaume d'Ockham et la suppositio materialis," *Vivarium* 42, no. 2 (2004): 202–224; Calvin G. Normore, "Material Supposition and the Mental Language of Ockham's Summa Logicae," *Topoi* 16, no. 1 (1997). The indispensable account, to which my discussion is much indebted, is Irène Rosier-Catach, "La Suppositio materialis et la question de l'autonymie au Moyen Âge," in *Parler des Mots: le fait autonymique en discours*, ed. J. Authier, Marianne Doury, and Sandrine Reboul-Touré (Paris: Presses Sorbonne nouvelle, 2003).

man is a noun or *man is a monosyllable*, in which the proposition is true only insofar as the subject term *man* supposits for itself.[183] What the doctrine of material supposition tries to explain is what is sometimes called the *autonymous* use of a term. "Autonymy," in the terminology introduced by Rudolf Carnap and adopted notably by Josette Rey-Debove, is the use of a term as the name of itself.[184] Medieval Latin did not make use of quotation marks, by which a logician in our own time might indicate the "mention" as opposed to the "use" of a term, although the Old French article *ly* was sometimes imported into scholastic Latin in order to mark the occurrence of material supposition.[185] What is troubling about the autonymous use of a term is that in standing for itself the term appears to cease signifying its significatum. A term in material supposition does not supposit for what it signifies, inasmuch as the truth or falsity of *man is a monosyllable* has nothing to do with the nature of the rational mortal animal. Flying in the face of the principle that a word must first signify if it is going to supposit, the term in material supposition, in referring to itself, appears to break off its dependence on its signification and enter a realm in which it only supposits, and might as well be meaningless. So it would appear to Ockham, for

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[183] As we will see below, definitions of *suppositio materialis* became increasingly complex, largely because it became clear to later writers that the phenomenon could not be explained merely as a reference of the term to itself. Nonetheless this recursive quality is inseparable from material supposition in all its various definitions. There is a parallel discussion of autonymy in sacramental theology, where certain thinkers maintained that the distinguishing feature of a sacrament is that it is a sign that signifies itself: Lanfranc of Bec and his followers "soutenaient que le sacrement était à la fois *sacrae rei signum* et *sacrum secretum*, signifiant et signifié, et que c'était précisément la caractéristique du signe eucharistique de signifier non pas autre chose (selon le réquisit de la définition augustinienne), mais soi-même (*non aliud sed ipsum significat*)." Irène Rosier-Catach, *La Parole efficace: signe, rituel, sacré* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2004), 41.

[184] Cf. Rudolf Carnap, *Logische Syntax der Sprache* (Springer-Verlag, 1934); Josette Rey-Debove, *Le Métalangage: étude linguistique du discours sur le langage* (Dictionnaires Le Robert, 1978).

[185] As we will see below in the section on Paul of Venice.

example, who considers material supposition to be "non-significative."[186] But already the non-significative nature of words in material supposition is identified in the middle of the twelfth century by the grammarian Peter Helias. As he explains it, this variety of reference is known as *material* because what is picked out by its use is the material of the word itself. For, he says, the meaningful word can be distinguished from its material substrate. Considered in isolation, this substrate—possessed by every word—should be understood on the model of *blictrix:*

> *Dicendum est quod vocabula quandoque se ipsa nominant, ut cum dicitur, "Homo est nomen." Hic enim non de homine loquimur sed potius de hoc nomine "homo." Et hoc appellabant antiqui "materiale impositum," quod quid sit ut intelligas, materiale impositum est vox representans sepisam, id est, posita ad loquendum de seipsa et dicitur materiale impositum quia nomen, si ita contingit, representat materiam suam, id est, vocem que quasi materia preiacet ut inde fiat nomen. Ex voce namque fit nomen per impositionem. Quod inde videri potest quia "blictrix" vox est tamen nondum nomen est, sed si alicui rei imponitur nomen erit.*[187]
>
> It should be said that words sometimes serve as the names of themselves, as when someone says "man is a name." For we do not say this about man but about this noun "man." And this the ancients [i.e., Priscian] called *imposed materially*, which you should understand as follows: material imposition consists in an utterance representing itself, that is, imposed to speak about itself. It is called *imposed materially* because the noun, taken in this instance, represents its own material, that is, the utterance which like a material precedes the noun, which is made out of it. For the noun is made out of the utterance by means of imposition. And this can be seen in the case of *blictrix*, which is an utterance although it is not yet a noun, but it will become a name if it is imposed on some thing.
>
> In *homo est nomen*, the word *homo* is used as though it did not yet have a signification.

Material supposition picks out that aspect of a word that is no more than *blictrix*, that is, its *figura vocis* or sound-shape. Now *homo* is a meaningful word being used in a way that brackets its significative function. But if the word *homo* in the proposition *homo est nomen* has been

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[186] On the complexities of Ockham's position, however, cf. Mary Sirridge, "Grammarians on Language About Language," Unpublished essay. I thank Professor Sirridge for sharing her essay with me in manuscript.

[187] Petrus Helias, *Summa super Priscianum*, ed. Leo Reilly (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1993), 193.

reduced to what it has in common with *blictrix*, the question arises as to why *blictrix* itself could not take its place in this proposition. In fact, *blictrix* is not a noun, so the proposition *blictrix est nomen* would be false. Still, its falsity is the sort of thing that logic can account for; and in any case, to produce a true proposition it would only be necessary to introduce a negation: *blictrix non est nomen*. For that matter, what about a proposition such as is regularly found in the treatises we have been examining, *buba est vox non-significativa*? At least at first glance, this sentence is proof that a nonsense word is fully capable of appearing within a proposition, and that the discipline that determines the truth and falsity of propositions is for its part fully capable of treating a proposition within which it appears.

In their elaboration of the doctrine of material supposition, thirteenth-century logicians found themselves unable to avoid the very words whose exclusion constituted the foundation of their discipline. Once supposition had been distinguished from signification, it became possible to conceive of supposition without signification: of propositions made up of nonsense words. The logicians realized that they would have to address the point directly.

2. Roger Bacon

Responding to this new sense among his contemporaries that *voces non-significativae* might be able to appear in propositions after all, the Franciscan friar Roger Bacon devoted a section of his *Compendium studii theologiae* to the appearance of the word *buba* in propositions on the order of *buba est vox non-significativa*. Composed at Oxford in 1292, and in large part a reworking of material from the section *de signis* of his *Opus maius* (c. 1267), the *Compendium*—as Thomas

Maloney has put it—"in spite of its title, is primarily a treatise on the notion of signification."[188] Its treatment of *vox* famously departs from the sorts of discussion we have encountered among terminist logicians, insofar as Bacon situates human utterance within what aspires to be a complete account of signs, vocal and otherwise.[189] A careful reader of a treatise of Augustine's scarcely known in the Middle Ages, the markedly Stoic *De dialectica*, and of Augustine's more widely known *De doctrina christiana,* Bacon is interested not first of all in *vox* but in *signum,* the sign, which is just any thing that makes something known to the intellect that apprehends it.[190] In Bacon's Augustinian definition of the sign, s*ignum autem est illud quod oblatum sensui vel intellectui aliquid designat ipsi intellectui*.[191] Insofar as damp earth bespeaks rain's having fallen, lactating breasts indicate motherhood, and barking the presence of a dog, these are all signs, for they allow something besides themselves to be known. *Vox*, in a first instance, is also a sign of this sort: a thing that allows other things to be known, even apart from whatever it specifically

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[188] Thomas Maloney, "Roger Bacon on the Significatum of Words," in *Archéologie Du Signe*, ed. Lucie Brind'Amour and Eugence Vance (Toronto: Institut Pontifical d'Études Médiévales, 1982), 188.

[189] There are several excellent studies of Bacon's theory of signification, which I rely on here: Alain de Libera, "Roger Bacon et la logique," in *Roger Bacon and the Sciences*, ed. Jeremiah Hackett (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 103–32; Maloney, "The Semiotics of Roger Bacon"; Maloney, "Roger Bacon on the Significatum of Words"; Jan Pinborg, "Roger Bacon on Signs: A Newly Discovered Part of the Opus Maius," in *Sprache und Erkenntnis im Mittelalter*, ed. Jan P. Beckmann and Wolfgang Kluxen, vol. 1, Miscellanea mediaevalia 13 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1981), 403–12; Karin Margareta Fredborg, "Roger Bacon on 'Impositio vocis ad significandum'," in *English Logic and Semantics from the End of the Twelfth Century to the Time of Ockham and Burleigh*, ed. H.A.G. Braakhuis, C.H. Kneepkens, and L. M. de Rijk, Artistarium supplementa I (Nijmegen: Ingenium, 1981), 167–91. In her article on material supposition, Rosier-Catach pays special attention to Bacon's treatment of *buba* in a discussion that anticipates my own. Cf. her "La Suppositio materialis et la question de l'autonymie au Moyen Âge," 89f.

[190] Cf. Pinborg, "Roger Bacon on Signs: A Newly Discovered Part of the Opus Maius," 405. On Bacon's relation to the *De doctrina christiana*, cf. Maloney, "The Semiotics of Roger Bacon," 151f. An overview of medieval sign theory will be found in Alfonso Maierù, "'Signum' dans la culture médiévale," in *Sprache und Erkenntnis im Mittelalter*, ed. Jan P. Beckmann and Wolfgang Kluxen, vol. 1, Miscellanea mediaevalia 13 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1981).

[191] *De signis* 82 Cf. Maloney, "The Semiotics of Roger Bacon," 124.

names.[192] From the mere pronunciation of an utterance a great deal can be gathered, starting with the fact that someone is there speaking it. In the section of the *Compendium* in which I am interested here, devoted to the question of whether an utterance signifies before it has been imposed to signify anything in particular (*an ante impositionem vox significet aliquid*), Bacon confines his discussion to two things that can be gathered from the production of any *vox*. The first is that there is a *species* of the utterance in the speaker's mind, a model or figure of the sound that must exist if the speaker has been able to speak it. The second is the form of that *species* itself. In other words, when I say *homo* you know that I have in my mind some idea of the sound *homo* and moreover that that idea has the same form as does the sound, namely the form of *homo*.[193] In this manner, *vox* signifies independently of its having been imposed as the name of anything.

Having established as much, Bacon now gives an example of a word that can be said to signify in this way: *buba*. The example is carefully chosen, as it is meant to indicate that an utterance will signify even if it has not been imposed to signify anything. If someone were to say

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[192] Bacon's opening of logic toward Aristotelian natural science is already notable, as Alain de Libera remarks, in his early and still overwhelmingly terminist *Summulae dialectices*: "l'auteur des SD n'est pas un simple 'dialecticien,' mais un philosophe intéressé par les nouveaux savoirs aristotéliciens. Tout en plongeant leurs racines logiciennes dans l'univers oxonien, les SD sont donc aussi à la fois imprégnées de la culture des maîtres ès arts parisiens, comme le montre la présence insistante de thèmes couramment développés dans les *Introductions à la philosophie* des artistes parisienes des années 1250 […] et riches de la culture accumulée par Bacon durant ses années d'étude des écrits naturels d'Aristote." de Libera, "Roger Bacon et la logique," 111.

[193] These passages are discussed in Maloney, "Roger Bacon on the Significatum" 191. Jan Pinborg summarizes the corresponding doctrine in the *De signis*: "According to Baconian physics and epistemology every object produces species through which it can be known. [...] The *vox* produces *species* of itself which are received by the mind through the ears; in the same way the speaker produces a *species* of the word in his mind before he actually utters it. [...] The vox, now, is a natural sign of this species in all three senses of 'natural sign': it infers it (when you hear a word you can infer that its species is in the mind of the person expressing it), it is obviously conform with it, since the exterior word is formed according to its interior counterpart, and it is caused by it for the same reason." Pinborg, "Roger Bacon on Signs: A Newly Discovered Part of the Opus Maius," 408.

buba, all sorts of things could be gathered from the utterance: for example, the fact that its speaker has a model of the sound-shape *buba* in his mind, and that this model itself takes the form *buba*. The consequence of his new account of utterance as a natural sign is thus that, strictly speaking, there can be no such thing as *vox non-significativa*: even *buba* must be said to signify. If every vocalization signifies, even if no more than its own model in its speaker's mind, there can be no truly nonsensical utterance of the sort Boethius had identified.

Bacon is fully aware that he is using a terminist example of a nonsense word in order to controvert the doctrine in which it had served as an example. In the section *de voce* of his early *Summulae dialectices*, probably written in 1252, Bacon had proceeded (with minor embellishments) on the model of the terminist tracts we have already seen.[194] Sound is distinguished into vocal and non-vocal, and vocal sound is distinguished into significative and non-significative, so that he announces in familiar fashion that: *[vox] non significativa est per quam nihil repraesentatur, ut 'buba,' etc.*[195] But his discussion of *buba* in the *Compendium* is original, and altogether different. If Bacon retains the word *buba* in this late work even though he no longer thinks that there can be a word *per quam nihil repraesentatur*, it is because he does nevertheless continue to acknowledge that a word can be unimposed. Although he believes that every utterance signifies naturally, he is not so rash as to think that it must also signify conventionally. But he devotes to the conventional signification of words (*significatio ad placitum*) a discussion that is just as distinctive as is his theory of natural signification.

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[194] Sten Ebbesen underscores Bacon's dependence on William of Sherwood, i.e., as opposed to Peter of Spain. Pinborg, "The English Contribution to Logic before Ockham," 27.

[195] Alain de Libera, "Les Summulae dialectices de Roger Bacon I-II. De termino, De enuntiatione," *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Âge* 53 (1986): 222. The novelty of the *De signis* with respect to the *Summulae* is remarked by Maloney, "The Semiotics of Roger Bacon"; de Libera, "Roger Bacon et la logique."

Bacon had by this time abandoned supposition theory altogether. In the first place, he had rejected the basic terminist definition of signification: that a word signifies what it is imposed to signify. As we have seen, his whole program consists in a proliferation of the possibilities of what a word can signify apart from its imposition. But in the second place, he also refused to distinguish between signification and supposition, the very distinction on which terminist logic rests. In the *Summulae dialectices*, Bacon treats supposition at length, and though his divisions are somewhat unorthodox, his exposition accords to a great extent with those of the terminist textbooks. Some fifteen years later, in the *De signis*, he continues to use the word *suppositio* but already with some dissatisfaction.[196] By the time he composed the *Compendium* he had abandoned the word altogether. This is because he had ceased to believe that there is any difference between what a word means in isolation and what it means in a proposition.

His reasons for this go to the heart of his new theory of signification. As I have noted already, Bacon gives an unusual emphasis to the will of the speaker in determining the conventional signification of a word. He takes the Boethian formulation "ad placitum" in a strong sense: a conventionally imposed word doesn't just signify whatever-it-is that it has been imposed on, it signifies exactly and only what the speaker wills it to. Bacon's intentionalist doctrine of signification is well-known chiefly because of what he concludes on its basis: as we have seen, if it is the will of the speaker that assigns a meaning to a word, the speaker probably has in mind the thing he wishes to speak about, rather than his own idea of it, and thus *vox* will refer directly to *res extra* rather than to an *intellectus*. But no less important is the corollary notion of *reimposition* that is embedded in this doctrine. For Bacon, it is not that a word has a given meaning, and then comes to stand for various things depending on its usage; rather, with

[196] Cf. *De signis* 52

each new use of a word, its speaker newly intends to name a thing, or in other words reimposes the word he is using. If *homo* refers to something different in *homo currit* and *homo est species*, this is because in each case it is imposed anew: it is not that its signification remains the same while it is applied to a different sort of thing, but that its signification itself changes with each imposition.[197]

All of this emerges in a discussion of what other thinkers would call material supposition but which Bacon, having abandoned the concept of supposition altogether, does not. In the following passage, Bacon imagines an objection that might be lodged against his conclusion that, while words signify *naturally* apart from their imposition, they do not also signify conventionally except insofar as they are imposed:

> *Cum dicitur "buba est vox," item haec vox "buba" ante impositionem, non considerata significatione naturali, aut est vox significativa aut non significativa; de quolibet enim affirmatio vel negatio. Si "buba" est vox significativa, habetur propositum. Si non, haec oratio erit vera: "buba est vox non significativa." Ergo haec oratio est significativa; ergo partes eius omnes significant.*[198]
>
> When "buba is an utterance" is spoken, again this utterance "buba," before imposition and prescinding from its natural signification, either is a vocal sound that signifies or that does not, for of anything there is either affirmation or denial. If "buba" is a significative utterance, the objection is granted. If not, this expression will be true: "buba is a non-significative utterance." Therefore, this expression signifies; therefore, all of its parts signify.

Bacon's nameless detractor suggests that *buba* must somehow be able to signify conventionally, even though it has not been imposed on anything, because it can appear as the subject term in a

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[197] "Bacon considère que ce transfert revient à 'une nouvelle imposition' du terme, qui 'rénove et élargit sa signification' par rapport à sa signification originelle, puisqu'effectivement elle équivaut à lui donner un second signifié…." Rosier-Catach, "La Suppositio materialis et la question de l'autonymie au Moyen Âge," 51. Cf. also Irène Rosier-Catach, *La Parole comme acte: sur la grammaire et la sémantique au XIIIe siècle* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1994), 131–7. Cf. *De signis* 90-1.

[198] Roger Bacon, *Compendium studii theologiae*, trans. and ed. Thomas Maloney (Leiden: Brill, 1988), 64–6.

proposition, and only *vox significativa ad placitum* is supposed to be able to appear in a proposition. One or the other of the propositions *buba is significative* or *buba is not significative* must be true, and either way *buba* must be significative, even though it is precisely an example of non-significative utterance.

Implicit in Bacon's reply to this objection is his rejection of the difference between signification and supposition. He declares that

> *Quod enim possint tales orationes esse verae et significativae, non potest fieri, nisi post impositionem huius vocis "buba" sibi ipsi.*[199]
>
> Such propositions could not become true and significative except after the utterance *buba* had already been imposed on itself.

Recurring as is his custom to the will of the speaker, Bacon declares that in a proposition such as *buba est vox* the speaker intends *buba* to name its own utterance. When a speaker uses *buba* in this way, what he is doing is imposing the utterance on a thing: its own vocal material. In short, as soon as an unimposed word appears in a proposition, it becomes imposed: so that in *buba est vox*, the word *buba* has ceased to be an example of what it is meant to exemplify. According to Bacon's theory, speakers are continually imposing and reimposing words whenever they use them, and so what occurs in *buba est vox* is not the supposition of a meaningless word but the use of a word to signify itself. The phenomenon that terminists call material supposition is not, for Bacon, distinct in any non-trivial way from any other use of a word, since it involves just like every other act of speaking the use of an utterance to name a thing: in this case, itself.

Nonetheless, Bacon also imagines a case in which the proposition *buba est vox* occurs without *buba* being imposed to signify itself. But even then, nothing would be demonstrated, for

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[199] Ibid., 66.

insofar as it contains unimposed words a series of words cannot attain to the status of a meaningful proposition:

> *Dicendum quod haec vocum congeries non facit orationem significativam et nhil significat, quia prima pars huius sermonis, scilicet, "buba," est vox non significativa ante impositionem; ergo tota oratio est non significativa ab una parte non significativa. Sicut si scribantur hae duae dictiones "est" et "vox," et praeponatur eis lapis vel lignum vel pomum in eodem pergameno in quo illa duo vocabula sequuntur, tota congeries posita in pergameno nihil significaret.*[200]
>
> It must be said that this conglomeration of utterance [*vocum* congeries] does not make up a significative proposition and signifies nothing, because the first part of this expression, namely, *buba*, is a non-significative utterance before its imposition; therefore the entire expression is non-significative because one of its parts is non-significative. It is as if these two words "is" and "utterance" were written down, and a rock or a chunk of wood or a piece of fruit were placed in front of them on the same parchment where those words would follow it: in that case, the whole conglomeration placed on the parchment would signify nothing.

Insofar as *buba* remains a *vox non-significativa*, it is no more than a *vocum congeries*, an amassment of vocal sounds, a mere thing, that is of a different order of reality than are the terms of a proposition. Thus, unless *buba* has been imposed on itself, *buba est vox* is not a proposition but a collection of physical objects. The physical object *buba* fails to attain to the status of a subject to its predicate, and neither can the words *est vox* serve as a predicate, so that there is no proposition at all. In short, Bacon maintains that the utterance apart from its imposition is a thing on the order of a rock or a piece of wood. But, just like a rock or a piece of wood, even the unimposed utterance signifies, because its presence makes certain things known. Once it appears within a proposition, this still naturally significative thing becomes conventionally significative to boot. Bacon thus denies the possibility of any thoroughly nonsensical utterance, and insists that for a word to appear in a proposition it must be meaningful both naturally and conventionally.

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[200] Ibid.

In discarding the distinction between signification and supposition and denying that any word can be used in a sentence without imposition, Bacon already provides what Irène Rosier-Catach has called an "elegant solution" to a problem that would continue to dog fourteenth-century thinkers, who did not follow Bacon's lead.[201] And indeed, some fifteen years after the composition of the *Compendium*, one of Roger Bacon's closest readers was not at all convinced.

3. Walter Burley

The logical writings of Walter Burley represent the rejuvenation of terminism after a decades-long slumber. Although it had not been eclipsed, as at Paris, by *grammatica speculativa*, at Oxford there had been very little new work done on the theory of terms after Bacon wrote his *Summulae dialectices* in the early 1250s.[202] At the beginning of the fourteenth century, Burley—who was deeply familiar with the early Oxford logical textbooks[203]—began to compose new

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[201] "Il nous semble qu'à la fin du XIIIe siècle Bacon avait déjà proposé une solution élégante au problème que les logiciens terministes du siècle suivant s'attacheront à résoundre de différentes manières, sans avoir à raisonner dans le cadre de l'alternative rigide dans laquelle ils le traiteront, de faire de l'usage autonyme soit une propriété intrinsèque et originelle du terme soit une propriété purement contextuelle, et en permettant que l'acception autonymique soit un usage *significatif* et volontairement attribué." Rosier-Catach, "La Suppositio materialis et la question de l'autonymie au Moyen Âge," 51.

[202] As Pinborg writes, "We do not know of any new *Summulae* being written in the second half of the 13th century, but the old texts were bring copied continuously. A new period of composition seems to start with Walter Burley in the years just after 1300." Pinborg, "The English Contribution to Logic before Ockham," 27. Ebbesen has argued at greater length that "there was a continuous use of old-fashioned *summulae* in England throughout the thirteenth century and continuous exercise in old forms of logical analysis at the University of Oxford." Ebbesen, "OXYNAT," 4–5. Cf. also Courtenay, *Schools and Scholars in Fourteenth-Century England*, 228.

[203] "Another fact pointing toward conservatism in England is that around 1300 the British still care to copy and/or revise old-fashioned textbooks of logic like *Logica 'Cum sit nostra'*—in one manuscript called *Summulae ad modum Oxoniae*. Part of, or at least a regular companion of these *Summulae* is a treatise on fallacies that one manuscript calls *Fallaciae ad modum Oxoniae*. [...] One teacher who used it as the basic text for a course on fallacies was Burley." Ebbesen, "OXYNAT," 2–3. Cf. also de Rijk, *Logica modernorum* II.1.445-6: "the second commentary [...]

works in the style that Bacon had rejected. Although he is less well-known today than some of his contemporaries, Burley was among the most influential philosophers of his time, engaging in a longstanding debate with Ockham that shaped the latter's ideas to a great extent and defending a sometimes derided position of "extreme realism."[204] Burley's logical writings are interesting in their own right, however, not least in connection with the question of the status of *vox non-significativa* and the nature of *suppositio materialis*. Late in his career, in the important longer version of the *De puritate artis logicae* written in about 1326, Burley would develop an unusually complex taxonomy of material supposition, and indeed he paid close attention to the phenomenon in many of his works, discussing it already at notable length in the early *De*

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found in this manuscript presents an adaptation by Walther [sic] of Burley of our treatise *Cum sit nostra*."

[204] The indispensable work on Burley remains Agustín Uña Juárez, *La filosofía del siglo XIV: contexto cultural de Walter Burley* (Madrid: Real Monasterio de Escorial, 1978). An overview of Burley's life and works will be found in Jennifer Ottman and Rega Wood, "Walter of Burley: His Life and Works," *Vivarium* 37, no. 1 (1999): 1–23. On Burley's influence, cf. Uña Juárez, *La filosofía del siglo XIV*, 100–15. On his ontological commitments and position within the debate over universals, cf. Ivan Boh, "Walter Burley," in *Individuation in Scholasticism: The Later Middle Ages and the Counter-Reformation, 1150-1650*, ed. Jorge J. E. Gracia (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 347–72; Laurent Cesalli, "Le réalisme propositionnel de Walter Burley," *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Âge* 68, no. 1 (2001): 155–221; Alessandro Conti, "Ontology in Walter Burley's Last Commentary on the Ars Vetus," *Franciscan Studies* 50, no. 1 (1990): 121–176; Stephan Meier-Oeser, "Walter Burley's 'propositio in Re' and the Systematization of the 'ordo Significationis'," in *Philosophical Debates at Paris in the Early Fourteenth Century*, ed. S Brown, T Dewender, and T Kobusch (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 483–505; Elizabeth Karger, "Walter Burley's Realism," *Vivarium* 37, no. 1 (1999): 24–40; Alain de Libera, *La querelle des universaux* (Paris: Seuil, 1996), chap. 6. On the opposition between Burley and Ockham, cf. Michael Wagner, "Supposition-Theory and the Problem of Universals," *Franciscan Studies* 25 (1981): 385–414; Elizabeth Karger, "Mental Sentences According to Burley and to the Early Ockham," *Vivarium* 34, no. 2 (1996): 192–230. Their disagreement on a point of supposition theory is the subject of Paul Desmond Henry, "Suppositio and Significatio in English Logic," in *English Logic and Semantics from the End of the Twelfth Century to the Time of Ockham and Burleigh*, ed. Henk A. G. Braakhuis, C. H. J. M. Kneepkens, and L. M. De Rijk (Nijmegen: Ingenium, 1981), 361–87.

suppositionibus, from 1302.[205] What interests me here, however, are not his considered treatments of the varieties of supposition but a stray remark he makes at the beginning of one of his commentaries on the *De interpretatione*.

