Chapter 6: Angelic Anagogy, Silver, and Matter's Mire

Part 3

Pushing the Envelope, Breaking Out: Making, Materials, Materiality

Chapter 6

ANGELIC ANAGOGY, SILVER, AND MATTER'S MIRE

LOOKING AT BYZANTINE icons is a difficult experience to articulate entirely. Our immediate impressions are very often preconditioned and so not really accessible. We are at the very least struck by their weathered antiquity, distinctive formal qualities, and probably above all by their confident charisma, their ability to confront without apology or qualification anyone entering their presence. One of our protective positions before that self-possession is to fall back on readings of contemporary (that is, primary) documents that indicate native ways of looking at such objects. These leading documents are often persuaded to agree with our commonly held explanations for these objects, explanations that in fact did not really exist in that culture. This chapter explores some of our useful fictions about images of angels, their recursive play, and matter's implications in this play.

Anagogy is the process habitually summoned to explain how objects, icons mostly, portage the space between the sacred and the profane. That is to say, the object transports the mind to a spiritual place and erases its own presence in this process of spiritual desire. A classic example is an epigram on an image of the Archangel Michael by the poet Agathias, sometimes called Scholasticus, who lived from about 532 to about 580. I use here a recent translation by Aglae Pizzone, who has also written a thoughtful and very useful analysis of this poem.

> The wax—how daring!—molded the invisible, the incorporeal archangel in the semblance of his form. Yet it was no thankless task, since the mortal man who beholds the image directs his spirited impulse by way of a superior imagination. His veneration is no longer distracted: engraving within himself the model, he trembles as if he were in the latter's presence. The eyes stir up a deep intellection, and art is able by means of colours to ferry over the heart's prayer.[1]

Like other scholars (including me),[2] she treats the icon as window, a transparent entity that exists to erase its existence.[3] Moreover, in her model, the viewer (and really, the writer, since the icon does not survive) is an autonomous agent, and the matter at hand is not only the image. Instead, the viewer's imaginative carnality, his/her corporeal presence before the object, is the determining materiality.[4]

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1 Pizzone 2013. On the relevance of this epigram into fifteenth-century Rome, see Gill 2014, 78–83.

2 Peers 2001.

3 Pizzone 2013, 80, "Agathias stresses the emotional impact of the image, eventually eliciting intellectual ascension. The painted portrait of Michael both stimulates embodied faculties and triggers a superior cognitive ability."

4 Pizzone 2013, 83–84: "By 'matter,' I mean not only the substantial, material object, i.e. the

Figure 26. Paten with the Communion of Peter and Paul, 65 cm in diameter, silver repoussé in high relief, ca. 600 CE. The Menil Collection, Houston (1990-12DJ), photograph: Paul Hester, with permission of The Menil Collection.

Pizzone's analysis rests on an understanding of spiritual knowledge and fulfillment working through vision and resulting in communion with the divine. This explanation, to be sure, parallels many descriptions in devotional literature and theological florilegia. But those sources are not neutral and need analysis, just as any sophisticated, self-involved literature would. Pizzone's work does certainly advance the question of the viewer's body in relation to the icon, and I am really using her for rhetorical contrast. My argument takes a strongly divergent tack, because I want to make a case for eliminating discussion of transparency, as well as of carnality as it belongs to humans only, and not least, I favour object over text, so I do not elide that sixth-century writer's explanations with a reclaimable material reality. A text is always self-interested, and it is always in an agonistic relationship with its subject ("art"), especially when it is ekphrastic. It is only one interpretative position among many possible, and it is prescriptive in the face of objects' own ceaselessly asserted materialistic independence.

My position tries to take account of the variety of experience and ontologies of the late antique/early medieval worlds. No single, discrete category exists, for them or even for us, and my argument champions mixture over line, multiplicity over binaries, and progress through many possible states of contact with the divine. That mixture is a natural state for us all. As Michel Serres has written, "No-one has ever witnessed the great battle of simple entities. We only ever experience mixtures, we encounter only meetings."[5] At stake, just the same, in any historical analysis is the particularity of mixture in that context. I want to confine myself here to relatively narrow limits, objects, and texts from approximately 550 to 650 and primarily in Greek. I will stray a little, but this period stands for larger issues meaningful for understanding Byzantine and Eastern Christian relationships to their material world and consequently (always as a consequence, one has to stress) to the divine.

