

INTRODUCTION

Nothing Is the Matter

Зачем я лишь о том всё время думаю,
как сделать, чтоб не думать ни о чём?
—Михаил Щербаков, “Интермедия 4”

“Do
“You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember
“Nothing?”
—T. S. Eliot, “The Waste Land”

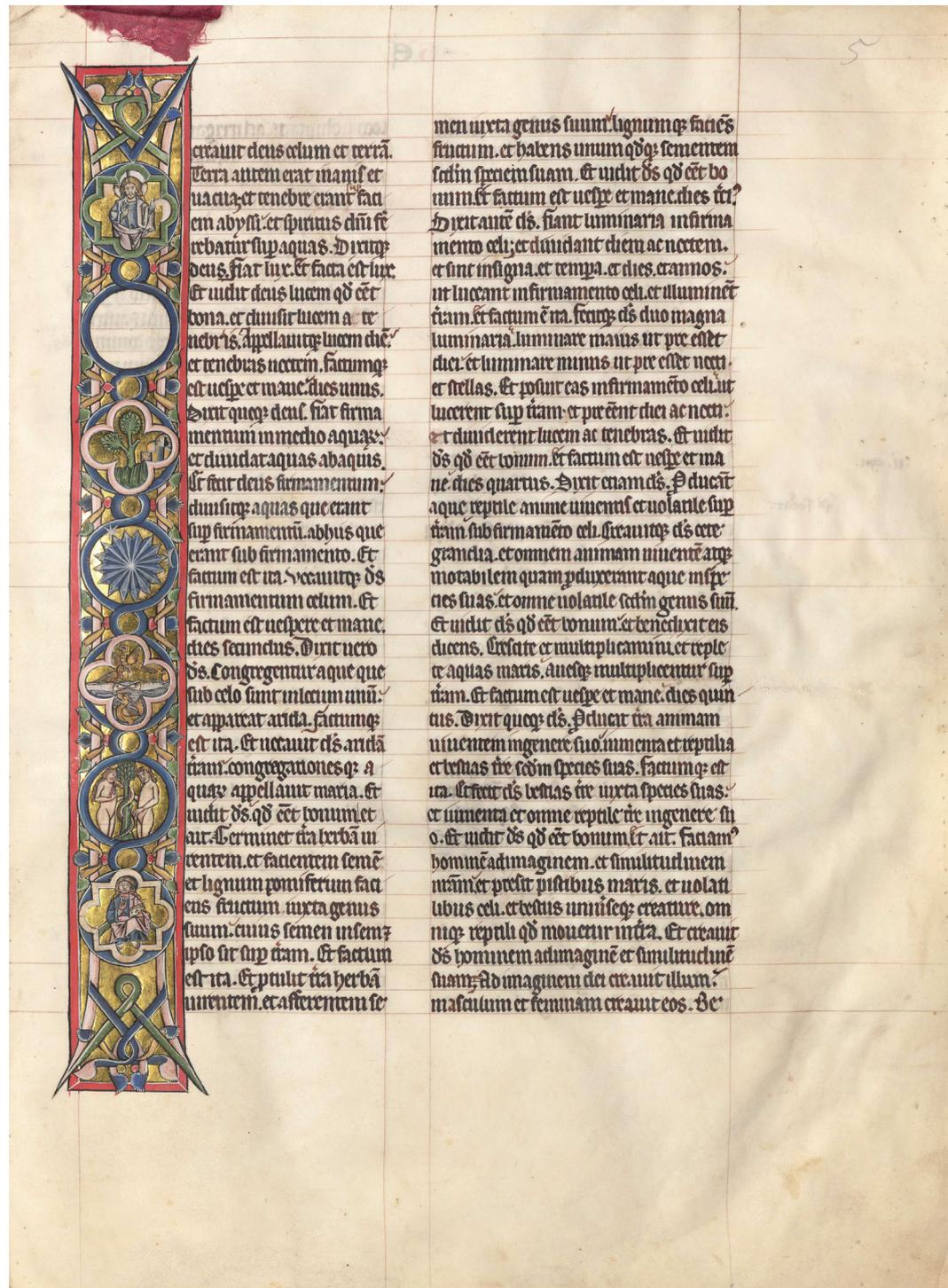
DATED TO THE LAST QUARTER of the thirteenth century, the remarkable folio that opens the book of Genesis in the Kaysheim Bible overwhelms the beholder with its sheer amount of stuff (fig. 1).¹ A rectangular column that forms the large initial letter *I*—the beginning of the first verse, “In principio creavit Deus”—is shot through with leafy tendrils. Inscribed into this column are six medallions, five of which are filled with Creation activity that chronicles days three through six. God is represented twice; in the top medallion, he is shown half-length, standing, poised to unleash his incipient universe. Underneath him, however, the second medallion remains completely empty. This emptiness takes the place of the division of light from darkness, the creation of the firmament, the gathering of waters, and the appearance of land. If the busy initial

