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Words made flesh: Imagery and incarnation in *The cloud of unknowing*

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Words Made Flesh:
Imagery and Incarnation in *The Cloud of Unknowing*

by
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Words Made Flesh:

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I. Introduction

In this paper, I intend to bridge a gap in the scholarship on *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Multiple theories have been put forth on the use of imagery and creative language in *The Cloud*. While all of these theories have shed some light on how language is used in *The Cloud of Unknowing*, I feel that something is missing in that while some of these readings directly relate the way imagery is used to the central fact that *The Cloud* is a work of apophatic theology, few of them relate these things in a way that extends to a theology of language that applies past the pages of *The Cloud*; none of them elaborate on the ways in which the ramifications of their theory of language would affect the apophatic understanding of Christ as The Word of God. This paper attempts to put forth a theology of language as used by the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* that both explains the images he uses and the way he does so, and which can also be applied as a more general view of language that naturally flows from the apophatic theology of *The Cloud*. This will also take into account how this view of language would affect the understanding of Christ as the incarnate Word, and show that what I propose is consistent with the author's understanding of Christ.

To do this I first outline the method of negative theology in *The Cloud* author's translation *Deonise Hid Diuinite*, which functions as my basis for explaining the author's method of using imagery (I.1). The second section summarizes the method and purpose of contemplation as put forth in *The Cloud*, which is a direct application of the apophatic theology of *Deonise Hid Diuinity* (I.2). A preliminary discussion of the role of Christ (I.3), and the role of language (I.4) in *The Cloud of Unknowing*, as well as a

review of past scholarship on these issues, follows. After discussing the theories that have already been put forth, I move into my explanation of what *The Cloud* author is doing with his creative use of language (II). The proposed language theory is then applied to the author's understanding of Christ as The Word (III), which is followed by some concluding remarks (IV).

1. The Method of Negative Theology in *Deonise Hid Diuinite*

Written in the late fourteenth century, *The Cloud of Unknowing* is an anonymous Middle English work of Christian mysticism from the apophatic tradition. Apophatic theology, also known as negative theology or *via negativa*, is a theological approach that attempts to define God in terms of negation. Its opposite is cataphatic, or affirmative theology. Affirmative theology defines God by what God is and does: God is good, God is merciful, or God exists, God was angry, God spoke. To the apophatic tradition speaking of The Divine in this manner is limiting. God is so far above what humans understand as good, or existent, that these words can not appropriately be applied to The Divine. To describe God as angry or speaking words is all a form of anthropomorphizing The Divine.

Before addressing the particular approach of *The Cloud*, which is essentially a guide to contemplation, it will be helpful to take a more general look at the apophatic mindset as found in the work of Pseudo-Dionysius. Pseudo-Dionysius, or Denis as *The Cloud* author calls him¹, was a Christian writer who epitomizes Christian platonism and

¹ In the Middle Ages there was a conflation between the author Pseudo-Dionysius, who at the time was believed to be the actual Dionysius that the Apostle Paul converted, and Saint Denis of France. But the author of these works was neither the convert of Paul, nor the French saint.

apophatic theology. His works were highly influential on the author of *The Cloud*; he is one of the few authorities that the author refers to in *The Cloud*.² In addition to invoking the authority of Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Cloud* author also translated his work *De Mystica Theologia*, which is *The Cloud* author's *Deonise Hid Diuinite. Why Denis Hid Divinity* is so important to understanding *The Cloud of Unknowing* is clear from its introduction, where *The Cloud* author states:

Pis writyng þat next folowep is þe Inglische of a book þat Seynte Denys wrote vnto Thimothe, þe whiche is clepid in Latyn tonge *Mistica Theologia*. Of þe whiche book, for-þi þat it is mad minde in þe 70 chapter of a book wretin before (þe whiche is clepid *Pe Cloude of Vnknowing*) how þat Denis sentence wol cleerli afferme al þat is wretyn in þat same book” (2).

The theology in the *Mystical Theology* will confirm the method of *The Cloud*. It is for this reason that I will first examine what the *Mystical Theology* has to say about negative theology in general, before going into the details of *The Cloud*; the method set forth in *Deonise Hid Diuinity* will be integral later in this paper.

In chapter III of *The Mystical Theology* Pseudo-Dionysius describes the methods of affirmative and negative theology, and how he has used both of these methods in his works.³ In his *Ierarchies of Heuen, and Ierarchies of þis Fiȝtyng Chirche* Pseudo-Dionysius claims to have affirmed the orthodox doctrines of the oneness of God, as well

² Ch. 70. the only other authors referred to are Augustine and Gregory of Nyssa for *The Life of Moses*.

³ Some of the works Dionysius mentions are either lost or fictitious. I will refer to them by the names *The Cloud* author gives them, but I want to include a list of how they relate to a modern translation of their names. The author splits what Pseudo-Dionysius calls *The Theological Representations* (lost/fictitious) into the *Ierarchies of Heuen* (*The Celestial Hierarchy*) and the *Ierarchies of þis Fiȝtyng Chirche* (*The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*). *Goddess Names* directly corresponds to the extant work called *The Divine Names*. And lastly the lost/fictitious *Symbolic Theology* is referred to as the *Gadering of Deuine Sentence*.

as the equality and single substance of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost in the Trinity. He addresses “how þat þe souereyn-substancial Jhesu is maad substaunce in þe trewþes of mankynde ; and alle oper soche þinges þat ben expressid in þe Scripture, ben affermyngliche preisid in þoo two bookes” (7). *The Divine Names* affirms how God can be named “Good, how Beyng, how Liif, how wisdom, & how Vertewe, & what oper þat þei be of þe vnderstandable namynges of God” (7). These works deal primarily with major doctrinal issues, and conventional names for God. But the next work mentioned is perhaps the most antithetical to the apophatic tradition, though it is also the work that I will argue the imagery in *The Cloud* resembles most (and least). *Deonise Hid Diuinite* reads:

Bot in þe book of þe *Gadering of Deuine Sentence*, þere I haue affermyngliche set wiþ preising alle þe names þat ben applied vnto God from þees sensible þinges—as whiche ben þe godliche fourmes, whiche ben þe godliche figures, whiche ben his partiees & his instrumentes, when ben his places & his enourmentes, whiche ben his frenesiees & his heuinesses, which ben his woodenesses & his dronkenesses, whiche ben his gloteniees & his opes & his cursynges, which ben his slepinges & whiche ben his wakynges—& what oper sensible formes þat on any maner in Holy Scripture ben applied vnto God (7).

From these works Pseudo-Dionysius explains two important things about cataphatic theology. First, it works on a hierarchy; when attributing things to God, one first starts with those things that are most godlike. One begins with God’s singularity, or goodness, or the Trinity, and moves down into what are referred to as ‘the sensible things’, such as

God's physical place, or oaths. Secondly, the further down a person travels in this hierarchy, the more numerous the predications are. If anthropomorphically God can be said to be such disparate things as asleep, drunk, or in a particular place, then it is hard to imagine very many things that can not, in this extremely figurative sense, be said of The Divine.

But the *Mystical Theology* is a negative work, and goes against both of these aspects of affirmative theology. As *The Cloud* author translates:

And zif we wolen merk hym by doing away of alle vnderstandable þings, it acordeþ moost þat we first do away þoo þinges, þe whiche be seen to be moost fer from hym. As þus: more niȝ & more acordyng vnto hym is liif or goodness þen is ayer or a stone ; and wiþ more acordyng euydence we schuld do away from hym gloteny & woodnes, þan spekyng or vnderstandyng. And zit he in hymself is abouen boþe alle spekyng and alle vnderstandyng (8).

While in affirmative theology one starts by affirming those worthy things that are most like the divine, in negative theology one must work from the bottom up, denying first those sensible things that are least like God. It even seems that there are two types of denial occurring here. Gluttony and insanity seem to be improper for The Divine, and are therefore attributed purely in a non-literal sense. But for speaking, understanding, goodness, and life, it is not that God exhibits nothing like these qualities so much as that the way they are exhibited in The Divine is so far above the way humanity exhibits them, and above what words can portray. Therefore, they must be denied due to their insufficiency.

In addition to descending from that which is high to that which is base, cataphatic theology also grows in what can be attributed to God. Negative theology does the opposite; *Deonise Hid Diuinity* differentiates itself from Pseudo-Dionysius's affirmative works in this way:

As it is now here in þis book, whan we entren into þe derkness þat is abouen mynde, we schul not onliche fynde þe schortyng of wordes, bot as it were a madnes & a parfite vnresonabiltee of alle þat we seyn. And in alle þe oper bookes oure enditing descendid fro þe heigest þinges to þe lowest ; and after þe quantitee of descendyng, it spred oute to a greet multitude. Bot now it ascendip in þis book fro þe lowest þinges to þe hizest ; and after þe mesure of þe ascencioun—þe whiche is somtyme sodeyner þen oper—it is maad streite. And after alle soche assencioun, it schal al be withouten voice, & al it schal be knitted to a þing þat is vnspekable (8).

Thus we make the transition from the negative theology set forth in the *Mystical Theology* to the practical guide of contemplation, *The Cloud of Unknowing*. As one ascends, denying all things that are predicated of God, one reaches a point where there is nothing left to deny, and nothing that can be said, and one is alone with The Divine.

