"Magnifying God Manyfolde": James Ryman's Practice of Repetition

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James Ryman, a Franciscan friar at Canterbury in the late fifteenth century, is now little more than a name and a body of work. There are two mentions of him in the Archbishop's register, which records him serving as an acolyte in Christ Church Cathedral on March 30, 1476, and as subdeacon on September 21, 1476, but his existence is otherwise documented only by an extensive collection of religious poems.[1] All but three of these survive together in a single manuscript, Cambridge, University Library, MS Ee.1.12, whose colophon is dated 1492.[2] Scholarship is almost equally sparse, consisting of a commentary to the only edition of his work, published in the 1890s, and a small number of articles that together establish Ryman as a poet with strong interests in macaronic writing and in the carol form, as well as an intense devotional interest in Mary.[3] These are the exceptions, however: the

1. See Karl Reichl, "James Ryman's Lyrics and the Ryman Manuscript: A Reappraisal," in *Bookmarks from the Past: Studies in Early English Language and Literature in Honour of Helmut Gnauss*, ed. Lucia Kornexl and Ursula Lenker (Frankfurt-am-Main: Peter Lang, 2003), 195–227.

2. The manuscript has been edited as "Die Gedichte des Franziskaners Jakob Ryman," ed. Julius Zupitza, *Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen* 89 (1892): 167–338. Unless otherwise specified, all quotations are taken from this edition; it includes neither titles nor line numbers, so citation is by poem number, stanza number, and line(s) within the stanza. For three poems identified as Ryman's that are not included in this manuscript, see Richard Beadle and Anthony Smith, "A Carol by James Ryman in the Holkham Archives," *Review of English Studies* 71, no. 302 (November 2020): 850–66.

3. See Susanna Fein, "John Audelay and James Ryman," in *A Companion to Fifteenth-Century Poetry*, ed. Julia Boffey and A. S. G. Edwards (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2013), 127–41; John C. Hirsh, "Christian Poetics and Orthodox Practice: Meaning and Implication in Six Carols by James Ryman, O.F.M.," in *Medieval Poetics and Social Practice: Responding to the Work of Penn R. Szittya*, ed. Seeta Chaganti (Fordham University Press, 2012), 53–71; David L. Jeffrey, "James Ryman and the Fifteenth-Century Carol," in *Fifteenth-Century Studies*, ed. Robert F. Yeager (Hamden, CT: Archon, 1984), 303–20; Reichl, "Ryman's Lyrics"; compare also A. S. G. Edwards, "Poetic Language in the Fifteenth Century," in *A Companion to Medieval Poetry*, ed. Corinne Saunders (Oxford: Blackwell, 2010), 531–32. Zuptiza's commentary

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relative neglect of Ryman's writing seems tacitly to support a recent assessment of his writing as "extremely repetitive, seemingly banal in quality, endless in quantity, and metrically uninventive."[4] Yet Ryman's work is unusual in being an extensive corpus of poems attributable to a single author, and hence for the opportunity it offers to examine an individual's practice in detail. Paying close attention to both the text and the manuscript of Ryman's poems, this article explores how they might most profitably be read. First, it contrasts Ryman's repetitions with those of his contemporaries, positing that his have been experienced as problematic because they do not necessarily respond to attempts to link form with content. Second, by demonstrating how his use of repetition builds on established mnemonic techniques, it shows that such repetitions are not failures of technical skill but traces of his composition process, in which repeated words and phrases are used as mental building blocks. It thus proposes a new way of reading his work, with a focus on praxis rather than product; it finally suggests that such an approach both informs and is informed by recent debates around the critical usefulness of "lyric" as a genre.

READING REPETITION

Even within individual poems, repetition is a hallmark of Ryman's work. His form of preference is the carol, in which the refrain line at the end of each stanza and the burden that repeats between stanzas cumulatively establish a recursive movement, so that there is no reading forward without reference back.[5] Many of his burdens are liturgical, while those poems that are not in carol form are typically prefaced by a rubric consisting of between two and four lines of liturgical Latin, which is translated in the first stanza. Burdens and rubrics alike thus establish Ryman's work as responsive and relational; they serve as grounds for his development of and variation on a series of recurrent themes, mostly notably the Annunciation, the Virgin Birth, and Christ's redemption of mankind. Yet it is not only Ryman's subject matter that repeats across poems. He also returns to the same phrases and collocations. Identical burdens and refrains, both Latin and

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was published in multiple parts as "Anmerkungen zu Jakob Rymans Gedichten," *Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen* 93 (1894), pt. 1: 282–338, pt. 2: 369–98; *Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen* 94 (1895), pt. 3: 161–206, pt. 4: 389–420; *Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen* 95 (1896), pt. 5: 259–90, pt. 6: 385–406; *Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen* 96 (1896), pt. 7: 157–78, pt. 8: 311–30; *Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen* 97 (1897), pt. 9: 129–53.

4. Anonymous peer reviewer for *Modern Philology* of a previous version of this article, 2023. I am grateful to both reviewers for their constructive criticism and helpful suggestions.

5. For burdens, see R. L. Greene, *The Early English Carols*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), clx–clxxii.

English, recur throughout his work, as do lines from within the body of his stanzas. He thus treats lines of his own composition (whether used as burdens and refrains or elsewhere in the poems) as equivalent to liturgical tags—equivalent, that is, to what David Lawton calls "public interiorities": "pieces of language . . . that already exist before they are revoiced by a new user."[6]

One obvious hypothesis to account for such extensive repetition is that Ryman revised his work, and that lines recur in consequence of his attempts to improve and perfect it. The first folio of the manuscript, which contains five variant translations of the rubric to poem 29 as well as two alternative versions of the first stanza of poem 8, indicates that Ryman did indeed revise.[7] Yet the construction of the manuscript as a whole suggests that the situation is more complicated. It is copied in two main hands, known as Hand B and Hand C. Hand C, which is now generally accepted as Ryman's own, is responsible for the greater part of the manuscript; it is a neat and legible hand that provides tidy copies of poems 1–110, consistently differentiating rubrics and burdens from the rest of the text and with few if any cancellations.[8] This part of the manuscript concludes with the colophon "liber ympnorum et canticorum, quem composuit frater Iacobus Ryman . . . anno domini millesimo cccc. lxxxxij" (a book of hymns and songs which brother James Ryman composed in the year of Our Lord 1492).[9] But although the formal *mise-en-page* and the presence of the colophon imply that the Hand C poems should be considered as a complete body of work, they are bookended by material copied in the less formal Hand B: not only the variant stanzas on the first folio, but also fifty-four complete poems on folios 3–10 and 80–104.

Just as the variant stanzas appear to be draft material, at first sight it seems that the complete poems supplied by Hand B are as well. Many of them are closely related to poems copied in Hand C; they respond to the same rubrics, share burdens, and in some cases contain identical lines and even stanzas. However, the Hand B poems do not begin in a new quire, and this means that they could not have been copied prior to the Hand C poems and bound together with them at a later date. Instead, they must

6. David Lawton, *Voice in Later Medieval Literature: Public Interiorities* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 8.

