The Seven Sleepers, Eros, and the Unincorporable Infinite of the Human Person

79-100 minutes

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Figure 1. Hans Memling, *The Resurrection with the Martyrdom of St Sebastian and the Ascension*

*I know you want to keep on living. You do not want to die. And you want to pass from this life to another in such a way that you will not rise again as a dead man, but fully alive and transformed. This is what you desire. This is the deepest human feeling; mysteriously, the soul itself wishes and instinctively desires it.*

—Augustine[1]

**Wrenched Out of the Their Histories**

In Kevin Brockmeier’s novel *The Brief History of the Dead*, there are only two geographies, separated by the membrane of death. First, there is the City, which is inhabited by the recently departed, mainly victims of a viral pandemic that has wiped out the entire population of the Earth, except for one person, Laura Byrd, who inhabits the other place, Antarctica, where she had been working at a research station when, essentially, the world came to an end. There is significant bleed-through between the City and the world. As the weather worsens in Antarctica, snow begins to cover every surface in the City, and as Laura lies frozen in her tent one late
afternoon, feeling her heartbeat in every part of her body, that same heartbeat fills the air of the City “like a soft rain of ashes—so abundant that it revealed the smallest motions of the wind.”[2] Those who live in the City conduct each day much as they did when they were alive: going to work, eating meals at home and in restaurants, strolling the streets and sitting on park benches, going to the movies, having sex, and even engaging in debates over where it is, exactly, they might actually be, and what they are. “Of course we’re bodies,” one of the characters argues with another. “Bodies and nothing but. Have you ever heard of a spirit that ate hamburgers and chili dogs for lunch, a spirit that got leg cramps in the middle of the night?”[3]

Laura Byrd has a vague idea what has happened to everyone and spends most of the novel trudging across the ice shelf looking for other survivors and simply trying to stay alive. Apparently the human figures of the afterworld City exist only in direct proportion to someone’s living memory of them, and because Laura is the only human being left alive on earth, only the souls of those she can remember can keep on living, as it were. There are Laura’s family members, of course, and past lovers and friends, teachers and fellow workers, but also anyone she ever ran into and can still remember: mailmen, street beggars, four Korean women who played mahjongg in her neighborhood park, her doorman, a stranger she once gave a book of matches to, and so on and so forth. As long as she can stay alive, so will the inhabitants of the City, all of
whom have died and are keenly aware that they are in some kind of purgatory or outer room that lies adjacent to the place you go when no one is left who remembers you at all.

When Laura finally succumbs to the elements, lying alone and hallucinating fiercely in her tent in a penguin rookery at the edge of the Antarctic ice shelf, her toes and fingers black and crumbled from frostbite, the streets and buildings and bridges of the City begin to disappear, and the inhabitants all gather at the park in the center of town, waiting “for that power that would pull them like a chain into whatever came next, into that distant world where broken souls are wrenched out of their histories.”[4] As Laura lies dying, the predominant noise outside of her tent is the incessant, hectic chattering of the penguins—a harsh reminder that, even with every single human being, and therefore all of human memory, extinct, the world still continues, and there is no one who is human to register the loss. Brockmeier’s novel is a beautiful and arresting meditation on the afterlife, and on the belief, prevalent in many cultures, that without the proper rituals of remembrance, the dead are either condemned to wander perpetually through non-places or do not really exist at all, except as general abstractions. And in its heartbreakingly sad last sentence, just quoted, the novel also speaks to a very human anxiety and dread over the idea of a disembodied afterlife, one in which body and soul must split apart and the all-too-human world which has been loved and has made the journey of the self possible is left behind for good.
Regardless of Paul’s statements in I Corinthians 15 that the human person “is sown a natural body” but rises as a “spiritual body,” and that “flesh and blood cannot possess the kingdom of God,” and despite the best efforts of certain theologians, such as Origen and Aquinas, to formulate an understanding of soul as some form of disembodied personal identity,\[5\] as Caroline Walker Bynum writes, “From the second to the fourteenth centuries, doctrinal announcements, miracle stories, and popular preaching continued to insist on the resurrection of exactly the material bits that were laid in the tomb.”\[6\] Further,

a concern for material and structural continuity [after death] showed remarkable persistence even where it seemed to almost require philosophical incoherence, theological equivocation, or aesthetic offensiveness. . . . The idea of person, bequeathed by the Middle Ages to the modern world, was not a concept of soul escaping body or soul using body; it was a concept of self in which physicality was integrally bound to sensation, emotion, reasoning, identity—and therefore finally to whatever one means by salvation.\[7\]

There were, of course, endless theological controversies and debates over the question of bodily resurrection, centering mainly on the issue of how a body, which is inherently corruptible, could be incorruptible and still be a body, and whether or not resurrected bodies represented a continuity of the same or some kind of transfiguration. “To put it very
simply,” Bynum writes, “if there is change, how can there be continuity and hence identity? If there is continuity, how will there be change and hence glory?”[8]

Augustine devoted a good deal of the last book of De civitate dei to answering the many worrisome doubts over the reconstitution of material bodies into new spiritual selves (Will resurrected bodies have genitals? What about scars? Will they be fat? Will aborted fetuses rise?), and he even addressed the issue of what happens to human flesh ingested by animals or other humans (answer: consumed flesh evaporates into the air where God collects and reconstitutes it). Ultimately, Augustine answered all concerns this way in Book 22, Chapter 21:

Sed etsi uel casul aliquo graui uel inimicorum inmanitate totum penitus conteratur in puluerum atque in auras uel in aquas dispersum, quantum fieri potest, nusquam esse sinatur omnino: nullo modo subtrahi poterit omnipotentiae Creatoris, sed capillus in eo capitis non peribit. Erit ergo spiritui subdita caro spiritalis, sed tamen caro, non spiritus; sicut carnisubditus fuit spiritus ipse carnalis, sed tamen spiritus, non caro.[9]

Indeed, Augustine went so far as to emphasize the yearning of the departed soul for the body in Book 13, Chapter 20 of De civitate dei, where, in relation to the idea that saints have no grief in their own deaths, even though they have been separated from their bodies, he wrote:

Non enim, sicut Platoni uisum est, corpora obliuione
desiderat, sed potius, quia meminerunt quid sibi ab eo sit
promissum, qui neminem fallit, qui eis etiam de capillorum
suorum integritate securitatem dedit, resurrectionem
corporum, in quibus multa dura perpessi sunt, nihil in eis
ulterius tale sensuri desiderabiliter et patienter expectant.[10]

We can see here a glimmer of the idea that, for Augustine, the
body was somehow a necessary vehicle for the fullest
possible expression of a uniquely individual soul, or person,
for why else would soul desire, or need, a material body?
Soul, in fact, in this scenario, remains in an always loving
relationship, even through physical suffering, with body, which
is, to a certain extent, the only means by which any soul
(person) can be distinct from any other soul (person).