The *Commentarius in librum aristotelis Perihermeneias* or *Middle Commentary*, written in the first decade of the fourteenth century, while Burley was at Oxford's Merton College or shortly thereafter, is the third of four commentaries he devoted to Aristotle's treatise.[206] The work is a close explication of the *De interpretatione*, proceeding line by line and addressing questions that arise along the way. In his remarks on 16a3-8, Burley takes Bacon's side in the *magna altercatio*, arriving at the Franciscan's conclusion and following his argumentation to get there.[207] A word signifies *res extra* rather than *passio animae*, he writes, because the impositor wishes to name a thing, not a concept, and the will of the impositor is what determines the *significatio* of a word. Nevertheless, to hear a word spoken is to be able to gather certain things in addition to what it has been imposed to signify:

> *Potest enim vox esse nota alicuius cui vox non imponitur ad significandum. Nomen enim vel verbum prolatum est nota vel signum per quod proferens habet similitudinem in suo intellectu istius rei quae significatur per nomen vel per verbum vel quod ipse aliqua passione afficitur erga eum ad quem loquitur, videlicet amore vel odio.*[208]

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[205] Walter Burley, "Walter Burleigh's Treatise De suppositionibus and Its Influence on William of Ockham," ed. Stephen Brown, *Franciscan Studies* 32 (1972): 15–64; Walter Burley, *De puritate artis logicae. Tractus longior*, ed. Philotheus Boehner (St. Bonaventure, N.Y: Franciscan Institute, 1955).

[206] Walter Burley, "Walter Burley's Middle Commentary on Aristotle's Perihermeneias," ed. Stephen Brown, *Franciscan Studies* 33 (1973): 45–134. Translations are my own. On the dating of the work, cf. Brown's introductory comments to this edition and Ottman and Wood, "Walter of Burley."

[207] Cf. I.14-16. A perspicuous overview of these sections will be found in Ana María Mora-Márquez, "La ontología realista de Walter Burleigh y su relación con las teorías del significado y de la suposición," in *Sobre la pureza del arte de la lógica: Tratado breve*, by Walter Burleigh, trans. Ana María Mora-Márquez (Bogota: CESO, 2009), 173–227. As Mora-Marquez points out, although Burley appears to support the traditionalist position at various points, these are only moments in a larger argument that decides for the new position.

[208] Burley, "Middle Commentary," I.16.

> For an utterance can be a sign of something on which it is not imposed to signify. For a noun or a verb, when it is pronounced, is a sign by which it is made known that the speaker has a similitude in his understanding of that thing which is signified by the noun or verb, or that he is affected by some feeling toward the person to whom he is speaking, for instance love or hatred.

Even if you do not know the language someone is speaking, Burley writes, you can gather from the mere fact that a person is pronouncing words that he has an idea in his mind of whatever it is he is talking about. You can sense whether the person loves or hates you. Finally, you can be sure that the speaker is a human being.[209]

Burley concludes, with Bacon, that *vox* is imposed to signify things directly. He also appears to subscribe to the argument that Bacon had made under the heading of the question *an ante impositionem vox significet aliquid*, for as we have seen Bacon do, Burley lists various ways in which an utterance allows things to be known independently of its imposition. But this appearance is misleading. In fact, Burley is only talking, in this passage, about words that have already been imposed. Burley declares that when you hear a *vox* that has been imposed to signify something, you can also gather other things from it, but he has nothing at all to say about what happens when you hear *vox non-significativa.* Even as he adopts Bacon's reasoning, Burley does not commit himself to the position that *vox* is in itself significant, only to the idea that once it has been imposed it also signifies naturally. But what about the unimposed word? Does it too signify naturally? Burley does not say. But his silence is conspicuous, and not only because he has imported an argument that Bacon makes about words on the order of *buba* into a discussion that specifically excludes them. For it is not as though Burley is uninterested in the question of nonsense words. To the contrary, he pays them a great deal of attention. As his terminist predecessors had done, Burley begins his commentary by invoking *voces non-significativae*,

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[209] I will return to these passages in greater detail below.

namely, *bu*, *ba*, and *buba*. But just as he uses Bacon's arguments for his own very different purpose, so he takes up these words in a way all his own.

The nonsense words appear in a section devoted to establishing the nature of the logical term. A term, Burley writes, is a *vox*. But here he admits a doubt. It is the first *dubium* introduced in the commentary, the first matter of controversy to be entertained:

> *Sed tunc est dubium : Cum eadem vox non posit bis proferri, si vox prolata esset pars nominis, videtur quod idem nomen non posit bis proferri, et sic nulla propositio prolata posset converti, et sic in syllogismo secundum eius esse in prolatione essent sex termini.*[210]
>
> But a doubt arises: since the same utterance cannot be pronounced twice, if the pronounced utterance is part of the noun, it would seem that the same noun cannot be pronounced twice, and thus that no pronounced proposition can be converted, and thus that insofar as the syllogism exists in pronunciation it would contain six terms.

An utterance is a unique occurrence: a particular sound that comes out of someone's mouth at a particular time and place, never again to be encountered. If a logical term is an utterance, then, it too would seem to be unrepeatable. But this would present a grave problem for syllogistic reasoning, which as we have seen rests on the repetition of the same term now as a subject, now as a predicate. Burley's point is that logic depends for its operation on the capacity of a term to appear multiple times without ceasing to be itself. For if the term *man* is not the term *man,* nothing at all is demonstrated by the syllogism

> Man is an animal;
> But this is a man;
> therefore, this is an animal.

Since Burley has already identified the term as a *vox*, what he must establish is that *vox* can be repeated and remain identical to itself. His reply to the doubt is that the *vox* of which a term is composed is not simply *vox*. This gesture does not at first appear unusual, as it resumes

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[210] Burley, "Middle Commentary," I.05.

an ancient interest not in the utterance as such but in the elements into which it can be broken.[211] Boethius, for example, had explained that Aristotle speaks of *ea quae sunt in voce*, those things that are in the voice, because he means to limit his discussion to certain specific forms of *vox*, namely nouns and verbs.[212] In the twelfth century, Peter Abelard distinguished between *sermo* and *vox*, declaring only the former to be the object of logic.[213] Indeed, it is in exactly this connection that we have seen the terminist logicians introduce *buba* and *blictrix*: in order to specify that logic deals not with *vox* as such but only with *vox* possessed of the differentia *significativa*. But in fact Burley is establishing something else than what these others had. He claims that what makes up a term is not utterance itself but a resemblance obtaining among various utterances:

> *Ad istud potest dici, salvando trinitatem terminorum in syllogismo, quod ista vox prolata quae est pars nominis non est aliqua vox una numero sed est unum commune ad istam vocem prolatam et ad quamlibet vocem consimilem. Circa quod est intelligendum quod ista vox 'homo' prolata a te et illa vox 'homo' prolata a me magis conveniunt quam ista vox 'homo' et ista vox 'animal.'*[214]
>
> To this objection it can be said, preserving the trinity of terms in the syllogism, that this pronounced utterance which is part of the noun is not some singular utterance, but is rather a single thing common to that pronounced utterance and to any other utterance similar to it. On account of which it should be understood that this utterance *homo* pronounced by you and that utterance *homo* pronounced by me accord with one another more than do this utterance *homo* and this utterance *animal*.

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[211] As Daniel Heller-Roazen has shown, the ancient authorities, both grammatical and logical, encounter *vox* only insofar as it is abstracted: "D'Aristote à Donat, et de Donat à Priscien, un procédé demeure constant: toujours, la voix se présente au savoir pour qu'il découvre en elle un élément de son art. […] Obstinément, on ne cherche dans la voix que ce qui saurait s'en détacher. Idée, mot, lettre, rationalité, ou littéralité, chaque terme s'abstrait du son et de son lieu; plus exactement, chaque terme vaut dans la mesure exacte où il s'en abstrait." Daniel Heller-Roazen, "De voce," in *Du bruit à l'oeuvre: Vers une esthétique du désordre*, ed. Juan Rigoli and Christopher Lucken (Geneva: Metispresses, 2013).

[212] Cf. Chapter I, *supra*.

[213] On Abelard's semantics, cf. Christopher Martin, "Imposition and Essence: What's New in Abaelard's Theory of Meaning?," in *The Word in Medieval Logic, Theology and Psychology*, ed. Tetsuro Shimizu and Charles Burnett (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009).

[214] Burley, "Middle Commentary," I.06.

The *vox* as such, as "itself," has no part in the term. The term is formed out of a *communitas* or *conveniencia* or *consimilitudo* among multiple utterances. This *communitas* alone, and not the *voces* among which it obtains, is the *materia* of the term. Nothing except what is fully iterable in the utterance will matter in the constitution of the elements of a proposition. Everything else about it, all the unrepeatable characteristics of a particular vocal sound, Burley separates out from the *vox communis* that is the *materia nominis et verbis*. But even as he excludes the *vox singularis* from consideration, he draws attention to the variability of utterances produced by different speakers at different times and in different places.

This distinction between *vox singularis* and *vox communis* is one I have not encountered elsewhere, and it is the basis of Burley's whole theory of terms. Burley stands apart from the other logicians we have examined insofar as he defines the *vox* that is pertinent to logic—i.e., the kind of *vox* that can be used as a term—not as utterance that is joined with a signification but as a *consimilitudo* among multiple *voces*. And indeed he specifically distinguishes his isolation of the *commune ens* in the utterance from any question of meaningfulness, maintaining that significative and non-significative utterances alike are able to accord with one another in this resemblance. Immediately after he has declared that the utterance *homo* goes together with another utterance of *homo* more than it does with the utterance *animal*, Burley turns to nonsense words:

> *Similiter, 'haec vox "bu" prolata a me et haec vox "bu" prolata ab alio magis convenient quam haec vox "bu" et haec vox "ba". Habent igitur aliquod commune ens quod non est commune istis, scilicet "bu" et "ba."*[215]
>
> Likewise, this utterance *bu* spoken by me and this utterance *bu* spoken by someone else accord with one another more than do this utterance *bu* and this utterance *ba*. Therefore

[215] Ibid.

> they have a certain common being which is not common to those others, namely *bu* and *ba*.

In citing *bu* and *ba*, familiar terminist examples of *vox non-significativa*, Burley makes explicit that he is interested in the utterance not insofar as it is meaningful but insofar as it conforms to other utterances. The *commune ens* is indifferent to sense or nonsense, even as it isolates something in the utterance that is distinguishable from the mere separated noise of different vocalizations issuing at different times and in different ways.

In short, although in citing *bu* and *ba* in the first pages of his commentary Burley appears to be following the conventions of the Oxford terminist tradition in which he is steeped, in fact he uses these examples not to distinguish *vox significativa* from *vox non-significativa* but in order to reveal the dimension in which they cannot be told apart. The perversity of this gesture should not be overlooked: in defining the term Burley reaches, without apology, for an example that has been transmitted to him as nothing else than an example of what is not and cannot be a term. For *bu* and *ba* not only provide him with examples of the material out of which a term might be made; they themselves take on the status of full-fledged terms. Without acknowledging that they exist for no other reason than to exemplify what cannot be used in a proposition, Burley begins using *bu* and *ba* in the commentary in just that way. Indeed, the first four examples of propositions he adduces contain either *bu* or *buba*.

Having identified the material of the term, Burley specifies that this *commune ens* can already take part in a proposition even before it has been assigned to name anything. A *vox non-significativa* no less than a *vox significativa* can supposit:

> *Nec est solum reperire unum tale commune in vocibus significativis sed etiam in vocibus non-significativis. Unde aliquid est commune huic voci 'bu' quae profertur a me et huic voci 'bu' quae profertur a te, et pro tali communi verificatur ista 'Bu est bu.'*[216]

[216] Ibid., I.07.

> Nor is such a common being only to be found in significative utterances, but also in non-significative utterances. Thus there is something common to this utterance *bu* which is pronounced by me and to this utterance *bu* which is pronounced by you, and on account of this common thing the truth of the proposition *bu is bu* can be demonstrated.

Bu est bu is admissible and moreover true, on Burley's account, because both *bu* and *bu* naturally supposit for what is common to both of them. This resemblance is not a form of signification. While Burley subscribes to Bacon's intentionalist account of imposition, so that the signification of a word depends on the will of a speaker, he implies here that supposition occurs apart from the will of any speaker: there is already supposition *before* anyone utters a proposition, insofar as singular utterances in the world resemble one another and thus can stand for what is common to all of them. As he says, *voces singulares universaliter supponunt pro communibus*: singular utterances stand for what is common to them and their likes, whenever they are pronounced. The stronger resemblance between this *bu* and that *bu* than between this *bu* and that *ba* is not a matter of meaning or reference but of *conveniens*, a pattern to which disparate utterances are reducible. In the proposition *bu est bu* it is not, Burley thinks, that a speaker intends both *bu* and *bu* to name "the utterance *bu*," so that we would be confronted here with the imposition of the word, as Bacon would have argued. Rather, the proposition merely draws out the self-identity of the term insofar as it is a term, that is, something made out of what is common to both utterances. Thus, in *bu est bu*, each singular utterance supposits for a *vox communis* that is one, without the intervention of any will to signify; and the proposition is true, without prejudice to the presence of nonsense words in it.

In the final lines of section I.07, Burley wraps up his remarks on the *commune ens* and on the possibility of supposition without signification by bringing to light a distinction that might otherwise escape notice. He has indicated that in *buba est buba* the subject term has personal

supposition. In other words, when the term stands for its material as a term, that which is common to both *buba* and *buba*, the supposition that takes place is not material. Burley now makes this point explicit:

> *Unde dico quod aliam suppositionem habet subiectum in ista "Buba est dissylabum" et aliam in ista "Buba est buba," quia in prima habet suppositionem materialem secundum quod est vera et in secunda suppositionem personalem*.[217]
>
> I maintain that the subject term has a different supposition in the proposition *buba is disyllabic* than it does in the proposition *buba is buba*, because in the first it has material supposition insofar as it is true and in the second it has personal supposition insofar as it is true.

Although in both cases it appears to be *buba* itself that is referred to, the subject terms in *buba est buba* and in *buba est disyllabum* do not have the same supposition. It is here that Burley's unusual definition of the materiality of the term becomes consequential for his theory of supposition. There are two ways in which a term might refer to its own utterance, because the utterance in question can be either *vox communis* or *vox singularis*. Material supposition occurs when a term in a proposition stands for itself as *vox singularis*. In his use of the proposition *buba est dissylabum* to exemplify material supposition, Burley follows convention, but the example is misleading to the extent that the *commune ens* for which it might also stand (in personal supposition) would itself appear to have two syllables. But this is not what he is talking about. As he presents it, *buba has two syllables* is true not because *buba*, *buba*, and *buba* can all be seen to have two syllables, but just because this *buba* does. Had he wished, he might have said that material supposition is what takes place in *buba is said loudly*, *buba is said with a regional accent*, *buba is stuttered*, and so forth.[218] Insofar as *buba est disyllabum* is true, the subject term

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[217] Ibid.

[218] Cf. the late twelfth-century Priscian commentary described by Karin Margarita Fredborg: "His example of the freedom from Latin rules in the case of French words is both humorous and extraordinary, the non-sense word '*buba*' and the pronunciation of this word—'*buuba,*' '*bubaa*,'

refers only to this one unrepeatable utterance *buba,* which is not an instance of the term but a mere *vox singularis*. What this means is that *buba* does not stand for itself. It supposits for nothing else than what distinguishes *buba* from *buba,* for *buba* to the extent (and only to the extent) that it is not *buba*. Or, to put it the other way around, *bu* in material supposition stands for *bu* to the extent that it is indistinguishable from *ba*. Material supposition is the use of a term to stand for a difference. It is not the autonymous use of a term after all: for it is not the use of a term as the name of itself. It is what takes place when a term stands for itself insofar as it is not a term and can never be a term.

In a proposition that is true when its subject term is taken in material supposition, something is said about the unrepeatable noise produced by a singular human voice. Burley points toward the possibility of a propositional knowledge of the variabilities of pitch, volume, timbre, tempo, and so forth that do not go into the term itself. This affirmation runs directly counter to Bacon's remarks on the possibility of *buba*'s appearing in a proposition. Burley's rejoinder is that not only can the mere *figura vocis* or *commune ens* appear in a proposition, but so can the irreproducible variability that desists from figuration. If in *buba est buba* the subject term is like a rock, or hunk of wood, or piece of fruit on the page, Burley suggests that in *buba est disyllabum* the subject term is like whatever there might be about a rock that would make it unrecognizable as a rock and indistinguishable from a hunk of wood or piece of fruit. But he does not see this as a problem. The truth of such a proposition can be known.

4. Paul of Venice

'*búba,*' '*bùba*' are all admissible, but not '*bubá*'!" "The Priscian Commentary from the Second Half of the Twelfth Century: Ms Leiden BPL 154," *Histoire Épistémologie Langage* 12, no. 2 (1990): 65.

Burley does not defend this claim. It is the implication of an undeveloped aside on *suppositio materialis* in a treatise not otherwise concerned with it. In his late taxonomy of supposition, Burley distinguishes five varieties of *suppositio materialis*: in all of them the utterance stands for "itself" (*pro se*), but without reference to any distinction between *vox singularis* and *vox communis*.[219] But his position in the *Middle Commentary* is not incompatible with that late taxonomy, nor with his account of material supposition in the early treatise *De suppositionibus* as *suppositio pro voce sola*.[220]

Throughout his career Burley maintained that material supposition occurs apart from signification, and he was by no means alone in that position. His slightly younger contemporary William Ockham famously identifies both material and simple supposition as non-significative.[221] In fact, at the beginning of the fourteenth century it had become a commonplace that material supposition, if not other forms of supposition as well, is a kind of reference without signification. As D. Vance Smith has observed, "supposition theory in England in the fourteenth century […] above all taught that one did not need to know what the primary imposition of a word or a thing was, when it happened, or who did it, in order to say something about the potential senses and shades of meaning of an animated body of signs."[222] But this consensus was

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[219] Cf. Walter Burley, *On the Purity of the Art of Logic: The Shorter and the Longer Treatises*, ed. Paul Spade (New Haven: Yale University, 2000), 82–6.
[220] Cf. Burley, "Walter Burleigh's Treatise De suppositionibus." 888
[221] In his *Summa logicae*, Ockham writes that material supposition takes place "quando terminus non supponit significative." William Ockham, *Opera Philosophica* (St. Bonaventure, N.Y: Franciscan Institute, 1974), I.1.64. There is an extensive literature on Ockham and supposition. Cf. e.g. Normore, "Material Supposition and the Mental Language of Ockham's Summa Logicae"; Panaccio, "Tarski et la suppositio materialis"; Joël Biard, "La Redéfinition ockhamiste de la signification," in *Sprache und Erkenntnis im Mittelalter*, ed. Jan P. Beckmann and Wolfgang Kluxen, vol. 1, Miscellanea mediaevalia 13 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1981), 451–8; Michael Loux, "Significatio and Suppositio: Reflections on Ockham's Semantics," *The New Scholasticism* 53, no. 4 (1979): 407–37; Sirridge, "Grammarians on Language About Language."
[222] D. Vance Smith, "Negative Langland," *The Yearbook of Langland Studies* 23 (2009): 58.

short-lived. Even as terminist logic in the new style of Burley and Ockham was incorporated into the arts curriculum at Oxford,[223] it was the older notion of the dependence of supposition on signification that prevailed. Elizabeth Karger has shown that, by the end of the century, logicians again denied that it was possible for there to be supposition without signification. Drawing on and extending Karger's findings, Stephen Read has argued that the notion of material supposition as non-significative is fundamentally absurd, and that the fourteenth-century logicians caught on to this absurdity and corrected the mistaken notions of their predecessors.[224] Concomitantly, by the end of the century the use of *voces non-significativae* among Oxford logicians dropped off as well: in the important *De logica* of John Wyclif, for example, even though much of it is drawn from Burley's works on supposition, there is no trace of *buba* or *bufbaf*.

The disfavor into which a position like Burley's would fall can be seen clearly in the case of the Augustinian Friar Paul of Venice, active at Oxford in the 1390s, who produced two

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[223] Courtenay, *Schools and Scholars in Fourteenth-Century England*, 238. On the history of logic at Oxford in the fourteenth century, cf. E.J. Ashworth and P.V. Spade, "Logic in Late Medieval Oxford," in *The History of the University of Oxford,*, ed. J.I. Catto and Ralph Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); William Courtenay, *Ockham and Ockhamism: Studies in the Dissemination and Impact of His Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 2008); Catarina Dutilh Novaes, "Logic in the Fourteenth Century after Ockham," in *Handbook of the History of Logic*, ed. Dov M. Gabbay and John Woods, vol. II (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2008).

[224] Karger, "La Supposition materielle comme supposition significative: Paul de Venise, Paul de Pergula"; Read, "How Is Material Supposition Possible?". De Rijk has also noted, in a different context and to a different end, the under-theorized and finally incoherent role of signification in the theory of supposition: "In the very beginning of the development [of the theory of the properties of terms] some confusion is found regarding the relative status and function of signification in this semantic theory. The sound basis of the contextual approach seems to be undermined (more or less with various authors) by the implicit presupposition of the natural priority of signification. Even the most sagacious among medieval logicians, such as William Ockham, were not able to trace that troublesome presupposition, let alone to expose and to cut it out. They would have done a better job, if, instead of rejecting such notions as natural or simple supposition, they had abandoned their notion of signification itself. The most critical logicians of the Middle Ages used a sharp knife, but amputated the wrong leg." Lambert-Marie de Rijk, "The Origins of the Theory of the Properties of Terms," in *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy from the Rediscovery of Aristotle to the Disintegration of Scholasticism 1100-1600* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1982), 173.

Logicae, a *Parva* and a *Magna*, which have been considered a kind of summation of the logical doctrines ascendant at Oxford at the end of the fourteenth century.[225] The *Logica parva*, an introductory text that was to enjoy wide circulation, largely in Italy, makes no mention of *voces non-significativae*. As in Wyclif's logic, no *buba* or *bufbaf* will be found in it. In fact, in his opening remarks on the nature of the *terminus* Paul avoids any use of the word *vox* at all, even as he declares that the *terminus* is a *dictio* rather than a syllable or a letter—all of these entities long defined in terms of their relation to *vox*. It is true that he makes a distinction between the term that is *significativus per se* and the term that is *non per se significativus*. But the emphasis should be placed here on *per se*, for the examples of the non-significative term he adduces are the syncategorematic terms *omnis* and *nullus*, which are significative in combination with nouns and verbs.[226]

Unlike the authors of earlier terminist textbooks, Paul does not begin by differentiating among the species of sound so as to isolate the *vox significativa*; having begun with the term rather than the *vox*, in the *Logica parva* he has no need to point out that there are *voces non-significativae*. But there is a discussion of *bu* and *ba* to be found under Paul's name. In the *Logica magna*, an exceedingly lengthy compendium of logical doctrines, Paul devotes a number

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[225] Jennifer Ashworth and Paul Spade write that these works "show a thorough familiarity with Oxford logic, including Ockham, Bradwardine, Swyneshed, Heytesbury, Billingham, Strode, Feribrigge, and Huntman." "Logic in Late Medieval Oxford," 60. As Catarina Dutilh Novaes puts it, "in many senses [Paul] epitomizes 14th century logic. Not only did he deal with virtually all of the important logical topics of this century (supposition, obligations, the truth of propositions etc.); he also usually summarized the logical knowledge produced in this century in his discussions, often quoting verbatim from his sources." "Logic in the Fourteenth Century after Ockham," 442. Paul's logical works were to have significant circulation in Italy, and are a crucial source of the late-medieval afterlife of Oxford logic in Italy. On the continental reception of the Oxford logic of the late fourteenth century, cf. the essays collected in Alfonso Maierù, ed., *English Logic in Italy in the 14th and 15th Centuries*, History of Logic 1 (Naples: Bibliopolis, 1982). Of particular interest is William Courtenay's contribution to that volume; on this subject, cf. also his *Schools and Scholars in Fourteenth-Century England*, 236.

[226] Paul of Venice, *Logica parva*, ed. Alan Perreiah (Leiden: Brill, 2002), I.3.

of pages to the question of the natural and conventional signification of terms. In that section, he maintains that material supposition can take place even when a term has no conventional signification. As he writes, *potest concedi quod aliqui termini supponunt materialiter qui numquam fuerunt impositi ad significandum*: "some terms that were never imposed for the purpose of signifying do have material supposition."[227] Marking material supposition with the imported French article *ly*, Paul gives a number of examples of this phenomenon:

> *Ly .ba. est vox*
> *Ly .et. est conjunctio*
> *Ly .ad. est praepositio*
> *Ly .omnis. est signum universale*[228]
>
> "Ba" is an utterance
> "And" is a conjunction
> "To" is a preposition
> "Every" is a universal sign

Ba is thus able to participate in a proposition without having been imposed as a name.

But just because it has not been imposed does not mean that *ba* is without signification. Paul has begun this section by affirming programmatically that there can be no term that does not signify. For even if it is not the name of anything, a term will signify itself: *termini vocales vel scripti seipsos naturaliter significant, sicut etiam aliae res sensibiles*.[229] All sensible things, terms included, naturally signify themselves. This notion recalls Bacon's ideas about natural signification but should not be confused with them. For Bacon, utterances signify both naturally and conventionally, but when they signify themselves it is only by imposition. For the logicians of Paul's time, by contrast, *vox* signifies naturally insofar it produces a concept of itself. Rather than allowing certain things to be gathered about the person from whose mouth it has emerged,

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[227] Paul of Venice, *Logica magna: prima pars, tractatus de terminis*, trans. and ed. Norman Kretzmann (Oxford: Oxford University, 1979), 76.
[228] Ibid. I have silently modified Kretzmann's translations in places.
[229] Ibid., 40.

as in Bacon, the utterance—considered now with reference to its hearer rather than to its speaker—generates its concept in the minds of whoever perceives it. As Read has summarized this doctrine, which he considers a Parisian innovation of the mid fourteenth century, "terms in material supposition are not non-significative. Rather, they do not have their proper signification, but a broad natural signification which everything has, to encompass themselves and things like them."[230]

Paul proves this doctrine, a commonplace by his time, by means of a surprising demonstration:

> *Item aliquis terminus supponit pro se, sed omne supponere est significare; ergo talis significat se. Consequentia patet cum minori, et maior patet de multis terminis supponentibus materialiter, ut*
> *Ly .Deus. est nomen,*
> *Ly. homo. est terminus scriptus.*[231]
>
> Some term supposits for itself, but to supposit is in every case to signify; therefore such a term signifies itself. The inference is obvious, along with the minor premise; and the major premise is obvious as regards many terms that have material supposition, as in
> "God" is a name,
> "Man'" is a written term.

The instance of material supposition, which had once seemed exactly to pose a problem for the idea that signification always precedes supposition, serves Paul here to demonstrate that very same idea. This is because, as he writes, the minor premise is self-evident: it goes without saying that *omne supponere est significare*. And Paul is so convinced of the impossibility of a non-significative term that he will write that "a term is significative even when it is not actually signifying."[232]

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[230] Read, "How Is Material Supposition Possible?," 18.
[231] Logica magna, 43
[232] Paul of Venice, *Logica magna*, 888.