7. See Reichl, "Ryman's Lyrics," 199–205; Daniel Wakelin, *Scribal Correction and Literary Craft: English Manuscripts, 1375–1510* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 298–301; Daniel Wakelin, "Les autographes littéraires et les écritures ordinaires en Angleterre à la fin du Moyen Age," *Genesis* 55 (2022): 170.

8. For a full description of the manuscript, including discussion of the hands, see Reichl, "Ryman's Lyrics," 196–98.

9. Cambridge, University Library, MS Ee.1.12, fol. 80r. All translations of Ryman's Latin are my own.

have been copied for the specific purpose of being added to the Hand C material. This represents a much more time-consuming and active way of bringing together the multiple versions of Ryman's poems than a decision to bind together preexisting quires: it demonstrates a strong desire for completeness. If Daniel Wakelin is correct to argue that Hand B as well as Hand C is Ryman's own, the author himself was responsible for supplementing "finished" work with further poems on identical subjects, many of which take their cue from the same scriptural or liturgical tags, in a process of accreting rather than revising.[10] Even if Hand B is not Ryman's, the structure of the manuscript suggests that he was working in a context that privileged supplementation over substitution.

The first three poems copied in Hand C give an indication of how this works in practice. These are carols, written in quatrains where the final line of each stanza is a Latin refrain. In poem 1, this line is "Alma redemptoris mater" (mother of the redeemer); in poems 2 and 3, "Concipies Emanuel" (you shall conceive Emmanuel).[11] All three carols follow Luke 1:26–38, but the resemblances between them go far beyond what is attributable to their shared source. To a very large extent, they consist of identical or near-identical lines arranged in slightly different patterns.[12] Thus, the first stanza of poem 1 is repeated almost verbatim in poem 2. In the former we find:

> The aungell seyde of high degree:
> "Haile, full of grace: god is with the;
> Of alle women blessed thou bee."
> (1.1.1–3)

In the following poem, the only substantive difference is that "Crist" is substituted for "god" in the second line. Even when Ryman's use of different burdens necessitates further alterations within a stanza, these are kept to a minimum. For example, in poem 1, the moment of Annunciation is described:

> The aungell seide: "O lady free,
> The holy goost shalle light in thee;
> Be whome Criste shalle conceyved be,
> *Alma redemptoris mater.*"
> (1.8.1–4)

In poem 2, this becomes

> "Drede not," he seide, that aungell bright;
> "The holygoost in the shalle light,

10. Wakelin, *Scribal Correction*, 298.
11. See further Zupitza, "Anmerkungen," pt. 1: 281.
12. See further Zupitza, "Anmerkungen," pt. 1: 288–92, 298.

> And thurgh vertu of god almyght
> *Concipies Emanuel.*"
>
> (2.7.1–4)

Because poem 2 refers to Christ's conception in its refrain, for it also to include the third line of the stanza as it appears in poem 1 ("By whome Criste shalle conceyved be") would be redundant. Ryman avoids this by substituting the line "And thurgh vertu of god almyght"—which in turn requires that the rhyme words of the previous lines be altered. He does so with great economy, however, changing only the word order in the second line, and only word order and adjectives in the first. Even with poem 3, whose rhyme scheme differs from the two previous poems, changes are kept to a minimum. Because it consists not of three monorhymed English lines and an unrhymed Latin refrain, but rhymes *abab*, the second line of each stanza is required to rhyme with "Emmanuel" and necessarily differs from poem 1. But wherever possible the new rhyme is achieved simply by switching the component clauses of the line, or by varying the position of lines within a stanza; to give just one example, the opening line of poem 3 corresponds not to the first but to the second line of the equivalent stanza in poem 1, deferring reference to the angel in order to provide the rhyme word "Gabriell" for the refrain's "Emanuel":

> "Hayle, full of grace: Christe is with the,"
> To Mary seide aungel Gabriell.
> "Of alle women blessed thou be!
> *Concipies Emanuel.*"
>
> (3.1.1–4)

These are just a very few indicative examples of Ryman's recycling of lines: not only are there numerous further examples within these three poems, but many of the same lines are repeated again in Hand C poems 86, 87, and 103, and Hand B poems 112–16 (one of which, 112, is an almost verbatim reproduction of poem 1, lacking only its two final stanzas).[13] Moreover, this is just one of several clusters of poems that share multiple lines, while many more lines repeat individually: merely the listing of each repetition forms a substantial part of the commentary in the sole edition of Ryman's poems. Yet even this handful of examples shows how unfamiliar some of Ryman's repetitions are. Repetition is typically conceptualized as a formal device that activates the reader's memory, as the return of a particular form of words invites comparison with its previous occurrences, creating a play of

13. For a comprehensive list of correspondences, see Zupitza, "Anmerkungen," pt. 1: 281–99, pt. 6: 396–99, and pt. 8: 311–16.

sameness and difference.[14] This position is neatly summarized by Krystyna Mazur: "Even as repetition may effect poetic closure and provide the poem with a regular pattern, exact repetition is impossible: the simple fact of temporal discontinuity between repeated elements leads to a difference in their functions, via the accumulation of significance and recontextualization."[15]

Such significant repetition is readily apparent in other late medieval poetic texts. In the late fourteenth-century dream vision *Pearl*, for example, the use of concatenation—repetition of the same word or phrase at the beginning and end of the stanzas in each of its twenty sections—creates a constant series of shifts in meaning that recreates for the reader the dreamer's experience of the incompatibility of human and divine frames of reference.[16] Due to its extensive use of homonyms and near homonyms, such as "maskelez" (spotless) and "makelez" (peerless), as well as familiar terms such as "cortaysye," whose repetition removes them from their usual context, Mazur's "accumulation" and "recontextualization" are very much to the fore in the poem. They serve, however, to demonstrate the limits of recontextualization and thus also of human language as a vehicle for apprehending God. A comparably intimate relationship between form and content is found in the carols of the period. John Hollander argues that, far from being meaningful, the burdens of carols constitute "redundant repetition" that marks the suspension of meaning.[17] Yet their introduction of a nonnarrative time frame means that, in combination with refrain, they exemplify Susannah Brietz Monta's perception that "repeated refrains pace the unfolding of poems in time, and yet even as they mark linear time they also frustrate it: they bring the immediate past of reading (or hearing) into the present. . . . Repeated words and forms (as in genres or rituals) lead us to expect what has not yet arrived and to measure what we hear, perform, or read alongside a past made present again."[18] In carols with English refrains and burdens, the simple fact of repetition fosters awareness of such doubleness. Where they take the form of liturgical quotations, this is supplemented by their invocation of a time that is not that of reading or performance; their

14. See, e.g., Derek Attridge, "The Movement of Meaning: Phrasing and Repetition in English Poetry," in *Repetition*, ed. Andreas Fischer (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1994), 61–83; John Hollander, "Breaking into Song: Some Notes on Refrain," in *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism*, ed. Chaviva Hošek and Patricia Parker (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 73–89, and compare his *The Figure of Echo: A Mode of Allusion in Milton and After* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).

15. Krystyna Mazur, "Repetition," in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Roland Greene, 4th ed. (Princeton University Press, 2017).

16. See, e.g., Ad Putter, *An Introduction to the Gawain Poet*, 2nd ed. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 147–98.