There was no better means than hagiography, as well as the
cults of saints’ graves and relics, for vividly illustrating to a
general medieval populace the importance of, and even desire
for, bodily integrity in the resurrection. As Peter Brown writes,
“the original death of the martyr, and even the long, drawn-out
dying of the confessor and the ascetic, was vibrant with the
miraculous suppression of suffering,” and the public reading of
passiones in late Antiquity was “a psychodrame that mobilized
in the hearer those strong fantasies of disintegration and
reintegration which lurked in the back of the mind of ancient
men.”[11] Michael Lapidge writes that the passiones “form an
extensive and distinctive body of early Christian literature.”[12]
Written in Latin and Greek, “as well as Syriac, Coptic, and
other languages, *passiones* survive in large numbers . . . from all parts of the early Christian world, especially those places where persecution was most vigorously pursued: Nicomedia, Antioch, Palestine, Alexandria, and Latin-speaking North Africa.”[13] The mutilated bodies of actual martyrs may, in fact, have been one of the spurs for many of the early Christian treatises on resurrection, and later martyr stories “are filled with examples of saints who do not even notice the most exquisite and extraordinary cruelties,” and whose bodies, while under torture and violent assault, somehow remain beautifully unchanged.[14]

It is important to note, as Lapidge does, that the *passiones* were written “at least a century, and perhaps several centuries, later than the ending of persecution with the Peace of the Church in 313” and that “there are few reliable (that is, contemporary and impartial) witnesses to the circumstances of persecution.”[15] Regardless of their historical accuracy, or lack thereof, the early Christian literature of martyrdom was steeped in the spectacle of bodies tortured, burned, hacked, ripped apart, and then miraculously recomposed, and as Brown points out, “while the body is ‘painted with wash on wash of blood,’ its core, the soul, remains all of one piece.”[16] Fidelity to the past was not what really mattered, although the stories always strove for historical versimilitude. The performance of *passiones* at saints’ festivals, for example, “gave a vivid, momentary face to the invisible *praesentia* of the saint” by laying bare “the fragilities of the body . . . with
macabre precision.”[17] The saint, finally, was “really there,” bringing the past into the present and bridging the gap between this world and the next one.[18]

The anonymous and Ælfrician corpora of hagiography in Anglo-Saxon England, including the Cotton-Corpus Legendary, the Old English Martyrology, and Ælfric’s Catholic Homilies and Lives of Saints (which include both passiones and utitas),[19] were certainly the inheritors of this early Latin Christian tradition of stories that emphasized the martyred saints’ ready desire to be killed, as well as the shining imperviousness and present-ness of their tortured, yet fully intact bodies. In Ælfric’s story of Saint Sebastian, well before his actual torture and execution, Sebastian and his halig companion Chromatius beg to be thrown into hot ovens.[20] Ultimately, Sebastian has to be killed twice—first, by arrows, and later, after his body is miraculously healed, by being clubbed to death and left to rot in a sewer. In the second instance, a widow retrieves his body and carries it to the catacombs where the apostles Peter and Paul are buried, a site that will later serve as a locus for the praesentia of the saint’s sacred and bodily powers. In Ælfric’s passio of Saint Julian, when the Roman emperor’s deputy in Antioch, Martianus, orders a group of men to be burned in front of Julian, although the flames “astah ma þone ðryttig fæðma · on þæs folces gesiþe · oðræt ad wæs for-burnen · and ealle þa tunnan,” the men who had been bound together on the pyre stood there “hale of þam fyre glitiniende swa swa gold.”[21]
Three murder attempts are made on Ælfric’s virgin saint Eugenia—by drowning, burning, and starvation—before she is finally, simply killed (acwealde) by an executioner of the emperor.[22] It is worth noting that when she earlier enters the burning oven, “ealle ða ontendnyysa · mid hyre to-cyme adwæscte.”[23] In his life of Saint Cecilia, Ælfric tells us that, even though she was put in a bath over a burning fire, she lay there for “ofer dæg · and niht · ungenderodum lichaman · swa swa on cealdum wætere · þæt heo ne swætte furðon.”[24] In these instances, the bodies of saints are not only impervious to fire, but in one case, can even quench it.

In cases where the mutilation of the saint’s body is palpably realized, the saint often remains unfazed, as in Ælfric’s story of the virgin Lucy, who continues praying, even after she has been disemboweled.[25] In his retelling of “The Forty Soldiers,” set in Armenia, a group of Roman soldiers who have converted to Christianity survive, unclothed and unbothered, in a lake of ice, until they are dragged from the freezing water to have their legs broken. While their limbs are literally cracking in half they sing a song that beautifully captures the trope of the saint’s rejection of his own material body that, nevertheless, makes his sanctity visible and whole: “Ure sawl is ahred of grine swa swa spearwa · þæt grin is tobryt · and we synd alysede.”[26] Afterwards, they are all burned together in a fire and their bones are disposed of in a stream, where they shine “swa beorhte swa steorran” (“as brightly as stars,” line 269). The gleaming radiance of their
disassembled bones in the middle of the night allows them to be found and collected by other Christians who can then enshrine them in a safe place where they can be re-presented as whole bodies over time and endure into the future as material proof of God’s powers.

In many of the Old English passiones, just as in their earlier Latin counterparts, we can see the importance to early medieval Christians of the paradoxical idea of the promise of bodily resurrection, where, as Bynum puts it, “the very stuff of change and putrefaction can be lifted to impassibility and immutability while continuing itself,” and for all the supposed illogic of the idea, “it is a concept of sublime courage and optimism,” for it “locates redemption there where ultimate horror also resides—in pain, mutilation, death, and decay.”[27]

Indeed, Ælfric’s interest in translating and adapting into Old English the stories of early Christian martyrs may have had something to do, as M.R. Godden points out, with “drawing parallels between the sufferings of the saints in the time of the early persecutions and the resistance of the Anglo-Saxons to the Viking pressures in his own time.”[28] P.A. Stafford has written that at the end of the tenth century, “the most spectacular theme in the history of England was the revival of Viking attacks,”[29] and some of Ælfric’s hagiographical subjects were martyred Anglo-Saxon kings, such as the East Anglian Edmund (841–869/70), whom the Danish chieftan Hingwar and his men humiliate and torture by beating him with clubs, tying him to a tree and scourging him with whips, and
then throwing javelins at him until, like Sebastian, he was “eall besæt mid heora scotungum swilce igles byrsta.”[30] Edmund’s head, decapitated by the Danes and left in the *piccum bremelum* (“thick brambles,” line 132) so that it cannot be buried, cries out “here, here, here” continuously while being guarded by a wolf so that it can be found and rejoined to its body.[31] Although Edmund is not, strictly speaking, an early Christian martyr, the details of his life, death, and bodily resurrection follow the familiar pattern of the established genre, wherein, as Ælfric writes, “His lichama us cyð þe lið un-formolsnod þæt he butan forlígre her on worulde leofode · and mid clænum life to criste siðode.”[32]

The very specific, historical, and political details of Edmund’s reign are less important than the ways in which his life can be seen to fit the model of a received tradition of sacred fiction, although the spectacle of his tortures as well as the resistance of his body and soul to those tortures may have resonated in a forceful “virtual” manner with an audience already well versed in physical mutilation and violent death through judicial torture and warfare.[33] When both read and recited, the texts of these Old English legends may have served as the only possible locus within which to reveal what could not be revealed, or ever realized, in the Anglo-Saxon historical present: the palpable and visible spectacle of bodies both wrenched out of and returned to their individual histories. Similar to Brockmeier’s novel, souls and bodies exist together, finally, not in an abstract post-apocalyptic heaven, but in a
shared, world-shaped, and living memory—a memory, moreover, that is as fragile as the bodies that contain it and rehearse its minute and flickering details. These legends might have therefore also functioned to assuage the anxiety that the promised resurrection of bodies with souls might be a wildly unrealistic fiction, and therefore, the material stuff of one’s identity, with all of its imperfections, would really have to be given up at the last day. In other words, the legends may have answered to the fear that the world—the too fierce love of which was really a sin, but without which identity wasn’t conceivable—would really have to be left behind.[34]