2. *The Cloud's* Approach to Approaching the Divine

The Cloud author takes the negative approach to God and applies its ramifications to contemplation. I say its ramifications because nowhere in *The Cloud of Unknowing* does he directly outline negative theology (hence my reliance on *Deonise Hid Diuinity* thus far); although he does directly accept and put forward the idea that

God is beyond what we can understand. The author begins with a description of four progressive degrees of Christian living: the common, special, singular, and perfect. The common degree is living in the world, and being concerned with bodily things. The special degree is a calling to live more like Christ, and serve his servants, with a concern for the spiritual things of life. The singular life is described as that “In þe whiche solitari forme & maner of leuyng þou maist lerne to lift up þe fote of þi loue, & step towardes þat state & degree of leuyng þat is parfite, & þe laste state of alle” (14). The author states that “Pre of þese mow be bigonnen & eendid in þis liif ; & þe ferþe may bi grace be bigonnen here, bot it schal euer laste wip-uten eende in þe blis of heuen” (13). *The Cloud* is written for those that feel they have been called to the singular life, and would like to approach the perfect life of contemplation which will not die with the body, but continue in heaven. The degrees of the Christian life are not referred to outside of the first few chapters, but in these few chapters they are used as a calling into the contemplative life, and into *The Cloud of Unknowing*.

The first three chapters set forth the goal and basic method proposed in the work. After going through the degrees of Christian living and establishing that the readers (granted they are part of his strictly defined target audience) are being called to a higher service of God, the author describes the new relationship that one should be yearning for: “Bot oo þing I telle þee: he is a gelous loue & suffreþ no felawship, & him list not worche in þi wille bot 3if he be only wip þee bi hym-self” (15). This is the goal of the singular life, on the way to the perfect life: to be alone with God, and only God.

Although the author does not make a direct connection, it is easy to see how the degrees of Christian living translate over into his descriptions of the active and

contemplative lives. The author relies on the active and contemplative differentiation throughout the text. Rather than just dividing these into two separate types of living, the author creates a three step process from the active and contemplative lives, and he uses Christ's saying from the story of Mary and Martha as a justification.⁴ When Martha—representative of active life—asks Jesus to make Mary—representative of contemplative life—help her with physical service, Jesus tells Martha that Mary has chosen the best part. The author argues “Where-so-euer þe best is set or nemnyd, it askep bifore it þeese two þinges: a good & a beter ; so þat it be þe best, and þe þryd in noumbre” (53). The author solves the number problem between the three things implied by the word “best”, and the two types of living, active and contemplative, by describing a third part in between the active and contemplative lives, which is the second part of the active life and simultaneously the first part of the contemplative life. These can be directly related to the degrees of Christian living: the common being the first part of the active life, the special being the second part of the active life in which one first takes part in contemplation. As one becomes more involved in contemplation and less in the active life one passes into the singular form of living. Lastly, when one is wholly in the contemplative life, one lives in the perfect degree. In seeking to enter from the singular to the perfect life, one seeks to leave behind the active life and enter more fully into the contemplative life. The second chapter ends with the author spurring the reader to get on with the work, and asking the logical question of anyone looking to begin the contemplative life: “Bot what schalt þou do, & how schalt þou put ?” (16).

⁴ Lk 10:38-42.

Answering this question is the main point of *The Cloud*: if one is being called to contemplation, how is one to proceed? How does one enter into contemplative prayer?

The author exhorts the reader to:

Lift up þin herte vnto God wiþ a meek steryng of loue ; & mene him-self, & none of his goodes. ... so þat nouzt worche in þi witte ne in þi wille bot only him-self. & do þat in þee is to forzete alle þe creatures þat euer God maad & þe werkes of hem, so þat þi þouzt ne þi desire be not directe ne streche to any of hem, neiþer in general ne in special (16).

The Cloud of Unknowing proposes that one approaches God in this manner, lifting one's heart to God in a meek stirring of love, and willing nothing other than God's self and not any divine attributes or creation. At this point, the connection to negative theology may seem insubstantial, but in this description the two things essential to *The Cloud's* methods are present. First, one is to be alone with God, and only will to love God. This is the ascent that is spoken of in *Deonise Hid Diuinity*, which ends with unity and solitude with The Divine after denying everything else. The author's statement of being alone with God may not seem quite that negative, but it becomes more clear as we move into the things that one should forget during this work. Not much later in the work the author clarifies that absolutely everything should be forgotten when contemplating The Divine. This means not only everything on earth, but everything in Heaven; holy things such as the angels and the saints must be forgotten. But the true nature of the negation can be seen more clearly when the author insists that the reader forget even

the works of God:

For þof al it be good to þink upon þe kindenes of God, & to loue hym & preise him for hem: ȝit it is fer betyr to þink upon þe nakid beyng oh him, & to loue him & preise him for him-self (25 ll. 9-12).

The contemplative is to love God, not for God's kindness, or mercy, or the good things God has done, but to love God's self. If this leaves the reader asking what in the world that is supposed to mean, then things are going well, for the author immediately follows with this:

Bot now þou askest me & seiest: 'How shal I þink on him-self, & what is hee ?' & to þis I cannot answere þee bot þus: 'I wote neuer.' ... For alle oper creatures & theire werkes—ȝe, & of þe werkes of God self—may a man þorou grace haue fulheed of knowing, & wel to kon þinke on hem ; bot of God him-self can no man þinke. & þefore I wole leue al þat þing þat I can þink, & chese to my loue, but not þouȝt. By loue may he be getyn & holden ; bot bi þouȝt neiþer. & þefore, þof al it be good sumtyme to þink of the kyndnes & þe worþines of God in special, & þof al it be a lizt & a party of contemplacion : neuerþeles in þis werk it schal be casten down and keuerid wiþ a cloud of forȝetyng (25-26).

Loving God's self is the essence of contemplation in *The Cloud*. God can not be known with the intellect, but can be embraced by one's ability to love. God's creation can be known, even specific divine works can be known, but God's self is beyond what we can understand. the goal of *The Cloud of Unknowing* is that one should approach God with

one's love, a naked intent towards God, and be so enthralled in The Divine that everything else—including anything in particular about God—is forgotten.

As I am finishing my overview of *The Cloud's* methods, there is a point that I want to make sure I bring out, since the author is very careful about it. The goal of this work is to enter into contemplation, which is the highest form of living, and best way that one can be connected with God. However, even as this method is the highest form of living, the author is clear that he has no disdain for those that do not take part in it, and are in the first part of the active life. Nor does he have anything against thinking about God in affirmative terms. As the passage above states "it be good sumtyme to þink of the kyndnes & þe worpines of God in special, & þof al it be a lizt & a party of contemplacion". Thinking of these things is good, it is simply not a part of the work that the author has set out to teach.

3. Knowing and The God-man

When considering Christian doctrine a possible problem with the method and theology of *The Cloud* becomes apparent. We can know bodily things, creatures, and even the works of God, but supposedly we can not know God's self. In many religions this likely would pose no problem, but in Christianity one may rightfully wonder what role Christ plays in all of this? If God is ever knowable, it is in Jesus Christ, the God-man, the Word made flesh; if one can comprehend the works of God, and one can understand bodily truths, then why doesn't the Incarnation make the very being of God knowable? The Incarnation seems like it should be a central concern to the author, either because it makes God known to us in the flesh, or because he must explain why

this is not the case, and why even by looking at Christ one can not truly know God. But *The Cloud* remains remarkably silent on this point.

The role (or lack thereof) of Christ and the Incarnation in *The Cloud* has been noticed by others. Commenting on the fissure that must exist between God and creation in the negative theology of *The Cloud*, A. C. Spearing writes:

It may be hard to see how such beliefs could be compatible with Christianity itself, and especially with its central doctrine of the incarnation: if God became man, taking on human language as well as human flesh, how can this absolute incapacity of human language exist? (xviii).

Spearing notes that *The Cloud* allows for contemplation of the Incarnation and Passion, but only in the early stages of the contemplative life. Spearing explains that this feature of *The Cloud* is consistent with the English mystic tradition of writers such as Richard Rolle or Julian of Norwich, albeit *The Cloud* author takes his avoidance of material devotion further than the other mystics. Spearing leaves the subject saying that *The Cloud* author “was not accused of heresy, but at times you can feel him struggling to hold on to orthodoxy” (xx). While *The Cloud’s* consistency with other mystics of the time is important, pointing it out does not really address the issue of Christ’s role in the work. And while there are parts of *The Cloud* where the author’s clarifications that earthly things are not bad seem anxious, and perhaps even paranoid, this is more to protect the reader from an unorthodox interpretation of *The Cloud* rather than representing a struggle with orthodoxy that is internal to the author.

In *Mysticism of The Cloud of Unknowing* William Johnston closely examines Christ’s place in *The Cloud*, and rightfully points out that Christ does play an important

role through his divinity. According to Johnston, the humanity of Christ is included in what is forgotten in the contemplative act, while one continues to concentrate on the person of Christ because of his divinity. This is directly in line with the teaching of *The Cloud* through the story of Mary and Martha, which is such a central image of the work. In a passage considering this event, *The Cloud* author comments that while sitting at the feet of Jesus, Mary was fully fixed on the divinity of Christ rather than his body:

3i! & ful oftymes I hope þat sche was so deeply affecte in þe loue of his
 Godheed þat sche had bot riȝt lityl specyall beholdyng unto þe beute of his
 precious & his blessid body, in þe whiche he sate ful louely, spekyng &
 preching before hir ; ne ȝit to anyþing elles, bodyly or goostly (46).

Johnston comments on this passage that “Through the humanity of Christ (which is present, though forgotten) she contemplates His divinity” (74). While Christ plays an integral role in Mary’s contemplation, Johnston notices an important but subtle difference:

[Mary’s] forgetting of the humanity of Christ is quite different from the forgetting of other creatures. It would seem that Mary is making no deliberate attempt to forget the sacred humanity; she is not vigorously “treading it down beneath the cloud of forgetting” as is done with other creatures; it is rather that she is so fascinated and absorbed by the Divinity that the beauty of His Humanity falls into the background (75).