17. Hollander, "Breaking into Song," 75.

18. Susannah Brietz Monta, "Repetition," in *The Cambridge Companion to Religion and Literature*, ed. Susan M. Fetch (Cambridge University Press, 2016), 133.

repetition collapses the distinction between linear human and permanent Christian time, rendering the poem in which they occur a microcosm of timelessness of Christian faith.[19]

Within individual poems, Ryman's own burdens and refrains also function in this way. For example, in poem 1 the unvarying refrain line "Alma redemptoris mater" punctuates the account of the Annunciation with a reminder of Mary's timeless position as mother of Christ; because the burden "Alma redemptoris mater, / Quem de celis misit pater" (whom the Father sent from heaven), also repeats the refrain, the two together suspend the linear progression of time within the poem, reemphasizing that Mary is mother of Christ even before the moment of conception. In poems 2 and 3 the precise wording of the refrain varies between "Concipies Emanuel," "Cui nomen Emanuel" (whose name is Emmanuel), and "Vt pariam Emanuel" (so that I shall bear the Emmanuel), yet this only emphasizes further the unvarying return of Christ at the end of the line, which is then reaffirmed by the burden's assertion "Inquit Marie Gabriell: / 'Concipies Emanuel'" (Gabriel said to Mary / You shall conceive the Emmanuel). In poem 3, the final refrain line introduces a further variation, "Nunc natus Emanuel" (now the Emmanuel is born), which brings the account of an event from scripture explicitly into the present day. Implying a contrast between the progression of the carol in real time and the expression of devotion to which it repeatedly returns, this reinforces the effect achieved in the poem's burden, where the final line it shares with poem 2 is prefaced by two lines of celebratory "nowels." Both burden and refrain foster awareness of the reading process as simultaneously a present act and an act of remembering.

In contrast, Ryman's sporadic repetition of single lines across multiple poems does not appear meaningfully to marry form and content. In part, this is because of the sheer scale of his work: such repetitions occur unpredictably across a corpus of 165 poems. But scale does not fully account for the problem. Even in a text as substantive as *Piers Plowman*, where repetitions also occur sporadically throughout the text rather than in identifiable formal patterns, Eleanor Johnson has demonstrated that the recurrence of the word "reddere" creates an effect analogous to "the dual gesture of a refrain, which at once asserts a known, familiar place and enacts that place's inaccessibility or unreliability," while Christopher Cannon has made a comparable case with reference to repetition in *King Horn*.[20] These are single

19. See further Jane Griffiths, "'This Word in Latyn': Translation and Untranslatability in Late Medieval Religious Macaronic Lyrics," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 123, no. 4 (July 2024): 467–95.

20. Eleanor Johnson, "*Reddere* and Refrain: A Meditation on Poetic Procedure in *Piers Plowman*," *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 30 (2016): 9; Christopher Cannon, "Lyric Romance,"

texts, of course, and Ryman's repetitions are experienced as problematic not within individual poems but when his writing is considered in its totality. Yet the work of the near-contemporary cleric-poet John Audelay indicates that it is possible to deploy repetition effectively across multiple poems. Like Ryman, Audelay was closely associated with the copying of the manuscript that contains his works, and like Ryman, he repeats words, phrases, and sequences of lines across separate poems.[21] But unlike Ryman's, Audelay's repetitions perform perceptible structural work. The poems in his manuscript are divided into a number of discrete sections, and in each he uses a series of repeated exclamations and injunctions. The most conspicuous of these occur in the long sequence the *Counsel of Conscience*. Here, the instruction "have this in mind" recurs at irregular intervals throughout, while the imperative "Mervel ye not of this makyng" both introduces a stanza that repeatedly signals the conclusion of individual poems within the sequence, and also marks the conclusion of the *Counsel* as a whole.[22] The repeated lines thus make explicit claims on the reader's attention, and they repay it by significant variation. Each of the concluding stanzas ends by naming Audelay as author, but between their repeated beginnings and endings Audelay claims various sources for his "making," including God the Father, the Holy Ghost, and St. Anselm. Theoretically, such variation allows him to make an orchestrated and cumulative claim to authority. Practically, it does so because the stanzas' nonidentical twinning invites comparison between them: drawing attention to the multiple guarantors of Audelay's writing, it encourages readers to notice and make sense of both similarities and differences. In Ryman's work, however, while an encounter with one of his numerous repeated lines is likely to prompt the recollection "he has said this before," in the absence of any clear principle governing his repetitions, it is difficult to work out their significance, or even whether there is any significance at all.

It is because many of Ryman's repetitions frustrate attempts to link form with content that his work has been judged as wanting in inventiveness and technical skill. Yet such assessments may reflect a mistaken approach to his writing, rather than flaws in the writing itself. In contrast to the repetitions in Audelay's work and in other carols, as well as those of his own burdens and refrains, Ryman's repetition of lines across multiple poems may not

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in *What Kind of a Thing Is a Middle English Lyric?*, ed. Cristina Maria Cervone and Nicholas Watson (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022), 88–105.

21. For Audelay's work, see *John the Blind Audelay: Poems and Carols*, ed. Susanna Fein (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2009).

22. See Susanna Fein, "Good Ends in the Audelay Manuscript," *Yearbook of English Studies* 33 (2003): 97–119; compare Christiania Whitehead, "Religious Lyrics and Carols," in *The Oxford History of Poetry in English*, vol. 3, *Medieval Poetry, 1400–1500*, ed. Julia Boffey and A. S. G. Edwards (Oxford University Press, 2023), 202.

have been intended for effect, nor even to be noticed by those who encounter his work. This is not to suggest that he did not write for an audience. As a Franciscan, he was working in a long tradition of using poetry to foster affectivity, and his habitual use of the carol form suggests a particular, doctrinally motivated interest in reception.[23] As Kathleen Palti has argued, it is a form that often serves community-building ends, and that is precisely what we see in Ryman's carols.[24] The inclusion of musical notation at several points in the manuscript suggests that his poems were written with performance in mind, and many of his burdens frame their repeating lines so as explicitly to invite participation. For example, in all but two of his eighteen carols whose burden concludes "Te deum laudamus" (we praise you God), the preceding line indicates that they are to be performed: "[Now] syng we [alle] thys tyme þus," "Dulciter pangamus" (we sing sweetly), "Te patrem [rite] uocamus" (we [rightly] call you Father) or "Alpha et .oo. quem vocamus" (whom we call alpha and omega).[25] These burdens thus contribute to the collapse of the distinction between human and divine time, just as those in poems 1–3 do, implying that the word of God is timeless. In addition, they serve as speech acts, or song acts, that perform what they describe.[26]

Yet despite such indications that individual poems were written to be disseminated and sung, they may not have been intended to be read together as a complete body of work. The three carols of Ryman's that have survived outside of the Cambridge manuscript are each witnessed singly, separated not only from other poems of Ryman's, but from other poems of any kind—and this is a much more typical form of dissemination of short poems than a single-author manuscript.[27] Even where such poems are grouped together,

23. See further Hirsh, "Christian Poetics"; compare David L. Jeffrey, *The Early English Lyric and Franciscan Spirituality* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975).