recalls John Ruskin’s admiring yet withering description of Gothic cathedral stonework as “the rude love of decorative accumulation,” the empty medallion commands the beholder’s attention precisely because, in its ostensible visual lack, it is unlike all else that surrounds it.²

Although it has been nuanced, tempered, and complicated, Ruskin’s assessment remains insidious in the field of art history. The impulse to fill in visual lacunae is a familiar trait frequently ascribed to later medieval imagery, which is regularly defined by its allegedly omnipresent *horror vacui*, or fear of empty space. Book margins teeming with grotesques, the profusion of sculpture on church portals, images colonizing road interstices on maps: all contribute to the collective conception of medieval art as a paragon of crowded spaces, which strives—with a certain mindless

FIGURE 1

I initial. Kaisheim Bible,
Germany, last quarter of
the thirteenth century.
Munich, BSB, Cod. lat.
28169, fol. 5r.



insistence—to plug and veneer every possible gap by whatever means necessary, generating content through sheer profusion.³ But empty loci are many and multifarious in the visual culture of medieval Europe, and they invade its material universe relentlessly and exultantly. In particular, their persistent presence on the pages of late medieval manuscripts frames emptiness as a potent site of meaning-making.

Of course, the Kaisheim miniature is not really empty. It is, instead, aniconic, with absence as its semiotic predicate. The blank space suggests not only the emptiness of the earth before its separation from heaven (Genesis 1:2: “terra autem erat inanis et vacua”), but also, and perhaps more forcefully, the very nothingness—the *nihil*—from which God will create the world. Moreover, the materiality of the parchment itself is significant: it points to that other essential act of Creation, of the Word made flesh (John 1:14), as well as to the imminent creation of animals whose descendants ultimately provided skin for the folio that here seemingly anticipates the acceptance of the divine Word. In fact, the words that peek through most clearly from the verso of the page include *ergo Dominus*—“therefore, God”—a part of Genesis 2:15 (“tulit ergo Dominus Deus hominem et posuit eum in paradiso voluptatis ut operaretur et custodiret illum”).⁴ Because of the ruling on the vellum, the evocation of God that bleeds through the nakedness of the roundel, and the adjacent text inscribed on the equally naked parchment, the emptiness seems incipient, about to be ruptured by the inscription of the self-same *Verbum* that was at the beginning and that was God (John 1:1).⁵ At the same time, it suggests the replacement of God’s corporeal body, no longer visible, by this body’s sign: to wit, a mere trace.

Indeed, because all emptiness bears traces—visual, cognitive, material—it often functions as a footprint of its makers and beholders, of their viewing practices, of their sensorium. In every kind of nothingness, matter remains. “There is no such thing as silence,” as John Cage wrote; “a canvas is never empty,” as Robert Rauschenberg echoed; and both evoked Henri Bergson’s philosophical discourse on nothingness: “We are immersed in realities, and cannot pass out of them.”⁶ To recall Michel de Certeau: “Despite the fiction of the blank page, we always write over the writing.”⁷ The fecundity of emptiness constitutes the subject of this book, which treats absence, in its many forms, as a generative presence. It is therefore as much about the occasional failures of figuration as it is about the potency of visual lack. In this book, I set out to explore medieval empty space as semiotically and epistemologically fraught: the space of the imaginary, generating and anchoring active processes of memory and imagination. I do not want to draw a sharp distinction between imagination and mental imaging familiar from Gospel meditations; at the same time, I do want to make clear that the empty space left by the Master of Heiligenkreuz in front of the dying Virgin’s bed—indicated by the pillow on which viewers, in their imagination, can kneel (fig. 2)—is different from the empty space that stands for the *nihil*, nothingness of the first day of Creation, or from the blankness that can index the unseen and the unrepresentable.⁸ Unrepresentability remains at the core of my argument as the book queries vacant, erased, and punctured surfaces and explores the production of meaning posited by the perceptive uncertainty that arises from sensory engagements with these spaces. Voids,