Moreover, I want to spend time on silver, because of this precious metal's role in defining craft, science, and interpretations of the world for this period (and beyond). This medium also illuminates others used for this period's art. Protochemistry (or alchemy) and geology are necessary knowledge for viewing this period, as it would be

painted image, eliciting the beholder's progress, but also the carnality of the beholder him/herself, the physicality of his/her sight."

5 Serres 2008, 28.

for anyone attempting to understand us. The science of late antiquity was a distinctive system of thought, organic with their relations to the world, however well or poorly any one person knew it.[6] Alchemy also combined those fields in its search for essences, for ways to perfect matter, and in its careful attention to process, however misguided many early scientific fields were, by our standards.[7] Our time is deep time, the time of geological and evolutionary processes, and is based on assuming that minerals and ores are inert. It is easy, then, for us to ignore alchemy, and to overexploit it, too.[8] Late antique explanations were based on an organic geology, and their temporal assumptions of minerals and ores necessarily were not deep. That time was flowing and emergent, because stones were constantly making and moving. (They are for us, too, if we stop to recognize it.)[9] Time was mixed, in the sense that human time was also mingled with stony time. Moreover, that geology was not then simply under their feet, but living its mingling life among other living creatures.[10] Geology, and its chemistry and physics, were divinely compelled and soaked in God's presence and provided the fullest understanding of crossing to the divine.[11] Rather than Agathias's anagogy (or at least our explanation of it as such), I would argue for straddling or bestriding over traversing, that is to say, mixture, relation, mingling, movement, a perfect meeting of physics and metaphysics.[12]

Drawing on the example of Michael Baxandall in *The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany*, these late antique objects can likewise be "addressed as lenses bearing on their own circumstances."[13] In the first regard, art historians use their eyes, but vision dislikes mixtures, and most conditions of display in museums undermine the heterogeneous in favour of clarity and legibility.[14] This silver plate from the Menil Collection in Houston, Texas, dates to around 600 CE (Figure 26), and it shows a scene of communion given by Christ to Sts. Peter and Paul. In documentary photographs, the plate is evenly lighted and consistently easy to read for narrative and identities. But in *Byzantine Things in the World*, and indeed in its display in the collection current to this writing in 2019, the silver plate partook and partakes in a dynamic process of figural passages yielding to

6 For bibliography on Byzantine science, see O'Meara 2017; Mavroudi 2015. For a wider net, see also Takahashi 2011, Takahashi 2014 and Lazaris 2020.

7 Alchemy's scientific roots are often borne out with sympathetic examination, if not realized as such. See, for example, Viano 2006, 199–206.

8 Parikka 2014, 22.

9 See, for example, Norris et al. 2014.

10 Feigelfeld 2015.

11 Braidotti 2013, 60: "'Life', far from being codified as the exclusive property or the unalienable right of one species, the human, over all others or of being sacralized as pre-established given, is posited as process, interactive and open-ended."

12 See the excellent article Smith 2012, as well as Chin 2015.

13 Baxandall 1980, vii.

14 Serres 2008, 81: "A medium is abstract, dense, homogeneous, almost stable, concentrated; a mixture fluctuates. The medium belongs to solid geometry, as one used to say; a mixture favours fusion and tends towards the fluid."

abstraction under light's intensities, even if installation photographs resist that dynamic (see Figure 21).[15]

Strangely, the embossed plate became illegible at just the points where figures and representational elements were present. In that sense, the apprehension of the scene takes self-conscious searching for the right position vis-à-vis the plate for seeing figuration, while its "natural material state" is lambent, mysterious presence. An irony, perhaps, is that the "natural state" took place in such a constructed setting, and photography scarcely touches its effects. Moreover, the colour values of the sheens of the plate revealed an identity instability that echoed alchemists' notion of shared essential qualities of silver and gold. From certain angles, the silver came to look golden and appeared to traverse both metals almost simultaneously. Exhibition is really the only way most of us can experience this changeable nature.[16] Silver reveals its own instability, its movement from state to state, its ability to cross worlds. Matter, in other words, is not an intruder on the making of meaning; rather, it contributes directly and fully to passages among states.[17]