24. Kathleen Palti, "An Unpublished Fifteenth-Century Carol Collection: Oxford, Lincoln College MS Lat. 141," *Medium Aevum* 77, no. 2 (2008): 272.

25. For music in Ryman's manuscript, see further Hirsh, "Christian Poetics"; and Reichl, "Ryman's Lyrics." The line "[Now] syng we [alle] this tyme þus" appears in Hand C poem 75 and Hand B poems 126, 128–31; "*Dulciter pangamus*" in Hand C poems 73 and 76 and Hand B poems 124, 133–35; the "*Te patrem*" line in Hand C poem 71 and Hand B poems 125, 134; "*Alpha et o*" in Hand C poems 72 and 74 and Hand B poem 127. In addition, Hand B poems 136 and 137 contain the closely related burden "Te deum laudamus, / Te deum confitemur" (we acknowledge you God). In the recently discovered carol of Ryman's, the *Te deum* burden is also introduced with a line that encourages performance: "On hym synge we myrth and melody" (see Beadle and Smith, "Carol," 856).

26. Compare Palti, "Unpublished Fifteenth-Century Carol Collection"; Daniel Wakelin, "The Carol in Writing: Three Anthologies from Fifteenth-Century Norfolk," *Journal of the Early Book Society* 9 (2006): 37; for a qualification of this view, see Lisa Colton and Louise McInnes, "High or Low? Medieval English Carols as Part of Vernacular Culture, 1380–1450," in *Vernacular Aesthetics in the Later Middle Ages: Politics, Performativity, and Reception*, ed. Katharine W. Jager (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 134.

27. See Cervone and Watson, editors' introduction to *What Kind of a Thing*, 9–11.

the manuscripts in which they are found generally take the form of compilations of religious instructive material.[28] Elsewhere, they tend to be recorded individually on flyleaves or on blank spaces in manuscripts; the recently discovered Ryman carol in a Norfolk commonplace book is a case in point.[29] Thus, while the clear statement of Ryman's authorship in the Cambridge manuscript suggests that it does purposefully gather together his poems, it may nonetheless be intended not for consecutive reading but rather as a compendium of material available for reuse.[30]

If this is the case, to read Ryman's repetitions for cumulative effect is to read with the wrong kinds of question in mind. In what follows, I shall suggest that rather than reading Ryman's repetitions across poems as a form of patterning with designs upon the reader, it is more productive to think of them as traces of his composition process: as signs of making, rather than signs of meaning.[31] One of the key arguments made by Derek Attridge in *The Singularity of Literature* is helpful here. Challenging the conventional assumption that, in poetry, "sound echoes sense, form enacts meaning," Attridge instead proposes that what is "said" in literary texts has no existence prior to the act of writing, and that it is not separable from the precise terms in which it is phrased. He posits that the writing mind works at the very limits of what it is possible to express, articulating an "otherness" that is "outside the horizon provided by the culture for thinking, understanding, imagining, feeling, perceiving."[32] On the face of it, this is a long way from Ryman's repetition of the same lines in multiple poems, which seems precisely to avoid alterity. Yet as Attridge demonstrates, "it is often through the old that otherness makes itself felt."[33] The creative process that he envisages as bringing such otherness into being is one of staging and restaging the materials to which the mind has access. In Ryman's case, that process consists of his constant reframing of series of set phrases. This makes manifest a negotiation between voice and language of the kind described by Mutlu Blasing. Arguing that "poetry is a cultural institution dedicated to remembering and displaying the emotionally and historically charged materiality of language,"

28. See Whitehead, "Religious Lyrics," 203–4.

29. See Beadle and Smith, "Carol," 852, 857.

30. In contrast, Hirsh argues that Ryman's carols are best read "in groups, as they were sung, and not singly, as if they were lyrics" ("Christian Poetics," 71); however, this also involves excerpting rather than engaging with Ryman's work in its totality.

31. Among other late medieval poets, the one whose practice comes closest to Ryman's is his near-contemporary John Skelton, who similarly depends on repetition as a means of finding out subject matter. See further Jane Griffiths, "Parrot's Poetics: Fragmentation, Theory and Practice in Skelton's Writing," Oxford Handbook Topics in Literature, 2015, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935338.013.62.

32. Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2017), 151, 26–27.

33. Attridge, *Singularity of Literature*, 27, and compare 152.

she observes: "In the form of a poem the prescriptive shape of the language itself becomes audible, and the "voice" [of the poet] is heard in and as its manner of submission to the constraints of a prescriptive code."[34] As the remainder of this article demonstrates, Ryman's work witnesses precisely such a negotiation between voice and available language, in which his repeated phrases serve as the material that is staged.

WRITING REPETITION

Ryman's poem 57 provides a good way into thinking about his writing process. Of all his poems, this most clearly indicates his understanding of words and phrases as having the capacity to communicate not simply as vehicles of meaning, but in ways that are literally material. Addressed to God, it is one of many of to take the form of apostrophe, but it is unusual in that the apostrophe is thematized through the burden "O, o, o, o, o, o, o, o, / *O deus sine termino*" (Oh God without end) and through the subsequent play on various potential significations of "O" in the first four stanzas:[35]

> O fader withoute begynnyng,
> O sonne and holigoost also,
> O iij. and one without ending,
> *O deus sine termino*;
>
> O iij. persones in one vnyte
> Beyng but one god and nomoo,
> One in substance, essens and myght,
> *O deus sine termino*;
>
> O, whiche hast made bothe day and nyght,
> Heven and erthe rounde like an O
> By thy wisdom and endeles nyght,
> *O deus sine termino*;
>
> O, whiche of nought althing has wrought,
> *O verbum in principio* (Oh word in the beginning),
> O, without whom is wrought right nought,
> *O deus sine termino.*
>
> (1–16)

34. Mutlu Blasing, *Lyric Poetry: The Pain and the Pleasure of Words* (Princeton University Press, 2007), 3, 5.

35. The O apostrophe is used systematically in Hand C poems 5, 6, 11, 35, 47, 107, 108, and Hand B poems 131, 139, 140; it also occurs less systematically (but nonetheless extensively) in Hand C poems 4, 7, 72–74, 76, 80 and Hand B poems 120, 121, 124, 125, 127, 152–61 and introduces lines in the burdens of Hand C poem 8 and Hand B poem 160.

The poem thus paranomasially responds to the paradox that is the nature of God. Its first line ends in the assertion that he is "withoute begynnyng," while its last states that he is without ending: formally, it conspicuously attempts to mirror God's timelessness. The play on "without begynnyng" and "sine termino" is repeated in more material form in the second stanza, whose line "Beyng but one god and nomoo" implies a limit on God that is vehemently denied by the refrain's reassertion that he is "sine termino." To be one "and nomoo," in these circumstances, is a condition not of limitation, but of limitless power—and this is emphasized by the way the *-o* rhyme of "nomoo" itself aurally anticipates the ending of the word "termino," used in a phrase that speaks to the absence of ending. In each of these ways, the form of the poem constitutes a form of meditation.