Not Dead, But Sleeping

The anonymous Old English legend of The Seven Sleepers, one of four anonymous prose texts interpolated into Ælfric’s Lives of Saints,[35] resides firmly within the tradition of adapting stories about martyrdom established in early Christianity[36]. Yet the legend also stands, I will argue, somewhat to the side of that tradition, and even poses a certain resistance to the idea that the martyr always desires and readily embraces the dismemberment and annihilation of his or her embodied self, which, nevertheless, always manages to retain, through physical mutilation and death, its materially sanctified integrity. In brief, the Old English Seven Sleepers recounts the story of seven members of the elite class of first-century Ephesian society[37] who, horrified at the emperor Decius’s torture and slaughter of those who refuse to
worship Roman gods, have given themselves over to a kind of uncontrollable sorrow and weeping that actually causes them to become emaciated and their youth to fade.[38] After being warned by Decius to bring themselves to “a better mind” (beteran mode, line 170) by ceasing their Christian worship, and while Decius is out of town (apparently looking for other Christians to torture and kill), the seven men decide to hide in a cave outside of the city, ostensibly to dwell “full eaðe on genere wunian” (“full easily in a safe place,” lines 185–86). When Decius returns to Ephesus, he sends out orders that the seven men should come to him immediately and make sacrifices to his gods. But instead of going to the emperor and refusing to do so with defiance, which would be consistent with one of the reasons they themselves stated earlier for retreating to the cave—to pray to God to let them “ætforan ðam casere þurh his fultum magon martyrdom gefremman”[39]—the men stay in the cave, eating a small share of bread together while weeping and “talking uneasily” (uneaðnysse spræcon, line 225). As the sun sets, and with the heaviness of “bitter tears” (biterlicum tearum, line 228) in their eyes, they fall asleep, after which point God intervenes and places them into a deeper sleep from which they will not be able to awaken themselves, “ne heora nan nyste hwær heora sawla reston” (“nor can they know where their souls rested,” lines 235–36). Not knowing that the seven men are suspended in a kind of death-like sleep, Decius orders the sealing of the entrance to the cave, with the intent that “hi mid ealle deað forswelge”
("they with death will be all swallowed," line 298).

After 372 years have passed, and some shepherd boys have removed the stones at the entrance of the cave, God wills the men’s awakening, and thinking they have only been asleep for one night, they send Malchus (the “second” of the seven; Maximianus is the “first”) to the city market for more bread. Malchus enters a city he no longer recognizes because it is now thoroughly Christian. The upshot of all this—after some scuffling at the market due to Malchus’s intrusion there as a kind of alien from another time, and the summoning of the bishop Marinus and the emperor Theodosius as a result—is that the seven men are recognized as resurrected martyrs from an earlier era and, therefore, the doctrine of bodily resurrection has visible proof. Because the Old English version of the story breaks off abruptly in the middle of a collective benediction by the seven saints, it does not include certain key passages in the Latin original: first, Maximianus’s statement to the emperor Theodosius that “suscitauit nos a terra ante diem magnum resurrectionis, ut credas sine dubitatione quoniam est resurrectio mortuorum”; second, the narrator’s statement that after Maximianus finishes his speech, the seven men “inclinatis capitibus suis in terra dormierunt, et tradiderunt spiritus suos”; and third, the appearance to Theodosius of the seven men’s spirits, who, after Theodosius has placed their bodies in golden caskets, tell him, “Ex terra surreximus, neque ex auro neque argento. Et nunc dimitte nos unde surreximus. Deus iterum resuscitab
Therefore, whereas the Latin version is at pains to express that the seven men rose from the earth once and will need to rise from that same earth again (at a later date), implying their status as *buried bodies* (if also “sleeping”), and to also represent them as “dying” a second time (or, perhaps, for the first time), the Old English version never emphasizes the type of resurrection the seven sleepers undergo, nor does it provide a picture of the final, more “real” death of the martyrs. Indeed, at the moment when they are first placed into a deep sleep, in contrast to the Latin version, which indicates that God “laid upon them a death of rest” (“precepit illis mortem quietis,” lines 115–16), the Old English notes that, after God wills it, they merely “happened into that quietness” (“hi gewurdon on δære seftynsse,” line 238). The anonymous Old English version is also at odds with how Ælfric summarizes the story in his Homily 27, where he has Maximianus state directly at the end, “Nu we arison of deaðe and we lybbað.”[41] In short, the seven sleepers of the anonymous Old English legend are never really martyred (they are not tortured nor successfully executed by Decius), nor are they, technically speaking, resurrected from the dead, so much as they are awakened from a kind of divinely-ordained historical stasis.[42] Nevertheless, by those who view them in fifth-century Ephesus, they are treated as living proof of a time when “ealle men gemænelice þurhwuniað” (“all men shall universally endure,” lines 763–64).[43]

Magennis writes that, in contrast to its Latin source, the Old
English version “shows particular interest in the thoughts, feelings and direct words of the characters. Verbs of thinking to oneself, saying to oneself, feeling and wondering pervade the text.”[44] Further, “there is an interest in the humanity of the characters which is unusual in Old English saints’ lives.”[45] Indeed, the most striking aspect of the Old English *Seven Sleepers*, when read alongside its Latin source, is the addition of certain psychologically complex details, especially with regard to the feelings and thoughts of certain characters, such as Malchus, whose post-sleep journey through an Ephesus he no longer recognizes is rendered by the Old English author as a nightmarish experience that draws upon not only Malchus’s anxieties and fears, but also the thoughts and feelings of the market men and town reeve who treat him as a suspicious foreigner. Moreover, the emperor Decius is portrayed as deeply conflicted over how to handle the defiance of his seven “darlings,” and the author’s handling of the general populace’s reactions to his torture and execution of other Christians, who weep and fall down from grief and fear, is equally sensitive to emotions not typically expressed in early medieval hagiography (nor present in the Latin versions of the story). Most aesthetically daring of all, the Old English author even details to his readers that, if they could have been there during Decius’s reign, they would have seen and heard how the streets cried out “for ðam halgan banum þe toworpene him onuppan,” and how even the walls of Ephesus “cwaecdon and bifedon, swilce hi feallan woldon for þam
Although the ultimate theme of *The Seven Sleepers* can be located in its medieval Christian doctrine—the bodily resurrection is real, and therefore it is in the afterworld where one finally, really “lives,” with shining body and soul together—I would like to argue that, in the Old English version's emphasis on the highly individualized emotional affect of its characters and even of its human world (in this case, the city of Ephesus), the legend also touches upon the development of a certain *thick* subjectivity through *eros*, without which no interest or investment in the world is possible for individuals. By *eros*, I wish to make clear that I am not referring to sexual love, so much as I am referring to what Freud termed the libido, or “love force.” In *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Freud wrote, “The nucleus of what we mean by love naturally consists . . . in sexual love with sexual union as its aim. But we do not separate from this—what in any case has a share in the name of ‘love’—on the one hand, self-love, and on the other, love for parents and children, friendship and love for humanity in general, and also devotion to concrete objects and to abstract ideas.” The Old English *Seven Sleepers* represents a unique concern and regard for the interior life (which includes spirituality), and for the world that provides for the expression of that interior life. It contributes, moreover, to our understanding of psychoanalysis, when we understand psychoanalysis as, in
the words of Jonathan Lear, “the history of a series of battles that are fought and refought within the human soul,” and also as the site where we can “trace the route of love as it is manifested in human beings” as “a force for individuation.”[50] The Old English legend can be viewed as a kind of creative attempt on the part of the anonymous author to individualize, through an atypical exploration of the psychic interior, a sacred history that locates itself, not in the tombs of those whom Peter Brown has called “the very special dead for whom mourning was unthinkable,”[51] nor in an abstract world of disembodiments, but in the living and very human world of embodied subjects. As a result, the Old English legend also grapples with, and even tries to answer, in my view, a certain problem of memory’s relation to history—in this case, of how to render an account of a sacred history that does not lapse into an undifferentiated narrative structure in which all saints lives are, in the end, essentially the same, but instead retains a material and heterogeneous particularity that affirms the sanctity of the unique human soul, or person, who passes through the vector of a particular historical moment and is both changed by, and changes, that moment.

