

A POET'S FABLE

EARLY IN 1529 a London lawyer, Simon Fish, anonymously published a tract, addressed to Henry VIII, called *A Supplication for the Beggars*. The tract was modest in length but explosive in content: Fish wrote on behalf of the homeless, desperate English men and women, “needy, impotent, blind, lame and sick” who pleaded for spare change on the streets of every city and town in the realm.¹ These wretches, “on whom scarcely for horror any eye dare look,” have become so numerous that private charity can no longer sustain them, and they are dying of hunger.² Their plight, in Fish’s account, is directly linked to the pestiferous spread throughout the realm of beggars of a different kind: bishops, abbots, priors, deacons, archdeacons, suffragans, priests, monks, canons, friars, pardoners, and summoners.

Simon Fish had already given a foretaste of his anticlerical sentiments and his satirical gifts. In his first year as a law student at Gray’s Inn, according to John Foxe, one of Fish’s mates, a certain Mr. Roo, had written a play holding Cardinal Wolsey up to ridicule. No one dared to take on the part of Wolsey until Simon Fish came forward and offered to do so. The performance must have been impressive: it so enraged the cardinal that Fish was forced “the same night that this Tragedy was played” to flee to the Low Countries to escape arrest.³ There he evidently met the exile William Tyndale, whose new English translation of the Bible, inspired by Luther, he subsequently helped to circulate. At the time he wrote *A Supplication for the Beggars*, Fish had probably returned to London

but was in hiding. He was thus a man associated with Protestant beliefs, determined to risk his life to save the soul of his country, and endowed, as were many religious revolutionaries in the 1520s and 1530s, with a kind of theatrical gift.⁴

In *A Supplication for the Beggars*, this gift leads Fish not only to speak on behalf of the poor but also to speak in their own voice, crying out to the king against those who have greedily taken for themselves the wealth that should otherwise have made England prosperous for all of its people. If his gracious majesty would only look around, he would see “a thing far out of joint” (413). The ravenous monkish idlers “have begged so importunately that they have gotten into their hands more then the third part of all your Realm.” No great people, not the Greeks nor the Romans nor the Turks, and no ruler, not King Arthur himself, could flourish with such parasites sucking at their lifeblood. Not only do they destroy the economy, interfere with royal prerogative, and undermine the laws of the commonwealth, but, since they seduce “every man’s wife, every man’s daughter and every man’s maid,” they subvert the nation’s moral order as well. Boasting among themselves about the number of women they have slept with, the clerical drones carry physical and moral contagion—syphilis, leprosy, and idleness—through the whole commonwealth. “Who is she that will set her hands to work to get three pence a day,” the beggars ask, “and may have at least twenty pence a day to sleep an hour with a friar, a monk, or a priest?” (417). With a politician’s flair for shocking (and unverifiable) statistics, Fish estimates the number of Englishwomen corrupted by monks at 100,000. No one can be sure, he writes, that it is his own child and not a priest’s bastard who is poised to inherit his estate.

Why have these diseased “bloodsuckers” succeeded in amassing so much wealth and power? Why would otherwise sensible, decent people, alert to threats to their property, their health, and their liberties, allow themselves to be ruthlessly exploited by a pack of “sturdy idle holy thieves” (415)? The question would be relatively easy to answer were this a cunningly concealed crime or one perpetrated on the powerless. But in Fish’s account virtually the entire society, from the king and the nobility to the poor housewife who

has to give the priests every tenth egg her hen lays, has been openly victimized. How is it possible to explain the dismaying spectacle of what Montaigne's friend, Etienne de la Boétie, called "voluntary servitude"?⁵

For la Boétie (1530–1563) the answer is structural: a chain of clientage and dependency extends and expands geometrically, he argues, from a small number of cynical exploiters at the top to the great mass of the exploited below.⁶ Anyone who challenges this system risks attack, both from the few who are actually reaping a benefit and from the many who are deceived into thinking that their interests are being served. Individuals may actually grasp that they have been lured into voluntary servitude, but as long as they have no way of knowing who else among them has arrived at the same perception, they recognize that it is dangerous to speak out.

If those who see through the lies could share their knowledge with other, like-minded souls, as they long to do, they could take the steps necessary to free themselves from their chains. Those steps are remarkably simple: what is needed, in fact, is not a violent uprising but a quiet refusal. Since only a minuscule fraction of the society is truly profiting from the system, all it would take, were there widespread enlightenment, is peaceful noncooperation. When the king demands his breakfast, one need only refuse to bring it. He may sputter in rage, but the rage will be as inconsequential as an infant's, provided that the great majority of men and women have collectively determined to be free. But how is that determination to be fostered? How is it possible for those who understand the situation to awaken others, so that all can act in unison? As long as they remain isolated, there is little that enlightened individuals can do, and it is risky for them to open their secret thoughts to others. If only there were little windows in each person, la Boétie daydreams, so that one could see what is hidden inside and know to whom one could safely speak.

For Etienne de la Boétie, the first and fundamental problem is to account for widespread behavior that seems so obviously against interest, and not simply against the marginal or incidental concerns of particular groups but against the central material and sexual preoccupations of all human societies. Why do people allow

themselves to be robbed and cheated? Simon Fish is grappling with the same problem, but his answer centers not on social structures or institutions or hierarchical systems of dependency. After all, very few people think of themselves as actually dependent on the lazy, syphilitic monks and friars who shamelessly take advantage of them. These so-called holy men are not conspicuous figures of wealth or might; on the contrary, unarmed and unattended, they dress poorly and go about begging. In Fish's account their place at the center of a vast system of pillaging and sexual corruption relies upon the exploitation of a single core conviction: Purgatory.

ALMS FOR THE DEAD

Fish was not alone in his theory. Elsewhere in the writings of the early Reformers, we find similar claims for the overwhelming importance of the doctrine of Purgatory, a doctrine already long under attack in England by those heretics known as Lollards.⁷ "In God's name, tell me," the king asks the impoverished Commonality in the tragedy *King Johan* by John Bale (1495–1563), "how cometh thy substance gone?" To which Commonality replies, "By priests, canons and monks, which do but fill their belly, / With my sweat and labor for their popish Purgatory."⁸ Tyndale similarly writes of the churchmen that "[a]ll they have, they have received in the name of Purgatory . . . and on that foundation be all their bishoprics, abbeys, colleges, and cathedral churches built."⁹

The claim obviously serves a Protestant polemical purpose by loading the immense weight of the entire Catholic Church upon one of its most contested doctrines, but in the heated debates of the sixteenth century, at least some English Catholics agreed. Writing in the 1560s in defense of Purgatory, Cardinal William Allen (1532–1594) claims that "this doctrine (as the whole world knoweth) founded all Bishoprics, builded all Churches, raised all Oratories, instituted all Colleges, endowed all Schools, maintained all hospitals, set forward all works of charity and religion, of what sort soever they be."¹⁰ Though it received its full doctrinal elaboration quite late—the historian Jacques Le Goff places the "birth of Purgatory" in the latter half of the twelfth century¹¹—the notion

of an intermediate place between Heaven and Hell and the system of indulgences and pardons meant to relieve the sufferings of souls imprisoned within it had come to seem, for many heretics and orthodox believers alike, essential to the institutional structure, authority, and power of the Catholic Church.

This degree of importance is certainly an exaggeration, but it is not a complete travesty: by the late Middle Ages in Western Europe, Purgatory had achieved both a doctrinal and a social success. That is, it was by no means exclusively the esoteric doctrine of theologians but part of a much broader, popular understanding of the meaning of existence, the nature of Christian faith, and the structure of family and community. Hence, to cite a single English example, the various fifteenth-century devotional treatises known collectively as *The Lay Folks Mass Book* include for recital after the elevation of the Host a vernacular prayer for the dead. The faithful pray for those souls, “father soul, mother soul, brother dear, sisters souls, sib men and other sere [*relatives and other particular individuals*],” who may be suffering in “Purgatory pain.”¹² The prayer—from a text that is not a piece of the official liturgy but a model of private, vernacular faith, intended to be read while the priests conduct the Latin Mass—pleads that bonds shackling these dead be unlocked, so that they can pass from torment to everlasting joy.