Yet the most conspicuous form of paranomasia in the poem is not aural but visual, as the insistent repetition of the initial *O* renders the graphs on the manuscript page inextricable from the meaning of the poem. The extraliteral significance attributed to the O graph in the first stanza is developed further as the poem goes on: in the third stanza, in the line "Heven and erthe rounde like an O," the letter *O* comes to symbolize the world itself, while in the fourth the reference to "right nought" recalls the O graph in its alternative sense of zero, nothing. In the fourth stanza, too, the line "O verbum in principio" repeats the refrain's use of *O* as both the first and the last letter, containing everything that comes between, while the way the latter provides the rhyme with the "sine termino" of the refrain reaffirms it as the graph that symbolizes both all of God's creation and his ongoing act of creation. Moreover, because the first six stanzas consist of a single invocation, with the prayer for forgiveness to which they serve as apostrophe appearing only in the penultimate stanza, the O itself becomes an all-encompassing graph. The structure of this poem thus has an effect equivalent to an idiosyncratic letter form in Hand B's copy of poem 160 in the Cambridge manuscript. Here, in one instance of the burden "O clemens O pia / O dulcis Maria" (Oh merciful, oh pious, oh sweet Mary), the *M* of Maria is formed in such a way that at first sight it looks like another *O*: the first half of it is identical to the three capital *O*s that precede it, and it is only on discovering that the second half is not a meaningful graph and realizing that the word is "Maria" that it can visually be resolved into the first half of the capital *M* (fig. 1). The complex graph activates an extratextual meaning that is latent in each of the O apostrophes both in poem 57 and elsewhere in Ryman's work. Collapsing the space on the page between the invocation of Mary and the first letter of her name, it reflects her unique position as intercessor for mankind, at once part of the humanity that appeals to her and possessed of the power to grant their requests.

Such conspicuously material paranomasia is sufficiently unusual in Ryman's work that to emphasize it may be to risk the kind of misreading

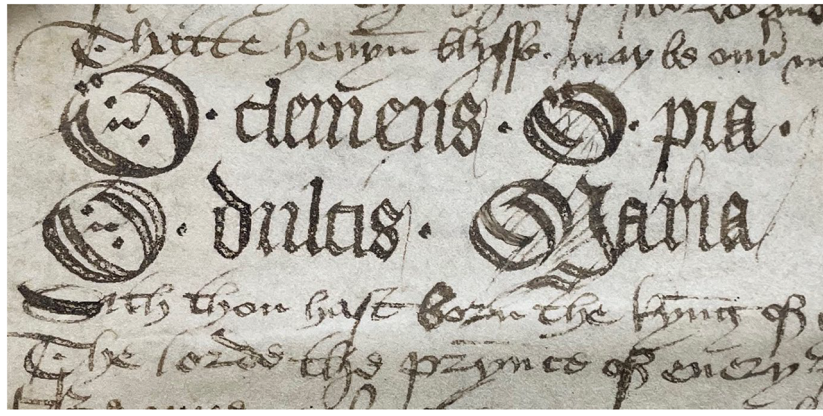

Figure 1. Cambridge, University Library, MS Ee.1.12, fol. 7v (detail). Courtesy of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.

that both Daniel Wakelin and Adam Smyth have identified in their discussions of the material turn in literary studies—namely, that attention will be focused on the relatively rare instances where the material features of a text appear to contribute to its meaning, rather than on the near-ubiquitous cases where they do not.[36] Yet the atypical visibility of both wordplay and graph nonetheless draws attention to one of the principles that underpin Ryman's writing: they are emblematic of the way his repeated phrases function as the building blocks of thought, with a solidity in the mind comparable to that of the *O* on the page. Poem 57 thus reveals how he treats fragments of language as if they were material, in the sense of both "subject" and "physical entity."

Ryman's practice is not unique in this respect. His constant return to the same phrases broadly resembles what Siegfried Wenzel has observed of preaching practices in the fifteenth century. In his discussion of English-language verses in sermons, including those of the Franciscan *Fasciculus morum*, Wenzel notes that liturgical tags are frequently used to indicate the theme of a sermon, and that in such cases, they are typically followed by an English translation. Further, he observes that such translations were frequently amplified so as to provide a moral, and that "Certain favorite passages were even translated more than once."[37] Such use of liturgical material

36. Daniel Wakelin, *Immaterial Texts in Late Medieval England: Making English Manuscripts, 1400–1500* (Cambridge University Press, 2022), 6–9, citing Adam Smyth, *Material Texts in Early Modern England* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 169–71, 175.

37. Siegfried Wenzel, *Verses in Sermons: "Fasciculus Morum" and Its Middle English Poems* (Cambridge, MA: Mediaeval Academy of America, 1978), 62–72, 81.

thus provides a potential precedent for Ryman's own repetition of burdens and his interest in repeat translations. Indeed, Ardis Butterfield has argued explicitly, "Once we look at the wide range of contexts and textual representations of refrain songs we find that the process of building up a song from shorter elements or core motifs has more in common than we might think with the sermon technique of treating each phrase as a distinct unit, available for comment and amplification."[38] Yet an equally close analogy for Ryman's wider habits of repetition is found in the memory-based composition techniques common in the earlier Middle Ages, and associated particularly with monastic settings. As Mary Carruthers has demonstrated, those engaged in such techniques employed individual words and phrases as a means of generating thought sequences, using them not only as a method of organizing material for retrieval, but also as prompts for further composition.[39] In monastic memory training, a clear distinction was drawn between *memoria verborum* and *memoria res*: the memory of words and the memory of things. The former, characterized by verbatim learning of a text, was considered an elementary technique: one that was to be mastered only as a foundation for the more challenging *memoria res*, in which the subject matter was so fully internalized that any aspect of it might be recalled at will, independently of its original context. Yet *memoria res* nonetheless depended on the memory of precise forms of words. Once a biblical text (such as the Psalms, for example) had been learned verbatim, it was broken down into its constituent parts (phrases, words, or even syllables). These were treated as images in the mind, stable points of reference that served as the means to recall the meditations to which they gave rise, as students "attach[ed] mentally the gloss and commentary to the units of text which were already laid out as 'seals' in the memory."[40]

Since the layout of the page was central to the memorization process, with students advised "always to memorize from the same codex and page, lest too many competing images of the words formed from different books blur and block their memory of the text," Ryman's O apostrophes and the curious M graph align with these practices in reflecting a view of the word as possessing visual as well as aural materiality.[41] The way his burdens are presented in the Cambridge manuscript—set apart from the poem that follows

38. Ardis Butterfield, "The Construction of Textual Form: Cross-lingual Citation in the Medieval Insular Lyric," in *Citation, Intertextuality and Memory in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, vol. 1, ed. Yolanda Plumley, Giuliano di Bacco, and Stefano Josso (University of Exeter Press, 2011), 50.

39. Mary Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400–1200* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 29–30, 60–66.

40. Carruthers, *Craft of Thought*, 30.

41. Carruthers, *Craft of Thought*, 55.

and frequently copied in display script—reflects how memorization of the words as they appeared on a particular page was the counterpart of and prerequisite for the creation of mental images, enabling them to serve as gathering points for material to be used in subsequent compositions. But Carruthers's argument that "the text was perceived as a foundation 'divided' into mnemonically-signed chunks or bits, which could be fitted together to build a whole structure" doesn't speak only to such visible differentiation.[42] It also provides a model for the more challenging form of play found in Ryman's unpredictable repetitions across multiple poems, in which the repeated lines are not visually distinguished, but are nonetheless treated as precisely such "chunks or bits" available for arrangement in a variety of patterns, set apart in the mind if not on the page.