Thus, while Christ is fully man and fully God, and his humanity is absolutely essential for salvation, and his human nature is inseparable though distinct from his divine nature, his humanity is not what one seeks in the contemplative work. It can not be left aside

like other bodily things, because Christ and his humanity, as the second person of the Trinity, is part of The Divine. However, one can still justify leaving the humanity of Christ behind to focus on the divinity, because in apophatic contemplation one does not pay attention to any particulars about God, which would here presumably include his humanity. Thus there is good reason to strive to be so enthralled with the divine nature of Christ that one leaves behind contemplation of Christ's human nature. Johnston summarizes an image from *The Cloud* author's other work, *Privy Counseling*, in support of this point:

In another passage, the author shows that he has mastered the theology underlying his spiritual direction. Our Lord, he says, is one Person; by His manhood He is the door, and by His Godhead He is the porter; in order to reach the porter one must pass through the door—and moreover, there is no other way in (73).

Thus Johnston points out that the humanity of Christ is the means by which we find Christ's divinity. While I agree with this without question, it leads to the point on which my view diverges from Johnston's.

Johnston notes that "the assertion [has been] made that *The Cloud* is theocentric rather than Christocentric" (67). This, however, is a viewpoint that Johnston disagrees with. In his Introduction to his modern translation of *The Cloud* and *Privy Counseling*, Johnston states his view more explicitly when commenting on the problematic place of Christ in the imageless ideal of negative theology: "yet, I believe that the author of *The Cloud* can truly be called Christocentric" (14). Borrowing terminology from Teilhard de Chardin, Johnston specifies that *The Cloud* is centered on the 'cosmic Christ', or the

risen and living Christ. The cosmic Christ is the same as the historical person, but he has, Johnston says, a different existence. As opposed to the historical Christ, the cosmic Christ can not be imagined and is “co-extensive with the universe”. This Christ that one can interact with is the Christ that Johnston believes *The Cloud* centers on. Johnston’s argument climaxes with his comment on a prayer in *Privy Counseling*:

This is truly the peak-point when the contemplative together with Christ offers himself to the Father for the human race. Now he has put on the mind of Christ so completely that, in a sense, only the Father remains. It is Christ who prays and offers himself to The Father—“I live, now not I, but Christ liveth in me.” (18).

My first issue with this comment is that in the prayer⁵ Johnston is commenting on I see nothing that indicates any such intimate connection with Christ. Christ has not been mentioned by name at all before this point of *Privy Counseling*, but only alluded to in relating the story of the sick woman seeking to touch Christ’s cloak. Outside of that there has only been reference to God, with no specific mention of any trinitarian distinctions, much less a joining with Christ in prayer as a form of approach to the Father. What Johnston is describing is something more traditional and conventional than the mysticism of *The Cloud*. Granted, it is tradition that *The Cloud* author would likely have no qualms with, but it is not the contemplative work that *The Cloud* strives for. These distinctions between Christ, and approaching only the Father, are artifacts of Johnston’s theory of the place of Christ in *The Cloud* corpus. But *The Cloud* author

⁵ The prayer can be found on page 141 of the Hodgson text, and page 144 of Johnston’s.

shows little interest in the trinitarian distinctions; they too must be transcended in the contemplative work.

Contrary to Johnston, I believe that *The Cloud* is theocentric as opposed to Christocentric, and that as a work of negative theology it is necessarily so. *The Cloud* is seeking a union with God as a whole where the distinctions of the Trinity bleed away and one is left only with The Divine. Which isn't to say those distinctions aren't real, or that *The Cloud* author rejects them, but only that such things are not what this form of contemplation is concerned with. This is evident as *The Cloud* author says that we can know things like the works of God, "bot of God him-self can no man pinke" (26). Thus we can know things like the Incarnation, or what persons make up the Trinity, but these are not God's self, and thus not what the contemplative is seeking to love. The divinity of Christ is strictly the Son, as orthodoxy teaches that only the Son was made incarnate in the person of Jesus. But the Son is only one person of the Trinity, and has made union with the Father possible, while sending the Spirit after his ascension to remain with his followers. To be Christocentric, and solely centered on the divinity of Christ, would lead to a theology centered on the person of the Son within the Trinity. Christ does play a central role, but it is because he provides access to The Divine as a whole; the humanity of Christ is not what the contemplative is searching for, but it is what makes the search possible. Nor is the contemplative looking only for that divinity that was made incarnate in Christ—the Son—but is looking for union with the entirety of the Godhead.

The God-man has bridged the divide between God and humanity. But in doing so he has not made God knowable (if anything has been made knowable it is strictly the

humanity of Christ, his divinity is still transcendent), but rather, he has made humanity able to reach God with love when one sits at the feet of Christ, as Mary did, and looks past the human, and into The Divine. God, who is humanity's shepherd, spoke, through Jesus as the Word made flesh, but we hear the Word in order to return to the shepherd, not to dwell on the sound—or as it were the body—of the Word that was spoken.

4. Speaking the Ineffable

Christ, as the Word, is a divine speech act; he is also called the image of the invisible God.⁶ Any cogent Christian theology of language must account for this divine metaphor of Christ as the Word. The connection between Christ and language will inform one about both a theory of language because words are like Christ, as well as the role of Christ because he is like words. Having established the place of Christ in *The Cloud*, a review of the scholarship on the author's use of imagery is in order; particularly three important essays concerning language use in *The Cloud of Unknowing*: "Of Another Mind: Ludic Imagery and Spiritual Doctrine in *the Cloud of Unknowing*" by Robert Englert; "Paradox upon Paradox: Using and Abusing Language in *The Cloud of Unknowing* and Related Texts" by Cheryl Taylor; and "Fantasy and Language in *The Cloud of Unknowing*" by J. A. Burrow.

I will begin with Englert's "Of Another Mind". The strength of Englert's article is that it is very organic; he is not attempting to compare two independent ideas, one being imagery and the other being the apophatic theology of *The Cloud*, but he is "interested in interaction, and in the creative process which allows symbols/images and ideas to

⁶ Col 1:15

assume religious form” (3). As the title of the article suggests, Englert centers on the specific idea of playful images, and proposes that the author uses them in a playful manner. Central to Englert’s argument is that *The Cloud* is unself-conscious, or in other words, that “*The Cloud of Unknowing* was a spontaneous search and not a planned or contrived project” (3). Englert then connects this with *The Cloud* author’s affinity for play, and associating his work with play:

Play, too, is an unself-conscious activity that calls for spontaneity and imagination rather than for order and objectivity. It is in the spirit of play, therefore, that the author makes a game of his teaching, plays with us rather than teaches us, and gives expression to the gameful style that is in part his message (4).

It is through the idea of play that Englert argues that *The Cloud* author is teaching a game rather than doctrine. I agree with this to an extent, which is why I had to rely on *Deonise Hid Diuinite* which is more theologically oriented for an explanation of negative theology, and then outline the particular application of the apophatic tradition used in *The Cloud*. Because the author is trying to teach the contemplative how to approach God with love rather than through objective facts about God, the system (if it can be called a system) has to be dynamic and something that the contemplative can react to and which can react to the contemplative. I do not doubt that there is something like playfulness in the images that Englert points out. One such example he gives is *The Cloud* author’s exhortation to hide one’s desire from God:

In Chapter Fourty-Six the reader encounters the Dionysian game of hiding by which the author is captivated. Here one is told to hide his desire from

God, not to be rude or boisterous in prayer, but subtle. The disciple should hide until God find him, elude all pretense of discovering God until finally God discover him. ... If such advice appears cold, one soon learns that the coldness is part of a flirtation which invites a response. ... The author eases any misapprehension when he tells us that he who hides from God comes to “fele (God) gamesumli pley with him as the fadir doth with the childe, kyssing & clippyng (hugging)” (5).

This method of hiding one’s desire from God is remarkably like a game. Approaching it from any other way seems detrimental; what would it mean for a contemplative to seriously and defensively hide desire from God? If it were serious, then to be ‘found’ would be to suffer a sort of loss; however, *The Cloud* author clearly intends the finding event to be like an earthly father “kyssing & clippyng” his child rather than a serious hiding.

Englert’s goal is to do more than merely point out images of play, and state that they are playful. Englert comes to this thought:

Our conclusion is that the author’s spiritual letter is not to be taken “seriously.” It is certainly not to be designated a spiritual doctrine. Rather, it assumes the guise of a game whose images appeal to “nakid entent” (10).

There are two problems with this conclusion. The first is that, while certain parts of *The Cloud* are playful, there are others that are certainly not part of a game and are very serious. In the prologue the author strictly confines his readership to Christians that are fully dedicated to Christ and the possibility of following him into contemplation. To anyone who would read *The Cloud* the author writes “I beseche pee bi pe autorite of

charite” to read the entire work. Furthermore, before embarking on contemplation the author exhorts that the contemplative must have confessed his or her sins, as is the “ordinaunce of alle Holy Chirche” (43). Under the reading of *The Cloud* as a work of play these things could perhaps be justified as ‘the rules of the game’, but other parts of *The Cloud* are more problematic, like the author’s warning against false contemplatives in chapters fifty-one through fifty-six. When the author says of the false contemplative, “Now trewly I trowe þat who þat wil not goo þe streyte way to heuen þat þei schul goo þe softe way to helle” (104), I am inclined to say that, while play certainly has a part in *The Cloud*, the overall theme and goal is in fact very serious.