The simple English prayer is evidence—to which much more could be added—that the attempt to free souls from the prison house of Purgatory was not exclusively the work of a priestly class of specialists. There *was* such a class, large in numbers, as Fish and other Protestant polemicists stridently insisted, whose maintenance cost a considerable amount of money. But their rituals, though regarded as particularly efficacious, were not the only assistance that the dead could receive, and lay persons could supplement the liturgical ceremonies that their donations sponsored with a variety of less formal (and less expensive) acts on behalf of their loved ones and themselves. In Catholic countries that did not pass through periods of iconoclastic violence, one can still see, particularly in small towns, many traces of this popular piety, often accorded formal, if grudging, recognition by the church. Thus, for



Fig. 1. "40 days of indulgence" Votive plaque beneath image of Virgin, Erice, Sicily. Photo: Stephen Greenblatt.

example, embedded in the stone walls along the narrow lanes of Erice, in western Sicily, there are numerous small, rather crude votive images beneath which elegant inscriptions, dating for the most part from the eighteenth century, promise the remission of periods of purgatorial suffering for those who stand before the images and recite prayers (fig. 1). I asked a local resident once, an elderly woman, whether people still stopped and said the ritual words. No, she replied, not any more. Was that, I inquired, because the practice was now regarded as superstitious? Not at all, she said; the priests now wanted you to pay for prayers in church. To be sure, these prayers were much more powerful, but they were too expensive, and everyone she knew had stopped buying them. But if the price came down, she added, more people would certainly want them.

Along with private fasts and vigils, such prayers—casual, informal, recited in the streets—certainly did not replace the proper intercessory gestures provided for by the "pious bequests" made in large numbers of wills, but they do clearly indicate that the task of assisting the soul's passage to bliss was not entrusted entirely to the certified authorities on the afterlife. Nonspecialists understood

that they could do things in their everyday lives to ease the pain of those they loved or to shorten their own anticipated share of postmortem pain.

Charity to the dead, whether performed privately or in public, by lay persons or by priests, began at home. But the effort to alleviate suffering extended beyond the immediate circle of self, family, and friends to “all Christian souls.” On All Hallows’ Eve, before All Saints’ Day (November 1), bells rang throughout the night in English towns and villages, as communities joined in prayers for the whole, vast company of the dead, and on the day following, All Souls’ Day (November 2), it was customary to distribute “soul cakes.” John Mirk, canon of Lilleshall, Shropshire, in the mid-fifteenth century, lamented that the custom of giving bread for the souls of the dead—“hoping with each loaf to get a soul out of Purgatory”—was in decline, but it evidently survived, at least in rural areas, into the eighteenth century.¹³ The *Sarum Prymer* of 1538 includes “A prayer to God for them that be departed, having none to pray for them.” These are souls, as the prayer puts it, “which either by negligence of them that be living, or long process of time, are forgotten of their friends and posterity” and therefore “have neither hope nor comfort in their torments.”¹⁴ Similarly, the *Sarum Horae* of 1531 tells those who are entering a graveyard that Pope John IV has granted as many days of pardon as there are bodies buried in that place to those who recite a prayer that begins as follows: “All hail, all faithful souls, whose bodies do here and everywhere rest in the dust [*Salvete vos omnes fideles animae, quarum corpora hic et ubique requiescunt in pulvere*]: the Lord Jesus Christ, who hath redeemed both you and us with his most precious blood, vouchsafe to deliver you from pains.”¹⁵ Such customs implicitly acknowledge that an ordinary person’s principal focus is likely to be personal—the overriding concern is with one’s own fate or with the fate of particular, named loved ones—even as they give form to and reward a more capacious sense of connectedness. Though the rituals of everyday life centered on the intimate and familial, they encoded the sense of a larger bond as well, linking the living with the souls of countless previous generations.

One does not need the whole elaborate doctrine of Purgatory, of course, to feel linked to the dead: memory and a sense of the shared human condition will suffice. To be sure, in most traditional cultures this feeling of connectedness acquires a more specific set of topographical references, but this localization had already occurred many centuries before the invention of Purgatory. Christianity had long offered its believers two principal places, Heaven and Hell, in which to situate definitively those who had once lived in the world and had now ceased to exist. Purgatory forged a different kind of link between the living and the dead, or, rather, it enabled the dead to be not completely dead—not as utterly gone, finished, complete as those whose souls resided forever in Hell or Heaven.¹⁶

It was not possible (or, in any case, not licit in orthodox Christianity) to pray for the souls in Hell, in hope either of mitigating their pain or of augmenting it. The unspeakable tortures of the damned could be contemplated with horror or with fierce satisfaction, but those who suffered for eternity were beyond the effective range of human intervention. Saint Augustine said that even if he learned that his father was burning in Hell, he would not attempt to do anything to succor him, for he knew that he was beyond assistance. The harsh sentiment is echoed in the fourteenth-century *Treatise of the Manner and Mede of the Mass*: “If I knew that my father were wholly held in Hell,” the text puts it, I would no more pray for him “than for a dog that was dead.”¹⁷

The blessed similarly had no need of human prayers; their condition, too, was fixed for eternity. The living might hope that their friends and family in Heaven might remember them and offer them some spiritual assistance, but there was nothing that souls in bliss could want in return. A large group of the dead, however, continued to exist in time and to need something that they could get only from the living, something that would enable them to escape from the hideous, dark prison in which they were trapped.

The lay community was obviously never as thoroughly bound up with a general concern for postmortem welfare as were those monastic and conventual communities where, in certain cases, it was customary to pray daily in the actual presence of members

of the order who had died. The nineteenth-century ecclesiastical antiquary William Maskell cites such a custom recorded at Durham Abbey: “Also the monks was accustomed every day, to go through the cloister, in at the usher’s door, and so through the entry, in under the prior’s lodging, and straight into the scentorie garth [*churchyard*], where all the monks was buried, and they did all bare-headed, a certain long space, praying amongst the tombs and throwghes [*sepulchres*] for their brethren souls being buried there, and, when they had done their prayers, then they did return to the cloister.”¹⁸ The formal arrangement that facilitated such observances—seats designed to drain off the liquids from the corpses, etc.—may still be glimpsed, for example, in the somber architecture of an underground chapel linked to the cathedral on Ischia, a chapel that must have seemed to the nuns to be a powerful representation of the purgatorial afterlife.

But the practice of burying the dead in the hallowed ground of the churchyard or, in the case of the wealthiest and most powerful parishioners, under the floor or in the walls of the church itself meant that ordinary men and women, including those quite uninterested in theological niceties, worshiped in close proximity to the mortal remains of those whose souls had passed on to their reward or punishment. Even the liberal use of incense, flowers, and sprigs of rosemary could not altogether have masked the smell of decay that medieval and early modern burial practices almost inevitably introduced into the still air of churches.¹⁹ The wall paintings, carved doors and capitals, altarpieces, stained-glass windows, and funeral monuments further reinforced the deep link between Christianity and the fate of the dead.

Not only doctrine, then, but also chants, gestures, images, and the very air that the faithful breathed said the same thing: the border between this world and the afterlife was not firmly and irrevocably closed. For a large group of mortals—perhaps the majority of them—time did not come to an end at the moment of death. The book was not quite shut. One chapter remained to be written, and if the outcome was fixed and settled, the sequence of events, the duration, and the quality of the experience were not. The living could have an ongoing relationship with one important seg-

ment of the dead, and not simply a relationship constituted by memory. There were things that the living could do for the dead—and not to do these things, or to delay doing them, or to do some and not others, was also a course of action in this ongoing relationship. The whole social and economic importance of Purgatory in Catholic Europe rested on the belief that prayers, fasts, almsgiving, and masses constituted a valuable commodity—“suffrages,” as they were termed—that could in effect be purchased, directly or indirectly, on behalf of specific dead persons.