Eleven poems on the immaculate conception, eight copied in Hand C and three in Hand B, show Ryman's using precisely the process traced by Carruthers, whereby use of individual phrases as memory places resulted in the creation of "association-fabricated networks of 'bits'" that were frequently unique to an individual.[43] Each includes the line "as the sonne beame goth thurgh the glas" in affirmation of the miraculous nature of the conception, whereby Christ passed through Mary's body just as the sun passes through glass, without altering its nature.[44] As Ryman puts it in the first of these poems:

> As the sonne beame goth thurgh the glas,
> Thurgh thy bodie so did he pas
> Taking nature, as his wille was.
>
> (7.9.1–3)

The image does not originate with Ryman. First used in North Africa, it was widely adopted in late medieval Christian writing in languages including late medieval Irish, Welsh, and Cornish, as well as in English, where it occurs in Lydgate's "Life of our Lady"; Ryman himself attributes it to St. Anselm in Hand C poem 17.[45] Yet for Ryman, it becomes a building block of thought—and significantly, the building block is not simply the image, but rather the image expressed in a specific form of words. In eleven of the poems in which he repeats it, he does so verbatim. The twelfth, copied in Hand B, is the exception that proves the rule:

42. Carruthers, *Craft of Thought*, 58.

43. Carruthers, *Craft of Thought*, 23, 21.

44. Compare Zupitza, "Anmerkungen," pt. 1: 325–26. The stanzas of the eleven poems that share the line are Hand C poems 7.9, 13.2, 17.9, 19.3, 40.3, 41.2, 45.3, 99.5, 105.8, and Hand B poems 120.4, 148.3.

45. See further Andrew Breeze, "The Blessed Virgin and the Sunbeam through Glass," *BELLS: Barcelona English Language and Literature Studies* 2 (1990): 53–64.

> The glasse is more pure, and itte wasse,
> Thorughe the which the sonne did schyne:
> So ys this meyde, through whom did passe
> The sone of god by grace dyuyne.
> (118.5.1–4)

This different phrasing demonstrates how there is no need to repeat a precise form of words in order to invoke a particular image. It thus emphasizes how remarkable it is that Ryman elsewhere does not vary his wording—and it does so all the more effectively because, unlike the majority of the Annunciation poems, those containing the line "As the sonne beame goth thurgh the glas" are not grouped together in the manuscript.[46] The fact that (with the exception of Hand C poems 40 and 41) they appear separately implies that they are unlikely to have been written consecutively, and this suggests just how firmly set phrases of Ryman's own composition became fixed in his mind. Like the liturgical phrases he repeatedly uses as burdens, they come to constitute the material of his thought. Whereas in classical rhetoric *inventio* (the selection of subject matter) and *elocutio* (choice of words) are treated as separate stages in the composition process, with *elocutio* occurring only after the subject matter has been selected, in monastic mnemonic practices words and phrases are treated as grounds for invention, and Ryman's writing reflects a personal development of this technique, in which the two become inseparable.[47]

Importantly, the technique is not only applied to single lines, but also to collocations. With the line "as the sonne beame goth thurgh the glass," this appears from the frequency with which Ryman uses it in conjunction with a second line that is also closely associated with the Annunciation. In Hand C poem 99, it is directly juxtaposed with "As a swete floure bereth his odoure" (99.5.1–2); in Hand C poem 41, it is similarly juxtaposed with the slightly variant form "And as a floure berith his odoure" (41.2.1–2). In Hand C poems 7 and 40 the "floure" line appears in a previous stanza, and it also occurs in a further Hand C poem (18) copied between two of the poems that refer to the sun passing through glass.[48] The implication is that these two separate verbal building blocks come to be so closely associated in Ryman's mind that the use of one prompts the other. In Hand C poem 14, for example, when Mary is described as "As the sonne beame, as bright and clere" (14.4.2), this

46. Beadle and Smith observe the same repetition of "idiosyncratic" forms of words in Ryman's *Te deum* poems ("Carol," 859).

47. See, e.g., Cicero, *De inventione* 1.7.9; Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 3.3.11–15; and the anonymous *Rhetorica ad Herennium* 1.2.3.

48. Compare variants of this line at Hand C poems 12.7.1, 14.3.1, 15.1.2, 18.4.1, 40.2.1, 80.1.1, and Hand B poem 154.1.1; none is combined with the sun image, but all occur in the context of the Annunciation.

is (unusually) not in the context of the Annunciation, but it does appear shortly after the line "Haile, *flos campi* (flower of the fields) of swete odoure" (14.3.1): here, it seems that Ryman's use of a variation on the phrase that he so often deployed in his Annunciation poems in conjunction with the image of the sun passing through glass prompted him to add a modified version of the sun image, even though this description of Mary occurs in a different context. His constant recourse to the same phrases thus reflects what Carruthers describes as a form of "medieval cognitive pattern-making [that] 'locates' knowledge, but *within* and *in relation to* other things," where what is "truthful" about the phrases he uses "is not their content . . . but how they cue memories."[49] Because the lines are juxtaposed at intervals throughout the manuscript, the implication is that they are not connected incidentally at the moment of writing, but more firmly paired, both as material to be explicated and the means of explicating it. The repeated phrases not only function as mnemonic prompts, but also constitute the memories that are cued.

Cristina Maria Cervone and Nicholas Watson's description of Middle English lyrics as "word engines" thus seems perfectly to encapsulate Ryman's repetitions across poems, in which—in contrast to refrains and burdens that act on readers' memories—words breed words in the writer's mind. Yet they use the term in discussing the generation of meaning "out of the rhythmical shaping of words, as well as out of the bodily metaphors that have now been shown to underpin human language and cognition."[50] For Cervone and Watson, as for Culler, lyric is concerned with the material *qualities* of language, whereas Ryman's "engines" are driven by the use of repeated words and phrases as if they were material, in all senses of the word. His repetitions exemplify the poet-critic Denise Riley's argument that the word may be "made into a thing through the sheer fact of its reiteration." She observes that, on the one hand, "hearing something said too many times will make it rise up out of its background, suspended in relief," while on the other hand: "If one were to think, conventionally, of the word as animated solely by its meaning, then through process of reiteration alone, one would be suddenly confronted by the word's corpse, or its waxwork. Whether by the enforced prominence of its sounds or the odd look of the letters themselves, to see a word printed many times over on a page makes it start out, and this exposed arbitrariness is indeed queer. . . . Sheer repetition exaggerates the sign into a wonder."[51]

Of all Ryman's poems, Riley speaks most directly to the anomalous poem 57. Although she is concerned specifically with the printed word, her

49. Carruthers, *Craft of Thought*, 34–35.

50. Cervone and Watson, editors' introduction to *What Kind of a Thing*, 5.

51. Denise Riley, *The Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony* (Stanford University Press, 2000), 155, 158.