“Silo”

FIGURE 2
Master of Heiligenkreuz,
Death of the Virgin, Austria
(possibly Bohemia), ca.
1400. Tempera and oil
with gold on panel, 66.00 ×
53.30 cm. Cleveland, CMA
1936.496, gift of the Friends
of the Cleveland Museum of
Art in memory of John Long
Severance.



gaps, holes, and erasures are plentiful in late medieval art, put brazenly on display to be grappled with, and they hold the beholder in suspension: they awaken doubt and spur on invention.

To date, no research has been dedicated to a systematic study of such empty spaces in the Middle Ages. Instead, images that address nothingness as a mode of visual communication have been summarily attributed to the emergence of conceptual art in the middle of the twentieth century. Indeed, erasure and blankness are familiar discourses in modern and contemporary media, especially as they flourished in the 1950s: in 1951 Rauschenberg painted his all-white canvases, and in 1953 he erased Wilhelm de Kooning's drawing and framed the erasure; in 1952 John Cage composed and performed 4'33", and in 1959 he published a lecture on nothing, declaring, "I have nothing to say and I am saying it."⁹ The following decade proved to be just as fruitful for the exploration of voids and empty spaces, from Mark Rothko's 1963 *Untitled #11* to Robert Ryman's white paintings, to Lita Hornick's 1968 publication, under the auspices of Kulchur Press, of Aram Saroyan's book that consisted of nothing but reams of typing paper, completely blank, save for the copyright notice and the price printed on the cover.¹⁰ Subsequent decades of conceptualized emptiness were summed up in the 2009 exhibition *Voids: A Retrospective*, which opened at the Centre Pompidou and then at the Kunsthalle Bern.¹¹ The show materialized Robert Smithson's wish to have a museum dedicated to emptiness, "defined by the actual installation of art. Installations should empty rooms, not fill them."¹² Featuring one empty room after another, *Voids* began with Yves Klein's 1958 *The Specialization of Sensibility in the Raw Material State into Stabilized Pictorial Sensibility* (originally on view in the locked,

whitewashed Iris Clert Gallery), continued through Robert Irwin's *Experimental Situation* of 1970 (which denied that an empty gallery is ever empty, "as every space has specific qualities that we can perceive"), and concluded with Roman Ondák's 2004 *More Silent Than Ever*, which purportedly contained a listening device, hidden from view.