And yet our explanatory framework asserts no real connection between an image and its model, except insofar as conventionalized *essential* resemblance gives it. To return to Agathias, wax is in some sense "greatly daring" in its material capture of the archangel. Such metaphors from technology have led scholars to develop theories of nonessential relations between images (the impressed wax) and the model (the seal)—one impresses the other and leaves a trace, but no essence is shared between the two, seal and wax. Theologians did employ this metaphor, and it allowed them to pursue an inoculating relation between icon and subject. Friedrich Kittler tells us, however, that a historical discursive practice is predetermined by media technology, and media—such as seals and wax, to take it to late antiquity—established and maintained a certain understanding of the operations that materials bore out.[18]

Materiality made passages between the terrestrial and divine, and technologies (and their descriptions) attempted to catch up with matter, its *Stoffe*, and its effects.[19] Alchemy was in the first place a strongly observant system. It examined the shining, self-perfecting lambency beyond the eye's reach and then attempted to articulate it and harness it. Here, silver and wax provided—and provides for us retrospectively—lenses with which to understand their own circumstances in their world. As Jussi Parikka

15 See Peers 2013.

16 I am also thinking of the David Plates in *Byzantium and Islam* at the Metropolitan Museum, where the plates shone brilliantly in silver and gold flashes. I am immensely grateful for the collegial sharing of installation photographs by the curator, Helen Evans, who also edited the catalogue (Evans 2012). See, also, Kiilerich 2012b.

17 See the stimulating book by Bucklow 2014.

18 See Kittler 2013 and Kittler 1999.

19 Jussi Parikka in Feigelfeld 2015: "I want to insist that the materiality of media starts even before we talk about media: with the minerals, the energy, the affordances or affects that specific metallic arrangements enable for communication, transmission, conduction, projection, and so on. It is a geopolitical as well as a material question, but one where the *geos* is irreducible to an object of human political intention."

has argued, "The engineer does not breathe life into inert material. With their specific qualities and intensities, the material demands a specific type of specialist or a specific method to be born, so that they might be catalyzed into the machines we call machines. The material invents the engineer."[20]

If Kittler tried to position media at the outset of cultural discourses, Parikka takes us one step back in the chain, to an originary moment of materials, or just matter, which includes stones, ores, wax, and so on, as formative or generative of its own outcomes in human hands. And to take this recursiveness one step further, or deeper, that lack of individuality or independence of the human agent, or even its self-evident existence, is difficult to catch hold of in these contexts where media technology shines its light.[21]

Substance as a basic stratum of the world is a necessary component in any historical discourse concerned with things. Naturally, contemporaries of this silver plate had notions about substances, and they sought explanations, as far as their media allowed, for how substance or matter worked and unfolded. For example, in this period, Stephanus of Alexandria is one of the most important sources for natural philosophy, in which alchemy should be included.[22] He has been credited with being an important intellectual bridge between Alexandria and Constantinople in the crucial seventh century, when the loss of Egypt meant a new gravitational centre for intellectuals was needed at the capital. That reputation may be undeserved, as recent work has argued,[23] but in any case, Stephanus wrote important treatises for this issue of substance, for matter and its dynamic independence.

Alchemy, in the hands of a thinker such as like Stephanus, was a program of self-improvement, indeed, of spiritual perfecting, that matched the self-refining progress of base metals to gold. Only the pure in spirit could help realize pure matter, and discerning that essential aspect of matter was based on a belief that all bodies, down to the lowest level of matter, have power and ability to regenerate. Those qualities all derive from an understanding of and connection with a vital spirit in matter:

> And being burnt to ashes they make many and divine works and various colours [...] leading the nature back outside to the visible. On the one hand, [those sulphurous things] are active bodies; on the other hand, a power, according to another discourse, displaying activity [...]. For such things as come to rebirth, relate to an easily apprehended art, especially they who cook together the ash of common plants with the like, and melt together the ashes of bodies and glasses with the like [...]. For [these bodies] come again to a certain power and virtue and re-birth, having a nature imitative of the whole universe and of the elements themselves, whence also they have re-birth, a communion with a certain spirit, as of things coming into existence by a material spirit. So copper, like a man, has both soul and spirit.[24]