The blessed souls in Heaven, of course, had no need of suffrages, since they had already attained eternal bliss, while the damned souls in Hell could not make use of them, since they were condemned to an eternity of irremediable torment. But imperfect souls, souls still bearing the stains of the faults they had committed in mortal life, would have to endure excruciating pain. Fortunately, suffrages were available to reduce the intensity and duration of this agony. Masses lovingly paid for and performed in memory of the dead were particularly efficacious, as were the prayers of the poor and sick offered in grateful memory of their benefactor. Similarly, the pious fasts, prayers, and alms of relatives and friends could be directed to relieve the sufferings of a named individual whom they believed to be in Purgatory. Moreover, the pope was the administrator, in effect, of an enormous account of “superabundant satisfactions” left by Christ and further enhanced by the saints and martyrs, an account that could be expended, in the form of indulgences, on behalf of deserving souls.²⁰ The reckoning in every case was strictly individual and scrupulously proportional to the gravity of the particular sins, but it was possible for individuals after death to receive help from others, just as living debtors languishing in prison could have their debts paid by their friends. “Thus devout prayers said with humility,” writes the poet and monk John Lydgate (ca. 1370–ca. 1450), “Delivereth souls out of Purgatory.”²¹

Popular religion in the Middle Ages conjured up vivid images of the efficacy of this help. One of the most widely read books in the period, the *Golden Legend* (ca. 1260) by Jacobus de Voragine (Jacopo da Varazze), recounts a vision granted to a warden of Saint Peter's:

Then the angel led the warden to another place and showed him people of both sexes, some reclining on golden beds, others at tables enjoying delicious viands, still others naked and needy, begging for help. This place, the angel said, was Purgatory. Those enjoying abundance were the souls for whom their friends provided plentiful aid, whereas those in need had no one who cared for them.²²

Though the story ostensibly functions as a justification for the newly instituted Feast of All Souls “on which day those who had no one to pray for them would at least share in the general commemoration,” it makes clear the enormous value of acquiring special prayers.

The value is heightened in *The Golden Legend* by the familiar emphasis on the pains of Purgatory. The emphasis, which often seems ghoulish, made perfect institutional sense. Since the ultimate fate of those who reached Purgatory was fixed and immutable—all would eventually reach Heaven—there had to be some reason to induce men and women to busy themselves and give their worldly goods to help the souls who were already imprisoned there or to abridge their own possible future prison terms. The reason was anxiety. Voragine rehearses, for example, the story of Master Silo originally told by the scholastic theologian Peter the Chanter (d. 1197) and found as well in the influential preacher James of Vitry (d. 1240) and the Dominican Stephen of Bourbon (d. 1261).

Master Silo had a colleague, a scholar who was very ill, and Silo asked him urgently to come back after he died and tell him, Silo, how things were with him. Some days after his death the scholar appeared to Silo, wearing a cape made of parchment written all over with sophisms, and woven of flames inside. The master asked who he was and he answered: “I am indeed the one who promised to come back to you.” Asked how things were with him he said: “This cape weighs upon me and presses me down more than if I were carrying a tower on my shoulders. It is given to me to wear on account of the pride I had in my sophisms. The flames that flare inside it are the delicate, mottled furs I used to wear, and they torture

and burn me.” The master, however, thought that this penalty was fairly light, so that the dead man told him to put out his hand and feel how light the punishment really was. He held out his hand and the scholar let a drop of his sweat fall on it. The drop went through the master’s hand like an arrow, causing him excruciating pain. “That’s how I feel all over,” the scholar said.²³

After all, as Aquinas wrote, the least degree of pain in Purgatory “surpasses the greatest pain that one can endure in this world.”²⁴

THE PRICE OF PRAYERS

Master Silo’s response to the ghost was to abandon the world at once and enter religious life.²⁵ Others less willing to forsake worldly wealth altogether used at least a portion of that wealth to assure themselves postmortem assistance. There was a range of available packages, as it were, from a simple funeral mass to the popular and moderately priced trental—a set of thirty requiem masses, said on the same day or on successive days—to the extremely expensive chantry, an endowment for the maintenance of a priest to sing daily mass for the founder or for someone specified by the founder, often in an ornate, purpose-built chapel.²⁶ On the eve of the Battle of Agincourt, queasy at the memory of his usurping father’s murder of Richard II, Shakespeare’s Henry V reminds God of his lavish acts of contrition:

Five hundred poor have I in yearly pay
Who twice a day their withered hands hold up
Toward Heaven to pardon blood. And I have built
Two chantries, where the sad and solemn priests
Sing still for Richard’s soul.

(4.1.280–84)²⁷

Two chantries were an extravagance, even for a monarch, but there were in this case special circumstances.²⁸ Aware that his claim to the throne is tainted, Henry in effect is bargaining with God or with the vengeful spirit of the murdered Richard, and the bar-

gaining chips are chantries. “Not today, O Lord,” he prays, attempting to distract God from the reckoning he fears will be due,

O not today, think not upon the fault
My father made in compassing the crown.

(4.1.274–76)

At this critical moment the king is concerned not with the fate of his soul but with the outcome of the battle: perhaps this served for Shakespeare and his audience as a spectacular, if morally problematic, display of heroic leadership.

Ordinarily, in making provisions for the afterlife, most people, including kings, wanted the sad and solemn priests to pray for their own souls. Faced with the terrifying prospect of purgatorial torment, the wealthy were willing to part with a great deal of money, particularly at the moment that they were forced to part with the world itself. The most spectacular instance of this willingness was that of a king who found himself in a position not altogether unlike that of Henry V—a king, that is, who wore a crown that had been wrested by violence from the legitimate ruler. The king in question was Henry VII, who came to the throne in 1485 by killing the Yorkist king Richard III at the Battle of Bosworth Field.

Henry VII was not an extravagant monarch—he was thought, if anything, to be something of a skinflint—but the magnificent late Gothic chapel he ordered built at Westminster was, according to one architectural historian, “the largest and certainly the most expensive structure ever built for funerary purposes.”²⁹ Three monks of Westminster were to serve as chantry priests, perpetually praying for Henry’s soul, and these constant suffrages were to be supplemented by anniversary masses in an impressive number of cathedral, conventual, and university churches. But even these extraordinary efforts to hasten his soul through Purgatory were not enough for a king who evidently thought he might be facing a long prison sentence in the afterlife. During his lifetime Henry founded a hospital and an almshouse whose grateful inhabitants could be counted on to offer up a steady supply of prayers, and in his will he provided for the establishment of two further hospitals, along with other contributions clearly designed to generate suffrages.

Finally, he saw to it that immediately after his death ten thousand masses would be said for the remission of his sins and the good of his soul. Ten thousand masses.

This was the father of the king to whom Simon Fish dedicated his *Supplication of the Beggars*. Somewhere buried in the story of Henry VIII's suppression of the monasteries and seizure of their great wealth is a son's violent repudiation of his father's attempts to ease his soul's torments. Between 1536 and 1539 Henry VIII took back for his own uses what Henry VII had laid out for himself—that, and much more. If his own last will and testament, drawn up and revised before his death in 1547, is any indication, the son by no means repudiated the religious beliefs to which his father adhered. But the terms of this will perhaps betray some ambiguous sign of the influence of *The Supplication of the Beggars* and, in any case, certainly reflect the silencing of the chantries. "We will and charge our Executors," Henry VIII commanded,

that they dispose and give in alms to the most poor and needy people that may be found (common beggars as much as may be avoided) in as short space as possibly they may after our departure out of this transitory life, *one thousand marks* of lawful money of England, part in the same place and thereabouts, where it shall please Almighty God to call us to his Mercy, part by the way, and part in the same place of our burial after their discretions, and to move the poor people that shall have our alms to pray heartily unto God for remission of our offenses and the wealth of our soul.³⁰

"In as short space as possibly they may after our departure": Henry VIII does not want to linger in the fires of Purgatory. Thousands of masses will not be sung to haste him toward Heaven, but a thousand marks could purchase the prayers of many poor people. In the unlikely event that he did not go straight to Hell, he would certainly have needed all of them.