Fourteenth-century logicians developed the idea of universal self-signification in order to shore up this idea, maintained by the founders of the theory of terms but soon called into question, that supposition cannot take place without signification. Their solution to the challenge raised by earlier fourteenth-century doctrines of non-significative supposition, such as Burley's, is (to my mind at least) overly facile: it consists merely in proposing a law of universal self-signification, so that the problem of non-significative words just fails to obtain. But in so doing they found themselves in obvious conflict with no less an authority than Boethius. Paul is well aware of this. He entertains three objections to his precept *termini vocales vel scripti seipsos naturaliter significant*, of which the second reads as follows:

> *Secundo sequitur quod nullus foret terminus non significativus immo quilibet terminus foret significativus. Consequens falsum et contra Boethium ponentem voces aliquas nihil significare, ut tales terminos 'bu', 'ba', et similes. Consequentia probatur quia quilibet terminus significat seipsum naturaliter, et propter naturalem significationem dicitur terminus maxime significativus*.[233]
>
> It follows that no term will be non-significative but rather that each term will be significative. This consequent is false and contrary to Boethius, who maintains that some utterances signify nothing—e.g., such terms as *bu*, *ba*, and the like. The inference is proved because each term signifies itself naturally, and it is because of natural signification that a term is said to be significant in the highest degree.

With this objection Paul anticipates the very point I am attempting to make here. The adoption of a doctrine of universal self-signification can only amount to a rejection of the possibility of a totally non-signifying utterance, a possibility on whose basis all of Boethian logic rests. But Paul denies that there is any contradiction to speak of:

> *Ad secundum dicitur concedendo consequentiam et consequens. Et tunc ad argumentum, dico quod ipse ponit tales 'bu,' 'ba,' nihil significare ex impositione, et hoc est verum. Nihilominus bene significant naturaliter seipsos, sicut et aliae res faciunt.* [234]

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[233] Ibid., 55.
[234] Ibid., 57.

> As for this objection, I reject both the inference and its consequent. As for the argument, I say that Boethius claims that *bu*, *ba,* and the like signify nothing as a consequence of imposition, and that is true. They do, however, signify themselves naturally, just as other things do.

Despite Paul's assurances, Boethius had not, of course, ever said anything about natural signification: for him, to signify nothing *ex impositione* really was to signify nothing at all. Paul's insistence on self-signification as a natural and universal quality of utterance is a rejection of Boethian authority more fundamental than the calling into question of the *orandi ordo* in the *magna altercatio* of the previous century. Every term being, as the objection says, *maxime significativus*, the *vox non-significativa* is not absent from the field of logic because it has been refused entry but because it is, strictly speaking, an impossibility.

5. Walter Burley, once more

Over the course of the two centuries that separate the origins of the theory of the properties of terms from the dissemination of Oxford logic on the continent at the end of the Middle Ages, two fundamental questions about the subject matter of the discipline—*can an utterance be non-significative?* and *can logic treat a non-significative utterance?*—were given multiple and irreconcilable answers. Following Boethius, the early terminists hold that non-significative utterances exist, but are essentially untreatable by logic. Roger Bacon maintains that no utterance is truly non-significative, and in any case that as soon as it becomes available to logic it has been used as the name of something, if only of itself. Resuscitating earlier doubts, Walter Burley insists not only that there exist entirely non-significative utterances, but also that logic can encounter them without difficulty. Finally, Paul of Venice and other realist descendants of Burley's arrive at a position that resembles Bacon's, although it rests on different—and more

thoroughly anti-Boethian—grounds: logic does not deal with non-significative utterances, because there can be no such thing, neither within logic nor without.

For my purposes the most interesting of these authors is Burley. Although he upholds the doctrine that in itself *vox* is entirely meaningless, he departs from the tradition in expecting logic to address itself to the empty noise of the bare utterance. Proceeding on the basis of a distinction between *vox singularis* and *vox communis*, he believes that the unrepeatable differentiating noise of the utterance can participate in the truth of a proposition. I would like to return to Burley's *Middle Commentary*, by way of conclusion, to pose a final question. What happens when someone hears a proposition containing a nonsense word in material supposition? What takes place in a human mind when it encounters *buba est disyllabum*? Burley does not answer this question, but he provides materials for speculation.

As we have seen, in section I.16 of the commentary Burley makes what appears to be a familiar Baconian argument about the signification of words apart from their imposition. As Bacon had done before him and as Paul would do in his own turn, Burley attempts to explain away Boethius's insistence that *vox* primarily signifies *intellectus* or *passio animae*. His solution is that the pronunciation of a noun or a verb signals the presence of certain entities in the mind of the speaker without having been imposed on them:

> *Potest enim vox esse nota alicuius cui vox non imponitur ad significandum. Nomen enim vel verbum prolatum est nota vel signum per quod proferens habet similitudinem in suo intellectu istius rei quae significatur per nomen vel per verbum vel quod ipse aliqua passione afficitur erga eum ad quem loquitur, videlicet amore vel odio. Unde vox est signum passionis animae non quia imponitur ad significandum passionem animae sed sic est signum passionis animae sicut est signum quod iste qui loquitur est homo.*[235]
>
> For an utterance can be a sign of something on which it is not imposed to signify. For a noun or a verb, when it is pronounced, is a sign by which it is made known that the utterer has a similitude in his understanding of that thing which is signified by the noun

[235] Burley, "Middle Commentary," I.16.

> or verb, or that he is affected by some feeling toward the person to whom he is speaking, for instance love or hatred. Thus utterance is a sign of a "passio animae" not because it is imposed to signify a passion in the soul, but because it is a sign of a passion in the soul, in the same way that it is a sign that the one who is speaking is a human.

Even if someone uses a word with which you are unfamiliar, you can be certain that she means something by it, that she harbors feelings of one sort or another toward you, and moreover that she is a human being. The use of a word to name something is an index of the rationality, and thus humanity, of the speaker; it is also an index of the presence of the particular concept of the named thing in the speaker's mind. If you happen to know the meaning of a word, you will know what concept its speaker has in mind; but whether you do or do not, the word will in any case indicate the mere presence of the concept without disclosing which concept it might be.

This knowledge of the presence of an *intellectus* that is at once an ignorance of its identity resumes a peculiarity of the circumstances of the original imposition of the word. In section I.14, Burley has set out his views on the debate over whether utterances refer to concepts or things. Following Bacon's emphasis on the *voluntas imponentis*, Burley argues that since the meaning of a word is assigned by a person's will, as everyone would agree, there is no reason why it should not signify the thing directly if that is the will of the impositor. But Burley goes on to "prove" (*confirmo*) this argument that he has based on the freedom of the will by invoking, as in fact Bacon had done before him, a limitation that hems in that same will:

> *Et istud confirmo sic: Intellectus prius intelligit rem extra quam intelligit aliquid exsistens in eo, quia intellectus non intelligit aliquid exsistens in eo nisi per reflecionem; nunc intellectio directa praecedit intellectionem reflexivam; igitur in illo priori in quo intellectus intelligit rem extra potest imponere nomen ad significandum rem extra. Et illud nomen sic impositum non significabit aliquid existens in anima, quia quodlibet exsistens in anima est adhuc ignotum intellectui et nomen non imponitur nisi noto; igitur vox potest significare immediate rem extra et non oportet quod primo significet passionem animae.*[236]

[236] Ibid., I.14.

> And I prove this as follows: the understanding understands an exterior thing before it understands anything that exists within itself, because the understanding does not understand anything existing within itself except by reflection; but direct understanding precedes reflexive understanding; and therefore, in order to signify the exterior thing, it can impose a name on that prior thing in which the understanding understands the exterior thing. And this name, imposed in this way, will not signify anything existing in the mind, because anything existing in the mind is still unknown to the understanding and a name is imposed only on what is known; therefore the utterance can signify an exterior thing immediately, and it does not have to first signify an impression in the mind.

Whereas Burley has just demonstrated the possibility that an utterance will signify a thing directly by recurring to the freedom of the will of the impositor, he now demonstrates the *necessity* of its signifying a thing rather than a concept by placing a constriction on the will. As it turns out, it is not possible for a name to be assigned directly to a concept. Burley's argument rests on a dictum that he ascribes to Boethius, although the latter had never said anything of the sort: *vox non imponitur nisi noto*, a name is not given to something unless that something is already known.[237] Since the *intellectus* can only know its own operations in a secondary, reflexive moment, the thing known in the moment of imposition has to be a *res extra*. Proceeding now on the basis of the distinction between *id quo* and *id quod* made famous by Thomas Aquinas in his discussions of *species intelligibilis*, Burley says that the concept is not that which is itself known but that by which something else is known.[238] What this means is that the mind (*intellectus*) is always necessarily unaware of its cognitions (*intellectus*) while they are occurring. While it is certainly possible for the mind to think and even to name one of its own cognitions, it can only do so by the mediation of another cognition which will remain for its part unthought for as long as it is in operation. The only way for the *intellectus* to know itself is

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[237] Burley makes use of this precept, derived from Averroes, throughout his career; cf. Paul Spade's note to Burley's ascription of an associated dictum to Boethius in the *De puritate*: "The quotation has not been found." Burley, *On the Purity of the Art of Logic*, 88n37.

[238] On *species intelligibilis*, cf. Leen Spruit, *Species Intelligibilis. 1. Classical Roots and Medieval Discussions* (Leiden: Brill, 1994); Robert Pasnau, *Theories of Cognition in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

through an infinite speculative regression of thinking but unthought cognitions. If the impositor wishes to name a concept in his own mind, he can do so only by forming another concept of it by which to know it, which is to say by treating it as a thing. In short, although the impositor appears to be free to name anything, which is to say either concepts or things, he must know something in order to name it; and because he cannot in the first instance know a concept, in fact if he names anything it will be a thing. The prior knowledge of the named thing on which every imposition depends is immediately the failure of that knowledge itself to be known. It is this perpetual postponement of knowledge on the part of the speaker of a word that is signaled to its hearer when it entails the presence of a concept without disclosing the concept itself.

But the essential point about this discussion is what differentiates it from the similar arguments we have encountered: the fact that Burley excludes *vox non-significativa* from consideration. As I have suggested, the fact that Burley imports an argument about utterance as such from Bacon, but restricts his own remarks to significative utterance alone, suggests that he wishes for his remarks not to apply to non-significative utterance at all. The question is what occurs when someone produces an utterance but does not name anything with it. The implication of Burley's restriction of his remarks to the noun and verb, rather than to utterance broadly conceived, is that what can be gathered from their utterance cannot be gathered from the utterance of *vox non-significativa*. Because *buba* has not been imposed as the name of anything, it is not the effect of a knowledge of what is named; and therefore it does not entail, and thus signal as effect to cause, the presence of such knowledge. It does not allow you to gather whether its speaker feels this way or that other way toward you. Hearing *buba* spoken does not even allow you to ascertain whether it has emerged from the mouth of a human being. In his exclusion of *vox non-significativa* from his discussion of what is signaled by the *vox* apart from its

imposition, Burley upholds the Boethian idea that there is such a thing as utterance that means nothing at all, from which nothing at all can be gathered, not even that its speaker is present, speaking, human, cognizant, and so forth.

Rather than being the effect of a prior knowledge, the pronunciation of *buba* is the cause of a subsequent failure of knowledge. Such an utterance is the production of an inability on the part of the mind to cognize any object. As we have seen, this prompting of a lapse in the *intellectus* is the reason that Boethius had banned nonsense words from the field of logic in the first place:

> *Si quis vero huiusmodi vocem ceperit, quae nihil omnino designet, animus eius nulla significatione neque intellegentia roboratus errat ac vertitur nec ullis designationis finibus conquiescit.*[239]
>
> If someone hears an utterance of this sort, which signifies absolutely nothing, his mind—bolstered neither by signification nor understanding—wanders around, turning upon itself, and does not come to rest at any such limit as would be provided by a signification.

But Burley does not think that this effect is a reason to exclude the *vox quae nihil omnino designat*.[240] His innovation consists in suggesting that this predicament of mental breakdown can itself be known. In *buba est disyllabum*, the unimposed word standing for itself in its unimposability produces a failure of knowledge. The propositional knowledge of the *vox singularis* in material supposition is not an apprehension of the physical characteristics of a vocal entity. It is the experience of the failure of knowledge when the mind is deprived of any object. As sheer differentiation, the *vox singularis* cannot be known. But the truth of the proposition in which it appears is a demonstrable and knowable truth.

What I am suggesting is that the use of a nonsense word in material supposition should be understood as the direct inverse of the scene of imposition. If to assign an utterance as the name

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[239] Boethius, *In Peri hermeneias*, 74.
[240] On Burley's relations to Boethius, cf. Uña Juárez, *La filosofía del siglo XIV*, 345–7.

of something is to *presuppose* (and thus signal) a knowledge that is itself unknown, to use an utterance non-onomastically to stand for its singularity is to *produce* an absence of knowledge that is itself known. Rather than the unknowability of the mind to itself, what is produced in material supposition is a knowledge of the unknowable voice object. While the mind cannot ever hope to know its own operations without mediation, Burley implies that it is possible for it to know its failure to cognize the utterance as such. Burley's colleagues did not take up this suggestion; neither, in truth, did Burley himself. But the idea was not lost altogether. Even as it was rendered unthinkable by Burley's descendants at Oxford toward the end of the fourteenth century, it reappeared elsewhere. In the following chapter, I show how the possibility of a form of knowledge produced by the failure of a mind that has been remitted to the singular utterance is the central concern of the *Cloud of Unknowing*.

III

THE HIDEOUS NOISE OF PRAYER: THE *CLOUD OF UNKNOWING* ON THE SYLLABLE-WORD

Et illud nomen sic impositum non significabit
aliquid existens in anima,
quia quodlibet exsistens in anima est adhuc
ignotum intellectui et nomen
non imponitur nisi noto.[241]

The thirty-fourth chapter of the *Cloud of Unknowing*, a mystical treatise written in England toward the end of the fourteenth century, contains a formula of exceptional importance.[242] The formula bears on the nature and possibility of the particular devotional practice that the *Cloud* instructs in, the so-called work of unknowing.[243] "Þe abilnes to þis werk," writes the treatise's

[241] Walter Burley, "Walter Burley's Middle Commentary on Aristotle's Perihermeneias," ed. Stephen Brown, *Franciscan Studies* 33 (1973): I.14.

[242] The dating of the treatise remains uncertain, as does its authorship. It was not written before the 1370s, and though John Clark believes it to date from the 1390s, the latest period generally accepted as possible, his reasoning has been question by Annie Sutherland, who fixes on the mid-to-late 1380s. Cf. John Clark, *The Cloud of Unknowing: An Introduction*, vol. 4, 5, 6, Analecta Cartusiana 119 (Salzburg, 1995), I.92; Annie Sutherland, "The Dating and Authorship of the Cloud Corpus: A Reassessment of the Evidence," *Medium Aevum* 71 (2002): 83. Phyllis Hodgson has given the most complete account of the treatise's phonological, grammatical, and lexical characteristics in the introductions and notes to the edition that I use here. On the history of twentieth-century scholarship on the *Cloud,* cf. Nicholas Watson, "The Middle English Mystics," in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1999), 539–65.

[243] An account of the word *werk* in the *Cloud* will be found in Rosemary Ann Lees, *The Negative Language of the Dionysian School of Mystical Theology: An Approach to the Cloud of Unknowing* (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 1983), 311. On Middle English vocabularies of labor, cf. Nicola Masciandaro, *The Voice of the Hammer: The Meaning of Work in Middle English Literature* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame, 2006).

anonymous author, "is onyd to þe selue werk, wiþ-outyn departyng."[244] That is, the ability to do this work is united inextricably with the work itself. In its context, this sentence appears to do little more than extend a set of remarks counseling against taking pride in the work of devotion. The first half of the chapter in which it appears has established that whatever success you might have with the prayer is due not to any aptitude or effort on your part, but to God's prompting alone; and that God grants or withholds this prompting without regard for your merit. In one sense, the sentence in question merely reinforces this line of argumentation, by locating the ability to do the work of prayer outside of the contemplative. But its implications extend beyond the limits of a simple warning against pride. The formula establishes with precision the metaphysical status of the prayer: it is such that its possibility is inseparable from its existence. It is a prayer that can only exist when it is already underway; and, conversely, when it is not happening it is impossible that it should ever begin. The *werk* would thus seem to name an activity that, strictly speaking, would never occur, for how can something ever take place at all, if it only becomes possible once it already exists? But the *Cloud*-author gives every indication that he is describing a prayer that he himself practices and that he believes others can practice as well. What all of this amounts to is that he endorses, in the case of the *werk* of prayer, a doctrine of existence and potentiality most famously refuted in Book IX of the *Metaphysics*, where Aristotle takes the Megarians to task for maintaining so absurd a principle as that a thing is only capable when it is acting.[245] Nonetheless, although he is not unaware of the difficulties of his position, the *Cloud*-author does not modify it; instead, he puts it only more forcefully. "Þe

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[244] *The Cloud of Unknowing and the Book of Privy Counselling*, ed. Phyllis Hodgson, EETS 218 (London: Oxford University, 1944), 70.3–4.
[245] *Metaphysics, Books I-IX*, trans. Hugh Tredennick (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, 1933), IX.3.

condicioun of þis werk is soche," he writes, "þat þe presence þerof abliþ a soule for to haue it and for to fele it. And þat abilnes may no soule haue wiþ-outyn it."[246]

The *Cloud*-author does not fail to explain why he holds this peculiar doctrine. In the following lines he goes on to say that the work only occurs to the extent that it is desired, and that it has the characteristic of only being desirable when it is already possessed:

> who-so feliþ þis werk is abil þerto, & elles none; in so mochel, þat wiþ-outyn þis werk a soule is as it were deed, & can not coueite it ne desire it. For as moche as þou wylnest it & desirest it, so mochel hast þou of it, & no more ne no lesse.[247]

The argument is that if the prayer exists to the extent that it is desired, and if it can only be desired once it is already present, then it follows that it is impossible for it to exist unless it exists already. The problem, needless to say, remains. Nothing has changed except that the notion of desire has been introduced. It is tempting to conclude that the *Cloud*-author resorts to this mention of desire so as to escape the difficulties of the metaphysical position he has set up. He seems to be claiming, as he does throughout his treatise, that the *werk* is a matter of "affect," and that in the realm of affect a different set of rules obtains. Love can accomplish what the intellect cannot; if there is a logical or metaphysical problem here, pay it no mind: love finds a way.

The *Cloud*-author does not allow this conclusion to be drawn. He hastens to emphasize one further point that might easily be overlooked: if the *werk* is coextensive with the desire to perform it, this does not mean that it is itself that desire.[248] The point is made unequivocally: "and ȝit is it no wil, ne no desyre, bot a þing þou wost neuer what, þat steriþ þee to wilne &

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[246] *Cloud*, 69.23–70.2.
[247] Ibid., 70.4–7.
[248] Carmel Davis has cited this same passage as support for the idea that "the desire for contemplation and the work of contemplation are presented by the author as being one and the same." *Mysticism & Space: Space and Spatiality in the Works of Richard Rolle, the Cloud of Unknowing Author, and Julian of Norwich* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 208.

desire þou wost neuer what."[249] The *werk* is something that incites desire and will without itself being either of them. The *Cloud*-author does not say what this "thing" is. He indicates only what it is not: it is not known, and it is neither will nor desire. Less edifyingly still, he instructs that the question should not be looked into any further, that the identity and nature of this thing should remain unknown: "Reche þee neuer þof þou wite no more, I preye þee; bot do forþ euer more & more, so þat þou be ever doyng."[250] Instead of trying to understand the activity that is its own possibility, you should just do it, and keep doing it, and then do it some more.

Against the express wishes of the *Cloud*-author, I have tried to figure out what this activity might be, and in what sense it would only be possible when it is already happening. I have proceeded on the basis of a distinction that I take to be fundamental to the composition of the treatise, a distinction that has never been rigorously maintained. As I see it, the text of the *Cloud of Unknowing* is not homogeneous but comprises two discrete things. The first is a set of practical instructions in the *werk* or *doyng* of unknowing: a procedure for a particular sort of prayer. As I reconstruct it in the following pages, this procedure consists very simply in repeating a monosyllabic word over and over again until it becomes devoid of signification. The passages that detail this technique make up only a small portion of the text.[251] The majority of the treatise is devoted to something else: explaining, situating, elaborating, and otherwise accounting for the procedure laid out in those instructions. I have come to think of the relation between these two parts of the *Cloud* on the model of a commentary in which lemmata appear

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[249] *Cloud*, 70.7–9.
[250] Ibid., 70.9–11.
[251] Notably, portions of chapter seven and chapters thirty-six through forty. The best discussion of these passages is Eleanor Johnson, "Feeling Time, Will, and Words: Vernacular Devotion in the Cloud of Unknowing," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 41, no. 2 (2011): 345–68.

interspersed, so that the practical instructions would be like excerpts from an authoritative text that punctuate and organize the unfolding of its interpretation.

What exercises the *Cloud*-author in his "commentary" on his own instructions, that is, the bulk of the treatise, is the task of making the procedure comprehensible within the terms of a particular discourse. That discourse, as Rosemary Lees, Alastair Minnis, Denys Turner, and other scholars have demonstrated, is the set of writings now grouped under the heading "the late medieval affective tradition."[252] The *Cloud* receives its central terms and emphases—in remarks on love, will, knowing, unknowing, and the like—from the revisionist account of the Pseudo-Dionysian writings propounded by Hugh of Balma and Thomas Gallus.[253] So faithful an inheritor of these thirteenth-century ideas is the *Cloud*-author that he can be considered at once derivative

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[252] The term refers to a remarkable aspect of late medieval spiritual writing, much of which puts an unprecedented emphasis on love, will, and compassion that would have been unfamiliar to earlier eras, sometimes underscoring this emphasis with a concomitant denigration of the usefulness of the intellect. It is in Christology that this shift occurs most dramatically, where the figure of Christ as a warrior or judge, notably in the harrowing of hell, comes to be supplemented and all but superseded by that of the Christ of the Passion. This alteration is accompanied by an efflorescence of expressions and practices of *sympathy* with the suffering Christ and by the rise of Marian devotion. The new Christological developments have been traced to the *Cur Deus homo* of Anselm of Canterbury, whose *orationes* are for their part considered the textual basis of the passionate prayers written in succeeding centuries, both in Latin and in the vernacular. This lineage extends through Bernard of Clairvaux and Ailred of Rievaulx, the Victorines Hugh and Richard, and in England to the "fourteenth-century English mystics" Richard Rolle, Julian of Norwich, and the *Cloud*-author. Cf. Rachel Fulton, *From Judgment to Passion: Devotion to Christ and the Virgin Mary, 800-1200* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); Watson, "The Middle English Mystics"; Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine. Volume III, The Growth of Medieval Theology (600-1300)* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1978), 134f.; Richard W. Southern, *St. Anselm: A Portrait in a Landscape* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), chap. 5.

[253] On the place of the treatise within the tradition of affective theology, cf. Lees, *Negative Language*; Alastair Minnis, "The Sources of the Cloud of Unknowing: A Reconsideration," in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England*, vol. II (Exeter: University of Exter, 1982), 63–75; Alastair Minnis, "Affection and Imagination in 'The Cloud of Unknowing' and Hilton's 'Scale of Perfection'," *Traditio* 39 (1983): 323–66; Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (New York: Cambridge, 1995), chap. 8; Boyd Taylor Coolman, "The Medieval Affective Dionysian Tradition," *Modern Theology* 24, no. 4 (2008): 615–32.

and exemplary: Lees writes that his treatises "have little claim to be considered as significantly innovatory texts in respect of the theory of contemplation," while Boyd Taylor Coolman calls his translation of the *Theologia mystica* "the most explicit and extensive "affectivizing" of the Dionysian Mystical Theology in the Middle Ages."[254] Read in the light of his participation in this tradition, the *Cloud*-author can be seen to put forward a vernacular theology of affect in which intellect and language are to be pushed aside in favor of love and will.

I cannot dispute this interpretation. But I will suggest that it holds true of one aspect of the text only: what I am calling the "commentary." *The procedure itself appears nowhere in the sources on which the* Cloud-*author has been shown to draw*. This specific form of prayer is not counseled in the affectivized Pseudo-Dionysian tradition; nor is it found elsewhere among practices of late-medieval devotion. It is, as far as I can gather, his own invention.[255] The *sui generis* character of the *Cloud*'s doctrine of prayer has been overlooked because the technique itself has been overshadowed by his explanations of its importance. But the *Cloud*-author's command to *do forth* rather than investigate, that is, to employ his technique rather than think about it, should not be ignored altogether. The question is what exactly you would do if you were to pray in the manner he recommends. I have already said that you would repeat a monosyllabic word over and over again. When the treatise's own explanations are bracketed, the nature of this procedure becomes unmistakable: it is a technique of vocalization. Its purpose is to harness certain characteristics of utterance in order to bring about the mental event called unknowing. It

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[254] Lees, *Negative Language*, 312; Coolman, "The Medieval Affective Dionysian Tradition," 617.

[255] Although it is a commonplace that the technique is an extension of the method of so-called aspirative prayer discussed in the thirteenth century by Hugh of Balma, in reality the two could hardly be more distinct. Cf. e.g. Lees, *Negative Language*, 330; Jean Leclercq, Francois Vandenbroucke, and Louis Bouyer, *La Spiritualité du moyen age*, Histoire de la spiritualité chrétienne 2 (Paris: Aubier, 1961), 504. Hugh of Balma, *Théologie mystique*, Sources chrétiennes 408 (Paris: Cerf, 1995), chap. 45–7.

is, at base, a linguistic phenomenon: and by examining the procedure as a procedure, rather than as the occasion for a doctrine of affectivity, it becomes possible to address the *Cloud*-author's much remarked interest in language without recourse to the notion of paradox. Many commentators have focused on what they take to be the paradox of the *Cloud*-author's apparent distrust of language, even as he himself takes a great interest in the stylistic aspects of his own writing.[256] But although the *Cloud*-author has been taken to insist on the self-contradictory notion that the purpose of using language is to move beyond language, and moreover to perform this contradiction by employing "colorful" speech while simultaneously counseling against the "fleshly tongue," there is more to the story than that.[257] In addition to his own use of language as

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[256] The best account of this "paradox" is Minnis, "Affection and Imagination," 342. Cf. as well Alastair J. Minnis, A. B. Scott, and David Wallace, *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism C.1100-c.1375: The Commentary Tradition* (Oxford University, 1992), chap. 5. Minnis is fully aware of the point I make in the following note. More recently, cf. Cheryl Taylor, "Paradox Upon Paradox: Using and Abusing Language in The Cloud of Unknowing and Related Texts," *Parergon* 22, no. 2 (2005): 31–51.

[257] The best study of the *Cloud*'s rhetorical stance remains Burrow, "Fantasy and Language in the Cloud of Unknowing." Burrow cautions against giving the "homely figures" undue importance. As he puts it, "so widespread is such imagery, indeed, that one may well wonder whether an English author of the period could possibly have avoided using it, even if he had wanted to. It seems to have been characteristic of Medieval English itself, of the language at large." Thus, Barrow concludes, unless such imagery can be shown to have been made particularly significant as "part of the author's whole effort to realize a story or explore an idea," the qualities of homeliness "are better left unmarked by any special comment." Ibid., 140. Burrow's important cautions have not always been heeded.