According to Nancy Partner, “One of the great impediments to recognizing the depth, complexity and individuality of the people who lived during the immense span of historical time we categorize as ‘medieval’ has come to mean the opposite of those qualities, at least as regards persons.”[52] Further, while medieval culture, “in terms of its art, literature and theology,
has long been acknowledged as sophisticatedly complex and emotionally dense . . . . somehow this collective cultural achievement is oddly disconnected from any idea of medieval persons of equivalent individual complexity.[53] The “prevalence of didactic genres (ranging from epic to sermons) which stress conformity with religious and social norms encourages the notion that in some way the pre-modern era of history was populated with pre-individuals.”[54] In Partner's mind, we need to “press harder than we usually do on the concept of the self operating silently here,” because “there lingers a common and unexamined assumption that ‘having’ a self . . . necessarily involves adopting one assertive style of individuality, even the set of values and goals we associate with the individualism which grounds western liberal modernity,” and it can often be too easy to let medieval persons “sink down into a shallow bas-relief of ‘medievalness,’ defined by the moralizing conformist elements of the dominant literate culture.”[55] It would be better to understand medieval men and women “as essentially like ourselves, of the same species at the same moment of development in evolutionary time, personalities formed at a deep level through the same developmental processes, as minds with the same emotional/rational structure confronting the world, however distractingly different their language, ideals and fervent beliefs.”[56] For Partner, the discipline of psychoanalysis, “with its coherent structure of explanatory concepts, is our intellectual instrument for recognizing the human psyche over
historical time and across cultures.”[57]

Because psychoanalysis, for Partner, is, “in its essential interests and procedures, a theory addressed to the symbolizing activity of the mind,” the “forms of expression” of, say, the Anglo-Saxon mind—whether in the form of poetry, hagiography, sermons, sculpture, or otherwise—provide us with one of the best means for tracing the “restless negotiations” between the “deeply stratified self and the real world.”[58] The medieval “person,” or “self,” I would argue, just as in our own time, cannot be understood outside of its relation to particular social milieus—social milieus, moreover, that do not necessarily always dominate and therefore subsume individuals, so much as they provide matter (language, ideas, custom, rituals, and the like) which can be worked into particular, unique lives and the symbolic productions of those lives. An Old English prose narrative such as The Seven Sleepers accords us a rare instance to see how, even when an author participates in a shared cultural production—in this case, early medieval hagiography—his activity will also bear the marks of his idiosyncratic thinking. According to the medieval historian David Gary Shaw, the self is “a highly localized site of awareness,” and is shaped not solely by its environment, but also by the interpretive action that means not only suffering the world but also coming to understand it and your place within it. There is room here for a self to innovate and to try to transform that place by
thought or action. The particular way a self or groups of selves do so is the actual subject of history.

The “self,” as Nancy Partner points out, is “a highly conceptual, if ill-defined term we use as a container for the elements of individuality that differentiate persons from the mass—self-consciousness, desires, conflicts, aware interiority layered over the iceberg depths of unconscious mind, all charged with the positive value of agency.” Some will argue that the invocation of such terms as “self,” “person,” “identity,” and “individual” are somehow overly modern in their denotations and therefore ill-advised in the analysis of affect and interiority in an Old English text, partly because, as Clare Lees and Gillian Overing have written in their essay “Before History, Before Difference,” the current “master” historical paradigm views the emergence of the modern self or individual as a post-twelfth- and thirteenth-century phenomenon, and therefore Anglo-Saxon England is somehow situated in a socio-cultural zone that is “before history” and therefore also “before identity.” Nevertheless, the Christian didactic literature that predominates in this period is, as Lees and Overing also write, “intimately connected to social practice throughout the medieval period and is crucial to any historical understanding of such variable categories as self, psyche, and body,” and further, “belief and its socio-historical formations are of prime relevance to historical questions of identity . . . and subjectivity.” We might also recall the “deeper” historical background for the so-called modern self that
Charles Taylor illustrates in his magisterial book *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*, where he does not allow the traditional diachronic-causal explanations for the emergence of a modern (we might say, Western liberal) self to be separated from what he calls its “spiritual center of gravity.” In Taylor’s assessment, ideas of what is “good” or “moral” and self-interpretation are inextricably linked, and the socio-cultural milieus within which self-interpretation has been formed over time include “spiritual discipline” as well as “religious ritual and prayer.” Although Taylor himself does not really treat the Middle Ages in any thorough sense in his book, an important idea can be extrapolated from his work, which is more explicitly detailed in the essay by Lees and Overing (and in other current work in Old English studies that takes up the question of embodied identities): that even within what Partner has called the “cultivated styles of ‘selflessness’ associated with religious communities, mystical and ascetic practices, or acquiescence in gender and social hierarchies,” we can detect the “actions of a human mind, the vector result of conscious and nonconscious pressures and compromises, aimed at certain ends for certain reasons, some known, some not.”

The Old English *Seven Sleepers* offers to us, I would argue, a rich representation of a unique self—the author—working at a symbolizing activity that represents a highly sophisticated exploration of premodern selves “suffering the world” (to borrow from Shaw) and coming to understand themselves through their embodied emotional responses to that suffering.
Further, the legend illustrates how the structure of the psyche “is created by a dialectic of love and loss”—as Lear puts it, explicating Freud’s ideas on mourning and melancholia, a necessary condition for there being a world for me is that I love it, or invest it with libidinal energy. Because my love affair is with a distinctly existing world, I must be disappointed by it. A distinctly existing world cannot possibly satisfy all my wishes. Out of the ensuing frustration and disappointment, I am born. Melancholia, or some archaic precursor, must lie at the heart of every I.\[61\]

In some respects, the legend’s elaborations upon the emotional lives of its characters, and even of the city of Ephesus itself (which lends to the world of the story the same interiority that structures the human selves that inhabit that world)—especially upon their sorrow and grief—brings out an aspect of the genre of the passio that is typically left unarticulated: the wounding and faltering of the human psyche (and therefore, also, of a spiritual mentality) under violent assault.

Whereas the traditional passio emphasizes the saint’s almost inhuman desire and tolerance for torture and death, the Old English Seven Sleepers dwells in almost every scene upon the terror, reluctance in the face of danger, and melancholy of its seven saints, and even describes how the horror brought about by Decius’s reign literally “un-hearts” or “disheartens” (ungeheorte, line 55) the general populace of Ephesus. As
opposed to the conventional descriptions of the martyr’s body under attack as shining, golden, sound, whole, and whiter than snow, there is a great emphasis in the Old English Seven Sleepers on the highly realistic and gruesome details of what really happens to bodies tortured into corpses—they are flogged and burned and cut up “swilce oftsticode swin” (“like stuck pigs,” line 94) and then ravens and other birds fly in and tear the eyes and flesh from the bodies, and “on heora blodigon bilon ðæra martyra flæsc bæron, ðearmas and innneweard.”[62] Throughout the story, the author stresses again and again the general terror, weeping, and grief of Decius’s pogrom, and even the likenesses of Decius’s own gods cry out in anguish at the suffering created on their account (lines 83–87).

Ælfric himself may not have approved of all of the rich descriptions of emotional anguish in the legend, for in his “Memory of the Saints” homily, a work which Peter Clemoes believes Ælfric may have originally intended to serve as a preface to his Lives of Saints,[63] he includes sorrow, or tristitia, as one of his eight “capital sins” (heafod-leahtras, line 267). More specifically, he describes sorrow as “ðissere worulde unrotnyss” (“this world’s sadness,” line 289), when a man “geunrotsoð ealles to sywðe for his æhta lyre þe he lufode to swyðe.”[64] Likewise, in his description in the same homily of one of the capital virtues, “spiritual bliss” (gastlice blys, line 346), Ælfric writes that this occurs when a man “on god blyssige betwux unrotnyssum þysre reðan worulde · swa
Whereas, for Ælfric, sorrow over one’s sins was appropriate, grieving for the loss of the world and worldly things was clearly not. Indeed, the worse the state of the world’s affairs, the better the occasion for celebrating one’s faith. Robin Norris has detailed the cautions against excessive mourning in early medieval culture, and writes that “the proper response to the death of a saint was a particularly problematic issue.” It may have been that, in the post-Constantine era, the development of the narratives of “confessor” saints (vitas) provided a new model for sanctity, one in which a saints’ followers were given some room to mourn the saint’s “natural” death (a death, moreover, that was typically foretold by the saint himself).[67] Ælfric himself, as Norris has outlined, respects the conventions of the genre of the vita, which “seem to require the confessor’s human followers to mourn his passing,” while at the same time, he “also shows an awareness of the conventions of the passio, which reject mourning altogether.”[68]

By contrast, the Old English Seven Sleepers could almost be said to be a close study of the sorrow and mourning born in the wake of a dark political power that seeks to violently sever Christian persons from their “beautiful” lives,[69] and the seven spiritual heroes of this tale are not so much martyrs or confessors as they are the grief- and memory-bearers of a way of spiritual life under attack. Although the ultimate conclusion of the story may have been designed to underline, and even provide visible proof for, a doctrinal message
regarding bodily resurrection, the bulk of the narrative explores, through a type of psychological realism unique for its time, the emotional suffering of highly socialized selves being wrenched out of a world which itself mourns that untimely separation. For the seven saints themselves, death is not so much to be embraced as it is to be avoided, perhaps partly because it would mean the end of a life in which their spiritual subjectivity is made palpable in its traffic with the world.