20 Parikka in Feigelfeld 2015.

21 See Holl 2015, 86.

22 See Papathanassiou 2008.

23 Rouché 2011.

24 And further: "For these melted and metallic bodies, when they are reduced to ashes, being joined to the fire, are again made spirits, the fire giving freely to them its spirit. For as they manifestly take it from the air that makes all things, just as it also makes men and all things, thence

In this elaborate way, Stephanus's position permits a further view into how substance or basic matter was conceived and explained in this period. It conforms to some fundamental definitions for substance used by scholars today: the possibility of division and separation, while retaining identity as substance; characteristic structures remaining in the substance despite separation; and certain tendencies predictable in themselves and in relations.[25] An important distinction is the vital spirit, the animating current that runs through matter. Modern physics and chemistry have their explanations for this spark of life, while scientists of all kinds had their own explanations in late antiquity. For Lucretius, famously, the movement of atoms was due to *clinamen*, an unpredictable and arbitrary swerve.[26] For this period, the swerve may be unpredictable and seemingly arbitrary, but that opacity is due only to a lack of discernment: for alchemists, investigation and experimentation were ways into a deeper and fuller understanding than was possible for those not able to reach that level. Alchemy was self-perfecting in claiming that vital spirit and to further world-knowing.

Part of that knowing involved risky work, and here I would like to bring us back to silver. Silver was a metal nearly stainless. In a system without classifications for metals and ores as we have them, the only real way to rank and organize them was through their relative purity. Ruled by the moon (as gold was ruled by the sun), silver had lofty celestial credentials, and it moved to perfection's rank naturally, as all things in the world moved to their proper places eventually. No one knew how long silver's route to perfection would in the normal course of time take to reach its goal, but the assumption was always that it would. Alchemy was the search for the accelerant for that purity, a way to harness that vital matter to its own perfecting end. And so the plate in the Menil is not inert according to this system; in its substance, it is moving that way through its vital spirit. Its vital spirit is most often temporally quite deep and slow, and it is also most often innocuous. But another quality of substance is its unpredictable and dangerous potential for change, regeneration and combination.[27]

In the absence of definitions of distinguishing characteristics that we would recognize from our geological framework, silver had such traits, too. Silver possessed qualities that were not fully explicable, especially when the problematic aspect of its relationship to quicksilver is examined. In Greek, *hydrargyros*, and in Latin, *argentum vivum*—the difficulty is evident in the very designation of mercury in that world.[28] Its vitality, both in its neutral form as silver and in its active form as quicksilver, is a common assumption in that world. Indeed, Stephanus inferred its basic sympathy with life-giving fluid, because

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is given them a vital spirit and a soul. So also the fusible bodies, being reduced to ashes with the metallic bodies, by a certain method recover their soul, as if becoming akin to the fire. And likewise all the elements have creations, destructions, changes and restorations from one to another" (text and trans. Taylor, 1938, 40–41).

25 See Hahn and Soentgen 2011.

26 On Serres's use of this theory, see Hahn 2006.

27 Hahn and Soentgen 2011.

28 See Stillman 1924/1960, 7–11.

warm, human blood is most like quicksilver.[29] In those terms, quicksilver and its slow brother, silver, are kinds of the lifeblood of earth that have cognate human attributes, but also dangerous and miraculous qualities. Mercury and sulphur were the basic catalysts of life in these theories, and their basic interaction produced vermilion, the material that artists and others knew to be closest to blood.[30]

In these ways, Greek science in the period around 600 was able to draw connections and, in fact, to find substantial unity in the world, from cosmos to humanity to the matter underfoot. Not everyone would know or articulate the material world in this way, of course, but the general position was certainly deep seated in nearly every aspect of life.[31]