Indeed, the paradoxical nature of this situation has been much exaggerated. In the first place, the *Cloud*-author does not in fact prefer *goostly conseyte* to *bodily conseyte*. He is opposed rather to *fantasye*, that is, the confusion of spiritual and bodily senses. To speak or interpret in a spiritual manner, he insists, can just as easily lead to error as can speaking or interpreting in a bodily. In this he is very close to the Augustine of *De doctrina christiana*, who, as Kathy Eden has demonstrated, does not allow the spiritual sense to be identifiable with the figurative. Cf. Kathy Eden, "The Rhetorical Tradition and Augustinian Hermeneutics in De Doctrina Christiana," *Rhetorica* 8, no. 1 (1990): 58; Saint Augustine, "De Doctrina Christiana," ed. R.P.H. Green (New York: Oxford, 1995). At stake here is the larger question of whether the flesh is the same as the body, an identification made too quickly in less careful work on "vernacular theology."

a writer and to what he says about the use of language in general, he does a third thing: he describes a procedure that is fundamentally linguistic. This procedure, the *werk* of unknowing, has nothing to do with the treatise as a textual *werk*; what is true of one is not necessarily true of the other.[258] As a treatise in affective theology, the *Cloud of Unknowing* may demand a

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Secondly, in using "homely figures" for spiritual things the *Cloud*-author follows a basic principle taught by the Pseudo-Dionysius: that it is more fitting to predicate the most apparently unlike thing of God than the most like, given that between God and creatures there is a radical separation in which degrees of likeness hold only in a very tenuous sense. This principle finds its fullest elaboration in the second chapter of the *Celestial Hierarchy*, where the pseudo-Dionysius declares that "incongruities are more suitable for lifting our minds up into the domain of the spiritual than similarities are." This is because the improbability of the figure will not cause the mind of one hearing it to rest in a false sense of having understood. That is, one will be led less astray by the proposition "God is a stick or a stone" than by "God is a spirit," because one will bridle against the former while more or less accepting the latter, when neither is in any case true. In this sense "God is a stone" is more adequate than "God is a spirit"—but not for any other reason than that, both being equally incommensurable with the truth, the former makes that incommensurability appear the more readily. Cf. Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem, trans., *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works* (New York: Paulist, 1987). This principle runs through all of the areopagitical corpus. With a different emphasis, the Pseudo-Dionysius explains in the *Mystical Theology* that the unwise think, wrongly, that they can know God on the basis of their own knowledge of the things of the world: and yet these things of the world *do* conduce to knowledge of God, insofar as they no less than more spiritual things are to be negated. In his English rendering of this passage, the *Cloud*-author speaks of "visible þinges, as stockes or stones," from which I take my example above. Cf. Phyllis Hodgson, ed., *Deonise Hid Diuinite and Other Treatises on Contemplative Prayer Related to the Cloud of Unknowing*, EETS 172 (London: Oxford University, 1955), 3.33.

In short, the great care that the *Cloud*-author takes to explain the limitations of homely speech does not contradict the fact that he makes use of it. To the contrary, and following the areopagitical dictum, he writes about *goostly* matters in general, and about God in particular, in a way that he hopes will prevent his readers from being deceived by the apparent adequacy of his speech. His homely speech is no more—and no less—adequate than would be a more refined, spiritual, elevated tone; but its improbability allows its failure to show itself more plainly. It does not betoken a pastoral care for the lower classes, who would identify more readily with speech about down-home things. It does not represent a vote in favor of a rustic, authentic, bodily spirit of English commonsense as over against a decadent, Latinate, hierarchical discourse of the city or Church. To imagine it to do so is to miss the point altogether, which is that such speech is marked in order that its *inappropriateness*, its being apparently—but only apparently—further removed from what it would speak about allows that distance to come into view.

[258] A tendency has emerged, especially in the wake of an exemplary essay by J.A.W. Burrow, to treat the *Cloud* quasi-literarily, as though it performed what it said: as if the work of unknowing that it speaks about were to be found in the reader's experience of the text. Cf. J. A. Burrow,

movement beyond language, but as an instruction manual in a particular method of prayer it remains committed to language without wavering and without paradox.

The procedure is a linguistic technique in the sense that it is a prayer of words and utterances, and it is also a linguistic technique in the sense that it is derived from the medieval sciences of language. Although it will not be found in his sources in the tradition of affective theology, neither does the *Cloud*-author invent it out of whole cloth. He develops this technique of vocalization on the basis of the definitions of the word and the syllable set out in textbooks of grammar and logic. My argument is thus as follows: although the treatise is, without a doubt, a work squarely within the tradition of affective theology, its main gesture is to subordinate the doctrines of that tradition to a procedure extrinsic to it, a procedure invented by the *Cloud*-author but worked out on the basis of medieval *scientia vocis*. This gesture, as I suggest in closing, places the *Cloud* within a theological tradition: not that of affective theology, but that of the *cogitatio secundum vocem solam* worked out by Anselm of Canterbury and Gaunilo of Marmontiers at the end of the eleventh century. The *Cloud* proposes a kind of prayer that is distinct from the affective piety characteristic of its time and place, derived from none of the

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"Fantasy and Language in the Cloud of Unknowing," in *Essays on Medieval Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 132–47. Eleanor Johnson has referred to what she calls the "aesthetic experience" of the treatise. Johnson, "Feeling Time, Will, and Words," 345. The most explicit formulation of this position is Taylor, "Paradox Upon Paradox." Cf. also Charles Lock, "The Cloud of Unknowing: Apophatic Discourse and Vernacular Anxieties," in *Text and Voice: The Rhetoric of Authority in the Middle Ages* (University Press of Southern Denmark, 2004), 207–33; Ellen Caldwell, "The Rhetorics of Enthusiasm and of Restraint in The Form of Living and The Cloud of Unknowing," *Mystics Quarterly* 10, no. 1 (March 1, 1984): 9–16, doi:10.2307/20716597; T. J. Morris, "Rhetorical Stance: An Approach to The Cloud of Unknowing and Its Related Treatises," *Mystics Quarterly* 13, no. 1 (1989): 13–20; Piero Boitani, "A Reading of the Cloud of Unknowing," in *Thou Sittest at Another Boke...: English Studies in Honour of Domenico Pezzini*, ed. Giovanni Iamartino, Maria Luisa Maggioni, and Roberta Facchinetti (Milan: Polimetrica, 2008).

models offered by its theological sources, and inassimilable to the treatise's own theological system.

1. The syllable

Here is how the *Cloud*-author explains the prayer-work. The *werk* of unknowing, he says, is a method of directing the will toward God. It consists in a prayer that involves no specific petitions or praises but attempts to *mean* God himself. It will do so apophatically, that is, by way of negation. In practice, the whole labor of "meaning God" consists in removing each and every thought from your mind, so that you think the absence of any particular thought. Such a state is the cloud of unknowing itself. The purpose of the prayer procedure is to force an encounter with a strange entity: something that is not anything besides God, but is also not God himself. It is certainly not the suffering God of the Passion, the characteristic object of affective piety. The *Cloud*-author likes to call it the *nought but God*.

Directing the will toward God is thus a means of encountering *nothing but God*. And yet it is not only the will that is operative in this encounter. Despite strong indications to the contrary, starting with the fact that the *Cloud*-author refers to it as *nakid entente*, this "bare will" does not work without intermediary:

> And ȝif þee list haue þis entent lappid and foulden in o worde, for þou schuldest haue betir holde þer-apon, take þee bot a litil worde of o silable.[259]

So as to be more easily wielded, the will can be wrapped up in a word. It is frequently suggested that the use of the little word is optional, and indeed better avoided if possible. To this effect, Lees calls the technique a "palliative,"[260] Phyllis Hodgson manages to conclude on the basis of

[259] *Cloud*, 28.10–12.
[260] Lees, *Negative Language*, 393.

this and like passages that the *Cloud* urges its addressee "to persevere and not to fall back for comfort on vocal prayer,"[261] and Rick McDonald appears to render the phrase *ȝif þee list* as "if it is necessary."[262] But this reference to the desire of the contemplative ("if you'd like") does not indicate that there are various ways of proceeding, of which this would be one. It resumes the essential point that *wanting* to do the work corresponds exactly to the work itself, and that its existence and its possibility are inextricably joined, *onyd wiþ-outyn departyng*. In other words, insofar as it makes the directing of the will practicable, enfolding the desire for God in a *litil worde* is not ancillary to the work of unknowing but its very *doyng*.

Two examples of words appropriate for this purpose immediately follow: "And soche a worde is þis worde GOD or þis worde LOUE." These words are fitting examples because they fulfill the single requirement governing the choice of word: that it be *of o silable*. All that matters about the word is its syllable-count, which must be one. That the "littleness" of the word is specifically a matter of syllabic quantity has not always been kept in mind, and its implications have never been remarked. The word *syllable* is a technical term in a particular discipline, and that discipline is grammar. Grammar is the science that takes as its object of study the utterance insofar as it admits of syllabification.[263] Conversely, syllable-count does not pertain to words except insofar as their susceptibility to grammatical analysis is presupposed. The repeated and

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[261] *Cloud*, lxviii.

[262] Rick McDonald, "The Perils of Language in the Mysticism of Late Medieval England," *Mystics Quarterly* 34, no. 3–4 (2008): 52.

[263] Grammar, the "cradle of the medieval sciences," has been the object of much recent attention. For an overview of the discipline cf. Martin Irvine, *The Making of Textual Culture: Grammatica and Literary Theory 350-1100* (New York: Cambridge, 1994). Cf. also the materials collected in Rita Copeland and Ineke Sluiter, *Medieval Grammar and Rhetoric: Language Arts and Literary Theory, AD 300-1475* (New York: Oxford, 2009)., as well as the editors' useful introductions. The other medieval science in which the term *syllaba* has currency is that of music. There too it would indicate an inescapably vocal nature of the prayer. On the relation between grammatical and musical accounts of the voice, cf. Elizabeth Eva Leach, *Sung Birds: Music, Nature, and Poetry in the Later Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007).

consistent terminological choice on the part of the *Cloud*-author to refer to the prayer-word as *of o silable* places the *litil worde* within the field of grammar, and it suggests that the status of its "littleness" should be understood on the basis of the explanations of the syllable provided by grammarians.

Grammar, as I have mentioned in the introduction to this dissertation, was the "cradle" of the medieval sciences, the basic discipline of literacy encountered by anyone with the most elementary education. As Rita Copeland has written, "grammar itself becomes a master discourse, providing the means of access to all other knowledge in the insistently textual culture of the Middle Ages."[264] It is both impossible and unnecessary to prove that the anonymous *Cloud*-author was personally familiar with particular grammatical textbooks. The fact that the treatise was evidently written by someone highly literate is in itself sufficient evidence that he would have been familiar with the ideas I discuss here, which are, incidentally, set out in every grammatical textbook in their opening pages. My argument does not presuppose any particular interest in the field of grammar, or indeed logic, on the part of the *Cloud*-author, but rather rests on the fact that it would not have been possible for him to be ignorant of the basic distinctions set forth by the *scientiae vocis*.[265]

What do the grammatical textbooks say about the syllable? The definition repeated throughout the Middle Ages is that of the sixth-century grammarian Priscian, who writes that

> Possumus tamen et sic definire syllabam: syllaba est vox literalis, quae sub uno accento et uno spiritu indistanter profertur.[266]

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[264] Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation*, 5.
[265] Cf. Introduction, supra. On the importance of their grammatical training for the *Cloud*-author's contemporaries writing literature, cf. Christopher Cannon, "The Middle English Writer's Schoolroom," *New Medieval Literatures* 11 (2009): 19–38.
[266] Priscian, *Institutionum grammaticorum libri XVIII*, ed. Martin Hertz (Leipzig: Teubner, 1855), 44.

> We can define the syllable as follows: the syllable is a writable utterance [*vox literalis*] that is emitted uninterruptedly under a single accentuation and a single breath.

At the most basic level, the syllable is a variety of vocal utterance. It is a collecting together, in a single unit, of the *elementa vocis*. It is a matter of accent and breath, something pronounced and emerging from the mouth of an animal.[267] The first consequence of the *Cloud*-author's specification of the *litil worde* as syllabic is thus that it consists in something said aloud, something emitted by the voice. It is not a form of silent meditation but an utterance. Nonetheless, there are indications to the contrary, the most serious of which is that the prayer is *goostly*, uttered only in spirit, and that "it is best whan it is in pure spirit, wiþ-outyn special þouȝt or any pronounsyng of worde."[268] It is this idea of the prayer as silent that has been picked up by modern scholars. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne and her colleagues refer, in an influential recent anthology, to the practice as "a form of silent prayer" without further qualification.[269] Cheryl Taylor appears to consider the technique to be one of "mental prayer" consisting finally in

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[267] Because of its enormous influence, and for the sake of simplicity, Priscian's *Institutiones grammaticorum* will be the main point of reference for grammatical doctrine here and in what follows. But the inherently vocal character of the syllable is not, of course, neglected by other authorities. Donatus, whose *Artes* served as the basic introductory texts throughout the Middle Ages, gives the following definition in his chapter *de syllaba*: it is a "combination of letters or the utterance of one vowel containing beats" (*syllaba est conprehensio litterarum uel unius uocalis enuntiatio temporum capax*). Cf. Louis Holtz, *Donat et la tradition de l'enseignement grammatical: étude et édition critique* (Paris: CNRS, 1981), 605. The important commentary of Petrus Helias draws out from Priscian's lapidary definition that the syllable is a *species* of voice: "'Vox' enim ibi ponitur pro genere etc." *Summa super Priscianum*, ed. Leo Reilly (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1993), I.106.

[268] *Cloud*, 78.20–2.

[269] Jocelyn Wogan-Browne et al., eds., *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280-1520* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 1999), 230.

"word-free, imageless contemplation."[270] And the statements as to the "optional" nature of the monosyllabic prayer invoked above share in this view.[271]

For his part, the *Cloud*-author allows that the prayer, though it is best when it is silent, might sometimes break into speech: the passage just cited continues "bot ȝif it be any seldom tyme, when for habundaunce of spiryt it brestiþ up into worde."[272] In his explanations of the procedure, in other words, he admits utterance as an exception. But insofar as it makes exclusive and invariable use of a word *of o silable*, the procedure has its own itinerary. Utterance is inherent to the syllable, and a prayer consisting in a syllable is thus an inherently vocal one. The contradiction between what the *Cloud*-author says the prayer procedure actually is and what he

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[270] "Paradox Upon Paradox," 42.

[271] The supposed silence of the prayer would bring it in line with monastic and, notably, Carthusian devotional practices. The life of the religious is regularly conceived in terms of practices of silence and the regulation of speech, which play a prominent role for example in the Benedictine Rule. But it should be noted that even or especially the monastic acceptation of "silence" does not necessarily mean the absence of speech. Many forms of activity falling under the rubric of *vacatio*, *silentium*, and so forth, consist largely in speaking. One has only to imagine the famous apian *murmur* of the *horae silentii*. Cf. Scott Bruce, *Silence and Sign Language in Medieval Monasticism: The Cluniac Tradition c. 900-1200* (New York: Cambridge University, 2007), 13. On monastic silence, cf. Jean Leclercq, *Études sur le vocabulaire monastique du moyen âge*, Studia Anselmiana 48 (Rome: Herder, 1961); Jerzy Schnayder, *De antiquorum hominum taciturnitate et tacendo* (Wroclaw, 1956). Paul Gehl calls silence a "recurring commonplace of monastic thought," a shifting set of vocabularies and practices that do not define monasticism but make themselves felt variously throughout its history. Cf. Paul Gehl, "Competens Silentium: Varieties of Monastic Silence in the Medieval West," *Viator* 18 (1987): 125. Scott Bruce traces the emphasis on silence as a virtue in its own right, rather than as merely a means of avoiding various sins, to Cluny. Carthusian practices of silence in England, which are of particular importance in the case of the *Cloud*, whose manuscripts are of Carthusian provenance and whose author is assumed, though not without some doubt, to have been a Carthusian himself, cf. Jessica Brantley, *Reading in the Wilderness: Private Devotion and Public Performance in Late Medieval England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), chap. 1; E. Margaret Thompson, *The Carthusian Order in England,* (London: MacMillan, 1930); Leclercq, Vandenbroucke, and Bouyer, *La Spiritualité du moyen age*, 194ff. More speculative treatments of silence as a theological concept will be found in Oliver Davies and Denys Turner, eds., *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation* (Cambridge University Press, 2002).

[272] *Cloud*, 78.22–3.

says about it cannot be neatly resolved. What is important is to register the contradiction itself, and to reconstruct the two itineraries on their own terms. Because the other has been established with precision, I address myself exclusively to the itinerary of the procedure itself.

As a syllable, then, the prayer happens aloud. It consists not just in any sort of utterance, however, but specifically in a *worde*. It will not take place in moaning, or whistling, or hollering. Instead, it will be a *dictio* or *vox literata articulata*, in Priscian's terms, or a *locutio signans aliquid,* in Boethius's: a writable word with a determinate *significatio*. As the examples *God* and *loue* attest, it will not be a made-up word such as *bufbaf* nor an animal noise on the order of *coax cra*. Moreover, it will be confined to the utterance of a *single* word. It will not be a collection of words that together make up a phrase, a sentence, *oratio*, but just a word by itself. This specification accords with a principle of vocal brevity announced repeatedly in the treatise. If a single word is to be used, it appears to be because utterance should be kept to a minimum:

> take þee bot a litil worde of o silable; for so it is betir þen of two, for euer þe schorter it is, þe betir it acordeþ wiþ þe werk of þe spirite. And soche a worde is þis worde GOD or þis worde LOUE."[273]

The shortness of the shortest possible word is most fitting to the *werk*, because shortness in itself assists in prayer.

This principle of *breviloquia*, as it is found both within his treatise and elsewhere, does not account for the *Cloud*-author's insistence on the use of a *litil worde of o silable*.[274] As a rule, it is better to speak directly and succinctly than otherwise. But the prayer is distinct from

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[273] Ibid., 28.12–3. Cf. also the parallel remarks on prayers at 74.8-12: "And ȝif þei ben in wordes, as þei ben bot seldom, þan ben þei bot in ful fewe wordes; ȝe, and in euer þe fewer þe betir. Ȝe, and ȝif it be bot a lityl worde of o silable, me þink it betir þan of to, and more acordyng to þe werk of þe spiryte."

[274] Cf. the exhortation at Matthew 5.7-8 *orantes autem nolite multum loqui*, as well as the many regulations of speech found in monastic and pastoral literature, chief among which the formula *multum loqui non amare* in *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, ed. Bruce L. Venarde (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), chap. 4.

utterance in general: it is not simply that its sounds should be kept to a minimum, but that this minimal utterance should take the form of a syllable. A word of one syllable could easily take longer to pronounce or contain more letters than a multisyllabic one, but the *Cloud*-author gives no indication that he is concerned with the length of the syllable that makes up the *litil worde*.[275] All that matters is that it be exactly as short as a syllable: "Cheese þee wheþer þou wilt [i.e., from the words *God* or *loue*], or anoþer as þee list: whiche þat þee likeþ best of o silable."[276] Although readers of the *Cloud* have regularly referred to the *litil worde* as "preferably" or "ideally" monosyllabic,[277] in fact the *Cloud*-author is consistent in distinguishing the monosyllabic "littleness" of the prayer word from any other kind of brevity. He has only one stipulation: you can choose whatever word you like, as long as it be monosyllabic.

In this injunction to choose whatever word you wish lies what is perhaps the most notable characteristic of the *litil worde*. This is its complete lexical indifference. If all that matters is that it be of one syllable, the *litil worde* could certainly be *God* or *loue*, but it could also be *cloud* or *is* or any other monosyllabic word. The *Cloud*-author could hardly be more explicit on this point, which has nonetheless been overlooked by modern scholars, who take the examples he gives to be the best and only words for the purpose. But if words like *God* and *loue* seem particularly well-suited to the task of praying, this in no way lessens the fact that they are only examples. This can easily be seen, however, in the fact that the second discussion of monosyllabic prayer relies on two examples not quite the same:

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[275] On Priscian's account, a single syllable can be as long as six letters and as short as one. Cf. *Institutiones grammaticorum*, 44. For his part, Donatus defines and discusses the syllable solely in terms of its being short, long, or "common." Indeed, the variable length of the syllable is its most salient characteristic for the purposes of prosodic analysis.

[276] *Cloud*, 28.14–5.

[277] Cf. Burrow, "Fantasy and Language in the Cloud of Unknowing," 141; Vincent Gillespie, "Postcards from the Edge: Interpreting the Ineffable in the Middle English Mystics," in *Interpretation: Medieval and Modern* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1993), 153.

> I maad no force, þof þou haddest now-on-dayes none oþer meditacions of þin owne wrechidnes, ne of þe goodnes of God […] bot soche as þou mayst haue in þis worde SYNNE and in þis worde GOD, or in soche oþer, whiche as þe list.[278]

In the final clause, the *Cloud*-author makes the point explicitly: these are only examples. Moreover, the repetition of the phrase *as þe list* from his earlier remarks calls attention to the fact that he is resuming a discussion already begun, so that what comes most to the fore is that the earlier examples have been partially replaced: *God* and *loue* have become *synne* and *God*. This discrepancy, and the substitutability of examples that it reveals, is soon underscored still further. After describing a situation of emergency in which you shout *fiir!* or *oute!* (that is, *get away!*), the author returns his attention to the *werk* of prayer that the emergency is supposed to be merely analogous to. But now, with the analogy supposedly left behind, one of the words that appeared in it, *oute*, has become part of the prayer itself: "And crye þan goostly euer upon one: 'Synne, synne, synne; oute, oute, oute!'"[279] First *God* and *love*, then *synne* and *God*, and finally *synne* and *oute*: as the *Cloud*-author proceeds, his first examples come to be entirely displaced.

The shifting instances of the prayer-word are not the only evidence that its choice is arbitrary. For the *Cloud*-author does not fail to address the question of which word is to be used. In the thirty-ninth chapter, after repeating that one should pray in a "lityl worde of o silable," he poses the question explicitly: "And what schal þis worde be? Sekyrlyche soche a worde as is best acordyng unto þe propirte of preier. And what worde is þat?"[280] He explains that the words *God* and *synne* are very appropriate to the task of monosyllabic prayer, given that the meaning of these two words comprehends everything one would want to mean in a prayer. But the explanation does not suffice, as he knows, for he has made clear already that it is the

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[278] *Cloud*, 73.7–11.
[279] Ibid., 78.18–9.
[280] Ibid., 76.22–3.

monosyllabic quality of a word that makes it appropriate rather than its meaning this or that. For this reason he goes on to specify that these words *God* and *synne* are not necessarily better than any others. If God had taught him to make use of some others, he would have done it:

> ȝif I had be lernyd of God to take any oþer wordes ouþer, I wolde þan haue taken hem and lefte þees; and so I rede þat thou do.

These are the words he himself has been moved to use, so that they should not lightly be set aside; and yet what is important is not what word is chosen but the fact that you are moved to chose some word, whatever it be. What determines the choice of the word is nothing else than this *stirring*:

> And þerfore take þou none oþer wordes to preie in—al-þof I sette þees here—bot soche as þu arte sterid of God for to take.

If you are stirred to use the words *God* and *synne*, there is no reason to choose some other word instead; but these words make themselves available to the stirring for a single reason. They are "fully brief"—that is, they are of one syllable:

> ȝif God stire þee to take þees, I rede not þat þou leue hem—I mene ȝif þou schalt preie in wordes, & elles not; for whi þei ben ful schorte wordes.[281]

The point is made without ambiguity: it does not matter what word you use. And yet the examples given are not entirely without interest, in that they allow the final notable characteristic of the *litil worde* to become clear. What is pertinent about the examples *God*, *loue*, *synne*, and *oute* is that they are words known to any speaker of the language in which the treatise is written. But this has nothing to do with Middle English as a particular language or with its "vernacularity." It simply means that the *litil worde* will not be a *nomen barbarum*: not an

[281] Ibid., 77.14–25.

esoteric, foreign, or unfamiliar term but just any old word already known to you.[282] All that matters is that the word exist already in your vocabulary, which in the case of readers of a treatise written in Middle English can safely be assumed to be a Middle English vocabulary. Much has been made of the fact that the treatise is written in the vernacular, as well as of the *Cloud*-author's rhetorical use of "homely metaphors." It is claimed that his project has to do with a special quality of resistance, at once "bodily," "affective," and "vernacular," to be understood in opposition to another sort of theology written in another style and language.[283] These claims

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[282] The strangeness of unknown or foreign words was, in magical contexts, sometimes thought to make them more efficacious. Cf. Claudia Rohrbacher-Sticker, "From Sense to Nonsense, From Incantation Prayer to Magical Spell," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 3, no. 1 (January 1, 1996): 24–46. This is precisely not the case with the *Cloud*, as we will see shortly. I discuss *nomina barbara* in the Introduction, supra.

[283] The category of "vernacular theology," whose currency we owe to the work of Nicholas Watson, has been extremely productive. Cf. his "Censorship and Cultural Change in Late-Medieval England: Vernacular Theology, the Oxford Translation Debate, and Arundel's Constitutions of 1409," *Speculum* 70 (1995): 822–64; "Conceptions of the Word: The Mother Tongue and the Incarnation of God," *New Medieval Literatures* 1 (1997): 85–124; "Cultural Changes," *English Language Notes* 44 (2006): 127–37. Watson notes the independent use of the term by Bernard McGinn, and Vincent Gillespie finds it in the work of Ian Doyle as early as 1953.

Despite the important work the concept of vernacular theology has generated, I am skeptical of certain of the uses to which it has been put in less exacting hands than Watson's. In this skepticism I follow the forceful cases made recently by Vincent Gillespie and D. Vance Smith. My resistance is largely to what seems to me the drawing of an unwarranted equivalency between vernacular language, the body, and the feminine, and of assigning to the resulting entity an inherent "counter-hegemonic" force. Gillespie cautions against too hastily assuming that the fact that a work is composed in the vernacular means that it is positioning itself against *latinitas,* emphasizing that religious texts in the vernacular are "rafted on the assumptions, ideologies, and even idiolects of Latin theological writing" and that vernacular composition "partly reflects the breadth of the available market for such texts, and the number of environments in which they might be used." "Vernacular Theology," in *Middle English: Oxford Twenty-First Century Approaches to Literature* (New York: Oxford, 2007), 403. More polemically, Smith has written that "vernacular theology may constitute daring and original thinking, but to assume that its own aim is to unfold outside institutionalized—among others, "Latinate"—intellectual formations is to mistake our interests with its own." And what is occluded in this focus on our own interests is finally a text's "capacity to respond to something other than its own moment of crisis." D. Vance Smith, "The Application of Thought to Medieval Studies: The Twenty-First Century," *Exemplaria* 22, no. 1 (2010): 89–90. Cf. also Katherine Zieman, *Singing the New Song: Literacy*

may be true, although it is worth pointing out that the *Cloud*-author at no point displays the least interest in the fact that he is writing in one language rather than another.[284] But whatever be the case with the language of the treatise as a whole, for their part the examples of prayer words are in the vernacular for a single reason: so is the treatise. Eleanor Johnson, in her important recent account of the *litil worde*, has claimed that the examples *loue* and *God* show that Latin is not suitable for the purposes of this prayer, given that their presumptive renderings into Latin, *deus* and *amor*, are bisyllabic. But what she demonstrates rather is that the examples are ill-rendered, and it would be a simple matter to find an adequate translation of the prayer word in the language of *hic haec hoc*. If the *Cloud*-author were addressing speakers of another language, his examples would just have to change: and all that would be necessary for them to be *adequate* examples is that they answer to his description of the *litil worde*.