Indeed, in the descriptive details the author expends on the grief of the seven men over the torture and execution of their fellow Christians, on the external world’s sympathy with the persecuted, on the time Maximianus and his companions spend together hiding in the cave, on Decius’s anxious indecision about what to do with his seven favorites, and on Malchus’s fear and anxiety as he roams through an Ephesus supposedly beyond his mortal future, we can see the author’s concern to reinsert the individual—and even the very human—self into a genre, late antique and early medieval hagiography, that, even in its emphasis on spectacular and occasionally gruesomely detailed acts of both despotic persecution and individual heroic endurance, did not always admit the solely unique mind, or person, to enter in. And perhaps this was the case because the ultimate aim of much early medieval hagiography was to displace the importance of individual persons who might cling to their embodied and en-worlded subjectivities in favor of an account of human history always already tilted at a disengaged and more perfectly abstract
afterlife (never mind all the contradictions inherent in biblical and medieval theological writing on bodily resurrection, which obviously speaks to an unconscious refusal to let go of individual bodies, and by extension, this all-too-human world in all its indecorous, yet beautiful corporality).

In the Old English *Seven Sleepers*, the author *touches*, again and again, upon the physical and psychic contours of what it means for particular individuals to suffer their lives and, in Lear’s words, to be “*constituted by the pursuit of the meanings*” by which they do “or might live.”[70] I would like to briefly highlight here, before concluding, what I consider to be two significant instances in the text of a unique attention to certain individualized, libidinal attachments to the world and one’s place in it: Decius’s indecision over how to manage his seven beloveds’ defiance of his rule and the seven companions’ reluctance to leave their hiding place. These aspects of the narrative create subtle points of resistance to the legend’s doctrinal message regarding the importance of a higher life *after* the death of the body (for after all, it is only *in their bodies*, carried through time, that the seven men can be made legible and understood—it is not despite and against their bodies that they are saints but because of them, and out of the snares of which, unlike other saints, they have never flown free).[71]

Whereas in most Old English saints’ lives, as Magennis writes, “the saints display superhuman composure in the face of
torture, while their opponents are implacably wicked and obdurate,”[72] in the *Seven Sleepers*, the seven men are not stoic when confronted by Decius, but rather present themselves in his court “mid floteriendum eagum for ðære angsumnyysse” (“with eyes fluttering on account of their anguish,” line 138), and Decius himself is greatly distressed (“gedrefed on his mode,” line 136) at having to haul in men who were once “near-followers” of his (*neahgangele*, line 116). Later, when the emperor rightly believes the seven men are hiding from him (but does not yet know where they are), he becomes *dreorigan mode* (“dreary in mind,” line 246) and expresses how great his unhappiness is over the loss of his *dyrirlinga* (“darlings,” line 247). When Decius later learns that his seven darlings are hiding in Celian Hill “on sorge and on ege” (“in sorrow and in fear,” line 279), he has a crisis of indecision as to what to do because he does not want to harm them (lines 281–85). Perhaps most interesting of all as regards the treatment of Decius as a singular character, who is distraught *in mind* over his necessary role as executioner of those whom we can assume he loves too much, is the author’s remark that, since Decius could not be decisive, and since how the story *has* to turn out depends on Decius acting the proper role of cruel tyrant, God literally “ðis geþanc on mode asende, þæt he het þæs scræfes ingang ðær hi inne lagon eall hit mid weorcstanum forwyrclan.”[73] In a striking departure from the genre, the legend illustrates how even the pagan emperor is not immune from the psychic wounds of his
own reign of terror, mainly because of his loving attachment to the seven men as, we can imagine, friends, and how he has to be forcefully reinserted into his monologic role as torturer of all Christians, related to his inner circle or not. In this way, the story introduces a wrinkle of the individual psychic interior into a generic sacred history, and thereby also displaces the main emphasis of the legend from how things always turn out (generic passion/resurrection history) to how particular selves suffer a particular world and, in Shaw’s words, “innovate and try to transform that place by thought and action.”[74]

Much like Decius, the seven saints are caught in a sacred history that can only turn out one way (martyr saints are persecuted, then killed, then recuperated through reassembly and resurrection), but the author’s handling of them within this somewhat always already codified narrative structure[75] is more concerned with delineating a certain melancholy in the men that is born out of a world not answering to their desires, and with tracing their disappointment over the loss of the external world, which disappointment Freud would say “lies at the heart of every I.”[76] When the seven saints realize that, although Decius has let them go once, he is not likely to do so the second time, they choose to hide together in a cave where, if even in a limited fashion, they can continue to practice a loving, Christian fellowship. We are told that they decide to bring into the cave with them the money they possess “in common” (gemænelice, line 194), in order to buy bread when they need it, but also so they can continue to
distribute alms to those who are needy when they make brief forays, in the person of their steward Malchus, back into the city (lines 193–204), all of which indicates their desire (and even will) to stay alive and to be as active in their faith as possible, and in this way, they could even be said to constitute a miniature quasi-monastery situated at the edge of a maelstrom of political terror. When, on one of his trips to the market, Malchus hears that Decius has returned to Ephesus and has commanded that Maximianus and his six companions should appear before him and offer sacrifices to the idols, although the news throws everyone in the cave into distress, Malchus, as their steward, serves everyone the meager provisions he has secured, so that they will be *geheartran* (“heartened,” line 219), and instead of rushing out to confront Decius with defiance, they “ealle ætgædere common and tomiddes ðam scræfe sæton, þæt hi gemænelice gereordodan.”[77]

As the sun sets and evening arrives, as I detailed previously, they weep and talk amongst themselves *uneaðnysse* (“uneasily,” line 225), and as their eyes are made heavy by bitter tears they fall into a sorrowful sleep (lines 227–29). One could describe the seven companions as passive, even fearfully passive, in the face of the emperor’s edict, but there is also in this scene in the cave, I would argue, an active commitment to not only suffering the world together, *in common*, but to also easing each other’s anxiety through the comforting communal ritual of eating a meal together, and
even of expressing their worries to each other over that shared meal. Given the fact that the author has shared with us earlier how Decius’s persecutions caused fathers to forsake their children, children to forsake their fathers, and every friend to forsake every other friend (lines 96–99), this scene of fellowship between the seven men in the cave is a significant instance of a type of strong filial affection that transcends its immediate political context, yet is also occasioned by that context and even remains in tension with it as well as with a sacred history that would prefer the spectacle of their passionately self-willed sacrifice. Because God decides, for his own purposes, to nudge them into an even deeper sleep, and to leave them that way for several centuries, the seven saints are relieved of the responsibility of confronting the emperor and more fully embracing their martyrdom; instead, we are left with the image of their embrace of each other’s company, and in this embrace, however sorrowful it is in its affects, we can glimpse a type of love that aims at both the worldly, at each man in his own uniqueness, and also at the otherworldly, at a faith in a Christian God to whom, before sitting and eating and weeping together, each of the seven had commended his life (lines 214–16). But what do the seven men weep for if not their lives and the destruction of their city, without which they cannot actively pursue their religion? Their lives as Christians—and by extension, their soul-directed minds and inner selves—are most legible and coherent and valuable to them when they can be made to “speak” and move
in a world that can be hoped to become, through the practice of their faith, more lovable—better—than it ever presently is.