Reading the entire work as playful is a problem that stems from the other issue in Englert’s conclusion that *The Cloud* “assumes the guise of a game whose images appeal to ‘nakid entent’”. Here the idea of the author’s images being part of a game is expanded to all of the images of *The Cloud*. But as *The Cloud* is not wholly a game, not all of its images are part of a game, nor are all of them playful. It is for this reason that Englert’s theory seems too specific to be expanded into a theory of how images are used in *The Cloud*; though he certainly succeeds in giving a wonderful interpretation of what the specifically playful images mean in *The Cloud*. Since playfulness does not apply to all the imagery in *The Cloud*—the central images of a cloud of unknowing and a cloud of forgetting, as well as the biblical image often used of Mary sitting at Jesus’s feet are in no way playful—this theory fails to give a justification for the use of these other images in a theology that seeks to avoid imagery.

Cheryl Taylor provides a theory uniting all of the imagery of *The Cloud* as paradoxical in “Pardox upon Paradox: Using and Abusing Language in *The Cloud of*

Unknowing and related texts”. Taylor proposes that *The Cloud* author has developed “a language that in some respects imitates and embodies his contemplative methods” (31). Taylor proposes that *The Cloud* author does this through constrictions in language, which “function as textual imitations of the effort made in the author’s contemplation by unknowing” (33). I agree that image usage in *The Cloud* reflects the author’s negative approach, but my explanation differs from Taylor’s. Taylor writes of the author’s use of imagery:

Long preemptive rebuttals of misconceptions constrict semantic possibilities more and more, before the text expands into brief but powerful positive formulations. The paradigm is established in explanations at the end of Chapter 4 that the cloud and darkness are not physical and so are not accessible to the imagination. These lead to assertions: ‘when I sey derknes, I mene a lackyng of knowyng...[sic]& for þis skile it is not clepid a cloud of þe eire, bot a cloud of vnknowyng þat is bitwix þee & þi God’. (34).

My view differs in that I do not think these uses of imagery end with positive formulations, but that the author follows the three step process laid out in *Deonise Hid Diuinity* of affirmation, negation, unknowing. I will address this more closely in the section titled “ Words Made Flesh: The Incarnation and Denial of Language”, and will return to the same passage concerning the image of the cloud of unknowing that Taylor uses.

The significance of constrictive language uses in “Paradox upon Paradox” is that they “are signs that language can penetrate no further” (40). A prime example Taylor

uses is the author's talk in *Privy Counseling* of a "blinde beholdyng", and when "the author explains that this 'blynde werk' of the soul is accompanied by 'a maner of goostly sizt'" (43). She also further expands on the image of the cloud of unknowing which she previously suggested the author negates, stating that it is also paradoxical:

[T]he cloud of unknowing is presented paradoxically as an opaque barrier which is yet a zone of connection. Radicalized in Chapter 68 as a 'Nothing' suddenly discovered to be 'All', it combines the drama of literary paradox with the transcendency of anti-linguistic contemplative paradox. The Revelation of an abyss of logical contradiction at the heart of the text reaffirms the metaphorical quality of the many preceding accounts of working in the cloud, and challenges the reader to move through delusive, imagination-based knowledge into the truth of 'goostli' working (44).

This works well as a theory on the method of how *The Cloud* author uses imagery, but seems fairly void of anything like a theory of how the author views imagery in general. For example, there are images that *The Cloud* author uses that are not paradoxical, namely the biblical ones of Mary at Christ's Feet, Moses entering the cloud on Sinai, and the relation between Moses, Aaron, and Bezaleel. Taylor hardly mentions the sections of *The Cloud* concerned with Mary, as the only place her name appears is in a footnote. Taylor says that the sections of *The Cloud* that mention Moses entering the cloud on Sinai "poeticize earlier attempts in *The Cloud* to articulate the goal of contemplation" (36). As for the analogy of contemplation with the ark of the covenant, she hardly does more than point out that *The Cloud* author uses it as an analogy (36), and her comments on the passage where the author associates himself with Bezaleel

and his student with Aaron center mostly around the beginning of that passage where she says the use of the word “spoken” “confirms the likelihood of mixed oral and written composition...” and that the passage creates an intimacy in the shared vocation of contemplation “briefly dissolving the hierarchy of teacher and learner” (39). But overall there are no comments on the exegetical passages that acknowledge them as uses of imagery.

Taylor seems to lay out methods of language use—paradox, oxymoron, constrictive and expansive imagery—which create a theory of language use in *The Cloud* only insofar as she proposes that these things mirror the author’s negative theology. And she is right that to the extent that because these images can not be literally known they do mimic the author’s apophatic contemplation, since God can not literally be known in positive statements. However this does not explain how the author views imagery so much as how he uses it. One can see that theory is lacking by comparing her ideas to Englert’s; his view that the author saw his images as creating a game says much more about why the author uses images in a negative system. Taylor’s theory surpasses Englert’s in explaining how the author uses images, since her theory of paradox applies to much more of the author’s imagery.

In “Fantasy and Language in *The Cloud of Unknowing*”, J. A. Burrow relies on a division in *The Cloud* between two different types of imagery. He quotes a passage of *The Cloud* concerning the imagination, stating that it will portray “sum fantasye, þe whiche is nouȝt elles bot a bodely conceyte of a goostly þing, or elles a goostly conseyte of a bodely þing” (117). Through this passage, Burrow’s analysis of *The Cloud*

author's imagery concentrates on respecting the distinction between the bodily and the ghostly. He writes that:

[T]he implication of the author's double definition seems to be—must be, indeed—that the physical world has its own necessary and proper integrity as well as the spiritual world, and that to conceive either world in terms of the other imperils the integrity of both (289).

The bodily conceits of ghostly things are fairly obvious; these bodily conceits are the types of imagery that negative theology is warning against as literal interpretations of spiritual things. One example Burrow gives is when *The Cloud* author states that while some people would tell a person to gather everything inside of one's self and worship God there, *The Cloud* author says he will not say this—though he does believe it is true—for fear that his student would have a “bodely conceiving of his wordes”. Instead, the author commands the contemplative to not be inside himself, nor outside himself. If one objects and says that then one will be nowhere, the author assures the reader that this is what he wants, “For whi no3where bodely is euerywhere goostly” (121). In this, the idea of “inside” is a bodily conceit of a ghostly thing. This warning guards the contemplative against any bodily striving to internalize efforts while they remain bodily strivings. Burrow describes the habits of false contemplatives as an example of a ghostly conceit of a bodily thing:

The author here describes an amusing variety of eccentric habits: wild gestures, staring eyes, piping voices, gaping mouths, and the like; and he expresses his disapproval of them in no uncertain terms... Such ‘unsemely and unordeinde contenaunces’ (99) are either simple hypocrisy

or else they derive from the fantasies of the disordered imagination. For just as spiritual activities can be disturbed by bodily things, so bodily activity can be disturbed by spiritual things. The attempt to act physically in a 'spiritual' way leads to absurdity, to madness, or even to damnation (290).

With examples of these possible confusions, Burrow moves onto the significance of the mutual dignity of the physical and spiritual worlds, and addresses more directly the role of language in *The Cloud*. The problem, as Burrow points out, is that even negative theology must be expressed and taught with the very language it seeks to avoid. He quotes what is probably the most important passage in *The Cloud* for understanding the author's view of language:

[B]eware þat þou conceyue not bodely þat þat is mente goostly, þof al it be spokyn in bodely wordes, as ben þees: UP OR DOUN, IN OR OUTE, BEHINDE OR BEFORE, ON O SIDE OR ON OþER. For þof al þat a þing be neuer so goostly in it-self, neuerþeles 3it 3if it schal be spoken of, siþen it so is þat speche is a bodely werk wrou3t wiþ the tonge, þe whiche is an instrument of þe body, it bohoueþ alweis be spoken in bodely words (114).

This passage is absolutely pivotal to understanding the use of imagery in *The Cloud*. *The Cloud* author wants us to attend wholly to the spiritual, but language by its very nature is always going to be bodily. Burrow expounds on this passage:

There is therefore no question, for [the author], of escaping into purely spiritual language. The task is rather to express spiritual things in such a way that the 'bodily words' do not become confused with their spiritual

referents. To avoid such confusion, it is best that the inevitable physical imagery should be clearly recognized for what it is: physical (295).

Burrow is exactly right on this point. The author has come to terms with the fact that, although he wants to talk about the spiritual, speech is a bodily act, and as such can only express things in bodily terms. Or, as Burrow puts it, “The phrase ‘bodily wordes’ has a double meaning here. It refers to language as a physical activity, ... and also to the fact that language expresses things in physical terms” (292). He further states that “The implication seems to be that the one fact follows from the other: i.e. it is *because* language is a physical activity that it can only express ideas in physical terms” (292).

On this point I could not agree with Burrow more, but this is also where I must depart from him. The issue of language in negative theology is absolutely central, and while I completely agree with the idea that the author sees the distinction, and respects the distinction of the bodily and ghostly having their own realms, I think that as a theory of why the author uses language the way he does it falls short.

The two previous articles, “Ludic Imagery” and “Paradox upon Paradox” tightly knit *The Cloud* author’s view of language to the fact that he is part of the apophatic tradition. Both of these seem more intertwined with the text than Burrow’s, and capture the nature of the contemplation that *The Cloud* author is specifically trying to achieve in his work. However, they do this at the peril of having a theory that is too specific to the text. This is certainly true of Englert, as an apophatic mystic could easily recognize the failings of language, yet still attempt to use it in a serious manner, knowing full well that it will fail, but that it is nonetheless the only method available. Taylor’s approach is too specific in that imagery is not of necessity paradoxical, even in negative theology, where

it can simply be insufficient, but not a paradox. And she doesn't give a reason for why an apophatic contemplative would be so comfortable using imagery so often; he may be justified in using imagery if it is paradoxical, but why use it at all? For Englert it is because it is a game; for Burrow because language is innately limited to the physical. Burrow's theory can, without a doubt, be applied to nearly all Christian literature, apophatic or cataphatic, that has been traditionally considered orthodox. And although this is a strength of the theory, because it shows its acceptability in a very wide range of spirituality, the theory seems to fall short of being a specifically apophatic theory of how the author uses language. It shows the necessity of using images, and the frustrations that come with trying to talk of spiritual things in negative theology, but it leaves one feeling unsatisfied because it leaves the physical and spiritual realms so mutually exclusive, even if they are both necessary. *The Cloud* author plays with language in a way that seems to imply a more intimate connection between language and the spiritual than simply recognizing that language is in the physical sphere while trying to express that which is in the spiritual realm.