Reformers who were centrally concerned to challenge the doctrine of Purgatory would not have been content with the king's provisions, but at least the money was not going to enrich the priesthood. Protestant polemics of the sixteenth century are virtu-

ally obsessed with the amount of wealth wasted in the vain belief that masses can shorten the torment. By this belief, Barnabe Googe, a prolific translator and antipapal polemicist, writes in *The Popish Kingdom* (1570),

so many altars in the Churches up did rise,
By this the number grows so great of Priests to sacrifice.
From hence arose such shameful swarms of Monks with
great excess,
Whom profit of this Mass doth keep in slothful idleness.
For this same cause such mighty kings, and famous
Princes high,
Ordained Masses for their souls, and Priests continually,
With great revenues yearly left and everlasting fee,
An easy way to joy, if it with scriptures might agree.³¹

In this view, the immense outpouring of wealth originated in the desire of kings and princes to secure for their souls an “easy way to joy,” and then spread to the whole class of the rich and privileged, eager to attain similar benefits for themselves:

Straight after these, the wealthy men took up this fancy vain,
And built them Chapels every one, and Chaplains did retain
At home, or in their parish Church, where Mass they
daily sung,
For safeguard of their family, and of their children young.
Both for their friends alive, and such as long before did die,
And in the Purgatory flames tormented sore doe lie.

The theology focused on the sins and sufferings of individuals, but, as Googe’s account suggests, the actual observances had a wider reach. Chantries and other costly ritual practices often served as pious attempts to help whole networks of family and friends, along with the donor himself.

Henry VII’s will notwithstanding, enormous bequests of the kind Googe attacks seem in reality to have been on the wane well before the Reformation. According to the historian Christopher Haigh, by the latter part of the fifteenth century “the endowment of chantries on a large scale was clearly a thing of the past in most parts

of England.”³² But Googe and his fellow polemicists are certainly correct in claiming that English Catholics invested heavily in suffrages. Medieval wills are full of provisions for the acquisition of prayers, along with almsgiving and other acts of pious beneficence.³³ As we have seen, the monks of Westminster Abbey, who said masses for the kings of England, were especially well-endowed beneficiaries of the belief in Purgatory, but virtually all monasteries and churches in the Middle Ages would have been the recipients of donations in exchange for prayers for the dead.³⁴

Theologians assured the faithful that their generous acts of penance and commissioned prayers would not be wasted, even if those for whom the prayers were said went directly to Heaven (or, for that matter, to Hell). Prayers that could not be used by the person for whom they were intended would go to the next of kin.³⁵ Only if no such person were available would the benefit of those prayers be deposited in the papal treasury, along with the supererogatory virtues of the saints and martyrs, to be dispensed to those who properly paid for them. It was always better to err on the side of excess, since there could be no waste, and since inadequate suffrages would work inadequately.³⁶

Catholic texts repeatedly emphasize that the donations on behalf of someone's soul have to be made in the right spirit,³⁷ but they could also be amazingly explicit about the benefits that money could buy. And though the doctrine fostered familial solidarity and the bonds of charity and remembrance linking the living and the dead, appeals were often made directly to self-interest. Hence, for example, the seventeenth-century English Catholic writer Jane Owen urges her wealthy readers to acts of frankly self-serving generosity: “O how many peculiar *Advocates* and *Intercessors* of the then most blessed Souls (released out of *Purgatory*) might a rich Catholic purchase to himself, by this former means, thereby to plead his cause before the Throne of Almighty God, in his greatest need?”³⁸ The French Jesuit Etienne Binet, in a text translated into English in the seventeenth century, emphasizes the burning shame that clever, rich people, finding themselves after death in the sulfurous and stinking smoke of Purgatory, will feel when they realize “that the souls of many country clowns, mere idiots, poor women and

simple religious persons go straight up to Heaven, while they lie there burning.” Their shame, in this account, will derive less from contemplation of their sins than from realization of their stupid carelessness: “And for a handful of Silver, they might have redeemed many years of torments in that fiery Furnace; and alas, they chose rather to give it to their dogs and their horses.”³⁹

Like Owen, Binet warns parents against counting on their children to provide suffrages for them. It is important to make all the necessary financial arrangements before your death, for your heirs will only want more money from your estate and will leave you frying.⁴⁰ Moreover, if you are hesitating between relieving a soul in Purgatory and relieving a beggar or a sick person in this life, you should consider the absolute certainty of the former course of action, underwritten by the full faith and credit of the Catholic Church, and the gross uncertainty of the latter. If you give to a living person, Binet points out, “you may often fail of your aim and lose both your money and your labor.” Why? “Consider the men themselves who for the most part are Ungrateful, Deceitful, Wicked, and so far unsatisfied, that you have never done with them.”⁴¹

There were some, not surprisingly, who thought it unjust that the wealthy could purchase spiritual benefits denied to the poor. “It may fall that the pope grant to rich worldly men that they should go straight to heaven without pain of Purgatory,” complains the fourteenth-century reformer John Wycliffe, “and deny this to poor men, keep they never so [*however carefully they keep*] God’s law.”⁴² Wycliffe believed in the existence of Purgatory, though he rejected prayers for the dead and strenuously objected to the purchase of suffrages. But even among those who concluded that Purgatory was a fable, the charge of unfairness recurs. A poem by the sixteenth-century Scottish Protestant minister John Wedderburn (1500?–1556) begins by declaring happily, if somewhat paradoxically, that the fire of Purgatory is at once “false” and extinguished—“Of the fals fyre of Purgatorie, / Is nocht left in ane sponk [*spark*]”—but continues with a complaint that the priests provided relief from its excruciating pains only to the rich:

At Corps presence [*Mass*] thay wald sing,
For ryches, to slokkin [*slake*] the fyre:
Bot all pure folk that had na thing
Was skaldit baine and lyre [*scalded bone and flesh*].⁴³

The injustice so evident on earth, with the rich living in ease and the poor suffering miserably, is extended by the purchase of suffrages beyond the grave. As the old saying goes, “No penny, no paternoster.”⁴⁴

Aquinas evidently discussed the problem, since the *Supplement*, composed by his disciples from notes and added to the *Summa theologica*, addresses it. The rich are not unfairly favored, he concludes, because the expiation of penalties “is as nothing compared with the possession of the kingdom of Heaven, and there the poor are favored.”⁴⁵ From this perspective, the availability of suffrages to the wealthy is a charitable gesture toward a group whose ordinary chances of reaching Heaven are roughly comparable to those of a camel passing through the eye of a needle. As one might imagine, this argument, however clever, did not quiet all resentment.

In England, as more famously in Germany, the resentment was particularly though not exclusively focused on the sale of indulgences. As early as 1395, the *Twelve Conclusions of the Lollards* articulated some of the key charges against the pope rehearsed by Protestant agitators more than a century later: if the pope actually possesses a vast fund of supererogatory works of virtue, as he says he does, then “he is a treasurer most banished out of charity, since he may deliver the prisoners that been in pain at his own will, and make himself so that he shall never come there.”⁴⁶ The argument was easily extended from the papacy to other parts of the clerical hierarchy. “Why make ye men believe,” asks Jack Upland, the speaker in a poem associated with Langland,

that your golden trental sung of you,
to take therefore ten shillings,
or at least five shillings
will bring souls out of Hell,
or out of purgatory?

If this be sooth, certes,
ye might bring all souls out of pain;
and that will ye not,
and then ye be out of charity.⁴⁷

All of the ill will normally aroused by money changers, usurers, and bankers is thus directed against the pope and the priests with their treasury of unspent suffrages.