Interestingly, what ties together both Decius’s reluctance to harm the seven saints and those same saints’ decision to remain in the cave together is God’s intervention into the narrative as an authorial force. In other words, in the face of the chief characters’ unwillingness to follow the terms of the generic plot of the *passio*, God has to literally place thoughts into Decius’s mind—he has to forcefully *change* the emperor’s mind—and in the case of the seven men, God resolves their inability to settle their own dilemma by placing them into a deep sleep, which constitutes a move to remove the seven men from their own self-directed narrative so that history can turn out the way God always intended it to turn out. In this way, the author of the Old English *Seven Sleepers* accomplishes, I believe, a rare feat: he allows a certain sacred history the final word, while also enacting the performance of what he might have believed were the personal and individual costs of that history—he highlights, in other words, history’s subjectivity, and therefore, its realism.

**All Worlds Are One World**

Whether in the Anglo-Saxon period or in our own time, it is a difficult thing to imagine a soul without a body. As Augustine himself asserted in Book 22, Chapter 21 of *De civitate dei*, “Quae sit autem et quam magna spiritualis corporis gratia, quoniam nondum uenit in experimentum, uereor ne
Nevertheless, both medieval and modern artists have often aimed to create vivid images of souls after death that are, as in Dante’s conception of shade-bodies in his *Purgatorio*, both non-corporeal and aerial yet also imprinted with the physiological lineaments of human form. Clearly, it is hard (or perhaps not desirable) to separate the idea of individual souls in a supposed afterlife, even before the Last Judgment, from the uniquely shaped bodies that once housed them in the world. Even in a novel as contemporary as *The Brief History of the Dead*, souls after death are mainly comprehensible in the bodies they have supposedly shed. After Laura Byrd has died and is leaving her body in order to traverse the Antarctic ice shelf and the mirages of the City toward the sun, Brockmeier’s description of her soul’s flight from her body is freighted, at every turn, with the form of that body which, nevertheless, does not weigh as heavily on her as it once did. Upon first emerging from her tent, Laura notices that she is completely unclothed, yet “she had never been warmer or more comfortable” and it “felt good to stretch her muscles.” Most strikingly, she notices that there “was still a trace of frostbite on the index finger of her left hand, a small plum-colored circle as perfectly formed as an adhesive bandage, and she peeled it off by the tail of a red string that protruded from the top, dropping it at her feet.” Following a “flock” of snow marbles that represent a type of atomistic being and that are rolling across the frozen landscape, Laura (for Laura’s soul and
“Laura” are one and the same) walks and even runs with bare feet through the snow, which becomes desert and then snow again, and at one point she thinks she hears a leopard seal calling out, “All worlds are one world.”[80] As Laura continues to move—at one point riding the back of a dog, at another guiding the sail of an ice floe—the contours of the subarctic geography give way to the empty but familiar architecture of the City and then back again, until Laura finally realizes “that something had happened. Her sense of time had broken apart into two equal halves and fallen away from her like the shell of a walnut.”[81]

At the same time that Laura’s soul, walking on water, is disappearing over the edge of the horizon of the world, the City itself is melting away, and some of its inhabitants speculate that, much like their own crossing from the world, through death, to the City, that the City itself “was undergoing a crossing of its own, that it was dreaming itself out of existence, or moving from one sphere of being into another.”[82] What the reader knows that the inhabitants of the City can only guess at is that the City and its citizens are only as palpable and alive as Laura Byrd’s memory of them, and having died herself and turned into something more ephemeral, yet possessed of embodied motion, she is shedding her physical frailties and even her own memories of who she was and is, and with those divestitures, so goes the human world itself. One has to admit, however, that as Laura’s soul moves with speed and agility over the surface of the
earth, a certain lightness and freedom of being attaches to her stride—as if the weight of memory, which had been too much with her, has thankfully fallen away. In this scenario, there is no more suffering, no more anxieties, and no more disappointment. But what is also “no more” is a mortally human attachment to the world, and therein, perhaps, lies the tragedy of the story.

Both Brockmeier’s novel and the Old English *Seven Sleepers* ultimately show us, in different ways, that what the leopard seal says is true: “All worlds are one world.” By this I mean, in both narratives, we see how the meaning of the given world—its *legibility*—whether medieval or modern, and either as a creation of God or of something else, is endlessly transmogrified and made uniquely particular across the individual selves that enter into and part from it, and who are joined to each other, across multiple histories, in suffering and recreating, through a capacious interiority, their experience. In Malchus’s post-sleep journey through the marketplace of fifth-century Ephesus, the city, for Malchus, is simultaneously the site of the nightmarish horrors of the pagan reign of Decius, as well as the now thoroughly Christian town adorned with *wundorlic* crosses that Malchus claims not to recognize and by which he is astounded and amazed (lines 466–68, 454–60). Malchus’s wonder at this new city soon turns to confusion and even fear. When he arrives at the market and hears men speaking Christ’s name openly, “ða ondræd Malchus him þearle, and he ðæs eall forhtode.”[83] Similar to the
inhabitants of the City in Brockmeier’s novel who, when they first arrive, cannot understand whether they are in heaven or hell— “what kind of hell had bakeries and dogwood trees and perfect blue days”? —Malchus begins to question where he is, exactly, saying to himself, first, “To soðan ne þinceð me næafre þæt hit soð sy þæt þis sy Efesa byrig, for ðy eall heo is on oþre wisan gestaðelod and eall mid oþrum botlum getimbred,” and then, “Ac ic nat eftsona, ne ic næfre git nyste, þæt ðeþ byrig us wære gehende buton Ephese anre, her onem Celian dune.” For Malchus there can only be one Ephesus, yet the world has changed without his notice of it and now Ephesus is a different city and Malchus is out of joint with time. But the only thing that can knit the two Ephesuses together is Malchus himself, and his six companions, who, in their reawakened persons—in both body and soul—and also in their textual figuration, mark the place of an historical excess that opens the dimension of the more, of the unincorporable infinite enclosed within the singular self who has touched reality and become real, and whose understanding of the world is indispensable to that world’s completeness.

**ENDNOTES**

I want to thank Valerie Vogrin, my colleague and friend, for recommending I read Kevin Brockmeier’s brilliant and moving novel, and also Nancy Partner for pointing me in the direction
of Jonathan Lear's writings. I also wish to thank Robin Norris and Roy Liuzza, as well as the anonymous reviewer, for their insightful and empathetic suggestions for revision. Any remaining errors are entirely my own.


9. “But even if by some grave misfortune or the savagery of enemies the whole [body] should be completely ground to dust and dispersed into the air or water, so that as far as it is possible, it has no being at all, by no means is it able to be beyond the omnipotence of the Creator, but not a hair of its
head shall perish. Therefore, the spiritual flesh will be subjected to the spirit, yet nevertheless [will still be] flesh, not spirit; just as the carnal spirit was subjected to the flesh, yet will still be spirit, not flesh” (Augustine, *De civitate dei*, in Bernard Dombart and Alphonso Kalb, eds., *Aurelii Augustini Opera*, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina, vols. 47 and 48 [Turnhout: Brepols, 1955] 48: 841); all translations of Augustine are mine).

10. “It is not, as Plato thought, that they desire the oblivion of [their] bodies, but it is because they remember what they were promised by Him who lies to no one, who even gave to them the security of the integrity of the hairs [on their head], that they longingly and patiently expect the resurrection of their bodies, in which [bodies] they have endured much cruelty, [but] will have nothing of such pain in the future” (Augustine, *De civitate dei*, in Dombart and Kalb, *Aurelii Augustini Opera* 48: 403).