observation nonetheless encapsulates how the *O* on the manuscript page contains meanings that cannot be encompassed other than by a graph combining image with wordplay. But her identification of the effect of excessive repetition as the creation of a "thing-word" is also relevant to what occurs in the composition of Ryman's work more widely.[52] Made obtrusive by repetition, his repeated phrases acquire an insistent materiality (or "fleshiness," to quote Riley again); as Haun Saussy writes of loan words, they stand out "like a sore thumb, an *italicized* word or a new penny."[53] While this materiality is apparent to the reader who engages with Ryman's work as a whole, it is no less so to the poet, for whom the repeated word or sign is not just a "wonder" in itself, but also invites what Cervone calls "the *work* of wonder": that is, the work of enquiry that follows from reactions of "amazement, surprise, curiosity, puzzlement, admiration, speculation."[54]

In Ryman's case, such work can be traced in the repetition of several seemingly formulaic lines in a cluster of Hand C *Te deum* poems:

> Both iij. and one we knowleche the,
> One in godhede, in persones thre,
> That euir were and ay shall be.
> (72.13.1–3)

> O fader of high maieste,
> The sonne and holigoost with the,
> Bothe iij. and one the knowlege we.
> (73.1.1–3)

> Fader and sonne and holigoost,
> We knowlege the in euery coost
> Bothe iij and one, of myghtis moost.
> (74.1.1–3)

> O fader, o sonne, o holigoost,
> Of thre and one, of myghtis moost,
> Thy myelde seruantis, in euery coost.
> (76.7.1–3)

Here, the formula "iij. and one" repeats verbatim between 73.1 and 74.1, with the spelling variant "Of thre and one" in 76.7, while the phrase "the knowlege we" / "we knowlege the" appears in 72, 73, and 74. In 72 and 73, the latter is rhymed with a periphrastic description of the Trinity that is

52. Riley, *Words of Selves*, 158.

53. Riley, *Words of Selves*, 157; Haun Saussy, "Macaronics as What Eludes Translation," *Paragraph* 38, no. 2 (July 2015): 221.

54. Cristina Maria Cervone, "Wondering through Middle English Lyric," in Cervone and Watson, *What Kind of a Thing*, 64, 63.

split over two lines; in 74, whose description of the Trinity is condensed to just one line, it cedes its rhyme function to the equally formulaic phrase "in euery coost." Finally, that phrase too recurs in 76, in the context of the identical rhyming trio *holigoost-moost-coost*. Unlike the image of the sun shining through glass, none of these features is remarkable in itself. The rhymes are predictable ones, and the phrase "iij. and one" verges on cliché; Ryman himself repeats it in the invocation to God in the first stanza of poem 57 and as the final line of the prayers with which Hand C poems 21–30 and 36 conclude. On first encounter, the main interest of such conventional formulations seems to lie in the way they confirm his facility at arranging and rearranging repeated phrases in different patterns according to the different formal requirements of individual poems.

But setting these poems alongside others that share the same phrases—Hand C poems 45 and 47 and Hand B poem 129—reveals how creative paranomasia operates here too. In the first instance, this occurs within individual poems. In poem 45 the phrase "iij and one" forms the culmination of a play, throughout the poem, on two senses of "alone": that which it takes in the burden ("And no one or nothing else besides; exclusive of all other people and things; and no other"), and its much less stable repetition in the refrain. Here, its meaning shifts according to whether it is applied to Christ or mankind; it stresses either the absolute aloneness of fallen man ("Being on one's own . . . unaccompanied"), or the singlehandedness of Christ's intervention on his behalf ("That is without the participation or help of others; single-handed, unaided").[55] In consequence, the focus shifts over the course of the poem from the hopelessness of mankind's position to the magnitude of Christ's endeavor, and the final stanza realizes that change by modifying the refrain word:

> Now beseech we that king of grace
> In blis for to graunte vs a place
> And hym to se there face to face
> That is both iij. and one.
> (45.5.1–4)

The petition is enabled by being composed after Christ's birth and death; the shift from "alone" to "one" at the end of the stanza is not merely a return to the formulaic description of God's Trinitarian nature. It also discloses that Christ's sacrifice is God's as well, and reaffirms the shift from division to unity between God and man.

Unlike poem 45, poem 47 uses the word "alone" in just one sense, "and no one or nothing else besides," in both burden and refrain. Yet its wordplay

55. *OED*, s.v. "alone," adj., 3, 1a, 1b, https://www.oed.com.

is no less pronounced. The refrain and the first line of the burden are identical, so that the first three lines of each stanza are followed by the line "Honour to the alone" not once but twice:

> O lorde, by whome althing is wrought,
> And withoute whom wrought right nought,
> With hert, with myende, with wille and thought
> Honour to the alone.
>
> Honour to the alone,
> That art bothe iij. and one.
> (47.1.1–4 and burden)

The emphatic echo draws attention not only to the repeated line itself, but also to the second line of the burden, "That art bothe iij. and one": it is this that provides the justification for the repeated assertion that honour is due. At the same time, because the repetition of "the alone" is followed by the statement that this singular entity is "both iij. and one," it paranomasially realizes the paradox that is the Trinity: even as "one" reaffirms the sense of its rhyme word "alone," it completes the line in which God is also said to be "iij."

This wordplay is developed in the poem's third and fourth stanzas, where each of the persons of the Trinity is named separately before refrain and burden reassert their unity in the line "Honour to the alone." In the final stanza, too, the Trinitarian paradox is revisited once more—this time, in combination with the formulaic rhymes of the *Te deum* poems:

> O fader, o sonne, o holigoost,
> O iij. and one, of myghtis moost,
> Of lest and moost in euery coost
> Honour to the alone.
> (47.7.1–4)

Just as rhyming "alone" with "one" in the opening stanza revitalizes the phrase "iij. and one," here the repetition of "moost" at the end of the second line and midway through the third reflects the paradox that God's "moost" encompasses "lest"—and it is precisely the awkwardness of the repetition that brings this home, calling attention to the terms of an otherwise formulaic phrase.

Linking clusters of repetition that occur in separate poems, the juxtaposition of "alone" with the *holigoost-moost-coost* rhyme trio demonstrates how Ryman's habit of word association creates what Attridge terms "alterity." Seeta Chaganti has argued with reference to two carols in London, British Library, MS Sloane 2593, that where a burden is not copied in full between each pair of stanzas: "Reading the carol involves the repeated reappearance

of the burden in a spectral, virtual sense: there but not quite on the same ontological plane as the material text interacting with it."[56] This is precisely what occurs with the burdens in the Cambridge manuscript. In contrast, the repeated lines in the body of the stanzas of poems 45 and 47 are materially present throughout. Yet when their comparison is extended to include those *Te deum* poems where Ryman uses the same *holigoost-moost-coost* rhyme in combination with the phrase "iij. and one," an equivalent kind of haunting becomes apparent. The *Te deum* poems do not include the word "alone" in any prominent position, but because Ryman elsewhere uses it so emphatically in conjunction with "iij. and one," including in a poem (47) that shares that *holigoost-moost-coost* rhyme as well, it is tacitly invoked. Such invocation is further highlighted by the way several other of the *Te deum* poems (Hand C 21–24 and Hand B 124–26) combine a *holigoost-moost* rhyme with the use of "sone" as well as "one" in nonrhyming positions in their final stanzas. The effect is analogous to that which Eleanor Cook identifies in her definition of "ghost rhyme": "a near rhyme . . . [which suggests] a possible full rhyme that is not there, and yet is there as a ghost."[57] One of the examples she cites, a couplet of Geoffrey Hill's, shows how this works in practice: "and in the fable this is your proper home; / three sides of a courtyard where the bees thrum."[58] Here, because the word that does not appear at the end of the second line, *hum*, is the one more commonly used of bees, its nonappearance foils the reader's expectation; *hum* is heard almost more clearly than if Hill had written it. In Ryman's *Te deum* poems, the ghost collocation "alone" is an equally significant absence. Because it is not reinforced by predictable formal features of the poems, it is less conspicuous to readers of his work than the ghost rhymes discussed by Cook. Yet the play between these overlapping clusters of repetition nonetheless demonstrates how word association remains a key principle of Ryman's writing even when one of the terms is silent, and thus reaffirms that his composition practices are characterized by intensely material contemplative play.