To the ordinary feelings awakened by a tantalizing glimpse of hoarded riches were added the fear and anguish deliberately cultivated in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries by popular preachers. As an esoteric doctrine among intellectuals, Purgatory could be the subject of complex debates about the quantification of quality, the ethics of proportionality, the difference between purgatorial and consummatory fire, the precise jurisdictional claims of the Church Militant, the degree to which souls could be said to undergo their pains “voluntarily,” the distinction between pardon “as to the penalty” (*quoad poenam*) and pardon “as to the guilt” (*quoad culpam*), and so forth. But as a popular belief, Purgatory aroused—or at least was meant to arouse—fear. The theologians who teased out the subtle science of the hereafter had, for the most part, a reassuring access to the fund of suffrages; the great majority of Christians did not. The faithful who were most deeply moved by the visions of torment were the most anxious to acquire some remission. To those who lacked the money to pay for such remission, the system of indulgences must have been particularly infuriating. “Why busy ye not to hear / to shrift of poor folk, / as well as of rich,” asks Jack Upland; “Why will ye not be at her dirges, / as ye have been at rich men’s?”⁴⁸

This anguished sense that priests were covetously holding back a benefit they could be freely distributing made the doctrine of Purgatory—or at least the institutional practices that the Roman Catholic Church had built up around the doctrine—vulnerable. In *A Supplication for the Beggars* Simon Fish takes up the smoldering issue of fairness, but he sidesteps class antagonism by pitting one group of beggars, the blind, ill, or impoverished, against another

group, the hypocritical idlers who contrive by “sleights” to exact more and more money. “Nor have they any other color to gather these yearly exactions,” Fish writes, “but that they say they pray for us to God to deliver our souls out of the pains of purgatory” (419).

Not everyone is taken in by the fraud. “Many men of great literature and judgment” dare to point out that Purgatory does not exist. Others observe that if there is a Purgatory, and if the pardons that the pope sells for money can in fact deliver souls from its pains, as the Catholic Church claims, then those same pardons given freely, without charge, would surely be equally effective. Moreover, if the pope can deliver one soul from torment, he can presumably deliver a thousand, and if he can deliver a thousand, he can presumably deliver everyone, “and so destroy Purgatory.” If he possesses such power and does not use it, if he leaves souls to languish in prison unless he is given money, then the pope is nothing but “a cruel tyrant without all charity.” Indeed, if all priests and friars—“the whole sort of the spirituality”—will allow souls to be punished for want of prayers and will “pray for no man but for them that give them money” (419), then they are all tyrants.

Anyone who publicly says such things is taking a serious risk, Fish acknowledges, for the priests are quick to accuse their critics of heresy. In fact, even those who have a clear cause of action against a cleric—for murder, “ravishment of his wife, of his daughter, robbery, trespass, mayhem, debt, or any other offence” (417)—are afraid to seek legal remedy for fear of excommunication. Moreover, there is no recourse to Parliament. If the king himself thought to propose laws in Parliament against the priests, Fish writes provocatively, “I am in doubt whether ye be able: Are they not stronger in your own parliament house than yourself?” (417).

But, if he acts on his own authority, the king has enough power to save his realm and succor his poor starving subjects. He can do so at a stroke by seizing the wealth that the wolfish priests have stolen from the people and using that wealth to relieve the needy. As for the thousands of lazy monks and friars, Fish urges the king to put an end to their racket once and for all: “Tie these holy idle thieves to the carts to be whipped naked about every market town

til they will fall to labor that they by their importunate begging take not away the alms that the good Christian people would give unto us sore, impotent, miserable people” (34).

THE DEAD HAND

Fish’s anticlericalism may well have struck a chord among impotent, miserable people unable to afford suffrages, but far more important, in a polemic addressed to Henry VIII, was the fact that the English state had for a long time been concerned about the fiscal implications of intercessory institutions like chantries.⁴⁹ The concern, which often flared into hostility and covetousness, centered on the fact that over the years a great deal of property had been progressively removed from the tax rolls and given in donation to the church. Ecclesiastical property was, at least in theory, inalienable; hence lands and other goods donated by those wishing to secure prayers for the suffering souls in Purgatory ceased to change hands and became “dead.” As early as the thirteenth century, statutes attempted to limit or control what was called *mortmain*—literally, in French, “dead hand”: property forever lost to a corporate body that never died and hence never released its iron grip on its rents and income. The statutes helped to produce income for the crown, by imposing costly fines and other charges on those who wished to donate real estate to the church, but they did not stop such donations altogether, nor did they wrest property already in the ecclesiastical dead hand back into taxable social circulation.

Originally devised to restrain gifts to the church for the saying of prayers, by the sixteenth century *mortmain* had become virtually synonymous with such gifts. In Bale’s fiercely anti-Catholic play *King Johan*, the character called Sedition announces that he plays many clerical parts:

Sometime I can be a monk in a long sad cowl;
Sometime I can be a nun and look like an owl;
Sometime a canon in a surplice fair and white;
A chapterhouse monk sometime I appear in sight . . .

Sometime the bishop with a miter and a cope
A gray friar sometime with cut shoes and a rope;
Sometime I can play the white monk, sometime the friar,
The Purgatory priest and every mans wife desire.
This company hath provided for me mortmain,
For that I might ever among their sort remain.⁵⁰

So ineffective have the *mortmain* statutes been, Fish tells the king, so successfully have the priests exploited people's faith and fear, that the realm has been split in two: the temporal kingdom is in competition with what the clergy call the spiritual kingdom, or what would be better termed "the kingdom of the bloodsuckers" (418). And the competitive advantage lies with the priests, for whatever "is once given them cometh never from them again." In the fantastic imagery of *A Supplication for the Beggars* the Catholic Church figures as an enormous maw into which everything—not property alone but the whole moral and political life of the nation—disappears: "O how all the substance of your Realm forthwith, your sword, power, crown, dignity, and obedience of your people, runneth headlong into the insatiable whirlpool of these greedy goulafres [*gluttons*] to be swallowed and devoured" (419).⁵¹

For Fish, the nightmare is not simply that the kingdom is divided but that it will eventually pass by an inexorable logic into the sole possession of the priests. More stringent *mortmain* legislation will not suffice to avert this end, for unless they come to understand that priests are "cruel, unclean, unmerciful, and hypocrites" (420), pious laymen will only resent attempts to restrict their ability to donate their wealth to the church. "I am as good a man as my father," the lords, knights, squires, gentlemen, and yeomen of England will tell themselves; "Why may I not as well give them as much as my father did?" (420). Until people grasp that the whole system of papal indulgences and pardons is a hypocritical fraud, they will contrive to evade any restrictions in order to purchase remission from purgatorial pain, as their forefathers did before them. Government half-measures will only slow the church's steady accumulation of wealth, not stop it. Or as Tyndale, with a longer view of the same process, puts it, "If men should continue to buy prayer

four or five hundred years more, as they have done, there would not be a foot of ground in Christendom, neither any worldly thing, which they, that will be called spiritual only, should not possess. And thus all should be called spiritual.”⁵²

THE COMMODIFICATION OF FABLES

“If men should continue to buy prayer”: for the early-sixteenth-century reformers, the fuel driving this whole monstrous juggernaut is a corrupt dream, the dream that salvation from a temporary postmortem punishment can be obtained through the purchase of prayers. “This Purgatory and the Pope’s pardons,” Fish writes to the king, “is all the cause of the translation of your kingdom so fast into their hands” (419–20). And the most remarkable feature of this immense “translation” is that it is entirely dependent on an invention. “There is,” as Fish flatly and accurately writes, “not one word spoken of it in all Holy Scripture.” “For Purgatory invented was,” as a crude polemic printed in 1570 puts it, “for to persuade that Popes had power, / to pardon every crime. Not only here when men doth live, / but also after death.”⁵³ The faithful have been led to believe, without any scriptural authority, in the existence of a realm between Heaven and Hell and then, still more fantastically, led to believe that the pope has the power to mitigate the torments of souls imprisoned in this realm. Driven by fear and a longing for some protection from the flames, generations of pious Christians have been lured by a fiction into handing over their wealth to clerical drones.

In their insatiable craving for riches, these drones also resort to physical intimidation and coercion. The Henrician reformers dwell on the notorious case of Richard Hunne, who refused to pay “mortuary”—the customary gift claimed by a priest on the death of a parishioner—for his dead infant son. Hunne was accused of heresy, imprisoned, and then found hanging in his cell on December 4, 1514.⁵⁴ (It is worth recalling that Tyndale, Frith, Latimer, and others who took up the assault on Purgatory were all martyred, as Fish would certainly have been, had Thomas More gotten his

hands on him.) But Protestant polemicists know that violence is not enough to account for the systematic exploitation of a whole society, from aristocrats and warriors to the simplest of villagers, nor is the limitless venality of a well-organized, complex, bureaucratic institution. The explanation, rather, lies in the way that fables seize hold of the mind, create vast unreal spaces, and people those spaces with imaginary beings and detailed events. The priests' principal power derives from their hold upon the imagination of their flock.