2. The syllable-word

This description is as follows: it is a vocal utterance, a word, a single word, whichever word you are incited to choose from among your already-existing vocabulary, as long as it be monosyllabic. The question is why the *Cloud*-author insists on this thing and not some other.

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and Liturgy in Late Medieval England (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 114–5; Wogan-Browne et al., *The Idea of the Vernacular*, 366ff.

[284] The treatise emerges as part of an already long-established activity of producing religious writing in the vernacular, as it was composed a century and a half after the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), according to which sermons should be given in the vernacular, and a century after Archbishop Peckham's extension of this vernacular imperative to confession and lay instruction (1281). That said, Watson has shown clearly that its period of composition was that of "an intense, approximately sixty-year cultural argument over the whole role of the vernacular in religious culture: an argument that took in larger questions about the intellectual capacities of the laity, the role of the clergy in ministering to them, and the suitability of vernacular theological writing as a vehicle for religious truth." Watson, "Censorship and Cultural Change," 837. But the question is to what extent this demonstrable historical context will be of determinate importance to the particular thing the *Cloud* wants to say, and it seems to me worth noting in this connection the lack of any explicit mention of its vernacularity.

Why not a silent prayer, or a prayer of sighs and wailings, or of phrases or sentences, or of some particular word, or of a word in a language unknown to you (foreign or magical), or of a multisyllabic word? Why not the Pater Noster or Ave Maria? The *Cloud*-author explains that if he insists on the use of the *litil worde* it is because such an utterance lends itself most fittingly to the purpose to which it will be put. This fitness inheres in a characteristic of this word that he calls its *hoelnes*: the way that it can be kept whole.

Recall that the purpose of the *Cloud*'s technique is to do away with all the thoughts in your mind in order that the intellect may encounter the very absence of thought, the so-called cloud of unknowing.[285] This encounter will be accomplished by means of the *litil worde*, which, according to an improbable figure, you use simultaneously to bludgeon your thoughts and to pound against the cloud. The double operation of unknowing consists in this blow—to which the *Cloud*-author gives the name *loue put*, that is, love-thrust—which takes place when you turn the word into an accoutrement of battle, at once a sword you bash against the cloud of unknowing and a shield to keep your thoughts at bay.[286] In being wielded in this manner, the word produces "þis lityl blynde loue put, when it is betyng upon þis derke cloude of unknowing, alle oþer þinges put doun and forȝeten."[287]

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[285] The final and most difficult to get rid of thought will be the feeling of one's own existence. The *Cloud*'s treatment of this sense is the subject of some pages of Nicola Masciandaro, "The Sorrow of Being," *Qui Parle* 19, no. 1 (2010): 9–35. On the sense of sensing, Daniel Heller-Roazen, *The Inner Touch: Archaeology of a Sensation* (Zone Books, 2007). It should be noted here that in the *Book of Privy Counseling*, the *nakid entente* that is here to be wrapped up in the word is said to be, itself, this feeling of one's own being. These two works are, in this regard, at least *prima facie* in deep contradiction. This discrepancy has been remarked by Paavo Rissanen, "The Prayer of Being in the Cloud of Unknowing," *Mystics Quarterly* 13, no. 3 (1987): 142ff.
[286] *Cloud*, 47.15, 21; 58.8. On this imagery, cf. Tarjei Park, *Selfhood and "Gostly Menyng" in Some Middle English Mystics: Semiotic Approaches to Contemplative Theology*, Toronto Studies in Theology 84 (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 2002), 118.
[287] *Cloud*, 58.8–9.

If the word of one syllable lends itself to this operation, it is because it can be kept *whole*. The *Cloud*-author explains that your always-returning thoughts will attempt to get you to explain the word, analyze it, that is, break it up into its parts, but this is what you must not do.

> ȝif any þouȝt prees apon þee to aske þee what þou woldest haue, answere him wiþ no mo wordes bot wiþ þis o worde. And ȝif he profre þee of his grete clergie to expoune þee þat worde and to telle þee þe condicions of þat worde, sey him þat þou wilt haue it al hole, and not broken ne undon.[288]

To keep the word whole is to withdraw it from the grammatical and logical procedures that would "break" it up by distinguishing in it genus from species, root from ending, literal sense from figurative—or syllable from syllable. This refusal of "exposition" by means of sheer repetition appears to seize upon the brevity and unity of the monosyllable, insofar as a longer word might be more readily articulated into parts. It would seem easier to keep "whole" a word whose syllabic quantity is one.[289]

This appearance is deceptive. In fact syllabic quantity and word quantity are entirely separate, and it is the *peculiarity* of the coincidence of part and whole in the monosyllabic word that matters here. Such a word is not to be used because, as Johnson has suggested, the syllable is "the shortest unit of audible language that carries meaning."[290] On the contrary, the syllable, as it is theorized in both the grammatical and logical traditions, is if anything the *largest* part of a word which is *not* in itself meaningful. In Priscian's terms, the *syllaba* differs from the *dictio* first of all inasmuch as the one is a part of the other, but no less because it is in the nature of the word to bear a complete meaning, while by contrast the syllable in itself does not necessarily

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[288] Ibid., 28.20–29.4.
[289] This reading is that adopted e.g. by Lees, *Negative Language*, 394–5.
[290] Johnson, "Feeling Time, Will, and Words," 351.

signify at all.[291] Moreover, the grammarian demonstrates the meaningfulness of the *dictio* (its having *sensus*) exactly by opposing the word to its parts. In other words, the syllable *-king* in the word *smoking* makes no reference to the monarchy; or, to use Priscian's example, the meaning of a word like *vires*, "men," is altogether distinct from that which might be imagined by someone breaking it up into *vi*, i.e. "by force," and *res*, "things." The meaning of *vires* has nothing to do with that of the words *vi* and *res*, and more importantly the syllables *vi-* and *-res* have nothing to do with the words they resemble. Insofar as they remain syllables, they are subordinated to the word of which they are a part and do not themselves signify.

The meaninglessness of isolated syllables is taught by the logical as well as the grammatical authorities. It is a point Aristotle makes twice in the opening pages of *De interpretatione.* In explaining why he has included the qualification "no part of which is significant separately" in the definition of the noun, he declares that the syllable has no meaning in itself.[292] In his influential commentary on Aristotle's treatise, Boethius underscores this point: "although every noun is made up of them, syllables themselves do not yet mean anything at all."[293] So that when the commentator explains what Aristotle means in defining the noun as a kind of *vox significativa*, his contrasting example of a *vox quae nihil designat,* a totally meaningless utterance, is the syllable.[294] The grammatical and logical authorities are in

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[291] *Differt autem dictio a syllaba, non solum quod syllaba pars est dictionis, sed etiam quod dictio dicendum, hoc est intellegendum, aliquid habet. Syllaba autem non omni modo aliquid significant per se*. Priscian, *Institutiones grammaticorum*, 53.
[292] Cf. Aristotle, *Aristoteles latinus*, ed. L. Minio-Paluello, vol. II, Corpus philosophorum Medii Aevi (Bruges: Desclée, De Brouwer, 1965).
[293] *Syllabae enim, cum ex his totum nomen constet, adhuc ipsae nihil omnino significant*. *Commentarii in librum Aristotelis Peri hermeneias, pars posterior, secundam editionem continens*, ed. Carl Meiser (Leipzig: Teubner, 1880), 54.
[294] As we saw in Chapter II, terminist treatises also mention the syllable as an example of *vox non-significativa*.

agreement on this point: the syllable has no semantic value, is as it were suspended in meaninglessness, until the word of which it is part has been uttered in its entirety.[295]

And yet there is one sort of word whose whole signification would seem to arrive in the understanding at the same moment as a single syllable is pronounced, and that is of course the monosyllabic word. This fact, that the non-significative part and the significative whole of a word can and in fact not infrequently do coincide, is not ignored by the grammatical authorities. To the contrary, it comes in for special treatment as the limit case that reveals the distinction between *dictio* and *syllaba* the more completely. Having already declared that the syllable does not always signify anything, Priscian explains that while it is true that a monosyllabic word can be called simply a syllable, this is the case only in an imperfect sense: for the syllable, he goes on, can in fact *never* signify anything by itself, as signifying is proper only to words.[296] It is nothing else than the existence of monosyllabic words that forces the grammarian to specify that the syllable is not just potentially but by nature totally and always non-signifying. In other words, the entity that would seem to undo the distinction between word and syllable is rather the basis on which their total irreconcilability makes itself known. Until a syllable has been placed within a word, it has none of the characteristics of a word and will not admit of any of the modes

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[295] The non-significative quality of the syllable is also evidenced in what Katherine Zieman calls a "formulaic expression regularly used to denote 'minimal ability' in" texts concerning the literacy of clergy: *legere aut sibilicare*. Zieman, *Singing the New Song*, 60. The ability to "syllabify" a text is simply to be able to read it aloud correctly, without knowing what it means. Zieman draws on the work of Paul Saenger, who has called such an ability "phonetic literacy." Cf. his "Books of Hours and Reading Habits in the Later Middle Ages," in *The Culture of Print: Power and the Uses of Print in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Roger Chartier (Cambridge: Polity, 1989), 141–73.

[296] *Syllaba autem non omni modo aliquid significat per se: ergo monosyllabae dictiones possunt quodammodo esse et syllabae, non tamen sincere, quia numquam syllaba per se potest aliquid significare: hoc enim proprium est dictionis*. *Institutiones grammaticorum*, 53.

of apprehension proper to a word.[297] Conversely, once a word can be considered as a word, it ceases to be apprehensible on the basis of the syllable or syllables that make it up. It is thanks to the monosyllabic word that the following principle can be formulated: insofar as it is considered as a syllable, a word does not signify; and insofar as it is considered as significative, a word is no longer a syllable.

The *Cloud*'s precept that the monosyllabic word be kept "whole" should be understood in the light of this double exclusion. On the one hand, it is a matter of insisting on the lexical indifference of the monosyllabic utterance by confounding the efforts of your thoughts to tell you what the word means. On the other, the utterance is not a syllable but a *worde* of one syllable, and the task it to keep it precisely *whole*, that is, a word and not a syllable. The work will consist, then, in producing an utterance that in being both syllable and word is emphatically neither. This *litil worde of o silable* is not, after all, a "monosyllabic word" but something that might be better called a *syllable-word*. Wholly and only a word, it is nonetheless retained at the level of the syllable: and this means that to utter it is to produce a word that is totally non-signifying.[298]

3. Its production

This meaningless word is not given but produced. Both the end and the means of its own

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[297] *Vides ergo per se ipsam syllabam deficere praedictorum ratione nec aliter posse examussim tractari, nisi posita sit in dictione*. Ibid.

[298] The prayer is thus exactly not, as is regularly claimed, a meditation on the meaning of the word it consists in. Comparisons to Hugh's "aspirative prayer," Walter Hilton's meditation on the name *Jhesu*, or Ignatius of Loyola's technique of "contemplating the meaning of each word of a prayer" cannot be sustained. A classic statement of this position is Leclercq, Vandenbroucke, and Bouyer, *La Spiritualité du moyen age*, 504. Cf. Ignatius, *Los ejercicios espirituales de San Ignacio de Loyola*, ed. Joannes Philippus Roothaan and Teodoro Toni Ruiz (Saragossa: Hechos y dichos, 1959), sec. 249–57; Walter Hilton, *The Scale of Perfection*, ed. Thomas Bestul (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000), 83.
On another kind of "praying without understanding," in the use of Latin by people with varying levels of familiarity with the language, cf. Zieman, *Singing the New Song*, 121ff.

production, the syllable-word emerges only in repetition. This crucial point is one that the *Cloud*-author makes almost glancingly, though he declares in so doing that, while he barely addresses it, it is no less important than the one characteristic of the *litil worde* he has underscored so heavily. The word is to be repeated incessantly:

> al-þof the shortnes of preier be greetly comendid here, neuerþeles þe oftnes of preier is neuer þe raþer refreynid […] it schuld neuer sees tyl tyme were þat it had fully getyn þat þat it longid after.[299]

And thus when the *Cloud*-author gives an example not of the word used in the prayer but of the *crie* in which it sounds, he sets the word down repeatedly: "And crye þan euer upon one: 'Synne, synne, synne; oute, oute, oute!'"[300] Now this frequency of the utterance corresponds to its use as a *loue-put*—a beating against the cloud of unknowing. The word is fixed to the heart so as to be always working: "fasten þis worde to þin herte, so þat it neuer go þens for þing þat bifalleþ."[301] But there is more to be said about it. The repetition of the single word prevents its entry into "ordered speech," it isolates it as a word outside of a grouping of words. To repeat the same word over and over again is to never produce a sentence into which it could be fit but to produce what Johnson has rightly called a "recursive and asyntactic" prayer, or in Vincent Gillespie's phrase an utterance "syntactically uninhibited."[302] But this insistence on the single word is very far from an insistence on its signification, from a hammering home of whatever it might mean. This is explicit in the Priscianic definition of the word as distinct from the syllable: for if a word has a *sensus*, the grammarian hastens to add that this status is exclusively granted by its placement within a sentence. The *sensus* of the whole and single word can only be gathered by reference to its participation in a sentence, an *oratio*, the ordered combination of words that

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[299] *Cloud*, 78.1–5.
[300] Ibid., 78.18–9.
[301] Ibid., 28.15–6.
[302] Johnson, "Feeling Time, Will, and Words," 346; Gillespie, "Postcards from the Edge," 153.

taken together show a complete *sententia*.[303] That is, although the word has meaning in itself, this meaning is not granted by the word's being definable in itself but only insofar as it can be picked out from the succession of words. For instance, you cannot know if the word *smells* is a noun or a verb, if it is a verb whether transitive or intransitive, and (in speech if not in writing) if it is a noun whether nominative or genitive, without a sentence in which the word would appear: and its *sensus* would be different in each case. The repetition of a single word outside of a phrase or sentence as taught in the *Cloud* is a refusal of the kind of ordered speech that would complete itself and thereby allow its various parts to show the sense of their combination and therefore the sense of each part.

Repetition thus deprives the *litil worde* of its *sensus*: both by retaining it at the level of the syllable and by preventing it from forming part of a sentence. But maybe it is not necessary to refer to the authority of a Priscian here. As the *Cloud*-author says, this word is "betyr lernid of God by þe proef þen of any man by worde."[304] And you already know very well what happens when you say *cloud cloud cloud cloud cloud cloud cloud cloud*. It is the same with the word *loue*, or any other: repeating it ad infinitum does not reinforce its meaning but cancels it out. In a process familiar to everyone, sometimes called (not very helpfully) *semantic satiation*, the more you repeat an utterance the less it seems to have to do with any concept or thing. A duration can be produced by the repetition of an utterance in which whatever signification might have attached to it before, and in all likelihood will do so again, just cannot possibly have anything to do with it for the time being. During this duration, not only does the semantic value of a word

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[303] *Dictio est pars minima orationis constructae, id est in ordine compositae: pars autem, quantum ad totum intellegendum, id est ad totius sensus intellectum; hoc autem ideo dictum est, ne quis conetur 'vires' in duas partes dividere, hoc est in 'vi' et 'res', vel quaedam huiuscemodi. Non enim ad totum intellegendum haec fit divisio*. *Institutiones grammaticorum*, 53.
[304] *Cloud*, 68.19–20.

become uncoupled from its sound-shape or *figura vocis*, but the sound-shape itself appears to change, so that it would belong to a distinct and unknown other word. The method of prayer of the *Cloud of Unknowing* is nothing else than the child's game of repeating a word until it sounds like absolutely nothing you have ever heard before and cannot possibly be considered to mean anything, even while it is indistinguishable from a word with which you remain altogether familiar.[305]

The procedure is a means of turning *God* or *loue* or *synne* or *oute* into a nonsense word. It is a collection of ruses to be employed in the confounding of the concepts that will attempt to join themselves to an utterance. These are as follows, each reduplicating the effect of the others. The word should be maintained in a state in which it cannot be told apart from a mere syllable. It should be pronounced without regard for its lexical specificity. It should be repeated incessantly, so that it takes on the bizarre proportions of a sound estranged from its usual familiarity and sense. It should be kept in a state of non-exposition, and wielded against all impulses to explain it or use it to explain anything else. These are all, and collectively, a technique for producing an utterance that enjoys an existence independent of reference and signification.

As we have seen in the previous chapter, such utterances had a constant if unwelcome presence in the writings of Oxford logicians in the two centuries leading up to the composition of the *Cloud*. In Boethian logic, a *locutio* is merely an utterance that has been stamped with a *figura vocis*, to which a *significatio* can be joined but need not be. For the medieval theorists of terms, such words pose a problem, insofar as they appear to be able to supposit for (i.e., refer to) their

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[305] A kind of nonsense in repetition is also produced in the early fourteenth-century poem "Erthe," in which the word *erthe* appears some twelve times in four lines. As D. Vance Smith has remarked, "The lines seem to use up language, stressing a single word until it becomes virtually nonsensical because it is coming to mean so much." D. Vance Smith, "Medieval Forma: The Logic of the Work," in *Reading for Form*, ed. Susan Wolfson and Marshall Brown (Seattle: University of Washington, 2007), 74.

own utterance even without having any signification, for example in the proposition *buf is monosyllabic*. I have suggested that at least one logician, Walter Burley, pointed toward the possibility that in this phenomenon of material supposition the mind might be able to know its failure to cognize its own vocalizations. I have also shown that this possibility disappeared from the field of logic with the development, beginning in the middle of the fourteenth century and in full effect by the time the *Cloud* was being written, of an account of utterance in which nonsense had become an impossibility.

The idea that a word such as *buf* might *do* something to the mind is merely hinted at in Burley, and is itself the reason for the expulsion from logic of the word *garalus* by Boethius. But the *Cloud*-author seizes on the efficacious potential of such words. He does something unattempted in grammar or logic, not to mention in theology or devotional literature: he provides a method for the production of the nonsense word. His bizarre proposal is that you turn an ordinary word into a meaningless one, *vox significativa* into *vox non-significativa*. Repetition of the syllable-word brings about its un-imposition. This operation is neither grammatical nor logical. Grammar accepts the nonsense word blithely, according to Boethius, whereas logic excludes it; but the *werk* of the *Cloud* consists neither in accepting nor in rejecting it but in producing it. The *werk* takes place in a possibility inherent in *vox* that opens between grammar and logic, in which you make your own voice available as an instrument for the carrying out of a task. The innovation of the *Cloud*-author should be located here, in his pressing a sort of utterance widely recognized though widely ignored in the medieval sciences of language into service. He does this because he believes the syllable-word to be possessed of a particular efficacy: it causes something to happen, it *works*.

4. Its use

What does the repetition of the word to the point of meaninglessness bring about? Here too the syllabic nature of the *litil worde* is of central importance. For the efficacy of the utterance is a monosyllabic efficacy, as the *Cloud*-author explains by means of a comparison between the person carrying out the prayer *werk* and someone caught in a fire and crying for help. How, the *Cloud*-author asks, will such a person shout? "Ȝe, how? Sekirly not in many woordes, ne ȝit in o woorde of two silabes."[306] When praying, you should shout like a person in an emergency, who will not stop to think about what he wants to shout out but will rather naturally emit a monosyllabic cry like *fire!* This is because brevity befits the direness of your situation, that is, the wretchedness of sin. But the syllable-word is not only appropriate to the state of its speaker but *useful*, and useful because it strikes the ears of whoever hears it in a particular way:

> And riȝt as þis lityl worde FIIR steriþ raþer and peerseþ more hastely þe eren of þe herers, so doþ a lityl worde of o sylable [….] And raþer it peersiþ þe eres of Almyȝty God þan doþ any longe sauter vnmyndfuly mumlyd in þe teeþ.[307]

Such a word more effectively brings succor than other forms of speech: whoever is within hearing distance will more readily come to your aid if you shout *help!* than if you remark that you might benefit from their assistance should they be willing to consider offering it. And this is so even, the *Cloud*-author goes on, in the case of mortal enemies. He claims that you will jump out of bed—"ȝe! þof it be aboute midwintirs niȝt"—to help your "deedly enmye" without giving any particular thought to the chill or to the fact that he is your enemy, if only he cry out *fire!*

Despite its homely appearance, the figure of someone in a fire shouting for help was a commonplace in thirteenth-century grammatical discussions of what we now call "performative speech acts," where it was used to illustrate the doctrine that sentences need not be

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[306] *Cloud*, 74.17–8.
[307] Ibid., 74.23–75.4.

grammatically complete in order to be understandable and effective.[308] The *Cloud*-author employs this figure in the context of prayer: if the syllable-word forces even enemies to help one another, he suggests, how much more useful will it be when it is addressed to God. The syllable-word all but forces the one hearing it to respond against his or her will, it puts out of commission whatever unwillingness to help might be present, and makes your enemy merciful toward you, or you merciful toward your enemy, "not aȝenstonding his enmite."[309] The *Cloud*-author does not go so far as to say that you will compel God to do anything unwillingly, but he comes remarkably close. This is how he explains it: if—through grace—the worst sinner, who is to God as it were an enemy, is able to "crye soche a lityl silable," notwithstanding their enmity "he scholde for þe hidous noise of þis crye be alweis herde and holpen of God."[310]

What matters in the syllable-word is its *hidous noise*. The efficacy of the little word is lodged in the *noise* of its *crye*, and it is for the sake of this noise that it is pressed into service in the *werk*. If God does not hear the particular word uttered, he does hear and respond to its noise. This is because, as the *Cloud*-author explains, you make something plain to God altogether differently than you do to another person. It would be exactly wrong to think that you should try to tell God anything, about yourself or himself or something else again, about a wish or a fear or a state of affairs. But this does not mean that God hears and helps you when you emit a syllable-word because the clamor of its *noise* communicates to him the mere fact that you need help. Operating under this misconception might lead you to make

> a bodily schewyng vnto hym, ouþer in contenaunce, or in voice, or in worde, or in som oþer rude bodily streynyng, as it is when þou schalt schewe a þing þat is hid in þin hert to

[308] Cf. Irène Rosier-Catach, "Grammar," in *The Cambridge History of Medieval Philosophy*, ed. Robert Pasnau and Christina Dyke, vol. I (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 212.
[309] *Cloud*, 76.4–18.
[310] Ibid., 75.21–76.3.

> a bodily man; & in as moche þi werk schuld haue ben inpure. For on o maner schal a þing be schewid to man, & on an-oþer maner vnto God.[311]

In speaking to God it is not a question of making known what is within you, as it is when you speak to another person. But what the *Cloud*-author's emphasis not just on the *worde* but also on the voice, face, and gesture indicates is that the utterance will "not make known" not only insofar as its *significatio* is to be placed under suspension but because its force as a natural sign is too.

The *hidous noise* of the syllable-word is not, in other words, the sound of a yell or scream, it is not the recuperation in the voice of an originary cry. The *worde* does not cease to be a *worde*, a *dictio* or *locutio*, an utterance fundamentally writable. But this is not because an inarticulate utterance would necessarily be outside the circuit of meaningful utterances. On the contrary, the problem with inarticulate utterances is that they say too much: that they too make something known. As we have seen in the two previous chapters, there are two ways in which the voice is understood to signify in the Aristotelian tradition: as *encoding*, arbitrarily, some idea with which a particular utterance would be associated (this is what Boethius calls *impositio*), and also as *symptomatizing* by its very presence the fact that some mental state is occurring. In other words, when someone speaks you can gather from the noise produced both some particular signified content *and* the bare fact that a person is there, meaning something-or-other, whatever it turn out to be.[312] Vocal sound may or may not carry an arbitrarily imposed meaning but in any case it will always announce the presence of a mind. This is why sighs, yells of pain, and the like, are not without *significatio*, even though they are unwritable and have not been imposed on

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[311] Ibid., 90.5–10.

[312] The classic statement of this distinction is Norman Kretzmann, "Aristotle on Spoken Sound Significant by Convention," in *Ancient Logic and Its Modern Interpretations*, ed. J. Corcoran (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1974). Boethius, as I have shown, rejects this second way of signifying, leaving only the first; Roger Bacon, among many others, reinstate it. In the fourteenth-century it receives a particularly clear formulation by John Buridan, *Questiones longe super librum Perihermeneias*, Artistarium 4 (Nijmegen: Ingenium, 1983).

any particular concept. And this is why if a person speaks a language you do not know, you are still able to gather that the person has something in his mind that he is attempting to make known by means of his voice. This is the point of the celebrated prose in which the *Cloud*-author castigates people who want to display their holiness in their bizarre modes of comporting themselves, and especially with their voices, expressions, and gestures. These wretches, gripped by their ill-advised wish to know things and to display what knowledge they have already, screw up their eyes like sheep knocked over the head, or tilt their heads to one side as though they had a worm in their ear; others "pipyn when þei schuld speke, as þer were no spirit in þeire bodies" or "crien and whinen in þeire þrote, so ben þei greedy & hasty to sey þat þei þink."[313] In trying to show something with their voices and countenances, such squeakers and lispers fracture the voice into parts, rather than keeping it whole in the effort to display nothing with it.[314]

In short, the *hidous noise* that makes God hear the syllable-word is not a clamor that makes it known that something is happening. What is hideous about the *litil worde* is that it does not even do that: it makes nothing at all known. It is for the sake of this hideousness that the *Cloud*-author insists that you should go so far as to conceal the meaning of your prayer from God, you should hide your desire in as dark an obscurity as possible. Thus you should perform the *werk* as if "þou on no wyse woldest lat hym wite hou fayne þou woldest see hym and haue hym or fele hym."[315] And this because it is in concealment that your desire will make itself

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[313] *Cloud*, 97.21–98.4.
[314] Smith sees in these *tokyns* or displays a resemblance to the signs of being in love. "By excluding these outward manifestations of loving, the problem the *Cloud* poses is how to love, if that is all we can do, without some idea of what it is we do when we are in love." The *Cloud* responds to this, its central problem, that of how to "desire a love that is not a discourse of love," by offering a ruse: that desire should be wrapped up in a linguistic utterance that holds itself apart from discourse. Cf. "Love Without Name: The Pseudonymous Writing of the Cloud of Unknowing," in *Love Without Object*, forthcoming.
[315] *Cloud*, 87.21–3.

known to him most easily and fully. "It schuld more cleerly com to his knowing, to þi profite & in fulfyllyng of þi desire, by soche an hiding, þan it scholde by any oþer maner of schewyng þat I trowe þou coudest ȝit schewe."[316] If the point of the prayer-work is to put the meaning of the *litil worde* under suspension, it is because the word will more effectively come to the hearing of God if its meaning is hidden as deep as possible: as it were concealed both from him and from yourself.