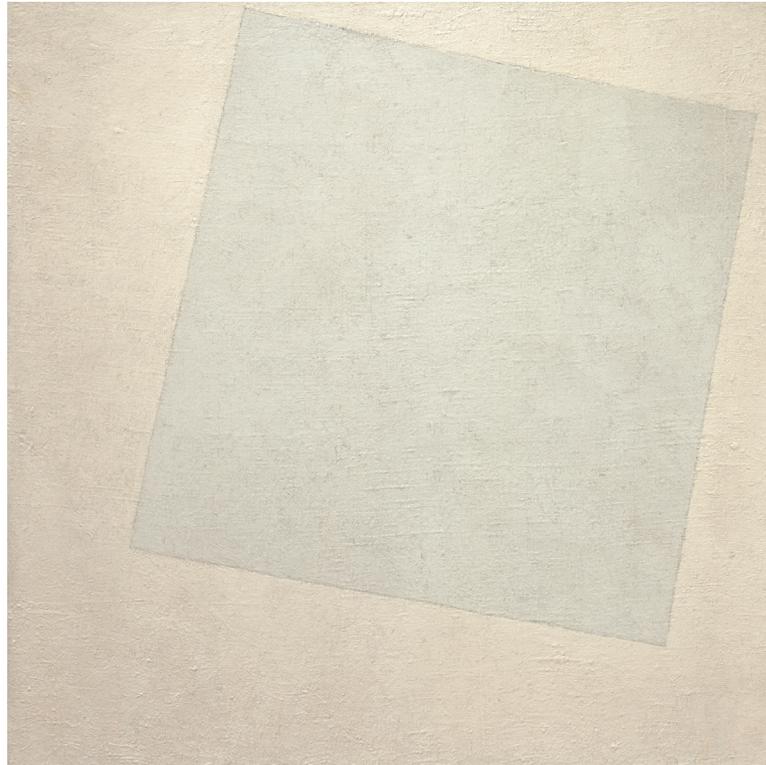
Visual engagements with absence continue to pervade contemporary art. Empty white rectangles found throughout cities—the essential readymades—form David Batchelor's ongoing *Found Monochromes* cycle, exhibited in 2015 at Whitechapel Gallery.¹³ Erasures predicate Ken Gonzales-Day's continuing *Erased Lynching Series*, which removes the lynch victim along with the rope from original nineteenth-century postcards, leaving everything else—the crowds and the setting—intact.¹⁴ Absence stands at the heart of the Ground Zero monument in New York City, an inverted footprint of the Twin Towers, haunted by what is lost (fig. 3).¹⁵ "From the birth of conceptual art in the 1960s down to the immediate present, visual artists have constantly been addressing the idea of nothing," writes Max Hollein, taking a particularly short view.¹⁶ At the very least, Rauschenberg's and Saroyan's antecedents lie in the visual, literary, and performance experiments of the early twentieth century: Kazimir Malevich's *Suprematist Composition: White on White* of 1918 (fig. 4); Vasilisk Gnedov's "Poem of the End" (Poem 15), which consists of a title only (and a hand gesture, right to left and back); André Breton's erasure of Francis Picabia's chalk drawing in 1920.¹⁷ And these Soviet and French visionaries, in turn, reintroduced the basic modalities of late medieval art into the contemporary enterprise of visual and aural perception, suggesting that the void can constitute the sublime and that "blankness,"

Black and white

FIGURE 3
Michael Arad and
Peter Walker, National
September 11 (Ground
Zero) Monument, New
York, 2011.



FIGURE 4
Kazimir Malevich,
*Suprematist Composition:
White on White*, 1918. Oil
on canvas, 79.4 × 79.4 cm.
New York, Museum of
Modern Art, 817.1935.



to borrow from Andrew Weinstein (who here comments on modern visual culture), “screens a wonder or terror too powerful to directly confront.”¹⁸

The short view, of course, is entirely understandable if not entirely excusable: while artists from Kazimir Malevich to Wassily Kandinsky to Ilya Kabakov freely wrote about whiteness, nothingness, and the void, medieval sources are not as forthcoming.¹⁹ Medieval concepts of emptiness and their relationship with material culture have to be teased out from treatises on cosmology and mathematics, theological and devotional tracts, handbooks on memory, and poems on mortality. This effort, however, requires dialogue between disciplines that rarely come into contact with one another. Scholarship on the concepts of the vacuum and zero as they developed in Western scientific thought seldom makes any connections with visual imagery, for instance, or with studies on medieval apophysis.²⁰ But what was the place of the image in the epistemology of absence? What role did material culture play in acquisition, theorization, and interpretation of scientific and theological knowledge? How did the void—heretofore the domain of the abhorrent and unnatural, a site that defies existence and divine omnipotence but persists in language and thought—transform into a proliferant locus, a place of generative and catalytic, if still intellectually terrifying, forces?²¹

In turn, images themselves must be trusted to offer insight into what it means to confront the viewer with unashamedly, actively empty spaces—exposed, punctured, effaced. In querying the epistemic nature of emptiness, they are, most purely, those very forms that, to borrow from Henri Focillon, “tend toward realization; they do, in fact, realize themselves and create a world that acts and reacts. . . . Forms never cease to live.