For Burrow to say that *The Cloud* author is comfortable using imagery because he accepts it as being physical, and that his remedy for language's physicality is removing ambiguities through clarification, pushes the divide between the spiritual and physical too far, because while they are different, they are intertwined. The physical and the spiritual are not unconnected; the connection is evident from the joined bodily and ghostly nature of humans. We are bodily, in that we have bodies, and we are ghostly, in that we have souls. This connection between the spiritual and physical realms is what my theory of language use in *The Cloud* is based on. More accurately, though similarly,

it is based on how the spiritual and physical come together in the doctrine of the Incarnation. Just as our bodies are a physical component to our soul, in the doctrine of the Incarnation Christ is the physical manifestation of God. As such, Christ is said to be the Word of God: the Word made flesh. And this is something all of the previously mentioned authors leave out. How does the author's view of language within negative theology affect his reading of Christ as the Word; or perhaps, how does the divine metaphor of Christ being the Word affect the author's use of language? This is the key a theology of language that can apply both to apophatic and cataphatic theology alike, as well as tend specifically to the way language is used in *The Cloud of Unknowing*.

Christ, as the Word, is a physical manifestation of God. In Genesis God is said to have spoken the universe into existence. Both of these show how there could be ghostly conceits that, through the speech act, are forced into the bodily realm: language is an incarnational act.

II. Words Made Flesh:

The Incarnation and Denial of Language

Imaginative language is an incarnation of that which it seeks to express. *The Cloud* author lays down his theory that all language is physical when he writes:

For þof al þat a þing be neuer so goostly in it-self, neuerþeles 3it 3if it schal be spoken of, siþen it so is þat speche is a bodely werk wrou3t wip the tonge, þe whiche is an instrument of þe body, it bohoueþ alweis be spoken in bodely words (114).

No matter how spiritual a thing is, because speech is a bodily work, the speech act always brings it into the bodily realm. What I mean when I say language is incarnational

is that words are physical manifestations of what they are representing; I rely both on the above account from the author that all spoken things are bodily, as well as the divine speech act—the Word of God—which is Christ, who is God made physical. The act of incarnation creates a bond between the thing being spoken of, which can be entirely ghostly, and what is spoken about it, which is always entirely physical. The bond created is how language can refer to that which it is manifesting, and this is particularly true of imaginative language.

In the closing of the last chapter I referred to two of God’s speech acts: Christ as The Word, and the creation in Genesis. These seem to be of two different types. Christ is “the image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15), while the creation is a speaking of things into existence, but not necessarily the creation of an image. I am interested in the former, as my concern is with *The Cloud’s* imaginative language. Perhaps non-imaginative language can be related more to the creation event, but that is outside the scope of this paper. But it is something I wanted to address as I will explore the theory of incarnational language wholly inside the realm of imaginative language. In addition, since the scholarship addressing *The Cloud* author’s use of imagery is thoroughly covered in the two previous sections, this chapter will concentrate almost wholly on setting up the incarnational theory of language that I am proposing, with only brief mentions of the previously mentioned scholars to further show how my work fits in with the existing theories.

In chapter fifty-five *The Cloud* author gives an example other than Christ of what I mean when I say that language is incarnational. He discusses angels and devils appearing to humans in forms that represent their spiritual selves, or their mission:

Pe deuil is a spirit, & of his owne kynde he hap no body more þen an aungele. Bot ȝit neuerþeles, what tyme þat he or an aungele schal take any bodi by leue of God to maak any mynistracion to any man in þis liif: al after þe werk is þat he schal mynistre, þer-after in lices is þe qualite of his body in some party (102).

Immediately following this he gives an example which he appears to take as real life, and not simply a metaphor. He says that some necromancers say that the devil will appear with a single large nostril, which he tries to entice humans to look into to see his brain, which is the fire of hell. The author explains that this single nostril represents a lack of discretion. This is an example of what I have in mind when I say that language is incarnational. First, that language is a bodily representation of something ghostly. Secondly, that through manifesting themselves in a physical manner, the images take on characteristics of that which they are manifesting. Sometimes it is as simple as a name, and sometimes it is a trait like a single nostril and a brain made of the hell fire. The author has already established that he views all speech acts as bodily, and I intend to show how his images are used to manifest some characteristic of the idea that they are expressing. The resemblance between things expressed and the imagery expressing them, as well as the notion that all language is physical, and that the incarnation of God is called The Word, are my arguments that language is incarnational. While this is relatively simple when it comes to the theory of how the author views language, it is important that this makes a connection between speech and Christ. As I also lay out the way in which *The Cloud* author negates language according to the three step process of affirmation, negation, and unknowing set forth in *Deonise Hid Diuinity*,

this connection will enable me to explore how the author's view and method of language use influence his reading of Christ within negative theology. The connection between Christ and language is extremely circular in that both elements mutually inform each other.

If viewed under the hierarchy of possible predications put forth in *Deonise Hid Diuinity, The Cloud* author's images fit in with the lowest and largest group of predicates, which are the last to be affirmed, and the first to be negated. These images make an analogy between God and pretty much any earthly thing, whether one saying that God made an oath, or saying that God is drunk. The imagery that *The Cloud* author creates is all low level imagery of this type, and because of this it is the first to be negated in negative theology, and the author can negate them as soon as he makes them. Through these images the author mimics the affirmation, denial, unknowing process of negative theology.

A natural starting point is with the eponymous central image of a cloud of unknowing. *The Cloud* author writes of one's first endeavor into contemplation:

For at þe first tyme when þou dost it, þou fyndest bot a derknes, & as it were a cloude of vnknowing, þou wost neuer what, sauynge þat þou felist in þi wille a nakid entent vnto God. Pis derknes & þis cloude is, how-so-euer þou dost, bitwix þee & þi God (17).

The creation of an image is the first act in the series of how language reflects negative theology; one needs an affirmation before one is able to negate it. The affirmation is the initial incarnational act of the image. Here we have a spiritual idea manifested through words, thus making it physical, which the reader receives and constructs as a mental

image. The author gives his imagery in no uncertain or weak words by writing that the experience is ‘kind of like’ darkness, and ‘kind of like’ a cloud; he directly says one will find “bot a derknes”, and that “ Pis derknes & pis cloude is, how-so-euer þou dost, bitwix pee & pi God”. They are not like a darkness and a cloud, but they are a darkness and a cloud. It is also noteworthy that the author actually presents two images, one is a darkness, the other a cloud. The use of two images shows the flexibility of the author; he is not committed to just one of them. There is something that an image of darkness and an image of a cloud share, and that is what the author is interested in. This shows how free the images are, and that they can be related to the most common type of image under Pseudo-Dionysius’s schema of descending affirmational statements.

While *The Cloud* is an apophatic work, cataphatic theology is still a prominent part of the process. This is evident from the author’s prologue, where he demands that the reader is well acquainted with and dedicated to Christ, as well as his demands throughout *The Cloud* that, before embarking on apophatic contemplation, one should contemplate the goodness of God, and the mercy of the Passion of Christ. Just as Christ makes a connection with God possible for humanity through the Incarnation, imagery allows access to the contemplation which it incarnates. In *Deonise Hid Diuinity* there is an image relating negative theology to sculpting (6). A sculptor has a piece of stone. The stone, as a big hunk of physical material, is like an affirmation. It gives the sculptor something to work with. But the sculptor makes the image by gradually removing pieces of stone—like a series of denials. One is left with a type of knowing, if I may call it such, which comes from denials. It is an unknowing, or, in the theology of

The Cloud, it is fully grasping God through love rather than the intellect. The sculpting image is a metaphor (an incarnation) of the process of negative theology.

By creating the image of the cloud of unknowing, and of entering a darkness, the author is showing the reader the stone he plans on working with—his affirmation. To get to the ghostly understanding hidden within the bodily stone the author must work his craft of carving off pieces of stone. The pieces he removes are different readings—literal readings—of his image. This is his denial:

& wene not, for I clepe it a derknes or a cloude, þat it be any cloude
 congelid of þe humours þat fleen in þe ayre, ne 3it any derkness soche as
 is in þin house on ni3tes, when þi candel is oute. For soche a derknes &
 soche a cloude maist þou ymagin wiþ coriouste of witte, for to bere before
 þin i3en in þe li3test day of somer ; & also a3ensward in þe derkist ni3t of
 wynter þou mayst ymagin a clere schinyng li3t. Lat be soche falsheed ; I
 mene not þus. For when I sey derknes, I mene a lackyng of knowyng ; as
 alle þat þing þat þou knowest not, or elles þat þou hast for3etyn, it is derk
 to þee, for þou seest it not wiþ þi goostly i3e. & for þis skile it is not clepid
 a cloude of þe eire, bot a cloude of vnknowyng, þat is bitwix þee & þi God
 (23).

This is the first passage in which the author provides one of his clarifications, and a denial of the image he has given his reader. In this second step of negative theology the author has carved away the literal reading of his image, and left the reader with the final stage of a ghostly understanding. As physical darkness is a lack of light, this ghostly darkness is a lack of knowing; and as a physical cloud blocks one's view by coming

between the person and the sun, this ghostly cloud of unknowing blocks understanding of the intellect by coming between the person and God.