CONCLUSION

One consequence of reading Ryman with an eye to composition process is to reaffirm that his repetitions are very much of their time. Aligned with contemporary sermon-writing and mnemonic techniques, his writing

56. Seeta Chaganti, "Dance in a Haunted Space: Genre, Form and the Middle English Carol," *Exemplaria* 27, no. 1–2 (2015): 142.

57. Eleanor Cook, *Against Coercion: Games Poets Play* (Stanford University Press, 1998), 224.

58. Geoffrey Hill, *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy*, quoted in Cook, *Against Coercion*, 229.

exemplifies what Butterfield describes as "the endemic characteristic of medieval lyrics as clusters of myriad smaller elements that then combine and recombine in new forms and contexts."[59] *Mouvance*—mobility or instability—has long been understood as a characteristic of texts disseminated in manuscript; indeed, Butterfield has argued that medieval lyrics are especially liable to such a process of "textual recycling/remixing."[60] This has generally been considered as a phenomenon that occurs over time and between multiple manuscripts that record variant versions of a work, but the manuscript of Ryman's poems shows something equivalent occurring within its confines, as it witnesses a recycling that occurs at the level of a single author's composition. The line "Magnifying God manyfolde" (2.9.1; 86.7.1), which Ryman twice applies to Mary, perfectly captures his own practice. The original Old English meaning of the suffix *-fold* was "folded in two, three, four, etc.," "plaited," and Ryman's constant reworking of set forms of words represents a verbal plaiting or pleating, in which strictly bounded repeated elements are used to construct work that is unbounded.[61] Composing in units of line or clause that can be rearranged almost ad infinitum, his privileging of praxis over perfection renders the business of writing a game that is also a serious act of devotion: an attempt to "synge without ending" (4.9.3) that makes manifest the belief that—as Monta has argued—"Repetition is central to praise."[62]

Yet despite such period specificity, the materiality of Ryman's language and the resulting inextricability of word and matter also bring his work into conversation with recent debates around the definition of lyric and the extent to which any such definition is meaningfully able to encompass both medieval and modern poetic practices.[63] As Cervone and Watson put it: "Literary scholars are . . . divided into those who hold that there is 'a thing called lyric' (however named) across periods, languages and places, so that a transhistorical and transnational 'theory of lyric' is possible, and those who argue that 'lyric' in this sense is 'a modern invention,' serving less to categorize lyric than to produce lyric through reading poems *as* lyric."[64] This binary is complicated in that proponents of lyric as a transhistorical category have tended not to include Middle English lyric in their analysis, stopping short

59. Ardis Butterfield, "Why Medieval Lyric?," *ELH* 82, no. 2 (Summer 2015): 328.

60. Butterfield, "Why Medieval Lyric?," 328; for the conditions giving rise to *mouvance*, see Paul Zumthor, *Toward a Medieval Poetics*, trans. Philip Bennett (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 45–49.

61. *OED*, s.v. "-fold," suffix.

62. Monta, "Repetition," 141–42.

63. See, e.g., Cervone and Watson, editors' introduction, Virginia Jackson, "Response: Old Lyric Things," and Stephanie Burt, "Response: Hevy Hameres," all in Cervone and Watson, *What Kind of a Thing*, 1–29, 342–54, 355–69, respectively; Butterfield, "Construction of Textual Form," 56–57.

64. Cervone and Watson, editors' introduction to *What Kind of a Thing*, 7.

at the sixteenth century.[65] It is for this reason that I have here consistently referred to "poems" rather than "lyrics": because Ryman's work so clearly differs in context and conception from lyric poetry of more recent periods, to claim it as "lyric" risks engaging in a form of criticism that (in Butterfield's words) "creates its object while claiming merely to find it."[66] Yet in being so consistently language driven, Ryman's poems do align with the emphasis on the material qualities of lyric language foregrounded by those who consider it to be a transhistorical category. While his work does not often manifest the aural qualities of "language at play, shaped as if by forces of its own, independent of its author—by its own phonological and rhythmical structures," it nonetheless exemplifies Blasing's wider argument about how the "materiality of language" operates in poetry.[67] Rather than focusing on its appeal to the senses, she is concerned with the densely irreducible history of previous use that exists in words and phrases, and with the way the work of individual poets not only builds on that use, but is conditioned by it. The process she identifies resembles the revoicing of "public interiorities" that Lawton identifies as a key feature of late medieval poetry. Yet by focusing on the influence of language over the speaking voice rather than what the speaking voice does with preexisting forms of words, Blasing places still more emphasis on language as a material medium.[68] It is precisely this process that we find in Ryman's repetition of individual lines and collocations in an extended use, as his habit of revoicing and recontextualizing available "pieces of language" not only encompasses public interiorities, but creates new "private" or "personal" ones as well. His repetitions place him among those recent poets who exemplify Reginald Gibbons's perception that "to write is to take a particular stance toward language, to be unable to think of it as if it were a transparent, unambiguous, easily effectual medium of communication."[69] Whereas a twentieth-century author said that there are no ideas but in things, for Ryman words are those things.[70]

On the one hand, then, Ryman's writing suggests that the understanding of lyric as both foregrounding and dependent on the material qualities of language might usefully be extended backward in time, thus contributing to recent investigations of the relationship between Middle English

65. See, e.g., Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); compare Cervone and Watson, editors' introduction to *What Kind of a Thing*, 2–3.

66. Butterfield, "Why Medieval Lyric?," 324.

67. Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, 136; Blasing, *Lyric Poetry*, 1–15.

68. Lawton, *Voice in Later Medieval Literature*, 8.

69. Reginald Gibbons, *How Poems Think* (University of Chicago Press, 2015), 36.

70. William Carlos Williams, *Paterson*, ed. Christopher MacGowan, rev. ed. (New York: New Directions, 1992), 6.

and modern lyric. On the other hand, to consider Ryman's repetitions as a period-specific manifestation of a non-period-specific tendency among poets to think in and with words, rather than through them, also enables a more productive reading of his work in its own right. This does not judge him by standards resulting from an ongoing process of lyricization, whereby form is assumed to express meaning. Instead, revealing Ryman as a creator whose poems manifest a fusion of word and thought, it shows that his body of work does not represent a final entity, but is rather a series of signs that reflect constant, complex praxis.