15. Lapidge, “Roman Martyrs and their Miracles” 99.


19. Michael Lapidge explains that there were “two broad categories of a saint’s life: the *passio* (‘passion’) and the *uita* (‘life’). The *passio* was the literary form appropriate for the saint who had been martyred for his/her faith, whereas the *uita* properly pertained to a confessor (that is, a saint whose impeccable service to God constituted a metaphorical, not a real, martyrdom).” See “The Saintly Life in Anglo-Saxon England,” *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, ed. Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991) 243–63, at 252.


21. 337–38: “rose more than thirty fathoms, in the people’s sight, until the pile was burnt up, and all the tuns”; “uninjured by the fire, glittering like gold” (*Ælfric’s Lives* 1: 110, 111).

22. In many of the early Latin *passiones* and also in *Ælfric’s* versions of those lives, many saints, like Eugenia, after enduring and miraculously surviving various tortures and
cruelly devised execution attempts, are typically ultimately dispatched with the swift blow of an executioner’s sword, an action to which no or little rhetorical flourish is added by the hagiographer, perhaps because the martyr’s body is seen as so impervious to death that when death finally does arrive, it cannot really be narrated. In very rare instances, the martyr-saint cannot be killed at all, as is the case in Ælfric’s story of Saint Agatha, who after many tortures and execution attempts, simply prays to God to let her leave the world and take her spirit, after which prayer she simply dies (Ælfric’s Lives 2: 206, lines 183–96).

23. 399: “all the conflagration was extinct at her coming” (Ælfric’s Lives 1: 48, 49).

24. 347–48: “the whole day and night with uninjured body as if in cold water, and she did not even sweat” (Ælfric’s Lives 2: 376, 377).

25. 127–28: “heo wearð þa gewundod · þæt hire wand se innoð ut · ac heo ne gewat swa þeah · ac þurh-wunode on gebedum” (Ælfric’s Lives 1: 216).

26. 251: “Our soul is escaped out of the snare as a sparrow, the snare is broken, and we are delivered” (Ælfric’s Lives 1: 254, 255).


30. 117–18: “all beset with their shots, as with a porcupine’s bristles” (*Ælfric’s Lives* 2: 322, 323). It is worth noting here that *Ælfric* writes that Hingwar’s men also *gebysmrodon huxlice* (“disgracefully besmeared,” line 107) Edmund, which may refer to a form of sexual assault.

31. 151–53: “Hér · hér · hér · and swa gelome clypode, andswarigende him eallum · swa oft swa heora ænig clypode · oppæt hi ealle becomen þurh þa clypunga him to” (*Ælfric’s Lives* 2: 324).

32. 186–88: “His body showeth us, which lieth undecayed, that he lived without fornication here in this world, and by a pure life passed to Christ” (*Ælfric’s Lives* 2: 328, 329).

33. Many studies on saints’ lives have emphasized their iconographic style and the ways in which certain formulaic elements outweigh a consideration for unique historical or psychological detail. On this point in the case of Old English saints’ lives, see especially Robert E. Bjork, *The Old English Verse Saints’ Lives* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985); James W. Earl, “Typology and Iconographic Style in

34. In this sense, Ælfric’s accounts of saints’ lives also participated in a medieval aesthetic tradition that answered to what Bynum has termed the problematic of identity as spatiotemporal continuity, especially with regard to the Christian belief in bodily resurrection after the Last Judgment. Perhaps the most striking representation of this aesthetic, as Bynum has suggested, is to be found in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, where to be in hell is to suffer the kind of bodily metamorphoses in which very human bodies are literally penetrated and devoured (and thereby completely subsumed), as they are by snakes and lizards in cantos 24 and 25 of the *Inferno*. In the *Purgatorio*, also cantos 24 and 25, souls carry aerial shades that take on the semblance of the bodies promised at the final resurrection. In these fictional scenarios, we can see the importance, to medieval men and women, of the connection between body and identity, and of the horror that is occasioned when that connection is violently severed. On this point, see Caroline Walker Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity* (New York: Zone Books, 2001) 163–89.
35. The text of the Old English *Seven Sleepers* appears on folios 107v–122v of the early eleventh-century manuscript, British Library, Cotton Julius E. vii, which is the principal manuscript of Ælfric’s *Lives of Saints*. It also appears, but in a highly fragmentary and badly damaged state, in British Library, Cotton Otho B.x. In this essay, all Latin and Old English citations of the legend are from Hugh Magennis, ed., *The Anonymous Old English Legend of the Seven Sleepers* (Durham, Eng.: Durham Medieval Texts, 1994), hereafter referred to as SS. All translations are mine, unless otherwise noted.

36. According to Hugh Magennis, there are two major Latin sources for the legend in the Middle Ages. One is the *Passio Septem Dormientum* of Gregory of Tours, which Gregory claimed to have translated “with the assistance of a certain Syrian”—whether from Syriac or Greek, we do not know. The other version, BHL 2316, is “much fuller than Gregory’s” and “is extant in a number of manuscripts of widely differing date and provenance, the earliest of which were copied in the ninth century” (Magennis, “Introduction,” SS 4). A variant of this longer Latin version is, according to Magennis, likely the direct source for the Old English version. Although, as Magennis also points out, “We are unable to point to any one manuscript which can be regarded as representing the exact source of the Old English,” he includes in his edition of the legend the Latin text found in the eleventh-century MS British Library, Egerton 2797, which he sees as corresponding very closely to the
Latin text the Old English author would have consulted ("Introduction," SS 12). The Old English author refers to the story as a ðrowung ("passion," line 1), but, as we shall see, the story does not really live up to the conventions of that genre, which may well be one of the reasons Ælfric did not want to render a more full translation of the legend in either his Catholic Homilies or his Lives of Saints.

37. The Seven Sleepers are the “nearest followers” (neahgangele, line 116) of the emperor’s household, and are also described as being “beloved” (leofe, line 172) of the emperor. The emperor Decius himself calls them “my darlings” (minra dyrilinga, line 247).

38. 111–13: “and heora nebwlite þurh ða mycclan sorhge mid ealle ahlænsode, and seo wlitige fægernes heora geogoðhades weornode and wanode.”

39. 188–89: “before the caesar, through His help, be able to accomplish martyrdom.”

40. 362–63: “God raised us from the earth before the great day of resurrection, so that you might believe without uncertainty that there is a resurrection of the dead”; 368: “bowing their heads, went to sleep on the ground and gave up their spirits”; 373–75: “We have arisen from the earth, not from gold or silver. Now release us to the place from which we arose. God will revive us again” (SS 90). The translation of the Latin follows Magennis, SS 91.

41. 222–23: “Now we arise from death, and we live” (Ælfric’s
Catholic Homilies: The Second Series, ed. Malcolm C.
Godden, Early English Text Society, s.s. 5 [London: Oxford

42. Magennis notes that the legend “is an untypical example
of a passion, and indeed . . . is untypical of early medieval
hagiography as a whole.” Further, the reluctance of the seven
saints in the face of danger “is stressed even more in the Old
English than in other versions,” and the Old English author
even seems drawn to this feature of the story, “deliberately
exploring the very human worries and fears of the characters,
who in some ways make unlikely heroes” (“Introduction,” SS
21).

43. The importance of the story of the reanimation of the
seven saints as supposed proof of the doctrine of bodily
resurrection is made clear by the anonymous author when he
describes the social context in which the seven men
reawaken—it is a time when “evil men” (yfele menn, SS 43,
line 324) were bringing Christian men into “heresy” (gedwilde,
SS 43, line 325) by persuading them that it was false to
believe that “ealle men on Domes dæg sceolon arisan mid
þam ylcan lichaman þe gehwa ær her on life leofode” (“all men
on judgment day shall rise with the same bodies in which they
had lived before,” SS 43, lines 327–28). The author makes it
explicitly clear that God chooses to awaken the seven
sleepers at a moment that is most historically propitious to
reveal to his troubled people their future resurrection (SS 45,


46. 87–88: “because of the holy bones scattered upon them”; 89–90: “quaked and trembled, as if they would fall down because of the holy bodies which hung on them, on each side, all around the city” (SS 35–36, 36).