But what does it mean to be *holpen of God*? What is the success of a prayer that asks for nothing? It is a state of the intellect made possible by the hideous noise. The purpose of the word that makes nothing known is exactly to produce a failure of knowledge in which nothing is known. This is because such a failure of knowledge is itself the knowing of God. As the *Cloud*-author puts it, while a person can never "bi þe werk of his vnderstondyng com to þe knowyng of an vnmaad goostly þing, þe whiche is nouȝt bot God," this does not mean that knowledge of God is impossible. For he continues: "Bot by þe failyng it may; for whi þat þing þat it failiþ in is noþing else bot only God."[317] While the work of the understanding will never allow a person to know God, in this very failure such knowledge may occur.[318] It is the purpose of the *werk* to bring about this failure, by producing a thinking that does not extend itself toward any particular object. In the *Cloud*-author's most favored phrase, it is a thought *wiþ-outen special beholdyng*,

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[316] Ibid., 88.11–4.
[317] Ibid., 125.4–12.
[318] This point has been regularly obscured by an overemphasis among the *Cloud*'s readers on its "anti-intellective" stance. Smith has recently put the question why the *Cloud*-author continues to speak about thinking at all, as he does, if what he is discussing is a matter simply of affection. Smith insists on a distinction sometimes occluded, namely that negative theology, that of the *Cloud* included, "does not *put* limits on the intellect so much as *describe* them." Smith, "Love Without Name." This is to say that the *Cloud* does not position itself against the intellect but that it scrupulously marks outs its failures, and if it does so it is because it is in the failures of the intellective faculty—and not its absence—that the knowledge of God will occur. To take seriously what the *Cloud*-author has to say about both knowing and loving is to be unable to affirm that he counsels a love of God in the absence of thinking.

that is, free of particular regard: it intends nothing and is without object. The technique of the *Cloud* works as follows: the repetition of the *litil worde* produces a null-word, in whose *hidous noise* the intellect becomes suspended as a null-thought which is the knowledge of God.

5. *Cogitatio secundum vocem solam*

One characteristic of the *litil worde* remains unaccounted for: its familiarity. If the *werk* consists in stripping a word like *loue* of its *sensus* by means of repetition, why not simply start with a word to which no *sensus* is attached? Why not use a made-up or foreign word? The answer is that something different happens when you hear a familiar word made meaningless by repetition than when you hear an unknown word. When a familiar word is stripped in this way of its meaning, it does not become a simply unknown word. Rather, it remains a known word even as the knowledge of it is withdrawn. What emerges is a *ludicrousness*, the total improbability that this utterance could be the same one you are familiar with, even as you have every reason to believe that it is. This ludicrousness occurs in the state of knowing that you know but not knowing. The "unknowing" of the *Cloud* is just this experience of language that occurs in the withdrawal of sense in repetition. The already known word is possessed of a force which an unknown word is not: its familiarity gives rise to an incomprehension that is not merely a fact but a problem. Instead of sliding past the ears, the word sticks. Undeniably familiar, and yet wrenched from its recognizability, the repeated word cannot be a matter of indifference. It presses itself upon you, compelling the mind to take notice of its own inability to conceive. The *hidous noise* of the *litil worde* is that of an inconceivability made present to the mind, a presence possible only inasmuch as it cannot be avoided.

For this unknowing does not take place outside of the repetition of the word, nor can it be imagined or desired apart from that repetition. This is the meaning of that formula, cited at the beginning of this chapter, in which the *Cloud*-author declares that the possibility of the *werk* is inseparable from its accomplishment, and that both of these are founded not on the will, desire, or intellect, but on a "þing þou wost neuer what, þat steriþ þee to wilne & desire þou wost neuer what." This unknown thing is the *hidous noise* of the syllable-word. If the *Cloud*-author instructs you not to worry if you cannot figure out what it is, but rather to just keep *doyng* the work, this is because the unknown thing is produced only by the force of repetition. You have to say *love love love love love love love love love love* for the thing to happen which is both the prompting and the accomplishment of everything that matters in the *werk*: a temporary lapse in which the mind is given up to the incomprehensible din of a word it knows it knows but cannot recognize.

The experience of the cloud of unknowing is this remittance of the intellect to a *cogitatio secundum vocem solam*, a thought according to the voice alone. If the *werk* has a theological predecessor it is not the "aspirative prayer" of Hugh of Balma but the thinking of God on the basis of the voice alone elaborated two hundred years earlier by Anselm of Canterbury and Gaunilo of Marmontiers.[319] The failure of knowledge the *Cloud*-author describes is the same experience Anselm claims, in the preface to his *Proslogion*, to have undergone as the origination of the so-called ontological proof. As Daniel Heller-Roazen has suggested, "one could define the entire philosophical *probatio* of the *Proslogion* as a single attempt to construct a metaphysics on the basis of a specific type of speaking without meaning; and the absolute novelty of the

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[319] The literature on the so-called ontological proof is enormous. My account of *cogitatio secundum vocem solam* follows indications given by Giorgio Agamben, who has underscored this phrase of Gaunilo's, notably in "The Idea of Language," in *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, ed. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University, 1999), 39–47. Daniel Heller-Roazen has shown that Anselm's formulation of the proof already anticipates Gaunilo's thought of the voice alone. Cf. his "Speaking in Tongues," *Paragraph* 25, no. 2 (2002): 95f.

Anselmian 'demonstration' could be said to lie in the fundamental position it assigns to the limit point of language at which the mechanisms of reference and signification, faltering, give way to a speech that quite literally expresses nothing."[320] Anselm reports that he had been tormented by a thought that eluded him, so that he attempted to give up trying to think it altogether. The attempt was fruitless, as the absent *cogitatio* instead imposed itself upon him, in its very absence, all the more adamantly.[321] And it is nothing else than this same[322] importunate absence of a thought that he comes to grab hold of as the formula of the ontological proof, *quo nihil maius cogitari potest* or "that than which nothing greater can be thought," which Gaunilo will complain allows nothing to be known about itself besides its utterance (*omnino nequeam nisi tantum secundum vocem*). As Gaunilo has it, a person hearing the formula knows that the utterance is not just a sound (*litterarum sonus vel syllabarum*) but a sound possessed of a *significatio*; but not having any idea what that meaning might be, he can do no more than imagine (*effingere*) it to himself on the basis of the effect the sound has upon his mind.[323]

What the *Cloud*-author invents is a technique for stymieing these efforts of the imagination, so that the mind might at least momentarily cease to even pretend that it knows the meaning of its utterance. Like Anselm, he is interested not in the way the mind represents fictions to itself in the absence of a determinate meaning but rather in its failure to imagine

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[320] "Speaking in Tongues," 95.
[321] *Ad quod cum saepe studioseque cogitationem converterem, atque aliquando mihi videretur iam posse capi quod quaerebam, aliquando mentis aciem omnino fugeret: tandem desperans volui cessare velut ab inquisitione rei quam inveniri esset impossibile. Sed cum illam cogitationem, ne mentem meam frustra occupando ab aliis in quibus proficere possem impediret, penitus a me vellem excludere: tunc magis ac magis nolenti et defendenti se coepit cum importunitate quadam ingerere*. *S. Anselmi Cantuarensis episcopi opera omnia*, ed. F.S. Schmitt (Edingurgh: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1946), 93.
[322] *Cum igitur quadam die vehementer eius importunitati resistendo fatigarer, in ipso cogitationum conflictu sic se obtulit quod desperaveram, ut studiose cogitationem amplecterer, quam sollicitus repellebam*. Ibid.
[323] Ibid., 127.

anything at all. The harried state of confusion that Anselm describes is one in which, despite his greatest efforts and his certainty that what he is presented with is not just the sound of letters and syllables but a meaningful utterance, it is not possible to say what its meaning might be. In the *Proslogion*, it is the negative structure of the formula *quo nihil maius cogitari potest* that safeguards this afflicting inability; but in the *Cloud* it is the familiarity of the syllable-word that gives rise to its importunity, its refusal to allow the mind to rest in its imagination of what the utterance might mean.

The *Cloud*-author invents his technique on the basis of the familiar experience of what takes place when a word is repeated over and over again, and on the basis of the properties of the voice as they were theorized in the grammatical and logical tradition. This same affliction of the mind had long before been described by Boethius as that of any person hearing an utterance, like a nonsense word or a syllable uttered by itself, which means nothing at all. According to Boethius, whoever hears a *vox quae nihil designat* will undergo an unpleasant experience: his mind will wander around, twisted and turned upon itself, unable to come to rest.[324] It is because a word like *garalus* could produce such a mental effect, removed from all possibility of the apprehension of truth or falsity, that Boethius banished it from the discipline of logic. But it is for the very same reason that the *Cloud*-author develops a method for producing the nonsense word. For the vertiginous state of mind that Boethius identifies is exactly what the *Cloud*'s technique is meant to bring about:

> For I telle þee trewly þat I had leuer be so nowhere bodily, wrastlyng wiþ þat blynde nought, þan to be so grete a lorde þat I mi3t whan I wolde be euerywhere bodely […] Lat be þis eueriwhere & þis ou3t, in comparison of þis no3where and þis nou3t.[325]

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[324] *Si quis vero huiusmodi vocem ceperit, quae nihil omnino designet, animus eius nulla significatione neque intellegentia roboratus errat ac vertitur nec ullis designationis finibus conquiescit. In Peri hermeneias*, 74.
[325] *Cloud*, 122.2–7.

The prayer-work of the *Cloud* follows a procedure whose single aim is to produce a nonsense word, in order that the mind might be forced to wander, without an object, in no place at all. Despite the affectivizing explanations the *Cloud*-author provides for it, the technique of unknowing concerns itself not with love or will but with this wandering of the mind caught up in the hideous noise of a word repeated to the point of senselessness.

IV
THE ROARING OF THE STONE:
CHAUCER ON *TYDYNGES*

Sonus non-vox, ut fragor
arborum, collisio lapidum.[326]

In Geoffrey Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls*, as in so many other bird debate poems, the various species of birds whose colloquy is overheard all speak, like the eagle in the *House of Fame*, "in mannes voys."[327] Their dialogue could as easily be assigned to humans as to birds, for they speak in what is recognizably English. All, that is, except for the goose, cuckoo, and duck:

> The goos, the cokkow, and the doke also
> So cryede, "Kek kek! kokkow! quek quek!" hye,
> That thourgh myne eres the noyse wente tho.[328]

These three birds produce a *noyse* that is clearly distinct from the other utterances that the poem is made up of. And yet the nature of that difference is difficult to pin down.[329] In the following stanzas these same birds go on to speak—as the others do—in English. And since the entire poem claims to reproduce the vocalizations of birds, this particular line should be no more or less

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[326] "Non-vocal sound, such as the crashing of trees or the banging of rocks." Lambert-Marie de Rijk, *Logica Modernorum: A Contribution to the History of Early Terminist Logic* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1967), II.2.418.

[327] *House of Fame*, ll. 556. All citations from the works of Geoffrey Chaucer are taken from Larry Benson et al., eds., *The Riverside Chaucer* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

[328] *Parliament*, ll. 498-500.

[329] Emma Gorst has recently remarked the confusion this line produces. As she writes, and I am not at all sure I know what she means, "The line 'kek kek' is the voice of a human mimicking a bird mimicking a human, and its inauthenticity as a bird voice is a slippage that reveals to us a failure of human language." Emma Gorst, "Interspecies Mimicry: Birdsong in Chaucer's 'Maniciple's Tale' and The Parlement of Fowles," *New Medieval Literatures* 12 (2010): 150–1.

imitative—or "onomatopoeic"—than any of the others. For his part, the poet provides no basis for drawing a distinction between this *noyse* and the glossable speech that surrounds it. In fact, far from disrupting the smooth flow of the poem, *kek kek kokkow quek quek* accommodates itself to the formal specifications of Chaucer's verse. At stake here is not the irruption of something inassimilable, but a line of the requisite ten syllables, arranged into iambs, and rhyming with the appropriate following line: "quek quek! hye" / "not worth a flye." Anyone reading or listening to the poem without the greatest command of its idiom might easily notice nothing particularly distinctive about the line, since it sounds virtually like all the others. Perhaps its most immediately notable characteristic is not the fact that it is largely made up of gibberish but that it alliterates to a degree not to be found elsewhere in the *Parliament*.

I mention the alliterative qualities of *kek kek kokkow quek quek* because it is in the context of a reference to alliterative poetry that Chaucer provides his other most conspicuous series of nonsense words. In the *Canterbury Tales*, in the prologue to his tale, the Parson explains that he, a Southerner, cannot produce a form of poetry associated with the north:

> But trusteth wel, I am a Southren man;
> I kan nat geeste 'rum, ram, ruf' by lettre[330]

When he wishes to indicate the formal qualities of a variety of poetry, the Parson uses a series of nonsense words. What shows itself in *rum ram ruf* is the materiality of utterance, not yet attached to any particular signification but already available for verse-making.

This chapter is about the transformation of *bu ba buf* into *rum ram ruf*, it is about the poetic possibilities that Chaucer discovered in grammatical and logical discussions of *vox non-significativa*. While these possibilities are indexed in the passages from the *Parliament of Fowls* and Parson's Prologue just cited, Chaucer's most sustained treatment of utterance will be found

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[330] *Canterbury Tales*, X.1.42-3

in the *House of Fame*, which is the subject of this chapter. At the heart of his consideration is a word that, unlike *kek kek* or *rum ram ruf*, does not appear to be nonsensical at all. I am referring to the first word spoken aloud in the poem, the utterance addressed to the dreamer by an eagle who wants to shake him out of a stupor. The word is *awak*:

> Thus I longe in hys clawes lay,
> Til at the laste he to me spak
> In mannes vois, and seyde, "Awak!"[331]

There is an indisputable sense in which this eagle is saying *wake up*. *Awak* is the imperative form of the verb *awaken*; it is the same thing that will be addressed to another swooning figure in the *Book of the Duchess.*[332] But *awak* also resembles a birdcall, for instance the screech of an eagle holding its prey in its claws.[333] Indeed, in some sense it is far more likely that an eagle would be screeching than that it would be speaking English. If in the *Parliament of Fowls* a goose can say both *kek kek* and *al this nys not worth a flye* without there being any obvious way to tell the difference, in the *House of Fame* that indistinction is condensed into a single *vox* that might as easily be a word as a mere squawk.

Awak cannot be said with assurance to belong to any of the varieties of *vox* distinguished by grammarians and logicians. The scene in which it is spoken is set up so as to defy any attempt to determine the status of the utterance: if a bird produces a vocalization and it awakens a dreaming person from a swoon within his dream, was the vocalization a word? Did the bird

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[331] *House of Fame,* ll. 554-6

[332] This messager com fleynge faste
And cried, "O, how! Awake anoon!"
Hit was for noght; there herde hym non.
"Awake!" quod he, "whoo ys lyth there?"
And blew his horn ryght in here eere,
And cried "Awaketh!" wonder hye.
Book of the Duchess, ll. 178-83.

[333] This indeterminacy is famously the case with the crow's *cokkow* in the Manciple's Tale, which is at once a birdcall, the name of a birdcall (and bird), and a word meaning cuckold.

intend to wake him up? If so, would the utterance have to signify that intention, or would any noise serve the same purpose? What *awak* announces is an indistinction of utterance, a confounding force thanks to which the non-significative cannot be told apart from the significative, the conventionally significative from the naturally. This confusion is not incidental. The bird who produces this word or squawk will go on to deliver a lengthy discourse on the nature of sound, and the main implication of his doctrine is exactly the kind of vocal indistinction instantiated in his first line.

In this chapter, I begin by reconstructing the eagle's theory of the indistinction of sound. That theory, as I see it, has a consistency and seriousness that has not been pursued far enough by Chaucer's readers. Chaucer does not only defy the scholarly authorities on *vox* but also constructs out of their materials a new account of *vox*, whose implications I investigate in the second half of the chapter.

1. A book of fame

The *House of Fame* is a dream vision usually thought to have been written in 1379 or 1380, that is, after the *Book of the Duchess* but before the rest of Chaucer's major works, the *Canterbury Tales* among them.[334] Divided into three books, the poem recounts a dream the narrator, who calls himself Geffrey, says he dreamed on "the tenthe day now of Decembre." In its first book, Geffrey finds himself in a glass temple of Venus, on whose walls is inscribed the story of Dido

[334] The dating of the poem has provoked much controversy, which has been renewed in the last decade. Useful accounts of the various theories can be found in Larry Benson, "The Love-Tydynges in Chaucer's House of Fame" in *Chaucer in the Eighties*, ed. J. Wasserman and R. Blanch (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986); and Alastair Minnis, et al., *Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Shorter Poems* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995): 167-71. More recently, a later date has again been put forward, in e.g. Marion Turner, *Chaucerian Conflict: Languages of Antagonism in Late Fourteenth-Century London* (New York: Oxford, 2007): 8-30.

and Aeneas; the better part of this first section consists in a vernacular retelling of their love affair that pits Virgil against Ovid, reducing their authoritative accounts to conflicting rumors and offering up the *auctoritas* of the dreamer himself: "non other auctor allege I" (314). The book ends with Geffrey's stepping out of the temple of Venus into a vast wasteland surrounding it—a field all of sand. It is from this field that, as Book II begins, he is plucked up by a talkative eagle sent, as he claims, by Jove to carry him to the airy realm of Fame. The eagle explains that he has been sent on this errand because, although he has served this god faithfully, Geffrey suffers a terrible affliction: he receives no *tydynges*, that is, he gets no news. To remedy this situation, they will go to the realm of Fame in search of *tydynges*. On their way through the air, this eagle delivers a lecture about the physics of sound. Book III finds Geffrey alighted in the realm of Fame, where he observes the goings on in her double residence: a palace where the monstrous Fama holds court, granting or withholding renown and infamy by caprice, and a wicker house spinning in the air behind the palace, full of *tydynges* that circulate in a great clamor until they are sent to the palace to be trumpeted abroad. The poem ends abruptly upon the appearance, in the wicker house, of an anonymous *man of gret auctorite*, who seems to be about to deliver some bit of news, but doesn't get the chance. Breaking off apparently uncompleted, the poem does not end as it might be expected to, with the awakening of the dreamer or in some other generically legible fashion.[335] As it stands, the mysterious man doesn't speak so much as a word and Geffrey is left there to an unspecified fate.

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[335] A great number of proposals have been floated by those hoping to fix the identity of this man of great authority whose name Geffrey says he neither will nor can give, none of which—rightly—has won overwhelming favor. They include Boethius, Virgil, "Nicolò, nuncio of Cardinal Pileo," and even Christ. The debates are summarized in Benson, "Love-Tydynges"; cf. also Donald Fry, "The Ending of the House of Fame," in R. Robbins, ed., *Chaucer at Albany* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1975): 27-40.

In a mere 2158 lines, Chaucer makes a startling number of allusions, notably to Virgil, Ovid, Dante, Statius, Boethius, Martianus Capella, Alan of Lille, and contemporary scientists of music and grammar. Commonplaces from the latter's works form the basis of the improbable lecture on the nature and activity of sound that the eagle delivers while carrying Geffrey from the desert outside the temple of Venus up through the air to the house of Fame.[336] In a pivotal article of 1985, Martin Irvine demonstrated beyond doubt what had gone unrecognized until then: the eagle's constant reference to grammatical texts in the tradition of Priscian and Donatus and to Boethian musical theory. The 150 lines of this lecture, falling at the mid-point of the poem, address themselves to Chaucer's main concern in the poem: the nature of language.[337] This concern is made explicit already in the title, the *House* or *Book of Fame*.[338] As Chaucer well knew, Isidore of Seville had explained in his *Etymologiae* that the word *fama* derives from *fans*, that is, speaking:

> *Fama autem dicta quia fando, id est loquendo, pervagatur per traduces linguarum et aurium serpens.*[339]
>
> Fame is so called because by speaking, that is, by talking, it wanders around, creeping through the vine-branches of tongues and ears.

For the encyclopedist, the spread of news in which fame would consist is a matter of language. What unites the various senses of *fama*—renown, reputation, infamy, glory, vainglory, rumor,

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[336] Cf. Martin Irvine, "Medieval Grammatical Theory and Chaucer's House of Fame," *Speculum* 60, no. 4 (1985): 850–76. On Chaucer's relations to the trivium, cf. also Ann Astell, *Chaucer and the Universe of Learning* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1996); and J. Stephen Russell, *Chaucer and the Trivium: The Mindsong of the Canterbury Tales* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998): 6-53.

[337] On Chaucer's interest in language generally, cf. John M Fyler, *Language and the Declining World in Chaucer, Dante, and Jean de Meun.* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ Press, 2010).

[338] Chaucer refers in the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women* to the "bok that highte the Hous of Fame" (F.417, G.405) and in the Retraction at the end of the *Canterbury Tales* to "the book also of Fame" (X.1085).

[339] *Etymologiae* V.xxvii.26. My translation.

gossip—is the fact that all these things are produced by linguistic means.[340] What Chaucer is concerned with in his "book of Fame" is this Isidorean domain in which fame and language might be coextensive. It is in this sense that Piero Boitani, whose research into the "tradition of fame" into which the poem intervenes is the most exhaustive undertaken, repeats throughout his book that "Fame is language itself."[341] Jesse Gellrich calls this concern the "'metalinguistic' characteristic of the poem."[342] Nonetheless the specific account of utterance elaborated in the *House of Fame*, and the theory of language that it amounts to, has not been isolated.

2. Vocal indistinction

Carrying Geffrey to the house of Fame, the eagle explains that sound, inasmuch as it is, in its substance, nothing else than broken air, will obey that natural force by which all things are brought ineluctably to their proper place. Thus, just as a stone will invariably fall downwards and a flame rise upwards, so will a sound be brought by *kyndely enclynyng* or natural inclination to the place in the universe toward which all sound tends. That place is the house of Fame: situated at the midpoint between land, sky, and sea, as most congenial to sound, it attracts to itself every utterance to issue anywhere in the world:

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[340] The classic account of fame is María Rosa Lida de Malkiel, *La Idea de La Fama*, 1952. A great deal of attention has been paid to *fama* in recent years. Cf. e.g. Thelma Fenster and Daniel Lord Smail, eds., *Fama: The Politics of Talk and Reputation in Medieval Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 2003); Leo Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame & Its History* (Vintage Books, 1997); Mark Ormrod, "Murmur, Clamour and Noise: Voicing Complaint and Remedy in Petitions to the English Crown, c. 1300-c. 1460," in *Medieval Petitions: Grace and Grievance*, ed. Mark Ormrod, G Dodd, and A Musson (York: York Medieval Press, 2009); Edward Peters, "Wounded Names: The Medieval Doctrine of Infamy," in *Law in Medieaval Life and Thought*, ed. Edward King and Susan Ridyard (Sewanee: 1990, n.d.); Hans-Joachim Neubauer, *The Rumour: A Cultural History* (Free Association Books, 1999).

[341] Cf. his *Chaucer and the Imaginary World of Fame* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1984): 72 and *passim*.

[342] *The Idea of the Book in the Middle Ages: Language Theory, Mythology, and Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1985): 175.

> And this place of which I telle,
> Ther as Fame lyst to duelle,
> Ys set amyddys of these three,
> Heven, erthe, and eke the see,
> As most conservatyf the soun.
> Than ys this the conclusyoun:
> That every speche of every man,
> As y the telle first began,
> Moveth up on high to pace
> Kyndely to Fames place.[343]

There is no sound that is not carried, as soon as it is made, to the realm of Fame. The *conclysyoun* the eagle reaches is that both *speche* and *soun* are subject to this movement. For the purposes of *kyndely enclynyng*, the distinction between the creak of a door-hinge and a declaration of love, the scratch of a pen against the page and someone reading aloud what is written there, is utterly inoperative. All noises rush headlong together up through the air to the realm of Fame.

Having established that this natural law applies to all sounds indiscriminately, the eagle explains how it exerts itself upon them. The *kyndely enclynyng* of sound is analogous to the phenomenon of ripples spreading across the surface of a body of water when a stone has been thrown into it. Though the stone will break the water at only one point, the small circle forming around that breakage will cause a larger circle to appear, and that one another circle still larger, and so forth, until by "multiplyinge ever moo" the disturbance of the water's stillness has traversed the entirety of the surface and reached the shore.[344]

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[343] ll. 843-52.

[344] The figure of the stone tossed into water is found in any number of accounts of the movement of sound, notably the *De musica* of Boethius. For its appearances in grammar texts, cf. Irvine, "Grammatical Theory," 865-6. Thomas recurs to it in his commentary on the *De anima*. For the purposes of the present discussion, it should be noted from the start that this "stone" will proliferate across the poem and that this instance will join the company of its other iterations in what follows.

The name of this force by which sounds are compelled toward the house of Fame is *multiplicacioun*:

> As I have of the watir preved,
> That every cercle causeth other,
> Ryght so of ayr, my leve brother:
> Everych ayr another stereth
> More and more, and speche up bereth,
> Or voys, or noyse, or word, or soun,
> Ay through multiplicacioun,
> Til hyt be atte Hous of Fame.[345]

Exerting itself equally on "speche […] or voys, or noyse, or word, or soun," *multiplicacioun* produces indistinction among all these entities by accumulating them all together rather than by reducing any differentiae that might separate them into species. This multiplicative principle, enacted in the polysyndeton of *or…or…or*, increases any particular *percussio aeris* in such a manner that its identity as *voys*, for example, rather than *noyse,* cannot be maintained.