In their separate state, they still clamor for action, they still take absolute possession of whatever action has propagated them, in order to augment, strengthen, and shape it.”²² And yet the tendency in art-historical literature is to treat empty spaces in manuscripts as signs of incompleteness, shortfalls of the modular method in the book-making process, and evidence of, at best, customization and, at worst, poor planning, lack of time, or the sudden financial hardship of patrons, scribes, and/or illuminators.²³ Holes in manuscript pages, if accidental, are seen as mere parchment defects and, if intentional, as curiosities; erasures are rightfully considered as evidence of haptic reading habits and iconoclastic practices as well as signs of reuse, but the semiotics of the resultant changes to images is rarely discussed. Certainly, isolated case studies have considered the significant potential such visual voids engender, but a synthetic study of emptiness in later medieval art is lacking. The present book proposes to explore the many iterations of empty spaces—visual, textual, semiotic, phenomenological, and cognitive—from a broad range of perspectives: as visual signs of figurative failure, as markers of absence, as sites of unrepresentability, and as vehicles for phenomenological and cognitive work on behalf of their viewers.

The late Middle Ages did not conceive the culture of emptiness, but it is between the 1200s and the 1500s that this culture achieved its fullest, most complicated expression. At this time, too, visual culture became clearly informed by intellectual developments in theology, philosophy, mathematics, and physics that debated the notions of emptiness, absence, and negation. Sizeable evidence suggests the broad circulation of scientific and scholarly thought in visual, literary, and pastoral contexts, particularly in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.²⁴ For instance, the dissemination of the optical sciences is

witnessed by the work of Peter of Limoges, whose *Tractatus moralis de oculo*, penned between 1274 and 1289, enjoyed a wide homiletic popularity. Meant for parish priests, the text interpreted—and made relevant for the pastoral audience—the epistemology of sensory perception expounded in the learned work of perspectivists such as Roger Bacon and Witelo.²⁵ Optical science informed late medieval literature as well: in her work on optical allegory, Suzanne Conklin Akbari convincingly demonstrates the impact of Bacon's and Witelo's writings on Jean de Meun and Dante Alighieri, respectively.²⁶ In a similar vein, Rebecca Zorach persuasively argues for the complex ways that Ramon Llull's work had bearing on early modern diagrammatic thinking.²⁷ Ideas were disseminated by various means, often through sermons, which knitted together larger scholarly and other lay communities. Such oral/aural transmission secured the circulation and recirculation of seemingly esoteric philosophies in different circles, sometimes for centuries, assuring their endurance and transformation (often to the point of unrecognizability) in various contexts.²⁸

The first chapter of this book, then, discusses a series of late medieval conceptions of nothingness, teasing out the complex interconnections between formal, empirical, and natural sciences and the material culture of the ensuing centuries. The focus is on the thirteenth century and on the fertility of the many cross-pollinations between observation and faith, between sciences and theology, and between the visual and the intellectual. In exploring scholastic restructuring of the cosmic void and the development of the concept of zero, all within the framework of notions of the imaginary, this chapter suggests that

we may understand and reevaluate the many figurations of emptiness in later medieval art in terms of philosophical and scientific paradigms of generative absence. To test these paradigms, I explore several figurations of the primordial void and divine Creation out of nothing, conceived at a time of ontological debate about the nature of emptiness. It is no accident that nothingness, in written sources, becomes conflated with emptiness, blankness, and absence or privation—and is referred to, variously, as *vacuum*, *inane*, and, of course, *nihil*. It is a distinction with little difference: here, in the mire of linguistic and conceptual slippages, nothingness becomes associated and intertwined with the pre-Creation void, the cosmic vacuum, and mathematical abstractions.²⁹

Chapter 2 moves into the next century and probes the concept of emptiness as a locus of the imaginary, as a substrate for something that does not (yet) exist. Here, I suggest that framed empty spaces offer an attempt to represent the unrepresentable: forces of death or sinful fruition, acts that can be witnessed but not experienced for themselves—and certainly not properly visualized. This chapter concentrates on several fourteenth-century French manuscripts that play with the displacement of the visible into the domain of the imaginary and intellectual. In discussing philosophical treatises that explore interrelationships between memory, vision, and imagination and in focusing specifically on the perceived capacity of memory to create things heretofore unseen and unknown in an act of generative heuristics, I argue that empty images function as prompts that invite meditation but not recollection, evoking those things that are impossible to see or remember but possible to imagine; they require, in other words, performative

participation from their beholder. Nothing excites one's imagination more than the absence of representation. Mindful of the fecund implications of the void, viewers are invited to fill it by crafting their own conception of fundamental processes that fail figuration. I begin with framed spaces of pure emptiness and discuss what happens when emptiness is modified: shaped, filled with color, or made part of a narrative.