The act of denial makes the author's use of metaphor over a comparison or simile important. He puts forth the image as something definite—it is a cloud, it is a darkness—before negating the literal reading so that it remains a cloud and a darkness, but not a literal one of either. There is a darkness and a cloud, but they are ghostly, not bodily. If he simply said the experience is like a darkness, it would be enough to say “but it is also not like a darkness because you can imagine a candle even on the darkest winter night”. The author's point is that it actually is a darkness and a cloud; however it is a ghostly darkness and cloud, which doesn't make it less of either, but only different from the types of clouds and darknesses that we interact with. That the author does not want to lose this initial affirmation is evident from a passage in *Deonise Hid Diuinity* where he writes:

It behoutþ us for to sette, for to see, & for to afferme alle þe settinges & þe beynges of alle þees beyng þinges in him þat is abouen al knowyng & mynde, as hym being þe cause of alle þees þynges ; and more propirly & more migtely for to denye alle þees being þinges, as hym souereinly beyng abouen hem alle, ful heiz in hymself, departid fro hem alle ; and not for to haue it in opinyon þat þees deniinges of þees being þinges ben contrary to þe first afermynges of hem, bot fastliche for to holde in sizt of byleue him for to be abouen alle doyng away of þees beyng or beable þinges, þe whiche in himself is abouen alle, 3e! boþe doyng away and affermyng of hem alle (4).

If in negative theology the denial does not do away with the initial affirmation, then when the author denies his images, in parallel to the process of negative theology, he does not do away with the initial affirmation. The author wants the non-literal image to remain because without the affirmation there is nothing to negate; without the stone the sculptor would be left with nothing to sculpt. Few people, if any, would be impressed with a sculptor, or learn anything from a sculptor, that showed an uncarved block of stone only to take the whole thing out of the room and exclaim “ta-da!” That would be equivalent to completely removing the image, or to saying nothing at all; and saying nothing is different from denying cataphatic statements. The author wants one to leave all prior knowledge behind in a cloud of forgetting for the purposes of contemplation, but he does not want one to enter contemplation without first knowing Christ and dedicating one’s life to him, nor to be unable to return to these cataphatic statements when one is not engaging in contemplation. Recall that the author affirms many statements about God, Christ, and the church while he is writing, but leaves all of these behind the cloud of forgetting while contemplating.

In the previous example the author uses two images, showing that he is not particularly committed to a single one, but that a multiplicity of images are available to him. This resembles the lowest level of images in Pseudo-Dionysius’s hierarchy, which is the most populated, because these images relate God to purely natural and physical things, such as sleeping, or anger. This next example further exhibits that the author’s images relate to this low imagery. In the next image the author creates an image which is an incarnation of the attempt to overcome distractions that come between the contemplative and God. The author writes of distractions:

fonde to loke as it were ouer þeire schuldres, seching anoper þing: þe
 whiche þing is God, enclosid in a cloude of vnknowyng. ... þis sleizt be
 wel & trewly conceyuid, it is not elles bot a longing desire vnto God, to fele
 hym & see hym as it may be here (66).

The author encourages the contemplative to try to look over the shoulder of one's distractions, and attempt to see the cloud of unknowing which contains The Divine. By speaking the image it is made incarnate. It is also denied when the author restricts the reading by carving away the literal interpretation in saying that looking over the distraction's shoulder is nothing else but a longing desire for God. One is left with the unknowing of a method for dealing with distractions.

The second image in this passage is suggested if the first does not work. In this case the author suggests that one:

koure þou doun under hem as a cheitif & a coward ouercomen in batayle,
 & þink þat it is bot foly to þee to styue any lenger wip hem ; & þefore þou
 zeeldest þee to God in þe handes of þin enmyes. ... & sekirly, me þink, &
 þis sleizt be sotely conceyuid, it is not elles bot a trewe knowyng & a
 felyng of þi-selef as þou arte, a wrecche & a filþe, fer wers þen nouzt: þe
 whiche knowyng & felyng is meeknes (67).

The incarnate image here is of the helplessness of the contemplative to make any progress in overcoming distractions without the help of grace. The author suggests that one throw one's self down like a coward in battle who knows it would be folly to fight any longer, and therefore yield one's self to the mercy of God. And, in his fashion, the author also sculpts away his denial in the passage, indicating that this surrender's meaning is

spiritual. It embodies a recognition of one's own sinfulness before The Divine. It is not a literal throwing down of one's physical body, but a throwing down of one's ghostly body.

The fact that two images are presented for the same purpose shows the connection between these images and the low sort of image. However, here the author goes even beyond two images and invites the contemplative to create new methods of overcoming distractions. He exhorts the reader to avoid distractions "in þe maner beforeseid, *or betyr zif þou betyr mayst*" (68, emphasis mine). By inviting the reader to create one's own method and one's own image, the lowest image type is implied, as it is the area where pretty much anything goes. Not only are most images acceptable in this sphere, but, since they are the first of the things predicated to The Divine to be denied, one need not hesitate in denying them. This approach sheds light on *The Cloud* author's method and why he is comfortable using imagery. Language is incarnational; therefore it embodies spiritual significance in a physical manner, and a legitimate one, as Christ was an incarnation and is certainly seen as legitimate. However, this by itself is not a good enough reason in the apophatic tradition, which seeks to know by unknowing. The justification for *The Cloud* author to use imagery is the speed and ease with which one can deny the lowest sort of images. Therefore the image does not commit him to the literal reading of it; since language is always physical, using these low images gives him the ability to quickly and easily deny what he has created—to chip away at his block of physical stone with denials, thus creating a spiritual unknowing. And the fact that he invites the reader to partake in the image making shows that the images he is using are of the lowest kind, and that there can be a plethora of these types of images. Any higher type of image in the same realm as a statement such as

“God is life” takes more care to deny because it is in a sense truer, but the lower images can be denied immediately, and even during the creation of the image. If one combine’s the incarnational view with Englert’s theory, these images, which are game-like, are incarnations of what the author is attempting and one can view them as toys—incarnations of the game. One can play with the toy of looking over shoulders, or put that toy away and play with throwing one’s self down like a coward in battle. Of course this is done in a very serious manner, and I do not mean that they are literal toys, but they are spiritual devices that act as tools in the process of contemplation, which in relation to Englert may be interpreted as toys.

The imaginative language that the author is the most cautious of is directional language. Because the author is so nervous of this type of imagery it provides an opportunity to bring out another point of the method and theory of language use in *The Cloud*. The author’s directional imagery shows that he is careful not only in his denials of the literal meanings of his images, but also in his constructions of affirmations; he sculpts with only the proper stone. The author often provides a denial of his images which is separate from their affirmation, but he also has denials within some of the images themselves. In “Paradox upon Paradox” Taylor sees this as the creation of paradox to restrict the reading—which it is, but more accurately it exhibits both the incarnational nature of language, as well as the author’s method of affirmation and denial, which leads to a spiritual unknowing.

In another example of the author’s anxiety about directional imagery, the author explains why he uses the image and advice that one should hide one’s desire from God rather than show it:

paraunture, & I had boden þee schewe vnto God þe steryng of þin herte,
 þou schuldest haue maad a bodily schewyng vnto hym, ouper in
 contenance, or in voyce, or in worde, or in som oper rude bodely
 streynyng, as it is when þou schalt schewe a þing tat is hid in þinhert to a
 bodely man ; & in as moche þi werk schuld haue ben inpure. For on o
 maner schal a þing be schewid to man, & on an-oper maner vnto God
 (90).

The author is worried that if he said to show one's desire, because showing has a connotation with an outward direction, one might strive with one's physical body. But in this same chapter the author argues that to bring one's desire into the depth of one's spirit is a better way to show things to God, because if it is put more into our spirit it is removed more from bodily things, and therefore in the part of us that is spirit, as God is spirit. Not that God would really be able to see our desire any more clearly, since The Divine sees all with perfect clarity, but because by bringing it into our spirit it is closer to God. This shows the careful way in which the denial of the image can be present in the image's incarnation; to show one's desire to God by hiding it can have no literal interpretation.

Because of the author's fear of misinterpreting directional language, he concerns himself specifically with the interpretation of prepositions. In regards to the preposition "in", the author advises where he wants one to be during contemplation:

& on þe same maner, wher anoper man wolde bid þee gader þi migtes &
 þi wittes holiche wip-inne þi-self, & worschip God pere-þof al he sey ful
 wel & ful trewly, 3e! & no man trewlier & he be wel conseiuid-3it for feerde

of disseite & bodely conceyuyng of his wordes, me list not byd þee do so.
 Bot þus wil i bid þee. Loke on no wyse þat þou be wip-inne þi-self. &
 schortly wip-outyn þi-self wil I not þat þou be, ne 3it abouen, ne be-hynde,
 no on o side, ne on oper. ‘Wher þan,’ seist þou ‘shall I be? No3where, by
 þi tale!’ Now trewly þou seist wel ; for þere wolde I haue þee. For whi
 no3where bodely is euerywhere goostly (121).