Those properties are similar to descriptions found in intellectuals' texts, alchemists' included, of the cosmic sympathies that guide and govern. And all these qualities establish ways for bodies to know, experience, and be guided to proximity to the divine and even contact with God. Geology's organic qualities, its patterns of growth, its abilities of motion and action, were common assumptions that linked the Bordeaux Pilgrim—never given a great deal of credit for his critical faculties—and great thinkers such as Proclus (412–85), who also wrote of the living qualities of stone and metals. Two principal camps, to generalize, claimed the field. On the one hand, Platonists, for whom the cosmos was caused by the One, saw soul in all things, making alive even those things that could not live otherwise. "Indeed, [soul] accounts for or is closely involved in a wide variety of functions that few people nowadays are inclined to ascribe to a single thing: reason, sensation, passions, appetite, and so on, but also life and growth, the 'vegetative' function people share with plants and the living, growing earth."[32] On the other hand, from the ancient world through the Byzantine, late antiquity was part of a long continuum wherein geology was life and provided passage from stones' and ores' matter to the highest insights into the unified workings of the cosmos.

Explanations for those workings varied among intellectuals writing in the fields of philosophy and science in this period. Aristotelians offered explanations from the other direction from Platonists, not top down and form on matter from above, but a solid stratum from which form could emerge and pass. Their philosophy in this period established a continuum from heaven to earth that broke the old dichotomy between the two realms. But they kept the notion of a dynamic universe filled with *pneuma*, or spirit, which pervaded the universe and established basic balances whereby all things strove to reach their own perfection, according to their nature. In this period—the sixth and seventh centuries—major arguments were mobilized that altered age-old Aristotelian

29 Papathanassiou 2006, 176, translating an unpublished text by Stephanus: "blood composed of air is warm and human and is like quicksilver. Yellow bile composed of fire is warm and dry and is like copper. Black bile composed of earth is dry and cold and is the dross of both [quicksilver and copper]. Phlegm composed of water is cold and humid and is like the vapours of a watery solution of gold, which are the souls of copper."

30 See Smith 2014a, 110–12, and 2014b, 36, as well as Connor 1998, 28–29.

31 Smith 2012, 516: Plotinus and others are a "potential index of certain deep-seated assumptions that rarely made it to the surface of explicit discussion."

32 Smith 2012, 526–27.

dogma. Adapted by philosophers such as John Philoponus (ca. 490–ca. 570) to the Christian deity, the *pneuma* became the divine spirit, heaven and earth were governed by the same principles, and the eternity of the universe was cut, replaced by creation and finitude.[33] A Christian understanding of the mechanics of the universe in these terms became increasingly exclusive in this period.

Two examples show how these models implicate the stuff of silver. The first comes from the life of St. Theodore of Sykeon, an Anatolian monk and bishop who lived during the reign of Heraclius (610–41); his hagiography dates shortly after that reign ended.[34] In one episode, the saint sends a deacon to Constantinople to purchase a silver service set for liturgical celebration. The deacon returns with a shiny new set, but Theodore discerns a problem with the silver. Not visible to a normal eye, the silver atoms had been debased by a previous form imposed on them, namely, that of a chamber pot for a prostitute. Judging the silver to be forever spoiled, Theodore had them both perform a prayer of blessing over the liturgical vessels, which tarnished before their eyes. Miraculous connoisseurship is revealed here. At a level distinguishable only by the saint, matter had sufficient form still to be intelligible as rotten and debased, but that level was below the current, apparently blameless form that the silver had taken. The real protagonist here, Theodore, is working through reductive concerns, of right and wrong substance, pure and contagious mixture. Almost radioactively tainted by sin, matter was in this episode the aspect that carried the body (in the end, the liturgical set), but the unformed substance of silver is the basic subject and discerned only by symptoms observable by an informed examiner.

The other example gives the positive side of mixture and contagion. Written a century or two after the fact, the *Narratio de Sancta Sophia* described the silver altar produced for Hagia Sophia in the sixth century in terms of a bravado mingling of stuff: in order to produce a work costlier than gold alone, Justinian collected a team of specialists in different materials, who advised him to combine all the most precious substances: "gold, silver, various precious stones, pearls and mother of pearl, copper, electrum, lead, iron, tin, glass and every other metallic substance."[35] The craftsmen ground the sub-

33 On Philoponus, see Sambursky 1962; Wildberg 2008; Sorabji 2010b; Torrance 1999; and among other noteworthy studies, MacCoull 2010a.