By the fifteenth century, the concept of generative emptiness and its implications for the devotional lives of the pious begins manifesting in the subtraction of the image. Chapter 3 explores the notion of erasure and its function in transforming the image being partially or completely defaced, expunged, rubbed out. Unlike whitewash, which erases the image from view by overpainting, pious erasure is irreversible.³⁰ At the heart of the chapter are the following questions: How does erasure augment and subvert the meanings of the original image? What do defaced images reveal about the process of engagement with medieval material culture? When does erasure equal silence, and when does it function as a performative prompt for words? By discussing illuminations in late medieval devotional manuscripts, which were erased and transformed by kissing, rubbing, or scraping, this chapter continues a phenomenological line of inquiry, interrogating the active role of the viewer in the destruction of original meanings of images and, therefore, in the construction of new ones.

Chapter 4 examines manuscripts that contain holes accidentally or intentionally cut into or punctured through parchment or paper, and explores the ways that these empty spaces serve as mediators of meaning for the beholder. Although I consider several examples of this striking emptiness, the focus of

the chapter is on manuscripts illuminated by Jean Poyet ca. 1480–1500, in which round or diamond-shaped holes were cut through the pages in order to reveal a set of images that bookend each section while remaining perpetually present on every page. In attending closely to the texts included in these books, I suggest that the cutouts function as manifold indices of two bodies: the body of the reader-viewer (and especially his or her eyes and mouth) and the body of Christ (and especially his wounds). Moreover, as bridges that semantically tie together disparate texts, structuring them as a visual whole and inviting touch, the gaping holes bring up a variety of issues considered throughout the book: the generative quality of empty spaces, the active role of the viewer in negotiating them, and the places of memory and imagination in this fraught negotiation.

One may say, then, that the book first inquires into what it means to represent the space of nothing, then explores spaces where nothing is represented, subsequently looks at spaces where nothing is represented any longer, and finally discusses spaces where nothing can be represented. These are all different kinds of nothingness, different species of emptiness, yet they are bound together by two central considerations. The first is the notion of the imagination. The cosmic void, the sign of zero, and the face of God are all entities that can be only theorized through the concept of the imaginary. Empty spaces marshal the force of the imagination; gaps and erasures hint at and tantalize its epistemological potential; holes and punctures engage it in cognitive play. The second consideration is that of the medium. Empty spaces, once noticed, are found everywhere, multiplying with uncanny speed through architectural and sculptural hollows, in painting, and in

glass. But my concern here is parchment and, more rarely, paper. In part, I do so to focus the study: limiting the medium allows for the broadening and deepening of the multitude of discourses that come to bear on the visual void. In part, I do so because it is the Gothic manuscript that spawned the myth of *horror vacui*; it seemed prudent, then, to turn to the poetics of emptiness that appears specifically in manuscripts. But mainly, I do so because the bodily origin of parchment lends special connotations to empty spaces left out of it or made on it and in it. Here, then, is where medieval and modern discourses on emptiness truly diverge. In discussing a variety of present-day blank, erased, and silent texts, discs, film strips, and canvasses, Craig Dworkin argues that, in the end, the “medium” does not exist: that “no single medium can be apprehended in isolation.”³¹ But for anyone studying medieval images, the materiality of the medium is paramount, and any empty space on parchment is implicated in the substance of the exposed, rubbed, or cut skin—an implication later extended and made metaphorical in the use of paper. Parchment, as a substance of flesh, spans a broad semiotic spectrum, from the late medieval elision of Christ’s skin and parchment, especially favored in Middle English literature, to Peter Comestor’s twelfth-century sermon that compares *libri pergamenum* and the devotee’s heart, to the baseness of the substance—“a stack of dead animal parts produced from and at the expense of animals,” to quote Bruce Holsinger.³² When paper comes to replace parchment, it retains bodily connotation, substituting, however, the vegetal for the animal. Parchment and paper are bodies awaiting inscription, physical or spiritual, in ink or blood, in image or word.³³