With his rhetoric of proof and ostentatiously scholarly vocabulary, the eagle advertises the scientific quality of his remarks. And this is not entirely a ruse: much of what he says is copied, as Irvine shows, verbatim from grammatical treatises. But Chaucer introduces a crucial alteration into the discussions he is ventriloquizing here. For he exactly reverses the opening gesture of scientific treatments of language, as we have seen it in the first two chapters of this dissertation. Rather than breaking *vox* up into various kinds, so as to narrow the scope of the discussion only to those sorts of utterance that will be disciplinarily legitimate, by amassing *speche* together with *voys* and *noyse* and *word* and *soun* Chaucer undoes whatever distinctions might have already existed. If Prisican begins his *Institutiones* by setting up a twofold distinction between writable utterances and unwritable ones, between utterances motivated by an intention

[345] ll. 814-21

to signify and those without one, the aquiline chapter *de voce* will begin instead with their being rendered indistinguishable.[346]

And so if the *House of Fame*'s first book has elaborated, in the vernacular, what Priscian had offered as the exemplary instance of the *vox literata articulata,* "arma virumque cano"—

> I wol now synge, yif I kan,
> The armes and also the man[347]

—the second insists, in the voice of an eagle that should by all accounts remain writable but without conjoined signification, on the reducibility of such utterance to an indistinguishable "soun" along with what is "piped of a mous" (785) or "cometh of pipe or harpe" (773) "be hyt rouned, red, or songe" (722). From the principle that "spech is soun" (762), the eagle concludes that significative and non-significative, lettered and unlettered utterance are no more than trivially distinguishable. The eagle's collapsing of all utterance together turns back on itself the gestures, Priscianic and Boethian, grammatical and logical, whereby scientists of language isolated that species of voice that would constitute the proper object of their science. It makes the reading of *arma virumque cano* impossible apart from its sharing fully in the nature of *coax cra*, the sighs of one dejected, and the lowing of cattle, not to mention the creaking of the walls. For my own purposes, the interest of this reduction of the differentiae of *sonus* lies in the way that it makes it impossible to know whether a given *noyse* means "this or that," as Chaucer will say, or

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[346] Chaucer's relations to Priscian and to grammatical divisions of *vox* more generally have been considered by Irvine, "Medieval Grammatical Theory and Chaucer's House of Fame"; Valerie Allen, "Broken Air," *Exemplaria* 16, no. 2 (2004): 305–322; Katherine Zieman, "Chaucer's Voys," *Representations* 60 (1997): 70–91. Zieman also discusses the effect of indistinction I am emphasizing here. As she writes, "The equation of sound, speech, and air (or wind) allows him to substitute mere sound for *vox*, a conflation of concepts emphasized by the reductive "noght but." With this substitution he eliminates the potential for internal differentiation of articulate, confused, scriptible, or unscriptible." Ibid., 82.

[347] ll. 143-4.

nothing at all. The problem of the nonsense word takes on new dimensions in light of the principle of *multiplicacioun*, as it becomes potentially present wherever there is *percussio aeris*.

What Chaucer seems to want to arrive at is something like an account of *vox sola*, although it would not be limited to the utterance. His intervention is to undo the distinctions of the sciences of language so as to have access to the material underlying an indifferent *noyse* or *speche*; to discover the dimension of speech in which it is no more than sound, and also the dimension of sound in which it cannot be told apart from speech. There is a very real sense in which this reversal should be understood as a joke. In this scene of a bird giving a lecture, the poet pokes fun at learning and at the learned. Even so, the reversal of the founding gesture of logical and grammatical treatments of *vox* is not an arbitrary form of parody but a methodological intervention with consequences for the thinking of utterance to which Chaucer addresses himself. Indeed, Chaucer took a particular interest in these questions. As Peter Travis has written, "Chaucer was absolutely fascinated by noise throughout his career, and by the possible significance, political and otherwise, of sounds that are traditionally understood to be devoid of meaning."[348]

In elaborating his own theory of utterance in the *House of Fame*, Chaucer makes two other crucial alterations to his sources. The *scientiae vocis* presuppose the existence of *vox*: insofar as it is the *subjectum* of their disciplines, grammarians and logicians cannot address the

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[348] Peter Travis, *Disseminal Chaucer: Rereading the Nun's Priest's Tale* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 202. Travis ascribes Chaucer's fascination to what he calls the "resistance of noise to our understanding." Even as he emphasizes Chaucer's interest in what he calls the "noise of history," Travis resists historicizing the instances of clamor he finds in the Nun's Priest's Tale, the *Parliament of Fowls*, and the *House of Fame*. As he explains, "rather than carefully representing the actual events of history, past of present, I find that Chaucer instead explores the essence of history via his experimental interrogations of the semiotics of noise, even as he explores with equal intensity the resistance of noise to our understanding." Ibid., 209.

question of whether or not *vox* exists at all. There is *vox*: it is only from this point that grammar and logic begin. But Chaucer does not begin with *vox*, and he does not even begin with *speche or voys or noyse or word or soun*: to the contrary, he begins with its absence. The poem starts off with the poet's falling asleep, and not a word is spoken aloud in it until Book II, with *awak*. As I will explain shortly, Chaucer imagines a state of dumbness from out of which utterance would have, somehow, to emerge. For the moment, I would just like to anticipate that—in addition to moving toward the indistinction rather than the specification of *vox*—Chaucer's account of utterance does not begin with *vox* as given but as withheld.

But the third and most important of Chaucer's interventions into the science of utterance is that, when he strips away all the differentiae from *sonus*, he does not end up with sound at all. Changing the procedure by which the object is approached, he also changes the object itself. When all differentiae are removed from *speche or voys or noyse or word or soun*, what is left is what Chaucer calls the *tydynge*.

3. *Tydynges*

The *tydynge* is the bare form of the indistinguished *vox*. An item of news or single rumor, a *tydynge* is the elementary particle of language as fame.[349] But because it is *vox* as subject to *multiplicacioun*, the *tydynge* is always more than one and increasing all the time. *Tydynges*, in their *multiplicacioun*, produce a "gret noyse," a kind of roaring that is the accumulation of every

[349] Chaucer's engagement in the *House of Fame* with "pastoral rhetoric about idle talk" has been documented recently by Susan Phillips, as part of a larger project departing from the observation that, as she says, "the literature of late medieval England abounds with cautionary tales concerning the dangers of idle talk." Susan E. Phillips, *Transforming Talk: The Problem With Gossip in Late Medieval England* (Pennsylvania State University, 2007), 68; 1. For a discussion of sins of the tongue generally, cf. Edwin Craun, *Lies, Slander, and Obscenity in Medieval English Literature: Pastoral Rhetoric and the Deviant Speaker* (Cambridge University Press, 1997).

type of broken air and the transformation of each into all the others. The *gret noyse* has the sound at once of a "swough," "gygges," "chirkynges," "other loude or of whisprynges," and "rounynges and jangles." Drawn from everywhere to the realm of Fame, they circulate in the spinning wicker house, chattering on about everything and nothing, being spawned by chance ("Aventure / That is the moder of tydynges")[350] and reprising all the utterances of the world:

> Of werres, of pes, of mariages,
> Of reste, of labour, of viages,
> Of abood, of deeth, of lyf,
> Of love, of hate, acord, of stryf[351]

—and so forth for another dozen lines. What is essential about them is that they do not cease moving, going from mouth to mouth and ear to ear, growing stronger by this circulation. When they have increased in size and strength far beyond what they began as, they fly up to one of the gaps in the twigs that make up the spinning house and proceed to Fame's palace, where their further circulation back in the world will be decided. The exemplary *tydynge* is one that is made up of "a lesyng and a sad soth sawe," truth and lie melded by the force of *aventure*:

> Thus saugh I fals and soth compouned
> Togeder fle for oo tydynge[352]

The *tydynge* is the indistinguishing of "fals and soth" in the sheer rumorological spread that drags it up and down, "north and south."

Tydynges are not so much reports of occurrences as occurrences in their own right. They are *newe thynges*, events in which something novel happens. The word itself means *happening* or *occurrence*, as Chaucer uses *tyd* for example in the following passage:

> Ther sawgh I grave how Eneas
> Tolde Dido every caas

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[350] ll. 1982-3
[351] 888
[352] ll. 2108-9

That hym was tyd upon the see[353]

It is in the wicker house where the poem ends up that it becomes clear that there is no difference between *tydynge* as report and *tydynge* as event. What occurs there is the telling of rumors, their spread and their invention consisting in the same event, one without reference to anything that "ys betyd" (2048) beyond the twig walls of the airborne house. This is why when a *tydynge* arises there it immediately begins to multiply beyond measure, because the substance of the occurrence that is reported is nothing else than its being passed along in rumor. Incidentally, the division of the house of Fame into a palace and the spinning twig house behind it corresponds neatly to the double sense of *tydynge*: the house is where "multiplex sermo," in Virgil's phrase, takes place, and the palace the site of its trumpeting abroad. But they are *together* the "house of Fame," just as *tydynge* is Chaucer's term of art exactly because its unambiguous reference is to the cotermination of its possible meanings.

The double constitution of the house of Fame has been obscured by an unwarranted habit among modern scholars of referring to the two dwellings in the realm of Fame as the *house of fame* and the *house of rumor*. This convention is puzzling because it is totally unsupported by the poem, which notably withholds a proper name from the wicker house and, moreover, nowhere contains the word "rumor" or any version of it, by way of naming the supposed "House of Rumor" or otherwise.[354] But beyond its mere inadequacy, this usage has the pernicious effect of setting up an architectonic opposition between "rumor" and "fame" that is not, to put it mildly, in accordance with the poem's aims; of aligning, more and less explicitly, the palace and its contents, as "house of fame" and as over against the "house of rumor," with the subject matter of

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[353] ll. 252-5

[354] The closest thing to a name it bears is *domus dedaly*, which I do not take to be a proper name. Cf. l. 1920.

the apparently eponymous poem; and thus of needlessly obscuring the operation of the multiplex but singular "Fames hous."

In the double realm of Fame, the event of speaking amounts to an ever-renewed spreading, a constant state of change and passage in which *tydynges* repeat themselves in one another's ear and in every possible way go on clamoring and whispering around. This repetition is the *multiplicacioun* by which *tydynges* are brought to Fame. As Chaucer presents it, Fame itself consists in repetition, for it depends for its very existence on its being passed along. Chaucer adopts this principle from Virgil, who affirms that Fama travels through the lands at superlative speed because she thrives on mobility, on incessant travel: her strength is derived from going (*Fama, malum qua non aliud velocius ulum. / mobilitate viget viresque adquirit eundo*).[355] This description takes on central importance in the poem devoted to Fama as its principal figure. For Chaucer, Fame is the name of that force whereby speech does not pass away into the air but produces repetitions of itself in order to travel all the way to the house of Fame. Once there, it goes on prolonging its mobility by rushing around in the wicker house. It is not only that Fame thrives on mobility, but that she requires it for her most minimal existence: she exists only insofar as she moves. What this means is that the rumorological dimension of sound demands an ever-renewed repetition. This is the force of the Virgilian indication that "nec dulci declinat lumina somno," that Fame never closes her eyes to sleep; "fama vigil," as Dante will put it, abides no cessation of movement.[356] The stakes of this impossibility of stillness will emerge in what follows; but what must be underscored for the moment is that the poem taking a determinately insomniacal Fame as its subject is not itself unfamiliar with sleep.

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[355] *Aen*. IV.174-5.
[356] *Aen*. IV.185; Dante, *Epistola a Cangrande* 1.

4. Dumb as a stone

For Geffrey sleeps—he does in fact nothing else. The *House of Fame* is, after all, a dream vision, and one that marks itself out as belonging to that genre from its very first line: "God turne us every drem to goode!"[357] Its proem goes on to address the mysterious nature of dreams, their causes and variety of interpretations; and before Book I proper can start the poet declares that

> At my gynnynge, trusteth wel,
> I wol make invocacion,
> With special devocion,
> Unto the god of slep.[358]

The most salient aspect of this initial insistence on sleeping and dreaming is not its generic identification of the poem with others of its kind, nor its humorous appraisal of dream theory, but rather its setting up "sleep" as the state in which the sleepless figure of Fame will be approached, as indeed the very deity to be invoked as one sets out to treat of the Fame who "nec dulci declinat lumina somno." The importance of this much-discussed collapsing of dream theory resides less in any particular statement that can be derived from it concerning the nature of dreaming as in the laboriously established fact that the narrator-dreamer *sleeps*.[359]

For the duration of the poem—which includes no awakening from the dream it sets out to narrate—Geffrey is in a state of sleep. This somnolence is not a mere device to make halfway presentable the unlikely events of the poem. It descends upon the dreamer again within his dream. When, at the beginning of Book II, the eagle snatches Geffrey up in his "sharpe nayles longe" and carries him aloft, his senses leave him for the time:

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[357] For considerations of the poem in its capacity as a dream vision, cf. e.g. A.C. Spearing, *Medieval Dream-Poetry* (New York: Cambridge University, 1976): 73-88; J. Stephen Russell, *The English Dream Vision: Anatomy of a Form* (Columbus: Ohio State University, 1988): 174-94; and Stephen Kruger, "Imagination and the Complex Movement of Chaucer's House of Fame," *The Chaucer Review* 28:2 (1993): 117-34.
[358] ll. 66-9
[359] On the "irony" of this deployment of dream theory, cf. Delany, *Chaucer's House of Fame*, 44.

> How high, I can not telle yow,
> For I cam up, y nyste how.
> For so astonyed and asweved
> Was every vertu in my heved.[360]

That this swoon is to be understood as a kind of sleep is made plain by the eagle's command to him to wake up from it, *awak*. The beginning of the flight upwards to the house of Fame takes place under the spell of sleep, just as the poem itself began with the invocation of the god of sleep. And though Geffrey's "mynde cam to me ageyn" (564) with the aquiline command, the eagle's explanation of why he has come will resume the characterization of Geffrey as stupefied and nodding off. If Jove has sent the eagle to bring Geffrey to a place where he might receive *tydynges*, it is because he is pitiably deprived of them at home: "no tydynge cometh to thee" (648). This deprivation consists in his sitting at his books all night, after having worked at "rekenynges" all day, "tyl fully daswed ys thy look" (658). Bleary-eyed and without news even of "thy verray neyghebores / That duellen almost at thy dores,"[361] Geffrey is a man in a daze even when he is not, strictly speaking, asleep, even when no eagle has come to scoop him up and scare him witless. What matters about Geffrey's torpor is the vocal state in which it locates him:

> Thou herist neyther that ne this;
> For when thy labour doon al ys,
> And hast mad alle thy rekenynges,
> In stede of reste and newe thynges
> Thou goost hom to thy hous anoon,
> And, also domb as any stoon,
> Thou sittest at another book
> Tyl fully daswed ys thy look[362]

Geffrey—at once narrator, dreamer, and poet—is afflicted with an incapacity of speech. He is as dumb as a stone.

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[360] ll. 547-50
[361] ll. 649-50
[362] ll. 651-8

How will the poem take place at all if its maker cannot speak? For indeed this affliction does not cease to trouble him. As I have said, Geffrey maintains a silence in the poem's first book that is barely interrupted in the second, and by the third he is unwilling to speak his own name and appears to trail off into the lapsus of the poem's end, having been unable to name the *man of gret auctorite*, or to report what that man might have to say. Moreover, the poet's dazedness has already been the subject of the opening lines of the *Book of the Duchess*—

> For I have felynge in nothyng,
> But as yt were a mased thyng,
> Alway in poynt to falle adoun[363]

—and will be recalled in the Host's description of him in the Prologue to "Sir Thopas" ("evere upon the ground I se thee stare").[364] But it is in the *House of Fame* that the implications of Geffrey's dumbness are laid out. If the poem will bring about the dismantling of the vocal distinctions taught by grammarians, it will not do so only in order to confuse matters. With his reference to dumbness, Chaucer introduces into his own account of the utterance an element altogether foreign to the *scientiae vocis*. Whereas the sermocinal sciences assume the existence of the voice and then go about the business of identifying its nature and varieties, here what is primary is a vocal incapacity. For Chaucer the vocal apparatus first comes into view in a state of inoperativity.

This substitution of dumbness for *sonus* or *vox* as the most basic element of Chaucer's quasi-physics of sound is the last of what I have been referring to as his three major innovations. The derivation of sound from dumbness can be seen in the description of "Eolus the god of wynde" (1571), whom Fama employs to spread reputations abroad with his two trumpets. Aeolus

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[363] l. 113
[364] *BD* 11-13; *CT* VII.697

is the instrument by which Fame performs her work, causing some people to be forgotten, others remembered, some lauded and some slandered, some according to their own wishes and some against their will. The noise of his trumpets—the very sound of Fame itself, as it returns to the world—reaches all ears; and whether he blows praise or blame, what always obtains is a noisiness impossible to ignore:

> What dide this Eolus, but he
> Tok out hys blake trumpe of bras,
> That fouler than the devel was,
> And gan this trumpe for to blowe,
> As al the world shulde overthrowe,
> That thrughout every regioun
> Wente this foule trumpes soun[365]
>
> And out hys trumpe of gold he brayde
> Anon, and sette hyt to his mouth,
> And blew it est, and west, and south,
> And north, as lowde as any thunder,
> That every wight hath of hit wonder,
> So brode hyt ran or than hyt stente.[366]

But this trumpeter does not dwell with Fame in her realm. He must be fetched from his distant land, where he lives in the same sort of house as does the god of sleep: "a cave of ston" (1584; cf. 69-70: "the god of slep anoon, That duelleth in a cave of stoon").[367] In case the association of Aeolus with stone should be overlooked, it is repeated twenty lines later: although, as befits the sounding of Fame, on being summoned "this Eolus nowhere abod / Til he was come to Fames fet," once he arrives there "he stod, as stille as stoon" (1602-5). The inescapable din of Fame's

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[365] ll. 1636-42

[366] ll. 1678-84

[367] Cf. Ovid *Met*. XI.601-2, where the silence of sleep's cave is underscored. Describing the wicker house, whose great sound is the material spread abroad by Aeolus, J. A. W. Bennett has emphasized its close relation—one of inversion—to the "cave of stone": "the 'gigges and chirkinges,' the porterless doors, the total absence of ease […] all appear to be suggested by, or rather to suggest—by their very dissimilarity—that other dwelling in a valley, which Chaucer alludes to, otiosely at first sight, in the first book of this poem; namely, the cave of Morpheus" (*Chaucer's Book*, 176).

announcements is spread abroad on a still, silent, sleeping wind. The very operationality of Fame consists in dumbness.

Still, if the petrological identifications of Aeolus reveal him as in league with dumbness, it is the proverbial description of Geffrey as "also domb as any stoon" that has made fast the connection in the poem between rock and dumbness. This muteness of Geffrey's is the reason that the poem provides for its existence and form: having scooped the dreamer up in his claws, the eagle explains that he has been sent to conduct Geffrey to a place where he will discover *tydynges* because Geffrey is wretchedly without them at home in his stupor. That is, it is the quality of being "dumb as a stone" that prevents *tydynges* from reaching him, and thus occasions the whole journey to the house of Fame and the sounding, from the end of Book II through the whole of Book III, of its vast ruckus. The reason the dream vision offers for its own occurrence is the dumbness of the poet.

Geffrey's dumbness is an inability to produce *tydynges*; it is also, and immediately, an inability to receive them. The equivalence of these two inabilities drawn here in some sense depends on the way that deafness and dumbness go proverbially together, and that the word *dumb* has itself sometimes also meant deaf. Dumbness, here, consists in a daze that prevents linguistic contact. But even if Geffrey were dumb only in the strictest sense, unable to speak, he still would not be able to receive *tydynges*. This is so because of the nature of the *tydynge*, of sound insofar as it is subject to Fame. Because Fame thrives on movement, in order to survive it must be always spreading. The same is true of the *tydynge*: simply to hear it—if such a thing were possible, as it is not—would not yet be to receive it; it must be passed on in order to have arrived. This is the obverse of the principle that all sound is preserved in the movement it traces by its *multiplicacioun*. Here, if it is not multiplied, it does not come at all. Accordingly,

Geffrey's inability to repeat the *tydynges* that might come to him prevents their coming in the first place, and thus, since all broken air is *tydynge*, his dumbness is immediately a de facto deafness. The *astonyed* state of his faculties, what suspends their operation, is not first of all an affliction of the senses but a vocal incapacity.

In the realm of Fame, where there is nothing but *tydynges*, to be dumb is to be entirely cut off from the possibility of encountering anything. This is why interpretations of the poem that understand the *tydynges* as solely or even predominantly "news of love," for example, cannot be sustained; they miss the horrible impermeability of Geffrey's dazedness by which all tydynges whatever are made unreceivable:

> Thou hast no tydynges
> Of Loves folk yf they be glade,
> *Ne of noght elles* that God made[368]

It is not only one sort of *tydynge* that fails to reach dumb Geffrey, it is every sort, so that he persists in a stupor that keeps him withdrawn from all occurrence. What Geffrey's state prevents from coming is *newe thynges*: "In stede of reste and newe thynges / Thou goost hom to thy hous anoon"; these *newe thynges* are what Geffrey goes to the realm of Fame in search of:

> The cause why y stonde here:
> Somme newe tydynges for to lere,
> Somme newe thinges, y not what,
> Tydynges, other this or that,
> Of love or such thynges glade.[369]

Though he names "love-tydynges" as the object of his search, the force of this passage resides rather in its surrounding this identification in an insistent de-specification of the tydynges in question: "somme," "somme," "y not what," "other this or that," "or such thynges." Moreover, though it has been largely ignored, John Leyerle's reminder of some decades past remains worth

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[368] ll. 644-6; emphasis mine.
[369] ll. 1885-90

recalling: that "love" retains its sense into Chaucer's time of renown or fame—so that "love-tydynges" would be a redundancy.[370] *Tydynges*, in the realm of Fame, are always *tydynges* of *tydynges*. In the wicker house, the *tydynges* produce one another in a seething mass; in the palace, what Fame's caprice causes to spread is not the report of an event but a version of what the suppliants themselves declare that they have done.

It is not only that *tydynges* of love fail to reach Geffrey. The situation is much graver: he hears nothing, passes nothing along, is removed from what Isidore calls the "vine-branches of tongues and ears." But what this means is that there is a limit to the reach of Fame.

5. The realm of Fame

The existence of any such limit would seem to have been ruled out. What Fame causes to be trumpeted spreads itself over the whole world without check: Aeolus blows so that news reaches "the worldes ende" (1867), so that it goes "al the world aboute" (1807), so that "thrugh the world hyt was yknowe" (1770), "as lowde as any thunder, / That every wight hath of hit wonder" (1681-2). Chaucer is not of course unfamiliar with the possibility that particular reputations might pass away: that they can and do is, indeed, the point of the "roche" upon which the palace of Fame is built. This rock, into whose surface names have been engraved, proves on closer inspection a strange "maner stoon": it is in fact a *roche of yse.*[371] Some of the inscribed names, those shaded from the sun, will persist indefinitely; some already have melted beyond

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[370] "The *House of Fame* is thus concerned with 'tydynges' and their nature, more specifically with 'love-tydynges', but the operative word is more 'tydynges' than it is 'love' unless we are to understand, as we perhaps should, a subsidiary sense of 'fame' in the word 'love'. The common Old English word *lof*, meaning 'praise' or 'glory', survived into late Middle English and occasionally appears spelled 'love' [….] Thus 'love-tydynges' would mean 'news of fame' as well as the dominant sense 'news of love.'" "Chaucer's Windy Eagle," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 40:3 (1971): 258.

[371] ll. 1130. Chaucer's rock of ice is adapted from Dante, *Inferno* 3.28ff.

recognition. But while this or that *tydynge* may not persist, the ability of *tydynges* generally to be disseminated is without limit. Some of the suppliants who appear before Fame have their wishes granted—to be remembered or forgotten, for the good they have done or the ill—and some do not; but the power of Fame to see her own will done is never in question, nor is the fact that her domain stretches as far as does the very universe.

The novelty of Chaucer's conception of an omnipotent and everywhere present Fame will emerge if the accounts from which it departs are examined even briefly.[372] Chief among these are the remarks on *fama* in Book IV of the *Aeneid*, especially the portrait at 173ff.[373] The first thing to be said is that Virgilian Fame traverses land. Even before her name itself appears for the first time in Book IV, she is already said to be "going through the great cities of Libya" (*extemplo libyae magnas it fama per urbes*). Fame moves through settlements, she rushes among the houses and courtyards and gardens built up by peoples, spreading herself around and then disappearing, ensuring the communicability of the polis with itself and, at once, threatening its ruin. Born of the earth (*illam terra parens*), at night she flies midway between the ground and the heavens, screeching her news down to the earth below (*nocte volat caeli medio terraeque per umbram / stridens*); by day she alights on the municipal infrastructure and, perched on the rooftops, brings about trembling in the houses and streets under her gaze (*luce sedet custos aut summi culmine tecti, / turribus aut altis, et magnas territat urbes*). In short, *fama* has everything to do with the traversibility of the surface of the earth. It is in her nature to travel, and to travel terrestrially. Though she flies through the air, her concern is always with the eyes, ears, and mouths on the

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[372] On the tradition of fame, cf. Piero Boitani, *Chaucer and the Imaginary World of Fame* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1984). Cf. also Charles Tisdale, "The House of Fame: Virgilian Reason and Boethian Wisdom," *Comparative Literature* 25:3 (1973): 247-61.

[373] On Chaucer's use of Virgil, cf. Christopher Baswell, *Virgil in Medieval England: Figuring The Aeneid from the Twelfth Century to Chaucer* (Cambridge University Press, 2006).

ground beneath her,[374] so that the distance she interposes between herself and the ground amounts to a means of foreshortening the distances on the ground itself, putting every mouth in communication with every ear. This is precisely not a flight away from the world, as will be at stake in the next account of Fame to be examined, but the constant maintenance of relation to it.

Although Boethius, another of Chaucer's major sources for the figure of *fama*, is mostly concerned with the checks upon this traversibility, in the *Consolatio* as well the surface of the earth is crucial to the constitution of fame. Lady Philosophy undertakes to demonstrate the nullity of what she calls, apparently indiscriminately, *fama*, *gloria*, and *claritas*.[375] She advises against being concerned about one's own *fama* by remarking first, with the *Somnium Scipionis,* that the earth—beyond which one's reputation could never spread—seen from afar is but a point. Moreover, she goes on, even here on earth the reach of Fame is altogether straitened: for how could more than a small number of people have heard of you, when the impassable mountains, deserts, and seas dictate the terrain through which reports of you can circulate? *Tam angustis exiguisque limitibus artata*—to what painfully tight quarters is Fame confined! If geographical difference, and the "loquendi diversitas" or, as Chaucer renders it, "diversite of langages," that is its corrollary, everywhere arrests the flow of news across the land, this is because this flow is—as was the case in Virgil's Libya—unthinkable apart from the terrestrial surface. Fame is worldly fame; it amounts to nothing in the face of eternity; it arises from the dirt and returns there before long. Flight from the world shows fame to have remained contemptibly behind.

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[374] Following Dyer's construal. Cf. Robert Dyer, "Vergil's Fama: A New Interpretation of Aeneid 4.173ff," *Greece and Rome* 36:1 (1989): 28-32.

[375] In Book II prosa V, *gloria* and *fama* alternate, seemingly for the sake of variation. When the discussion resumes in Book III, the word *claritas* occurs in the same connections, more or less displacing the other two terms.