34 Festugière 1970, 1:36–38 (42); Dawes and Baynes 1948/1996, 117–18. Festugière 1970, 2:196–98, also mentions a very similar contemporary story from Theophylactus Simocattes (active first half of the seventh century).

35 *Narratio de S. Sophia*: "Wishing to make the altar table much costlier (*polytelesteran*) than gold, he called in many specialists and told them so. They said to him. 'Let us place in a smelting furnace gold, silver, various precious stones, pearls and mother of pearl, copper, electrum, lead, iron, tin, glass and every other metallic substances (*hylen*).' Having ground all of these in mortars and bound them up they poured them into the smelting furnace. After the fire had kneaded together (*anamaxamenon*) these (substances), the craftsmen removed them from the fire and poured them into a mould, and so the altar-table was cast, priceless mixture. In this way, he set it up, and underneath it, he placed columns of pure gold with precious stones and enamels; and the stairs all round upon which the priests stand to kiss the altar table he made of pure silver. As for the basin of the altar-table, he made it of priceless stones and gilded it. Who can behold the appearance of the altar table without being amazed? Who indeed can comprehend it as it changes

stances in mortars, smelted them all at once, and kneaded them together, and finally poured them in a mould. The text gives other extravagant descriptions of the liturgical furnishings, but the effect is also noteworthy: the resultant material brought out wonder in viewers (naturally), and it more compellingly altered colour and brilliance, so that sometimes it was golden and sometimes silvery in sheen and glow, but also alternating with sapphire; it was able simultaneously to include all colours and hues.

This narrative has a number of points of contact with my argument: in the first place, it shows the nature of mixture according to understandings of the period, that is to say, as a blend without loss of individual characteristics. Each material retained in some way an aspect of its own appearance and substance that played out in the altar cladding. Such questions of identity and mixture had been debated throughout this period. The examples of torches and woven cloth often played into these philosophical discussions: torches when bundled together can seem united, but are perfectly distinct when they are separated, and likewise, cloth of many-coloured threads can appear one colour, but examination of the weave reveals individual threads and colours. For Platonists, "mixture is one of the delusions so characteristic of the world of seeming and becoming,"[36] but for an erstwhile Aristotelian such as Philoponus, while mixture is ultimately reducible to the four elements, above that level, substances, such as water and wine, retain their particularity while losing or reducing their actuality.[37] Without that position, every combination above the four elements would have been very hard to comprehend and to describe, according to how we know the world.

In the second place, the process described has a great deal in common with methods of alchemy preserved in late antique sources. The kneading of metal to produce certain effects occurs as a cognate to breadmaking, because as we've noted, alchemy has many cognate forms in other fields such as cookery and agriculture. The kneading takes place there because the smiths are working with a yeast—namely, gold. Gold is a seed, like semen or yeast, that enlivens and engenders all with which it comes into direct contact in such processes.

In the third place, this description takes us back to the Menil silver plate. That object is an antidote, as so many things are when considered in themselves very carefully, to mental or spiritual anagogy as the prescribed means for late antique people to overcome the limitations of this world and to traverse to the next. The conditions of display and points of contact with such a plate allow us to imagine what that anonymous narrator could be describing, that is, the play, growth, and change of substance so richly seen in gold and silver, but evident in all materials in descending show. In this way, the plate comments on its own circumstances. It can reveal, if looked at in light and space, its silvery, watery quality, when forms submerge in that glowing field; it can stabilize

colour and brilliance, sometimes appearing to be gold, at other places silver, another gleaming with sapphire—in a word, reflecting seventy-two hues according to the nature of the stones, pearls and all the metals?" See Preger 1901–7/1975, 1:94.17–96.6 (17); Mango 1986, 99 (slightly modified).

36 de Haas 2003, 262–63.