A manuscript page, too, foregrounds the notion of the frame. Unpainted sections

of parchment become spaces proper only when outlined, with frames as sure markers of deliberate emptiness. Gaps between images and texts are framed by these very images and texts, which stand witness to the significance of what is not represented. Frames similarly predicate the function of erasure. Erasure only works when something remains: a remaining body, for instance, frames an erased face; a remaining landscape frames a figure that has been kissed or rubbed away. For holes in manuscript pages, the parchment itself serves as a frame, giving shape to the void spaces of tears, cuts, and punctures. In the end, without framing devices, unframed emptiness easily loses meaning, reverting to stylistic choices or signaling incompleteness. Empty spaces must be unexpected, jarring, and uncomfortable, visibly framed by something other than themselves: so, a framed empty square in *Le double lay de la fragilité humaine* manuscript, discussed in chapter 2, is fundamentally different from the visual voids in the Getty Apocalypse, which play with complex frames around images but treats emptiness in a habitual way, as a constant of iconographic schema—in other words, it does not treat it at all. Finally, because empty spaces are by their very nature recursive, a framed void constitutes the ultimate *mise en abyme*—ready to reflect the one who stares at it, the one who imbues it with self-generated meaning—an impossible cognitive trapdoor, a mirror, an expanse.

This book, then, is about things that are ostensibly missing: things that should be there, that the human mind desires or expects to be there, but that are absent nonetheless, whether because they are unrepresentable or unimaginable or incomprehensible—or because these things can indeed be represented, imagined, and comprehended only through lack (an unfilled space, an erasure,

a hole). The notion of such a lack is, perhaps, responsible for the fact that emptiness as a subject is rarely studied by medievalists. Philosophers have long held that human beings have a predisposition to positive truths because negative ones reek of redundancy. When we look at a framed image of the Crucifixion, we can assert that the picture is there and subsequently analyze it, without having to superfluously declare what it is not (not a Flagellation, not a Nativity, not a random doodle). When we look at a partially erased image of the Crucifixion in a Book of Hours—or even at an empty space where the image of the Crucifixion, for all intents and purposes, was expected—we can still assert the absence in a positive way: we see the absence of a specific and definable image (and not of a Flagellation, a Nativity, or a random doodle).³⁴ But an empty space in a manuscript where an image is expected but not defined is a conundrum because, in the absence of a probability, it invites all sorts of “nots” and rejects any matter of positive assertions. As Roy Sorensen elegantly sums up, absences “seem causally inert and so not the sort of thing that we could check empirically.”³⁵

The themes explored here are expansive, but there should probably also be a word about what this book does not claim to do. It does not treat the notion of abstraction, although it briefly inquires into the semiotics

of form and color. Certainly, emptiness and abstraction are connected—but that is another book, for another time.³⁶ Even though it is about embodied response, the book does not scrutinize the gendering of this response: the breadth of the material explored and the uncertain and shifting audiences for this material preclude this approach. The book, finally, is not conceived as a survey of visual apophysis but rather as a first foray into exploring different kinds of nothingness that haunt medieval art. It is my hope that other researchers will pick up the gauntlet and look at other kinds of voids and their signification in other media, other contexts, and other publics.

In 1852, in his letter to Louise Colet, Gustave Flaubert confessed his wish to write a book about nothing: “Ce qui me semble beau, ce que je voudrais faire, c’est un livre sur rien.”³⁷ What he really wanted was a book without much of a subject, held up by the internal force of its own style, “comme la terre sans être soutenue se tient en l’air” (like the earth, without being supported, holds itself in the air). Instead of embracing a nothing of a subject, I am here embracing the subject of nothing, and while I can hardly aspire to the stylistic *légèreté* for which Flaubert wished, I do hope that this book will at the very least enrich the ways that we look at aesthetic and philosophical underpinnings of later medieval art.