Like Fish, Tyndale does not altogether and explicitly deny that there could be some middle state, between death and judgment. "It seem not impossible haply," he writes with a deliberate flourish of uncertainty, "that there might be a place where the souls might be kept for a space, to be taught and instructed."⁵⁵ Such a hypothetical proposition is permissible; the task is to refuse detailed imaginings of the kind that the papists offer: "[Y]et that there should be such a jail as they jangle, and such fashions as they feign, is plainly impossible, and repugnant to the scripture."

Here, as in other aspects of his thought, Tyndale is closely following Luther, who tried at least in his early writings to keep open the possibility of a place of purgation without imagining anything very explicit about it. As a pious young Catholic, Luther—imbued with that aspect of the doctrine that stressed the duty to help those whom one loved—had wanted to free his grandfather from Purgatory and therefore ascended the Santa Scala in Rome on his knees, reciting an Our Father on each step. In this way, it was said, it was possible to save a soul. But when he had arrived at the top, doubt seized him: "Who knows if it is really true?"⁵⁶ Despite this doubt, in his "Defense and Explanation of All the Articles," Luther still declares that he personally does not deny the existence of Purgatory: "I still hold that it exists . . . though I have found no way of proving it incontrovertibly from Scripture or reason." But in the absence of such incontrovertible proof, it is wrong, he writes, to force anyone to come to the same conclusion: "My advice is that no one allow the pope to invent new articles of faith, but be willing to remain in ignorance, with St. Augustine, about what the souls in Purgatory are doing and what their condition is."⁵⁷

By 1530 Luther came to denounce the whole notion of Purgatory, but in the “Defense and Explanation,” written in 1520, he was still clinging to a minimalist vision of suffering souls: “For us it is enough to know that they suffer great and unbearable pain and crave your help.”⁵⁸ Any further inquiry is a form of dangerous curiosity, curiosity that leads, as the Puritan divine Thomas Wilcox put it in 1581, to an uncontrolled proliferation of fantasies: “For if one may be suffered in the vain and idle imaginations of his own heart and head to discourse without the warrant of the word, upon this or any other such like point . . . why shall it not be lawful, for others to doe the like? And so by that means, we shall have a whole world of men’s fantasies propounded unto us. . . .”⁵⁹ The key is to stop rampant speculation, to learn to be lowly wise.

Several prominent English Protestants in the early sixteenth century attempt, like Luther, to hold onto a notion of Purgatory but to strip it of its specificity, its space, its rituals. The great preacher Hugh Latimer writes that there is some middle state, but the souls in it are probably not tortured, even if they sound as though they are in pain: “They need to cry loud to God: they be in Christ and Christ in them.” These souls might do something for the living, but the living can do (and need do) nothing for them, for their salvation is assured: “I had rather be in Purgatory,” Latimer writes wryly, “than in the bishop of London’s prison; for in this I might die bodily for lack of meat; in that I could not; in this I might die ghostly for fear of pain, or lack of good counsel; in that I could not: in this I might be in extreme necessity; in that I could not.” It is pointless to endow prayers for the dead, nor indeed would the souls in Purgatory desire such empty gifts: “[W]e see not who needeth in Purgatory; but we see who needeth in this world. . . . I am sure the souls in Purgatory be so charitable, and of charity so loth to have God dishonoured, that they would have nothing withdrawn from the poor here in this world, to be bestowed upon them, which might occasion the dishonour of God.”⁶⁰ Money wasted on Purgatory is not only withdrawn from the poor; it is withheld from the state: giving money for chantries, trentals, and the like, Latimer writes wittily, is rendering to God that which is

Caesar's. As for the questions that remain about the residual, vague concept of Purgatory, Latimer, like Luther, advises a frank expression of uncertainty: "Now my answer is this: 'I cannot tell'."⁶¹

But remaining in ignorance is actually quite difficult. Tyndale notes two particular qualities of the imagination that pull powerfully toward a fraudulent specificity: an extraordinary capacity to shape textual materials in an endless variety of forms and an equally extraordinary capacity to give these forms the illusion of solidity. Mocking the competition among the followers of various scholastic theologians, Tyndale writes that "every man to maintain his doctor withal, corrupteth the scripture, and fashioneth it after his own imagination, as a potter doth his clay." The conventional image of the potter here serves to insist upon radical malleability: "Of what text thou Hell provest, will another prove Purgatory; another *limbo patrum*; and another the assumption of our lady; and another shall prove of the same text that an ape hath a tail."⁶² It might seem that the consequence of this absolute interpretive license would be to render Scripture blank or invisible, but for Tyndale its principal corrupting effect is, rather, as he puts it, to materialize or "darken" the Word of God. The false prelates made us "image-servants; referring our deeds unto the person of God, and worshipping him as an image of our own imagination, with bodily work; saying moreover, if we would not do such penance here at their injunctions, we must do it in another world; and so feigned Purgatory, where we must suffer seven years for every sin."⁶³ Through the imagination, illusions assume the opacity and materiality of bodies, bodies that require "bodily work," and the faithful are thus lured into idolatry.

Purgatory, concludes Tyndale, is "a poet's fable."⁶⁴

THROUGHOUT the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Protestants of all persuasions return again and again to this set of ideas: not only the fraudulence of Purgatory, its lack of scriptural basis, and its corrupt institutional uses but its special relation to dream, fantasy, and imagination. At one extreme we may take Richard Corbett, a celebrated wit, friend of Ben Jonson, bishop of Oxford and

of Norwich, and a sharply satirical anti-Puritan as well as anti-Papist. “Your holy water, purgatory, bulls,” Corbett mocks the Catholic priesthood,

Wherewith you make the common people gulls,
Are gross abuses of fantastic brains
Subtly devis’d only for private gains.⁶⁵

At the other extreme, we find the sober, uncompromising Thomas Wilcox, warning that to permit the lawful circulation of “vain and idle imaginations” about Purgatory will inevitably lead to the spread of “a whole world of men’s fantasies.”⁶⁶ So, too, the more moderate divine John Veron, a French-born Protestant, ordained in England and imprisoned for his beliefs under Mary Tudor. Veron’s Protestant spokesman Eutrapelus in his dialogue *The Hunting of Purgatory to Death* (1561) argues that the whole doctrine of Purgatory is the lying invention of poetry. His wavering friend Dydimus concedes that he had not realized “that the poets are great liars and that their books be full of lying tales and vain fables: and also that both they and painters, have had always license to feign, whatsoever please them.”⁶⁷

An early-seventeenth-century tract spells out the Protestant charge against the Catholic doctrine of Purgatory with painstaking explicitness. The text, published under the pseudonym Nickgroom of the Hoby-Stable, was by Sir Edward Hoby (1560–1617), the eldest son of the great translator of Castiglione and the nephew of Queen Elizabeth’s principal adviser, Lord Burghley. Hoby is responding to a defense of Purgatory by the Jesuit John Floyd:

Such is the notorious folly of your Preacher . . . that he gathereth a Gospel out of a Poem, and that not written historically, or doctrinally, but in pathetical verse, full of Metaphors, Metonymies, Apostrophes, Prosopopeis, and other as well rhetorical figures, as Poetical flowers, which to take in a proper and of rigorous sense, is folly, to urge them as points and articles [of] faith, is such a solemn foolery, that it may seem the next degree to madness. He should know the difference betwixt an

Evangelist, and a Poet, a Gospel and a Poem, rigid truth, and figurative speech, Articles of Faith, and poetical fancies.