But Chaucer's Fame is another thing entirely. If for Boethius it was constricted to the land, and for Virgil it hovered just above the inhabited earth, the realm of Fame in Chaucer's poem is far up above the world, at the midpoint of heaven, earth, and sea (845-6). The coordinates of this house are imported from Ovid,[376] himself elaborating the Virgilian passage cited above; but what Chaucer underscores is the distance that interposes itself between the location of Fame and that of the land far below her. The only thing that takes place in the poem's central book, given up all but entirely to the eagle's lecture, is that Geffrey is brought an enormous distance from the surface of the earth, carried higher and higher until it recedes from sight altogether. Nothing else happens while the eagle is pontificating about sound except this departure from the world. But this is not, as it was for Boethius, to withdraw from the sphere of Fame's influence and take in its puny aspirations from afar: it is rather to go straight to her, to the realm where she rules unchallenged. According to the physics of *kyndely enclynyng*, far from sticking to the earth Fame exterts a force in obedience to which all utterance is sucked away from its worldly situation and sped far away. It has not been sufficiently remarked that the flight away from the world in the *House of Fame* is exactly opposite, where Fame is concerned, to that in the *Consolatio*: it is in leaving the surface of the earth that, in Chaucer's scheme, one not only goes *toward* Fame but discovers that her power is without check. For Fame's reach extends everywhere, and rather than perch on the spires of cities and flit around their walls she has her own great citadel in which she sits, omnipotent. It is from there that, after drawing all sound before her, she causes it to be spread, or not spread, unstoppably by her capricious fiat. That is, enthroned at the midpoint of the universe, she has Aeolus trumpet whatever she wills—a trumpeting heard in every quarter, near and far. And yet Geffrey is without *tydynges*. Even as

[376] Cf. *Met*. XII.39.

Chaucer's "book of fame" accomplishes the unfettering of Fama, it reinstates a limit to her reach. The Chaucerian gesture is to relocate this limit from its Boethian placement in the extralinguistic (the torrid zone) or intralinguistic (the incomprehension following from *loquendi diversitas*) to the site of an impossibility of the production of any language at all.

What Chaucer invents in the *House of Fame* is a world made up entirely of *tydynges*. The realm of Fame, where she makes her double house, is situated at a remove from the world inhabited by the beings who speak the sounds she governs: this is what is underscored by the ascending flight that takes up the entirety of Book II. But just before the eagle deposits him there, Geffrey learns something further. It is not that all the sounds of the world, in being sped away to Fame, remain as they were in the world, so that her house would be the site of a disembodied and invisible ruckus. For this is what Geffrey wonders, whether

> thys noyse that I here
> Be, as I have herd the tellen,
> Of folk that doun in erthe duellen,
> And cometh here in the same wyse
> As I the herde or this devyse;
> And that there lives body nys
> In al that hous that yonder ys,
> That maketh al this loude fare.[377]

His guide tells him he has the wrong idea: "Noo, quod he." On reaching the realm of Fame, the eagle explains, the sounds take on a resemblance to their speakers, so that her house appears not empty but rather teeming with the reconstituted likenesses of bodies. The verisimilitude of these quasi-bodies is so strong that to all appearances the very same worldly creatures whose utterances have been collected there have been brought along with them:

> Whan any speche ycomen ys
> Up to the paleys, anon-ryght
> Hyt wexeth lyk the same wight

[377] 1058-65

> Which that the word in erthe spak,
> Be hyt clothed red or blak;
> And hath so verray hys lyknesse
> That spak the word, that thou wilt gesse
> That it the same body be,
> Man or woman, he or she.[378]

Speech passes for its speakers: it becomes the virtual replica of whoever uttered it.[379] And though the eagle's doctrine of likeness explicitly touches only "speche," words spoken by human utterers, he has by this point repeated many times the point that *speche or voys or noyse or word or soun* are all subject to the same force. It must be supposed, in other words, that when rodent squeals and the creakings of rafters and the din of the stoneworker's hammer make their way to the house of Fame, they too "wax" on their arrival like the very rodent and the rafter and the hammer. Fame presides over a realm not only populated by the verisimilitudes of human speakers but made up, in the ersatz solidity of its treadable ground, its palace walls, its twigs and rocks and mounds of ice, of all the embodied noises let out by the various shiftings of the world below. The realm of Fame is a world that will pass for our own, but made up entirely of *tydynges*. As Boitani puts it, "what he contemplates here is not reality as such, as it *exists* in the sublunary world, or as it *is* in the hyperuranian universe of being, but as it is *told* [….] Reality as told is different from reality as it existed before it was told [….] there is no reality here but only its oral sign."[380] *Tydynges* are utterance insofar as it is withdrawn from the world in which it is pronounced. That the substitute world consisting in this multiplication so convincingly mimics the actual world is only the token of the latter's having been bracketed altogether. These likenesses of "enclyned" sounds thus persist not only at such a distance from the earth that it can

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[378] 1074-82
[379] On this process, cf. Paul Ruggiers, "Words into Images in Chaucer's Hous of Fame: A Third Suggestion," *Modern Language Notes* 69 (1954): 34-37.
[380] Boitani, *Chaucer and the Imaginary World of Fame*, 209–10.

no longer be discerned at all (906-13), they are also given up to a ceaseless activity in Fame's realm that bears no relation to the situations in which they were first sounded. For even as the *tydynges* "wexeth lyk" whatever produced them, *multiplicacioun* assures that what is spoken and by whom is always shifting: and indeed what takes place in the realm of fame is not the collection of the sounds of the world but rather the constant production of new sounds without regard for the world.

I dwell on this point because it is here that Chaucer's specific interaction with the discipline of logic generally, and with the logical concept of *vox non-significativa*, becomes apparent. As we have seen, with the notion of *multiplicacioun* he renders inoperative the distinction between types of *sonus*, thus ensuring that any utterance will be potentially non-significative. His points of reference for this move are for the most part grammatical, as Irvine notes. But Irvine is wrong to think that Chaucer does not draw on logic as well.[381] The removal of utterances from the world in *multiplicacioun* causes the relations between words and the things and concepts that they might signify to fall apart. In the realm of Fame, there are no speakers who could have *intellectus* in their minds to which the *tydynges* would correspond. There are no *res extra animam* to which they could refer. *Multiplicacioun* is a force of vocal indistinction but it is also a force of unimposition. It takes utterances and cancels the act by which they were assigned to a thing as its name.

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[381] "Grammar and logic overlapped in several areas, and their histories in the twelfth through fourteenth centuries were mutually dependent. But the parallels between Chaucer's text and the nongrammatical sources are not close. The most extensive treatment of *vox* is found in the grammatical texts, since *vox* was considered the special *materia* of *grammatica*. The language and sequence of topics treated in the Eagle's discourse can only be found in the grammatical sources, and. only *grammatica* includes the distinctively literary and textual orientation which is Chaucer's concern throughout the poem. Ockham's razor should be applied to all source studies: we need not multiply sources beyond what is necessary." Irvine, "Medieval Grammatical Theory and Chaucer's House of Fame."

Moreover, *multiplicacioun* bears on the supposition of utterances in addition to their signification.[382] A *tydynge* cannot stand for something as a term in a proposition, because it is constantly shifting. As we saw in Chapter II, for a *vox* to count as a *terminus* it must be able to remain identical across multiple appearances, i.e. in a syllogism. As William Wilson has argued, Chaucerian fame is self-consciously positioned against the discipline of logic.[383] What the undoing of the difference between truth and falsity in the *tydynge* rests on, though, is a removal of a context in which a given utterance could be determined to stand for something in particular. Because supposition is the reference of a term to a specific thing in a given situation, *multiplicacioun*—separating utterances from things and withdrawing them from their contexts—suspends its operation entirely.

Insofar as it is subject to Fame, every utterance is non-significative. Not only could any *tydynge* potentially "signify nothing," it actually does signify nothing. As for supposition, *multiplicacioun* renders it impossible to determine, and thereby renders terminist logic impracticable. It could be that, although it has been removed from any proposition that might

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[382] As D. Vance Smith writes, "the rigorous order in which these rules [of supposition theory] were to be applied, and their centrality in the curriculum, meant that every educated reader could be expected to read in the same manner. […] such rules were a part of the communal experience of educated reading in the English Middle Ages, a reading for form that proceeded out of a common discipline and that ultimately formed the community of readers." D. Vance Smith, "Medieval Forma: The Logic of the Work," in *Reading for Form*, ed. Susan Wolfson and Marshall Brown (Seattle: University of Washington, 2007), 79.

[383] As Wilson concludes, the final scene of the poem "comments on the uses of logic for poetic thought. In a brief emblematic event derived from Ovid (*Metamorphoses*, XII), a "lesyng and a sad soth sawe" are compounded into one tiding. The point of the fable is that truth and falsity are compacted and cannot be separated; but the very function of logic was such a separation, "a vero falsum cernere" and the self-evident truth of the fable is that there is no way "... whereby shal be knowen the trewe fro the fals." The *House of Fame* has used logic to discover the truth about Fame, but now the poem discourages the use of logic on the ground that it is a method of proving what common sense or intuition already knows. Chaucer is exploring the means of rendering truth in poetry, and the sceptical, although not melancholy, conclusion is that truth can be systematized but not discovered by means of logic." William S. Wilson, "Scholastic Logic in Chaucer's 'House of Fame'," *The Chaucer Review* 1, no. 3 (1967): 184.

have occurred in the world, the utterance as *tydynge* could somehow supposit in the realm of Fame, for instance by standing for itself. But that would be a strange kind of supposition, and the relation between *tydynges* is not so much one of standing for as it is one of producing. Turning every utterance into *vox non-significativa*, *multiplicacioun* does not stop the flow of speech but creates more speech out of its material.

6. The roaring of the stone

The question is whether *multiplicacioun* can produce *tydynges* where there is no *noyse* at all. The realm of Fame extends everywhere, and yet Geffrey persists beyond her reach, dumb as a stone. As the eagle announces, the purpose of the journey to the house of Fame is to remedy this situation, or in figurative terms to make a stone speak. But it does not go without saying that someone incapable of speech could produce speech; quite the contrary.

The proem to Book II addresses exactly this difficulty. Interrupting the descent of the eagle who has appeared at the end of Book I and who will snatch Geffrey up as soon as Book II begins in earnest, the Proem stops to address the reader ("Now herkeneth every maner man / That Englissh understonde kan"), and then Venus, the Muses, and "Thought" in quick succession.[384] The narrator promises that the dream he is about to detail is so "sely" that "Isaye, ne Scipion, / Ne kyng Nabugodonosor, / Pharoo, Turnus, ne Elcanor, / Ne mette such a drem as this." This list of famous names, along with the ensuing invocations to "O Cipris" and "ye […] that on Parnaso duelle," serves first and foremost to locate its enumerator in the bookish scene the Eagle will shortly depict: Geffrey sitting "at another book / Tyl fully daswed ys thy look." It again puts the dreaming of a dream "the tenthe day now of Decembre" in relation with a corpus

[384] All passages cited in this paragraph are to be found at ll. 509-28.

of dream literature, but again not in order to say anything about the particular dreams recorded in that corpus or about the nature of dreaming itself; its function is, instead, to identify the teller of the dream with Geffrey at his books "as dumb as a stone."

It is having established this scene of vocal incapacity that the narrator now invokes "Thought":

> O Thought, that wrot al that I mette,
> And in the tresorye hyt shette
> Of my brayn, now shal men se
> Yf any vertue in the be
> To tellen al my drem aryght.
> Now kythe thyn engyn and myght!

This "thought" registers in silence what the dreamer encounters, and locks it up in an incommunicable enclosure. Its invocation announces the possibility, by no means assured ("*yf* any vertue in the be"), that the secret writing it produces might be made known. The force of the relative clause "that wrot … of my brayn," identifying Thought with writing and silent non-communication, is to place the stress in the ensuing indirect question on "tellen" rather than on the object and adverb that follow it. That is, the question is whether Thought is possessed of a faculty by which it could "tell" at all, not first of all whether it can tell the dream adequately and in its entirety. Can the dumb recording of reading and writing speak? If it can, says the narrator, let it make known the "engyn," the instrument or power, by which it will perform such an operation.[385]

Thus ends the Proem to Book II. The next line appears to resume where Book I had left off, with an eagle descending toward Geffrey from the sky of the *Purgatorio*:

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[385] Rendering Dante's "ingegno" at *Inf*. II.7. On Chaucer's adaptation of this passage from the *Inferno*, cf. B. G. Koonce, *Chaucer and the Tradition of Fame: Symbolism in the House of Fame* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1966): 138-9. On Chaucer's use of Dante generally, cf. David Wallace, *Chaucer and the Early Writings of Boccaccio* (Suffolk: Brewer, 1985): 5-22.

> Now kythe thyn engyn and myght!
> This egle, of which I have yow told,
> That shon with fethres of gold
> Which that so hye gan to sore,
> I gan beholde more and more[386]

But it can also be read as continuing the proem. The *engyn* and *myght* for the telling of thought that the poet invokes is the eagle itself.[387] This eagle is about to explain that broken air is subject to a force by which it is carried to the house of Fame. Now, this same eagle is the means by which Geffrey is carried to the house of Fame,[388] and their flight begins with Geffrey's having left the silent Palace of Venus, standing around without speaking in the field of sand ("'O Crist', *thoughte* I" [492]), and falling into his mute swoon on being caught between the eagle's toes.[389] The dreamer makes no sound that could itself take flight; it is the eagle who lifts him up still silent. And it is the eagle's "vois and stevene" that then makes what is the first sound to take place in the whole dream, all of the classical voices of Book I taking place in Geffrey's ecphrastic *sight* ("tho saugh I" the repeated formula), and his own words in reaction to them kept all shut up within his "brayne": "When I had seen al this syghte / In this noble temple thus, / 'A, Lord,' thoughte I" etc. (486-70). But, "at last," the eagle breaks this silence:

> Thus I longe in hys clawes lay,
> Til at the laste he to me spak

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[386] ll. 528-32.

[387] John Steadman also remarks the close connection between this invocation and the eagle that appears in its immediate vicinity: "Before describing this allegorical flight of thought, Chaucer appropriately invokes 'Thought' itself,"—but in eliding the word 'engyn' and thereby identifying the eagle as thought itself, rather than the faculty by which it might be made known, he goes astray. As will be seen, the eagle is precisely not a "contemplative symbol." Cf. Steadman's "Chaucer's Eagle: A Contemplative Symbol," *PMLA* 75:3 (1960): 159.

[388] That the eagle's flight, Geffrey between his toes, describes the movement of sound toward Fame has not escaped notice: "His flight actualizes his theory of sound […]; the eagle carrying Chaucer is a moving, ascending sound wave and the flight itself is an instance of what every sound does as it rises upward to Fame." Leyerle, "Chaucer's Windy Eagle": 256.

[389] A perceptive account of the silences of Book I will be found in Boitani, *Chaucer's Imaginary World*, 10.

> In mannes vois, and seyde, "Awak!
> And be not agast so, for shame"
> […]
> And with that vois, soth for to seyn,
> My mynde cam to me ageyn
> For hyt was goodly seyd to me[390]

It is because this first instance of speech occurs that *multiplicacioun* can take place and Geffrey can fly to the house of Fame. With *awak*, the eagle brings Geffrey out of his swoon: this *tydynge* rouses the "astonyed and asweved" virtues or faculties of his prey. As he begins to "stere," the awakened Geffrey still holds his tongue:

> And therwith I
> Gan for to wondren in my mynde.
> "O God," thoughte I[391]

But the eagle, as if reading his mind, interrupts what he is thinking, and finally manages to get a word out of him, though only one: " 'Gladly,' quod I" (605).

In short, the talkative bird is the *engyn* by which the *vertu to tellen* in Geffrey is *kythed*, made known. He is, in other words, a figure for the voice. Nonetheless, Geffrey does not lose altogether his stupefied demeanor, remaining largely silent with the exception of his brief responses to the questions scattered here and there in the eagle's monologue. Indeed, he remains "as any stoon," a rock borne aloft in the eagle's claws: and though it has been very plausibly suggested that the eagle's joking "thou art noyous for to carye" (574) makes reference to Geffrey's inconvenient weight, it is more obviously another version of the injunction to wake up: the eagle is bored with his speechless (and, thus, non-listening) companion.

On their way to the house of fame, Geffrey and the eagle are thus like a stone sent through the air by an *engyn*. But Chaucer makes another reference to a rock hurled by an *engyn*.

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[390] ll. 554-65
[391] ll. 582-4

What Geffrey and the eagle in their flight recall is a simile with which the poet tries to convey the sound of the *gret noyse* he hears when he leaves the palace of Fame and approaches the wicker house that whirls in the air behind it:

> And the noyse which that I herde,
> For al the world right so hyt ferde
> As dooth the rowtynge of the ston
> That from th'engyn ys leten gon.[392]

The sound of *tydynges* in their *multiplicacioun*, the din of all the broken air in the universe together, is said to be like that of a stone hurled through the air by an *engyn* of war. The simile should be startling, given that stone, from Morpheus to Aeolus and not neglecting poor Geffrey himself, has stood as the exemplary figure of what is dumb and still. And yet here it is possessed of a sound, and not just any sound but a stentorian one:

> therout com so gret a noyse
> That, had hyt stonden upon Oyse,
> Men myghte hyt han herd esely
> To Rome[393]

Some three hundred lines after Aeolus has stood "as stille as ston," this constantly spinning house "That never mo […] stille stent" (1926) is itself likened to a stone.

What makes this mute thing produce the noise it does is an "engyn," that is, a siege engine or catapult: as Nicholas Havely notes, this is "presumably a reference to *trébuchet* (stone-throwing) artillery."[394] Its effect, however, is to recall the poem's single other use of the word, and to reinscribe thereby the figure of an engine of thought, the voice, propelling a stone, mute Geffrey, through the air. And indeed this implication of the figure of dumbness at the center of the "gret noyse" is not anomalous. The eagle explains the central notions of his physics of sound,

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[392] ll. 1931-4.
[393] ll. 1927-30
[394] Geoffrey Chaucer, *The House of Fame*, Nicholas Havely, ed. (Durham: Durham Medieval Texts, 1994): 184n.

multiplicacioun and *kyndely enclynyng*, on the model, respectively, of a stone thrown into water and of one dropped from the hand and falling downwards. Moreover, the whole resounding palace of Fame is built upon a rock, though one not thrown into water but made up of it: the "roche of ys." Chaucer's invocation of the noisiness of stone recalls logical discussions of sound such as that of the *Logica 'cum sit nostra'*, in which the banging of rocks, *collisio lapidum*, exemplifies *sonus non-vox.*

In fact, stone figures *gret noyse* just as characteristically as it does dumbness. At the end of Book II, the eagle asks Geffrey if he does not hear "the grete soun […] that rumbleth up and doun / In Fames Hous" (1025-7). When Geffrey responds that he does in fact hear it, he is asked "what soun is it lyk?" He responds:

> "Peter, lyk betynge of the see,"
> Quod y, "ayen the roches holowe,
> Whan tempest doth the shippes swalowe,
> And lat a man stonde, out of doute,
> A myle thens, and here hyt route […]"[395]

The sound of *tydynges* is like that of rocks being struck by the frenzied sea. Here no less than in the passage just cited, the din of the house of Fame makes itself known as the *rowtynge of the ston*, the roaring of stone. And in case the petrological quality of what the waves are beating against should be overlooked, the poet makes a great point of it: "Peter!," Geffrey says. This exclamation, it should not be overlooked, is the same as that employed by the eagle in Book III when Geffrey comes upon him again, and asks if he can stay longer in the realm of Fame, because he has not yet found the *tydynges* for which he has been searching. The eagle informs him that he has been waiting for him, so that he could help him find the *tydynges* by lifting him up into the wicker house:

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[395] ll. 1034-8

"Petre, that is myn entente,"
Quod he to me; "therfore y duelle."[396]

This final word of the eagle's, the opening of his only speech in Book III, can be understood variously. It means, certainly, "By St. Peter! I intend to wait for you, as you ask; that's in fact why I'm sitting here." But if *Petre* is not an exclamation but the antecedent of the demonstrative pronoun directly following it, the eagle might be announcing, rather, something like "What I mean to say is stone." His "entente," or the sententia of his utterance,[397] would then be the figure of dumbness itself. The fact that the only other instance of this word *petre* in the poem comes at Geffrey's mention of the "roches holowe," and that when the eagle speaks it he is said, without evident motivation, to be "perched hye upon a stoon" (1991), further emphasizes the petrological qualities of the word. In short, insofar as the eagle is the "engyn of thought," that is, the voice, he might be announcing here that the *entente* or *significatum* of utterance is stone. In any event, the sound of *tydynges* is always likened to that of a stone, even though stone is what is dumb. In using the same figure for both *noyse* and dumbness, Chaucer poses the same question he frames in the proem to Book II: how is it possible for dumbness to be transmuted into *tydynges*?

7. Sand

If a rock is going to make noise, it will do so the same way anything else will: by striking or being struck. What is noisy is not the rock in itself but a *collisio lapidum*—a percussion. A rock can be struck by waves and it can itself crash through the air, in both cases producing what the grammarians call a *percussio aeris* or *aer ictus* and Chaucer's eagle renders "eyr ybroken" (765).

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[396] ll. 2000-1

[397] As the word is used at e.g. *CT* VII.1078, "Or elles, per aventure, the entente of Salomon was this."

It is not only the air that is liable to broken, however, in this percussion; for a rock catapulted through the air or pounded by the sea is itself struck, and may be broken apart by the impact. Even the rock made of ice that forms the base of Fame's palace is notable inasmuch as it is susceptible to dissolution, a meltable "rock" constantly being broken down into droplets. A rock that produces a *rowtynge* is a rock beaten, thrown, melted, and in any event *pulverized*.

There is a name for pulverized rock, and the poet does not fail to use it. At the moment when their *multiplicacioun* is at its most exemplary, *tydynges* are liked to nothing else than sand. The eagle promises Geffrey that, when they have arrived at the house of Fame, he will find

> Mo wonder thynges, dar I leye,
> And of Loves folk moo tydynges,
> Both sothe sawes and lesinges
> […]
> Mo discordes, moo jelousies,
> Mo murmures and moo novelries,
> And moo dissymulacions,
> And fayned reparacions
> And moo berdys in two houres
> Withoute rasour or sisoures
> Ymad then greynes be of sondes[398]

If there are more, and more, and still more *tydnyges*, their always increasing number is "more" with respect to the quantity of grains of sand in the world. The *multiplicacioun* of what Virgil had called *multiplex sermo* is enacted in the anaphora of *mo*, such that *tydynges* are likened to sand, which is to say, the minimal unit of pulverized rock.

The whole thing ends up in a pun. Reversing the procedure of the sciences of language, Chaucer does not depart from but arrives at the non-differentiated material substance of utterance. But instead of *soun* he calls that material substance *sond*. He does so because *tydynges* are dumbness subjected to a percussive force. In the allegorical account of sound I am

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[398] ll. 674-91

reconstructing, a rock is beaten against and fractures into sand, which is to say that dumbness becomes pulverized into *tydynges*. The roaring of the stone occurs when the voice-*engyn* breaks a stupor into its minimal elements. The result of this percussion is that the dumb and stationary rock becomes voluble, reduced to a size allowing it to be blown abroad by the winds. But the sand remains no less a stone than it was before the percussion: *soun* as *sond* is a dumbness that is preserved even as an impact causes it to shatter. It is this preservation of dumbness even in the din of *tydynges* that is signaled by the end of the poem. The ultimate rumor, toward which everything had seemed to be tending, announces no more than an inability to speak. What Fame spreads is dumbness.

Spread abroad in any form of vocalization is nothing else than the fracturing of a petrified state of mind. What this means is that the origin of all speaking is a blankness in the mind. To hear *tydynges* is to be unable to gather from their pronunciation that their speaker has this or that or indeed any *intellectus* in her mind, because the origin of *tydynges* is a linguistic and cognitive incapacity. The *tydynge* thus answers in the strictest sense to the definition of *vox quae nihil designat* as Boethius uses it. I have already suggested that *multiplicacioun* makes all utterances potentially nonsensensical by indistinction, and actually nonsensical by unimposition. It also does so because the material on which it works is exactly the kind of mental lapsus that *vox non-significativa* entails.

This line of thinking goes in the opposite direction as that of the logicians at Oxford during Chaucer's lifetime. For a Paul of Venice, every utterance naturally and ineluctably signifies itself, in addition to whatever else it might signify; and it is because the utterance is in the first instance significative that it can come to stand for particular things in particular contexts. What Chaucer offers, in his vision of speech as no different from the sound of *collisio lapidum*,

is something much closer to the Boethian doctrine of *vox* than anything being written by his logician contemporaries.

But like the *Cloud*-author Chaucer takes an interest in *vox non-significativa* not in order to produce a more adequate description of it but to put it to use. If in the logical tradition the *vox non-significativa* is to be avoided because it corresponds to a mental lapsus, and in the *Cloud of Unknowing* it is to be made use of so as to produce just such a mental lapsus, for Chaucer it is the mental lapsus itself that is primary and the question is how to say anything at all given that your mind is blank. The poet discovers in the nonsense word the possibility of producing utterances not in spite of but out of the very material of the *masednes* that afflicts his mind.

The word *sond* appears one other time in the poem, at the end of Book I, as Geffrey steps out of the Virgilian temple of Venus. He finds himself in

> a large feld,
> As fer as that I myghte see,
> Withouten toun, or hous, or tree,
> Or bush, or grass, or eryd lond;
> For al the feld nas but of sond,
> As smal as man may se yet lye
> In the desert of Lybye (482-8)

It is in the midst of a desert, a field full of sand, that the dumb Geffrey reads his books. This desert is full of is *tydynges*, but dead *tydynges*, grains of sand undisturbed by wind ("yet *lye*"): the same *tydynges* that are said to remain at Geffrey's very door, unable to reach him. Their stillness is only provisional, however ("*yet* lye"), and if some wind were to reach them, if the silently cogitating Geffrey for instance were instead to speak, they could be stirred up and published abroad. It is into this scene that the "swifte comynge" of the eagle as the voice-*engyn* interposes itself, the beating wings stirring up the sand and commencing a flight of *multiplicacioun* that ends up in the sandstorm of "more *tydynges* than there are grains of sand."

Out of the inert material of Virgil and Ovid, which Chaucer encounters only with a *daswed look*, the poet can produce *newe thynges* by the intervention of the percussive force of a *vois and stevene* that stirs up the arid words shut up in his *brayne*. The *tydynge* is the event of the *multiplicacioun* of dead words by the *noyse* of *awak*.

Chaucer makes non-significative utterance the basis of his poetic practice. He is interested in how such utterance is produced, and in how poetry can be made out of it. The *House of Fame* is his proposal. The poetics of nonsense laid out in the *House of Fame* would become the avowed basis of the composition of the *Canterbury Tales*. At the end of the General Prologue Chaucer offers an explanation for why the work would emerge in the first place. The host offers to dispose and judge the activity of storytelling because, as he says, he knows that everyone intends to talk and joke as the group makes its way to Canterbury,

> For trewely, confort ne myrthe is noon
> To ride by the weye doumb as a stoon;
> And therefore wol I maken yow disport[399]

On this "therefore" hangs the whole frame of the *Canterbury Tales*. The telling of tales is an attempt stave off the great boredom that would be the result of traveling along in silence. The work assigns the force that produces it to a dumb stone. The *tydynges* produced by the pulverization of that stone are the tales themselves.

[399] I.772-5

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