37 Erismann 2014; Sorabji 2010a, 24–26; de Haas 1999; Sambursky 1962, 99–121; and for Philponus, Sorabji 2004b, 291–94 (20a.4–7) and Sorabji 2004a,178–80 (5c.2).

and coalesce into that legible moment of communion with Christ; it can also show its golden substance, which ferments and grows the plate to the perfection that only gold can give. Such an object can recapitulate in its matter and form the very nature of the world and its relation to God. Nothing is eternal but God, according to thinkers such as Philoponus, and that belief—strongly against tradition—became increasingly common in this period.[38] God created and provided motivation to all matter, and nothing reduces entirely to nonbeing (except in its form).[39] For Philoponus, this argument about the nonperishability of substance can also apply—strikingly—to the Eucharistic materials, too. So the bread can become flesh, as he wrote in his refutation of Proclus in *Against Proclus on the Eternity of the World* (529), but when the form of the flesh has perished, the form of the flesh can be "non-being," and yet the body or substance remains itself.[40] And so for the wine as well: "For when the wine is changed into blood, straight away the form of the wine is destroyed; and likewise, if the bread changes into flesh, the very form itself of the bread has not become flesh, but rather it itself has on the one hand gone into non-being, yet on the other in its substrate the form of the flesh is generated."[41]

God-motivated, but not activated by ritual or prayers in this model, what Philoponus is describing is in some fashion the tainted substance of Theodore of Sykeon's silver. Form is passing, however miraculously produced, and substance retains its nature, however it is shaped. In other words, the plate and icon, like so many objects or things in that world, can reveal their own self-directed anagogy through their substances.

As in Baxandall's aphorism, the object is its own lens on its own circumstances—its recursions are always rich. The forms on the plate show the very anagogy in matter: Christ is giving his own blood, but the wine remains, even having received that form, while the bread is sitting there, separated flesh (though unrecognizable as such from its appearance) of the man behind it. On the Menil silver plate, the Lord is giving his very (undiminishing) body for eating and drinking by the two princes of the apostles.[42] The bread is still bread, clearly—this is Philoponus's point, as Leslie MacCoull says: "there is no need to imagine some kind of incorporeal matter mysteriously at work in our world. On the contrary: the three-dimensional performs as matter perfectly well."[43]

Here is a remarkably realist philosophy that also finds resonance in hagiography and other literary genres, such as ekphrasis. Alchemy is a cognate system of thought, one in which the substratum of matter can be directed and purified to its best essence. Likewise, the liturgical action of the Eucharist demanded purity on the part of the participant in this period, so in a remarkable conjunction of thinking and being, transitive

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38 Burrus 2013 reveals some of the beautiful complexity of this position.

39 See, for example, Torrance 1999, 323–26.

40 On this issue, see the excellent MacCoull 2010b.

41 Rabe 1899, 358.14–20, trans. MacCoull 2010b, 320. For an alternative translation, see Share 2010, 41.

42 On a comparable plate, see Krueger 2014, 113–14.

43 MacCoull 2010b. 322.

matter refined Christians to their best, most divine form.[44] Gold is the divine substance that pulls along *every* other substance in its wake toward accomplishing its ultimate self-realization, its best essence. Science told them about such matters, and the things around them told them what their science could say.

The mix and mingling that we all do was active on stuff's side, too. The wax was greatly daring in the image of the archangel, and the silver of the plate was deeply involved in its search for perfection. Movingly, matter was able to bestride these passages between material and spiritual realms. The angelic wax might have been about anagogy for Agathias, but that anagogy was, ironically, downward, to the matter that made present and real to him the fearful archangel.[45] At this level, substance trumps form. Agathias's semblance of the archangel's form is only ever stated at the level of wax and colour, the basis of the encaustic technique of icon painting. Tellingly, the archangel is never described as such; he has none of the attributes other texts might give him, such as wings, a beardless face, youthful beauty, a staff or orb. He is revealed on the level of matter, the wax and colours. And the viewer is likewise made into a semblance: the moulding of the archangel is also performed on that imaginary viewer, who is engraved within himself or herself in that same spiritual semblance. Substance, shared among God's creation, is the stratum truer to the divine than form, and the mingling of this matter, our mire in our world's stuff, shows forth the archangel's anagogy, descending to the "deep intellection" of strangely invisible matter.

44 On the move from communal to penitence and purity in understanding and performance of the Eucharist, see Krueger 2014, 127–29.

45 I have argued for this movement in Byzantine and some modern art in Peers 2018c.