Hoby's work is nominally a dialogue, but in response we are given not a defense of Catholicism and not an acknowledgment of the pervasiveness of metaphor, metonymy, apostrophe, and prosopopoeia in Scripture but, rather, a defense of poetry: "Is not this," a character objects, "to shift off their *Idolatrous appeals*, their *mental* and *imaginary petitions* to the Poet's pen?"⁶⁸

At moments in the Protestant polemic the emphasis falls almost entirely on the emptiness of the fictive imagination, as if "imagined" were inevitably synonymous with "untrue." Cardinal Allen's defenses of Purgatory, writes the acerbic Puritan controversialist William Fulke in 1577, may be compared to "the arguments of those vain fables that were wont to be printed in English of *Bevis of Hampton*, *Guy of Warwick*, and such like, where the arguments show how such a Knight overcame such a Giant, how such a sorcerer wrought such a miracle, which are rolled as confidently as though they were true, and yet there is no man of mean wit so ignorant, but he knoweth them to be feigned fantasies." To Allen's urgent appeal—"Therefore I shall desire all Catholic readers, as they believe this grave sentence of God to come, and fear the rod of our father's correction, that they prevent the same, by lowly submitting themselves unto the chastisement of our kind mother the Church"—Fulke sarcastically replies that it is mere rhetoric. "As for that Prosopopoeia of the mother, opposing her to the father, in word is more rhetorical than Christian in deed, and because it is unfit for the matter, it is more of garrulity than of eloquence." The whole Catholic edifice, Fulke mocks, is an absurd pageant manned by a belligerent impostor: "Now this lusty gallant as though he had fully repaired and fortified the old ruinous and battered towers of *limbus patrum*, with canvas painted walls, he standeth upon his bulwark of brown paper, and crieth defiance to all his enemies."⁶⁹

A "bulwark of brown paper": Protestants sometimes wrote as if the whole doctrine of Purgatory were a stage set, a will-o'-the-wisp,

a filthy spiderweb they could simply sweep away. Certainly, by the time of Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), it had been swept away in England, so completely that the poet does not feel obliged to condemn or mock it. In Milton's cosmos, there is no purgatorial space at all and no conspicuous refutation of what was once such a central object of Protestant loathing. The nearest thing to an allusion comes in the grotesque fantasy of the fate of those among the horde of "Embryos and idiots, eremites and friars / White, black and gray, with all their trumpery" (3:474–75),⁷⁰ who hope through superstitious means to pass disguised into Paradise. Just at the foot of Heaven's ascent, writes Milton, a violent wind sweeps these deluded impostors off their feet and blows them into the "devious air":

then might ye see
Cows, hoods and habits, with their wearers tossed
And fluttered into rags, then relics, beads,
Indulgences, dispenses, pardons, bulls,
The sport of winds: all these upwhirled aloft
Fly o'er the backside of the world far off
Into a limbo large and broad, since called
The Paradise of Fools, to few unknown
Long after, now unpeopled, and untrod.

(3:489–97)

The indulgences that flutter in the wind, along with all the other rubbish, are all that remains of the elaborate cult of the dead, and what was once a massive, imposing realm has been transmuted into a comic limbo.⁷¹ But this Miltonic perspective, which has shaped our own account of the past, is highly misleading. In early-sixteenth-century England, there was nothing gossamer-like about Purgatory. The great imaginary construction had produced highly tangible results.

Hence at other moments, what is most startling is not the fraudulence of the imaginary place but its power. Tyndale's young follower John Frith writes that when he read the accounts of Purgatory written by those "witty and learned men," Thomas More and the bishop of Rochester, he was struck by the fact that the accounts

did not match: "M. More saith, that 'there is no water in Purgatory;' and my Lord of Rochester saith, that 'there is water;' Master More saith, that 'the ministers of punishment are devils,' and my Lord of Rochester saith, 'that the ministers of the punishment are angels;' " and so forth. The conflicting details, Frith concludes, "made mine heart yearn and fully to consent, that this their painful Purgatory was but a vain imagination." The vanity (that is, the emptiness) of the doctrine, the fact that the great prison house is "nothing but man's imagination and phantasy" and its fires a mere piece of "poetry,"⁷² does not mean, however, that it is without consequences in the world: purgatorial fire, though a figment of the imagination, brings real gold and silver into the coffers of the Catholic Church.

When in 1545 and 1547, with zealous Protestantism in the ascendant, the English Parliament acted to dissolve the whole system of intercessory foundations created to offer prayers for souls in Purgatory, the lawmakers and bureaucrats found themselves faced with an immense task. They had to strike at colleges, free chapels, chantries, hospitals, fraternities, brotherhoods, guilds, stipendiary priests, and priests for terms of years, as well as at many smaller funds left to pay for trentals (the cycle of thirty requiem masses), obits (the yearly memorial service), flowers, bells, and candles. *Britannia*, the great survey of the realm by the antiquary William Camden, gives as the total number of suppressed foundations 2,374 chantries and free chapels, 110 hospitals, and 90 nonuniversity colleges, a list that modern scholars regard as a substantial underestimation.⁷³ It would have been a social catastrophe simply to shut down all institutions that had been created in the attempt to provide prayers for the dead.

Government commissioners struggled to separate out the religious functions of such institutions, functions that they wished to ban, from benefits to the community which often seemed manifest and even indispensable. It was one thing to stop the sick from praying for the soul of the founder; quite another to shut down the hospital that the founder had endowed in order to acquire a long-term fund of prayers.⁷⁴ In part the task was a legal one: crown lawyers had to figure out how to break a large number of wills, divert-

ing funds from their intended purpose and violating the explicit wishes of the testators. In part it was institutional: to rid itself of Purgatory, English culture had to embark on a huge enterprise of recycling and reorienting. Key aspects of the community's structure had been bound up with its ongoing relationship to souls in the afterlife. If that relationship were to be decisively broken—Protestant reformers hoped to achieve this end—then the ultimate purpose of many significant institutions had to be reconceived and the impulse to assist others channeled in different directions. In part, therefore, the task was also psychological: men and women had to be led to reimagine their own postmortem fate, as well as that of their loved ones.

“I HATE DEAD NAMES”

We can observe the traces of this psychological reimagining in John Donne's remarkable *Devotions on Emergent Occasions* (1623–1624). Lying ill, brooding on the resemblance between his sickbed and a grave, Donne tells himself that his condition is worse than death:

In the grave I may speak through the stones, in the voice of my friends, and in the accents of those words which their love may afford my memory; here I am mine own ghost, and rather affright my beholders than instruct them; they conceive the worst of me now, and yet fear worse; they give me for dead now, and yet wonder how I do when they wake at midnight, and ask how I do to-morrow. Miserable, and (though common to all) inhuman posture, where I must practise my lying in the grave by lying still, and not practise my resurrection by rising any more.⁷⁵

“In the grave I may speak through the stones”: the phrase invokes tales of ghostly voices surging up uncannily from the grave. It was precisely by means of such voices (or, more accurately, reports of such voices)—along with accounts of voyages to the otherworld and the testimony of those rare individuals who died but then mi-

raculously revived—that the existence of Purgatory was affirmed again and again throughout the later Middle Ages. The purpose of spectral visitations was most often to plead for prayers, almsgiving, pious fasts, and above all masses, in order to obtain some relief from excruciating pain. Less commonly, ghosts returned, as Donne puts it, to “instruct” the living, that is, to issue warnings, disclose hidden wrongs, or urge the restitution of ill-gotten gains.

Throughout the many medieval and Renaissance accounts of these voices or apparitions of the dead, there is a fairly standard pattern.⁷⁶ The ghost generally appears shortly after death, while the memory of the deceased, usually a close relative or friend of the living person to whom the vision manifests itself, is still fresh. Ghostly apparitions, then, are quite distinct from the persistence of the dead through fame: hauntings are not about the dream of occupying a place in the memories of future generations, not about the longing to escape from the limitations of one's own narrow life-world, not even about the craving for persistence that leads men to engrave their names on stone tablets. The spectral voice is not for strangers; it is for those who awake at midnight and think about the dead person whom they have loved, and wonder with mingled fear and hope about the fate of that person's soul.⁷⁷

But it is not exactly his own spectral voice that Donne imagines echoing through the stones; it is the voice of his friends. And he does not imagine their words—“the words which their love may afford my memory”—as the prayers that pious Catholics hoped would relieve their sufferings in the otherworld. Rather, by lovingly remembering him after his death, the friends will give Donne's voice at least the semblance of continued existence in this world. Such an existence, however limited, would be preferable, Donne thinks, to his present condition, so leveled by illness that he is his own ghost. In his friends' minds, waking at midnight or thinking about him on the morrow, there is not sweet memory but fear, not gentle closure but ongoing dread.