Rather than risk using the word “in” the author would rather tell the contemplative to be nowhere, because nowhere bodily is everywhere spiritually. As in all instances of language, the author gives the reader an incarnation of a ghostly idea. Though here the physicality of the image is almost entirely due to the fact that it is spoken rather than the image itself representing something physical. The image demands denial of anything like a literal reading, and thus it negates itself upon affirmation, and the reader is left with the ghostly understanding that in contemplation one must be nowhere, so that one can spiritually be everywhere. The inability to have a literal interpretation ensures that the image will not be misunderstood. If one is nowhere bodily then one need not worry about distractions, and certainly one can not misinterpret this and actually try to be nowhere bodily. But if the author were to follow common practice and say to direct one’s worship inward, the contemplative could perhaps exert great effort attempting to make everything internal in a more physical sense, when the image the author is sculpting is intended for spiritual direction. There is also an important indication in the above passage of the author’s acceptance of cataphatic statements when he writes that if one says to worship God inside one’s self it is said “ful wel & ful trewly”. *The Cloud* author accepts other’s images, but he simply prefers to use more precise imagery that will not

allow his reader to go astray. Although his imagery is of the lowest type, he wants it to be precise, and as something that is an incarnation, he wants the image to be a good representation of that which it is incarnating.

As part of the incarnational act the author takes the time to consider how the physical part of imagery affects the spiritual meaning, and the relation between the two. This is evident in his treatment of the spiritual meaning of the prepositions used in the ascension of Christ. The author responds to the objection that the ascension was not just spiritual, but that Christ ascended bodily, giving evidence that heaven is upwards, and that therefore one should literally direct one's mind upwards during prayer. He says that it was not necessary for Christ to ascend in order to get closer to heaven, since up is no closer than any other direction, but that it is simply the most seemly:

Ensumple herof may be seen by þe assencion of oure Lorde ; for whan þe tyme statute was icomen þat him likyd to weende to his Fader bodely in his Manheed—þe whiche was neuer, ne neuer may be, absent in his Godheed—þan migtely, by þe vertewe of þe Spirit God, þe Manheed wip þe body folowed in onheed of Persone. Þe visibilite of þis was moste seemly & most acordyng to be upward (113).

Christ did not need to go up, and physically ascending did not actually assist him in getting to heaven, but he had to leave somehow, and, if he is going to leave, then ascending upwards seems to be the most meaningful action: the image Christ is physically creating, with his body rather than words, is a physical manifestation—an incarnation—of the spiritual event of his return to the Father. Similarly one might lift up

one's hands in prayer, but it is a bodily representation of a spiritual lifting. *The Cloud* author writes of such actions:

Neuerpeles it is needful to lifte up oure i3en & oure hondes bodely, as it were vnto 3one bodely heuen, in þe whiche þe elementes ben fastnid. I mene 3if we ben sterid of þe werk of oure spirit, & elles nou3t. For alle bodely þing is sogette vnto goostly þing & is reulid þerafter, & not a3ensward (112-113).

Since the spiritual is directing our prayer towards heaven, one may feel called by the work of one's spirit to raise one's hands and eyes physically as a bodily representation of what one is doing spiritually. But if one does this one must recognize that it is representing something spiritual, and the physical motions are not ends in themselves.

The image of the incarnation begins to present a new type of imagery: exegetical. These images differ from the others in that Christ actually did ascend, and their literal reading carries some truth to it. But the author is often not interested in what literally happened in the biblical passages he examines. Rather, he is interested in the spiritual significance of each passage, and in this sense, these images are also incarnations of a ghostly meaning much like the images that the author creates himself. And the author fully intends to analyze the passages as such, and even continue to deny the literal reading.

Finally, the author treats the biblical story of Moses's encounter with God, which produced the ark of the covenant. The author identifies two types of contemplatives: the first must toil long and hard before temporarily and rarely reaching the perfection of contemplation, perhaps only in occasional ravishings; the other kind seems to enter into

the perfection of contemplation whenever desired, whether walking, sitting, standing, kneeling, or anything else. The first he relates to Moses who had to toil to climb the mountain and enter the cloud where he was given the design of the ark. Aaron is like the second, who, because he was a priest, was able to see the ark whenever he pleased. The ark is the gift of contemplation:

& weel is þis grace & þis werk licnid to þat arke. For riȝt as in þat arke were contenid alle þe juelles & þe relikies of þe temple, riȝt so in þis lityl loue put ben contenid alle þ vetewes of mans soule, þe whiche is þe ghoostly temple of God (126).

If the cloud that the contemplative is to enter is the same cloud as Moses, and the contemplative is to have access to the ark of the covenant, then these biblical images can not be read literally since the ark is lost, and the contemplative is not at Sinai with Moses. Despite this, the cloud that Moses entered is the same cloud that the contemplative has been invited to enter throughout the entire work; the story from Exodus is the motivation for the author's choice of a cloud as the image of God in apophatic contemplation. So while Moses did literally ascend Sinai and enter into a cloud, one can not read this story literally if one seeks to apply it to one's life. Instead, one must take the image and read it metaphorically; one must put the physical aspect of the image behind the cloud of forgetting, and enter into a direct and spiritual interaction with the incarnational image that one is using.

III. Flesh Made Metaphor

1. The Non-Literal Reading of Christ

It is through apophatic denial that one can encounter God in the biblical images of Christ, leaving the literal reading behind and entering into an interaction with the image. *The Cloud* author illustrates this in his exegesis of the encounter of Mary and Martha. The author recounts the passage and provides a reading that presents Mary as an archetype of contemplatives:

In þe Gospel of Seinte Luke it is wretyn þat when oure Lourde was in þe hous of Martha hir sister, al þe tyme þat Martha maad hir besy aboute þe digtyng of his mete, Mary hir sister sat at his feet. & in heryng of his worde, sche beheeld not to þe besines of hir sister, þof al hir besines was ful good & ful holy, for it is þe first party of actyue liif ; ne 3it to the preciouste of his blessid body, ne to þe swete voyce & þe wordes of his manheed, þof al it be beter & holier, for it is þe secound party of actyue liif & þe first of contemplatye liif, bot to þe souereyneest wisdom of his Godheed lappid in þe derk wordes of his Manheed: þeder beheeld sche wiþ al þe loue of hir hert. For fro þens list hir not remowe for noþing þat sche saw ne herde spoken ne done aboute hur ; bot sat ful stille in hir body, wiþ many a swete priue & a lysty loue put upon þat hi3e cloude of vnknowyng bitwix hir & hir God (47).

While Martha is busy with the business of active life, Mary sits at the feet of the God-man. She is oblivious to everything going on around her, and, as the author later notes,

does not even defend herself against her sister's complaints. She has pushed all earthly things into the cloud of forgetting. This includes the humanity of Christ. Even though paying attention to Christ's blessed body, and sweet voice and words would be good, such activities are only the first part of the contemplative life, and Mary is engaged in the highest form of contemplation. She is only paying attention to the highest wisdom of his Godhead, which is wrapped in the dark words of his humanity. She is only interested in being lost in love, looking past the humanity of Christ, and onto The Divine.

Mary sets a precedent for the activity of apophatic contemplation. She is used as an exemplar of contemplation through the scriptural image of contemplating Christ's divinity—an image that is an incarnation of what the contemplative should be. The contemplative seeks to encounter The Divine, a connection between humanity and God that Christ made possible for everyone through the Passion and Resurrection, just as his literal presence made it possible for Mary. But like the cloud that Moses entered, one can not literally be with Mary at the feet of Christ. As one metaphorically enters the cloud on Sinai, one must also metaphorically sit at the feet of Christ. This ghostly reading of the text, that, like Mary, one can also sit at the feet of Christ, is the type of reading that the contemplative is interested in. When using these images to assist in contemplation the contemplative must leave behind the literal reading of the image in a denial, and enter into a completely spiritual reading of the text. Mary did sit at the feet of Christ, but the contemplative is interested in Mary as an example, and interested in Christ for his Divinity rather than his literal body. This is the connection between the image of God, Christ, as the Word, and images produced with actual words. Just as Mary sat at the feet of the image of God, and looked past the literal image and

contemplated the ghostly understanding of Christ's divinity, the contemplative is to look past any literal reading of the images that *The Cloud* author creates and contemplate the image's ghostly meaning. To say "look past the literal word, which is a bodily manifestation of a ghostly thing, and contemplate the ghostly meaning of that image", can equally be said of Christ and of the images created by *The Cloud* author. The relation between Christ and imaginative language makes sense of how *The Cloud of Unknowing* understands the legitimacy of repeatedly using imagery in an apophatic work, as well as how one is to approach the Incarnation of God within the apophatic tradition. One first accepts the initial affirmation, which is an image; one then denies the literal interpretation of the image, seeking instead the ghostly understanding; and lastly through this affirmation and denial one reaches an unknowing where a greater bond not within the power of the intellect is created between the contemplative and God.

The result is that in contemplation Christ must be read metaphorically. One can not literally sit at his feet, but one must sit at his feet; Christ's ascension did not literally help him get to Heaven, but was to symbolize his return to the Father, and the symbolic motion most appropriate for such an action is an upward motion. While Christ did literally walk the Earth, and his actual Passion and Resurrection did offer salvation to humanity, in order to have individual meaning to the contemplative seeking to encounter The Divine all encounters with the Word of God must be treated in the same manner as imaginative language. *The Cloud* author makes this clear in his treatment of the visions of Saint Martin and Saint Stephen:

For þat þat þei sey of Seynte Martyn & of Seinte Steuen, þor al þei soche
þinges wiþ þeire bodely izen, it was schewyd bot in myracle & in certefiing

of þing þat was goostly. For wite þei ryȝt wel þat Seynte Martyn mantel come neuer on Crystes owne body substancyaly, for no nede þat he had þerto to kepe him for coude ; bot by miracle & in licnes for alle us þat ben Abel to be sauid, þat ben onyd to þe body of Criste goostly. & who-so cloþeþ a pore man & doþ any oper good deed for Goddes loue, bodily or goostly, & þei schul be rewardid as substancyaly þefore as þei had done it to Cristes owne body. Pus seiþ hym-self in þe Gospel. ...Alle þe reuelacions þat euer sawe any man here in bodily licnes in þis liif, þei haue goostly bemenynges (107).