47. In fact, in the two instances where Ælfric *did* treat the story of the Seven Sleepers, very briefly—in the Second Series of his *Catholic Homilies*, titled as *Sanctorum Septem Dormientium*, and in an addition he made to a homily for the first Sunday after Easter in the First Series—as Hugh Magennis writes, “Ælfric is drawn to the doctrinal significance of the legend” (specifically, the theme of bodily resurrection) and “ignores entirely its human dimension” (“Ælfric and the Legend of the Seven Sleepers” 321).

48. According to Jonathan Lear, for Freud, “sexual energy is not at bottom sexual energy,” but is, perhaps, “a manifestation
of a more fundamental force permeating nature” (Love and Its Place in Nature: A Philosophical Interpretation of Freudian Psychoanalysis [New York: Farar, Straus and Giroux, 1990] 144). It is this fundamental force, of which sexual love is only one manifestation, that I mean to denote by the term eros, and which I see as manifest in the Old English legend’s detailed attention to the emotions of its characters—emotions, moreover, that mainly hinge on various characters’ attachments to each other, and to the world which makes those attachments possible.


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54. Partner, “The Hidden Self” 42.

55. Partner, “The Hidden Self” 44.


57. Partner, “The Hidden Self” 46. And I would argue, too, that recent discoveries in cognitive science are likely to support this idea. As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson tell us, “the very structure of reason itself comes from the details of our embodiment,” thought is “mostly unconscious,” and because the mind “is not merely embodied, but embodied in such a way that our conceptual systems draw largely upon the commonalities of our bodies and of the environments we live in,” the result is that “much of a person’s conceptual system is either universal or widespread across languages and cultures.” Further, our conceptual systems “are not totally relative and not *merely* a matter of historical contingency, even though a degree of conceptual relativity does exist and even though historical contingency does matter a great deal” (*Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought* [New York: Basic Books, 1999])
4, 3, 6).


60. Partner, “The Hidden Self” 42.


62. 70–71: “in their bloody bills carry the flesh of the martyrs, the entrails and inward parts” (SS 35).


64. 290–91: “grieves all too severely for the loss of his possessions that he loved too much” (*Ælfric’s Lives* 1: 356). The translation is mine.

65. 346–48: “rejoices in God amid the sorrows of this cruel world, so that we may not be without courage [literally: ‘without mind’] in misfortune” (*Ælfric’s Lives* 1: 360). The translation is mine.


68. When the emperor Decius first tries to plead with the seven saints to abdicate their Christian worship, and they refuse to do so, he tells them he will give them some time to reconsider so that they might save their “beautiful lives” (*wlitige lif*, line 170, SS 38).


70. It is important to remember that since the Old English version of the legend is lacking (or missing) the scene from its Latin exemplar where, at the very end, the seven saints “in terra dormierunt, et tradierunt spiritus suos secundum preceptum Dei” (“went to sleep on the ground and gave up their spirits according to the will of God,” SS 90, lines 368–69), the souls (or the spiritually-oriented interior selves) of the seven sleepers are never, strictly speaking, separated from their bodies for the duration of the Old English narrative. I will admit, however, that the lines written just after God puts the seven saints to sleep—where God decides “þæt heora nan felan ne mihte hu hi gewurdon on slæpe, ne heora nan nyste hwær heora sawla reston” (“that not any of them might feel how they fell asleep, nor any of them know where their souls rested,” lines 235–36, SS 40–41)—are problematic because it raises the question of whether or not only their bodies lie sleeping in the cave for 372 years, while their souls are being kept somewhere else. And this also raises the question of what (or who), exactly, “they” are who “on ðam scræfe tile
hwile gereste hæfdon” (“in the cave had rested for a suitable while,” line 391, SS 45), and whom God “awakens” from their “sleep” (line 396, SS 46). It was, of course, a commonplace of medieval hagiography that the bodies of saints enclosed in tombs were only resting, or sleeping, until God would reanimate them and rejoin their bodies to their souls, which were seen as capable of moving, somehow, through the world while their bodies, or pieces of their bodies, lay immobile in crypts and reliquaries. But I would also argue that, in the legend’s emphasis on the fact that the seven saints never actually die in the cave, but merely are put by God “on þære seftnyssse” (“into that softness,” line 238, SS 41), that they do exist, to a certain extent, as whole “persons” in a state of historical suspension. The Old English text never indicates that God returns their souls to them when they are awakened, only that he brings them, so to speak, out of their sleep gesunde (“sound” or “entire,” line 397, SS 46). Further, the power of their story would have rested to a certain extent, I believe, on the fact that, after 372 years, not only do the bodies of the seven men resist decrepitude, but so do their minds, for the author emphasizes how, “þæt ilce geþanc and seo sylfe carfulnysse þe heom amang þam nihtslæpe wæs on heora heortan, eall þa hi awacodon hi þæt sylfe gęþohton, and hi nan oþer [þing] nyston” (“the same thought and the same worry that was in their hearts during their night-sleep, when they all awakened they thought the same, and they knew no other [things],” lines 402–4, SS 46). If their souls were, indeed,
separated from them at the point of their bodies’ anesthesia by God and then returned to them upon awaking, these would be souls without memory of where they had been, which would be at odds with the Anglo-Saxon conception of the intimate and interdependent relation between soul and mind. On this point see Godden, “Anglo-Saxons on the Mind,” where he writes that, in Ælfric’s view, “the soul is . . . the intellectual, rational self” (279). Indeed, in his first entry in his Lives of Saints, “The Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ,” Ælfric writes, “Seo sawul hæfð . . . gemynd · and andgit · and wyllan,” and “þas ðreo þing na synd na ðreo lif ac an · ne þreo ædwiste ac an” (“The soul has mind [memory] and understanding and will” and “these three things are not three lives, but one, not three essences, but one,” Ælfric’s Lives 1: 112–16; the translation is mine). I would contend, then, if even tentatively, that the souls of the Seven Sleepers have remained intact with their bodies, also anesthesized, over the course of the 372 years they are shut up in the cave.


72. 287–88: “sent this thought into [Decius’s] mind, that he command the entrance of the cave, where they [the seven saints] all lay within, be barricaded with cut stones” (SS 42).

73. Shaw, Necessary Conjunctions 13.

74. It is worth emphasizing, again, that the anonymously-authored Old English Seven Sleepers cannot really be termed a conventional passio, and that there are many idiosyncracies,
plot-wise, that may have contributed to Ælfric himself not wanting to translate a more full version of it.


76. 220–21: “all came together and sat in the middle of the cave, that they might take food in common” (SS 40).

77. “But what this spiritual body shall be to us, or how great its grace, seeing that we have no experience of [its] coming, I fear it would be rash to profess it” (Augustine, *De civitate dei*, in Dombart and Kalb, *Aurelii Augustini Opera* 48: 841).


83. 484–85: “then was Malchus terribly afraid, and he was all frightened at this” (SS 48).


85. 490–92: “Truly, it does not seem to me that it could be true that this is the city of Ephesus, because it is all built in a different manner and all timbered with other buildings”; 494–96: “But again, I do not know, neither have I ever yet known, that there was any other city near to us except only Ephesus, here beside Celian hill” (SS 49).
86. The structure of my concluding sentence is indebted to two scholars: Edith Wyschogrod, who in her essay “Memory, History, Revelation” writes that “the dead other cannot be incorporated into my interpretive framework, or into any system of signs—but rather as an excess that opens the dimension of the more, of an unincorporable infinite” (Memory and History in Christianity and Judaism, ed. Michael A. Signer [Notre Dame: U Notre Dame P, 2001] 19–34, at 32), and George Kateb, who in his essay “The Idea of Individual Infinitude” writes, “One’s understanding is indispensable to the completeness of the world; one’s words are necessary. One’s life is transitory, but one’s mind deserves immortality. It has touched reality and become real” (The Hedgehog Review 7.2 [Summer 2005]: 42–54, at 49).