In the universe conjured up by Donne's *Devotions*, there is ample space for Heaven, and Hell; there is even room for a plurality of worlds; but there is no place for Purgatory. When, in the course of

a long work obsessed with death and the afterlife, a ghost makes its appearance, it is only the living Donne himself, gravely ill and hence frightening to his friends, and not the spirit of a dead man who is being purified before rising to bliss. The middle place where such spirits could have been found, by the millions, only a generation or two earlier—and we might recall that Donne was raised as a Catholic and related by marriage to the family of Thomas More—has vanished. To be sure, Donne can invoke it as a metaphor; in Elegy VI, he speaks of kisses he has breathed into “my purgatory, faithless thee.” But, declaring that “I hate dead names,” he goes on to warn his mistress that she is teaching him to look with “new eyes” and to fall away from his old faith: “[T]hus taught, I shall / As nations do from Rome, from thy love fall.” Such a falling away will, he knows, provoke anger and rejection, but he will be armed against their effects:

[W]hen I
Am the recusant, in that resolute state,
What hurts it me to be excommunicate?⁷⁸

Purgatory has become nothing but a “dead name” for Donne, and he is resolute in turning away from it, as he turned away from other aspects of Rome. Yet it leaves a ghostly trace in his writing, and not only in his sardonic reference to his mistress. In his *Devotions* he speaks of three kinds of hearts: the first, suitable to be presented to God, are “perfect hearts; straight hearts, no perverseness without; and clean hearts, no foulness within”; the second, suitable for the devil, are “hearts that burn like ovens,” hearts fueled by lust, envy, and ambition, Judas hearts. But there is a third category, one to which Donne himself belongs:

There is then a middle kind of hearts, not so perfect as to be given but that the very giving mends them; not so desperate as not to be accepted but that the very accepting dignifies them. This is a melting heart, and a troubled heart, and a wounded heart, and a broken heart, and a contrite heart; and by the powerful working of thy piercing Spirit such a heart I have.⁷⁹

This “middle kind” is precisely the category assigned by Catholic tradition to the souls in Purgatory.

Theologians had for centuries pondered the fate of those Christians who were neither completely good nor completely bad, and, in particular, the fate of those at the brink of death burdened with some sins for which they had not done (or had begun but not yet completed) the canonical penance. The sins in question were not the gravest ones, mortal sins for which Hell was the inescapable punishment, but lesser ones (“venial sins,” as a distinction fully formulated in the twelfth century put it), for which, if justice were to be satisfied, some punishment was still due.

In Donne’s analysis of his spiritual condition, he belongs neither with those whose hearts are perfect nor with those whose hearts are indelibly stained. Contemplating his own death, he recognizes that he stands in urgent need of purgation. But the cleansing for which he hopes has no special place assigned to it in the otherworld; it must happen now, in this life, through the healing power of Jesus’ sacrifice. “Let thy spirit of true contrition and sorrow,” he prays, “pass all my sins, through these eyes, into the wounds of thy Son, and I shall be clean, and my soul so much better purged than my body, as it is ordained for better and a longer life.”⁸⁰ With this prayer for a spiritual purging that accompanies and surpasses the physical purging prescribed by his doctors, Donne rises from his sickbed like Lazarus from the grave. It is as if the entire Catholic vision of death, reckoning, purgation, and ascent had been compressed, reoriented, and forced into the drama of sickness and recovery in this life.

“Any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind,” Donne writes in the most celebrated passage of the *Devotions*, “and therefore never send to know for whom the bells tolls; it tolls for thee.”⁸¹ The famous image here is not historically neutral: the tolling of the bells in Protestant England was a subject of contention.⁸² More zealous Protestants wanted to see the custom eliminated as a remnant of popery, and they had a strong case. Traditionally the bells, signaling the passing of a fellow Christian, were a call for prayers that would help speed the newly departed soul through its purgatorial torment. Such assistance would come

most naturally from the immediate family of the deceased, but the bells alerted and invoked the assistance of the entire congregation, for all the faithful, living and dead, were bound together. The sound of the bells demarcated a geographical unit of fellow feeling within whose limits prayers were particularly appropriate. The English church instituted restrictions on this practice, but it did not eliminate bell ringing altogether. Donne's image gives unforgettable expression to the shared community of the living and the dead. At the same time it redirects the focus: the dead are no longer a special group imprisoned in a distant penal colony; they are ourselves.

The principal idea, of course, has to do with participation in the human community: "No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main." But the force of the image of the bells tolling is bound up with its uncanny implication: you may not have realized it, but you are on your deathbed; indeed, you may already be dead. Donne began his work by imagining himself as his own ghost, an image he now immeasurably deepens. But where do these ghosts—all of us, in effect, or at least all of us who have heard the bells toll—reside? In a realm under the earth? In a special place set aside for purgation? No, here in this world, a world that is an enormous charnel house, where we await resurrection.⁸³ "Where Lazarus had been four days," Donne tells God, "I have been fifty years in this putrefaction; why dost thou not call me, as thou didst him, *with a loud voice*, since my soul is as dead as his body was?"⁸⁴

In a strange, vivid realization of this notion, on February 25, 1631, less than two months before his death, Donne preached his final sermon at St. Paul's wrapped in his shroud. "To the amazement of some beholders," wrote his biographer, Izaak Walton, Donne "presented himself not to preach mortification by a living voice: but, mortality by a decayed body and dying face."⁸⁵ The sermon, "Death's Duell," vividly imagines what it calls the body's second death: "the death of corruption and putrefaction, and vermiculation, and incineration, and dispersion in and from the grave, in which every dead man dies over again." As if he is already dead,

Donne politely accepts prayers for his soul, but they are almost without significance: "I thank him that prays for me when the bell tolls, but I thank him much more that catechises me, or preaches to me, or instructs me how to live."⁸⁶ There are no ghosts, save the Holy Ghost, no suffrages, save preaching to the living. For the dying Donne there is an almost frantic hope of Heaven; there is an intense fear of Hell and a still more intense fear of putrefaction; but there is no Purgatory.

AS WE HAVE seen in the course of this chapter, the Protestants who attacked the doctrine of Purgatory had worked out an account of the poetics of Purgatory. They charted the ways in which certain elemental human fears, longings, and fantasies were being shaped and exploited by an intellectual elite who carefully packaged fraudulent, profit-making innovations as if they were ancient traditions. In the 1626 sermon at which we glanced in the prologue, John Donne links humans' love for objects of their own making to the legal ruses by which clever men get around real estate restrictions and thence to Purgatory, transubstantiation, the invention of tradition, and the diseased imagination: "For, as men are most delighted with things of their own making, their own planting, their own purchasing, their own building, so are these men therefore enamoured of Purgatory: Men that can make Articles of faith of their own Traditions, (And as men to elude the law against new Buildings, first build sheds, or stables, and after erect houses there, as upon old foundations, so these men first put forth Traditions of their own, and then erect those Traditions into Articles of faith, as ancient foundations of Religion) Men that make God himself of a piece of bread, may easily make Purgatory of a Dream, and of Apparitions, and imaginary visions of sick or melancholic men."⁸⁷

By the nineteenth century the tangle of dream, crafty institutional practice, and material consequences that Donne identifies in this extraordinary passage had hardened into the concept of ideology. But that concept, as modern thinkers have tried to deploy it in a wide range of cultural analyses, has been dismayingly

insensitive to the imaginative dimension that most fascinated Donne and his contemporaries. In the Old Testament, Donne remarks, there is no precedent for Purgatory; its foundation stone was laid by Plato, who is the patriarch of the pagan Greek church. “The Latin Church had Patriarchs too for this Doctrine,” Donne continues, “though not Philosophers, yet Poets.”⁸⁸ What we call ideology, then, Renaissance England called poetry.