The author notes that Saint Martin's cloak was never actually on the physical body of Christ, as if Christ still needs protection from cold. Rather, Christ gave Saint Martin this vision as a miracle to back the understanding of the saying from the gospels that if one does a good deed for the lowest person, Christ counts it as an act of goodness to himself.⁷ *The Cloud* author confirms that all bodily visions are given for their spiritual meaning and edification. He offers the experience of Saint Stephen's martyrdom as another example:

sekirly he schewid him not vnto Seynte Steuen bodily in heuen fopi þat he wolde ȝeue us ensample þat we schuld in oure goostly werk loke bodely up into heuen. ȝif we mouȝt se hym as Seynte Steuen did, ouper stondyng, sitting, or liggyng. For how-so his body is in heuen—stongyng, sitting, of ligging—wote no man. & it nedip not to be wetyn... but þat he is pere as him list, & hap him in body as moste semely is vnto hym for to be.

⁷ Mt 25:32-46

For zif he schewid him liggyng, or stondyng, or sittyng, by reuelacion
 bodely to any creature in þis liif, it is done for sum goostly bemenyng, &
 not for no maner of bodely beryng þat he hap in heuen (109).

Any encounter that one has with Christ is not for any literal or bodily significance, but is all meant spiritually. The author goes on to explain that Christ standing signifies his readiness to help, just as when one says to a friend “I’ll stand by you”, that person is expressing a willingness to support the friend. Christ specifically showed this to Saint Stephen as a message to all martyrs to stay strong because he will be there to help them. The author concludes the section repeating “& þus maist þou se þat þees bodely schewynges were done by goostly bemenynges” (109). The significance of all physical showings is spiritual, just as the significance of all of the images that *The Cloud* author creates is spiritual. The author insists on this realization through denying the literal interpretation of images and favoring the spiritual.

In *The Cloud of Unknowing* the author is always careful in the transition from affirmation to denial, making sure that the denial of the bodily meaning is explicit, and that the spiritual meaning is what the contemplative is interested in. In the author’s later work, *Privy Counseling*, the author is more confident in his readers’ ability to understand that the meaning of all images is spiritual, and he makes the transition seamlessly. This passage from *Privy Counseling* makes clear that readings of Christ should be taken spiritually rather than literally in the contemplative work:

Take good gracyous God as he is, plat & pleyne as a plastre, & legge it to þi
 seek self as þou art. Or, zif I oþer-wise schal say, bere up þi seek self as
 þou arte & fonde for to touche bi desire good gracious God as he is, þe

touching of whome is eendeles helpe by witnes of þe womman in þe
 gospel: ... 'If I touche bot þe hemme of his cloping, I shal be saaf.' Miche
 more schalt þou þan be maad hole of þi seeknes for þis heizge heuenly
 touching of his owne beyng, him owne dere self (138-139).

Just as the woman in the gospel sought healing by touching the garment of Christ, the author directly relates this to a reaching out and touching of The Divine's self. Because one can no longer reach out to touch the physical Christ, one must reach out with desire to touch God. The denial is subtle, but it is there in the specification that one must reach out "bi desire" rather than with one's hand. All interactions with Christ must be understood spiritually. In the contemplative work the literal interpretation of visions, images, and Christ are all denied, and one is left only with a spiritual understanding that results from unknowing.

2. The Self Denial of Christ

To this point it has been illustrated how language is incarnational and imitates the process of negative theology consisting of affirmation, denial, and unknowing, as well as how *The Cloud* approaches images and Christ in the same manner. In support of the view that Christ must always be read metaphorically, this section will demonstrate how the life of Christ independently parallels the process of negative theology, much as *The Cloud* author's language use.

As with instances of language, the affirmation of Christ is through an incarnational act—more specifically, the Incarnation. In the Incarnation The Divine made an affirmation about The Divine. The affirmation was an image in the form of a human. The image was a walking talking affirmation that was not just a representation of The

Divine, but an incarnation that was an actual physical instantiation of The Divine. This is the first step in the process of negative theology. It is also the key to cataphatic theology. In affirmative theology Christ is the surest way that one can know anything about God. As Pseudo-Dionysius explains, the apophatic denial does not do away with the initial affirmation, the Incarnation is also important to negative theology. It remains true that the literal Christ made unification with The Divine possible through salvation. But in the work of contemplation, one must deny the literal Christ, and sit at his feet contemplating his divinity rather than attending to his humanity.

The second step in the apophatic process is the denial, where one denies the affirmation in order to reach the third step of a state of unknowing and a closer proximity to God. The denial must not do away with the initial affirmation, but show that there is more to it than one thought—it can not contain the whole truth. Christ exhibits his self denial through his Passion, and Resurrection. (By which I do not mean self-denial, but performing an apophatic denial of himself.) The Passion and Resurrection form the moment when the literal interpretation of Christ is denied. One can no longer see the Nazarene as a mere human—he has died, and overcome death. The bodily presence of Jesus is denied in the Passion; in the Resurrection one sees that what is left is the spiritual interpretation of Jesus as the Christ. Like *The Cloud* author's images, the literal interpretation is restricted to bring out the spiritual understanding of the image. The one difference is that the images *The Cloud* author creates are made of words, whereas this image—Christ, the Word—is made of flesh.

The final step of the apophatic reading of Christ's life is entering into unknowing. After the affirmation and denial, one should be left with a deeper connection to God.

Christ fulfills this at Pentecost, by keeping his promise of sending the Paraclete. The reception of the Holy Spirit is the stage of unknowing, and the unification with The Divine that one strives for in contemplation. The affirmation was made in the incarnation, and through the denial of the Passion and Resurrection the literal presence of Christ had to be removed, but just as the unknowing of contemplation does not leave the contemplative a fool who knows nothing, the absence of Christ does not leave the earthly church empty, but rather more full thanks to the Holy Spirit.

Within Christianity the preparation and celebration of these important events in the life of Christ form the entire basis of the Christian liturgical year. The year begins with Advent and Christmas, celebrating the affirmation made through the Incarnation. After a brief period come the seasons of Lent and Easter, mourning the death and celebrating the resurrection of Christ. This double natured state of mourning and celebrating is appropriate in representing the apophatic denial. One is losing the literal body of Christ, and *The Cloud* author repeatedly reminds his audience that the body and literal presence of Christ is a good thing not to be scorned. But his body is not part of the work of the contemplative. On Good Friday Christians confront the pain of leaving the physical Christ behind. But like the contemplative, one looks forward to the ultimate result of the denial, which will bring one closer to God than the affirmation could have. This is fulfilled in the Easter Celebration. Because Christ overcame death, one begins to see the advantage that comes from the denial as the resurrection creates the possibility of eternal life for all. Lastly the Easter season ends with Pentecost, where the Holy Spirit enters the life of the Christian community as a way to remain spiritually connected to God in the absence of the bodily Christ. Here the reception of the Holy Spirit is the

stage of unknowing, where one is left with a denial of the physical interpretation of the image—the bodily form of Christ—and in that denial enters a completely spiritual connection. This is also the point where the major period of the liturgical year known as Ordinary Time begins. The name ‘ordinary’ implies that it is the normal routine of things, which fits well with the fact that in a literal sense the Christian is now living in a time where the spiritual presence in his or her life is the Holy Spirit as opposed to the physical presence of Christ. Ordinary Time is where one functions in unknowing, left with a denial of the physical and an immersion in The Spirit.

These major events in the life of Christ—Incarnation; Passion, and Resurrection; and the arrival of the Holy Spirit—are at the foundation of important Christian doctrines, as well as the holidays that define the liturgical year. It is through these events that one sees how the life of Christ, like the use of imagery in *The Cloud*, participates in the pattern of negative theology. When viewed in conjunction with how *The Cloud* instructs one to treat imagery and Christ, it becomes apparent that the key to understanding *The Cloud* author’s use of imagery, as well as the role he assigns to Christ in contemplation, are found in each other.

IV. Conclusion

The independent evidence that both *The Cloud* author’s use of imagery and the life of Christ mirror the process of apophatic negation, along with the demonstration that *The Cloud of Unknowing* expects the contemplative to approach imagery and Christ in a similar manner of looking past the literal word/Word and onto the spiritual significance, creates a coherent explanation of *The Cloud* author’s use of imaginative language as well as the role of the God-man in negative theology.

Besides adequately explaining language use in *The Cloud*, and how language relates to the metaphor of Christ as The Word, a chief benefit of the incarnational theory of language is that one need not abandon what other scholars have said. The playful nature of some of *The Cloud's* images is undeniable, and it remains; the author does take great care to reaffirm the mutual dignity of both the physical and spiritual, and acknowledges that language is by necessity physical; and the author certainly creates images that are paradoxical. None of this has to be left behind under the incarnational view.

A final consideration is that one can not neglect the fact that this paper is itself a speech act, and that language as an incarnation is itself an image. In addition to being an image, this paper's meaning is at least partially ghostly. While all language is physical and therefore similar to the Incarnation of Christ, the primary significance of language's incarnational nature is that it creates a connection between Christ and speech acts. It shows how Christ affects *The Cloud* author's view of language, and how his view of language affects his understanding of Christ. Because of this, the literal interpretation of language being incarnational must be denied, though without removing the initial affirmation. One must first accept the affirmation that language is incarnational. Then, one must deny it due to its physical nature, and through this denial attempt to realize that this physical speech act is insufficient in understanding what the metaphor of Christ as the Word, or how his status as the Word relates to apophatic theology's avoidance of language. After an apophatic denial of the image of language as incarnational one is left with knowing its relevance through unknowing.

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IV.