Return to the Sacred: The Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham and Contemporary Christianity

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Abstract: Once one of the most popular Catholic pilgrimage sites in England, The Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham, now under the care of the Anglican Church, operates as a site of devotion, but it also operates as a site of memory. In this essay, I will argue that, in this place of memory, where pre-Reformation worship meets contemporary devotion and tourism, we find insights for the contemporary church. The Protestant Reformation contributed to the desacralization of the world. Later events such as the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, and the Scientific Revolution of the past two centuries have shifted Western attitudes about the natural world even further away from the sacred. However, every year, thousands of visitors come to Walsingham. What draws them? What are they seeking? To consider what a shrine such as Walsingham might mean to a pilgrim, I will examine Philip earl of Arundel's poetic lament at the destruction of the shrine, William Shakespeare's nostalgia for the sacred feminine in *The Winter's Tale*, and Robert Lowell's 1947 poetic treatment of Walsingham. I will argue that focusing on sacred spaces, particularly those associated with the sacred feminine can benefit contemporary Catholics and Protestants.

Keywords: Catholic; Protestant; sacred feminine; memory; Reformation; shrine; Walsingham; Shakespeare; Robert Lowell

In Spring 2008, I attended an academic conference at The Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham. During a break from our meetings, we toured the grounds, ultimately ending up in front of the high altar of Walsingham Priory, the only part of the site left standing after iconoclastic attacks during the reign of Henry VIII. On that afternoon, we came to the ruins of the high altar as scholars and as tourists. However, we were soon reminded that the ground on which we stood was sacred when a group of Nigerian pilgrims arrived and began to sing songs of praise beneath the high altar. Their songs transformed the space from a site of memory to a site of worship. This juxtaposition—sacred and secular, ruins and reconstruction, medieval and contemporary—is central to Walsingham's identity, for, as Waller (2011) argues, Walsingham is "a repository of powerful and contradictory stories" (5).

Once one of the most popular Catholic pilgrimage sites in England, "an international center of pilgrimage rivaled only by Santiago de Compostella in Spain and Rome itself" (Gibson 1989), the Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham, destroyed in the iconoclasm of the Reformation, is now under the care of the Anglican Church. While the Shrine operates as a site of devotion, it also operates as a site of memory. In doing so, it offers a complicated performance. In reestablishing devotion to Our Lady of Walsingham in 1922 and rebuilding the shrine shortly thereafter, Father Hope Patton and those who succeeded him effectively resurrected a space of worship from another time. While the Catholic Church of the Annunciation in the village of Walsingham—with its open beams and its contemporary look—fits the pulse of twenty-first century Catholic parish life, the Shrine looks back to a medieval form of worship before the Vatican I and II councils; before the threats of the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, the age of Freud and Darwin; before the Reformation. The shrine thus feels

like an artifact taken from a previous age and dropped into the contemporary world. Nevertheless, people come to the Shrine, and many do so not merely for curiosity. Many come seeking the sacred.

In this essay, I will argue that, in this place of memory, where pre-Reformation worship meets contemporary devotion and tourism, we find insights for the contemporary church. The Protestant Reformation, particularly as it unfolded in those parts of Europe influenced by the theology of John Calvin, contributed to a desacralization of the material world. Later events such as the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, and the Scientific Revolution of the past two centuries have shifted Western attitudes about the natural, material world even further away from the sacred. However, every year, thousands of visitors come to Walsingham. What draws them? What are they seeking? Scholars such as Simon Coleman have offered fascinating anthropological studies that attempt to explain why contemporary people return to the pilgrim routes once walked by their ancestors. In this essay, I attempt a different and, perhaps, less ambitious investigation. I will consider three literary treatments of the sacred feminine: Philip earl of Arundel's poetic lament at the destruction of the shrine, William Shakespeare's nostalgia for the sacred feminine in *The Winter's Tale*, and Robert Lowell's 1947 poetic treatment of Walsingham. Using these texts as my focus, I will suggest that, in a world increasingly disconnected from tradition and from nature, many pilgrims come to Walsingham seeking a connection with both the past and the material present, a connection that they find as they walk the roads that centuries of previous pilgrims have walked. This connection can offer a sense of community and comfort in uncertain times. For these reasons, I would argue that reconnecting with the sacred, particularly the sacred feminine, can provide deep spiritual benefits for contemporary Catholics and Protestants.

According to the official narrative, the origins of the Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham stretch back in time to the twilight of the Anglo-Saxon period, in 1061, just five years before the Norman Conquest.[1] According to the legend recounted in a fifteenth-century poem called the "Pynson Ballad," a rich widow named Richeldis de Faverches had a vision in which the Virgin Mary took her spirit to Nazareth and instructed her to build a replica of the Holy House where the Annunciation took place. This focus on the Annunciation, on Mary's body and on maternity, would be reinforced by the Shrine's famous Holy Relics—vials of the breast milk of the Virgin Mary. In this site, focused on female fertility, the domestic and the dynastic meet, for the shrine became one of England's most popular pilgrimage sites, frequented by English monarchs, including Henry VII who brought his battle standard to Walsingham as a gift to Our Lady for her help in his fight against his enemies.

Walsingham as a site of devotion drew criticism even before the dissolution of the monasteries. Indeed, perhaps because of the wealth and popularity of the shrine, it became a target of abuse for those who feared that pilgrimage had become little more than a license to travel and to reject social norms. The response of some sixteenth-century reformers went beyond a desire to reform the shrine, however, and became a plan for utterly obliterating Walsingham and its sister shrines. In July of 1538, in the heat of Reformation, the Holy House was burned to the ground, the Priory was destroyed, except for the arch over the high altar, and the image of the Virgin Mary, the focus of intense devotion for centuries, was dragged from the chapel and brought to London. A month later, reformers cast the statue of Our Lady of Walsingham, Our Lady of Ipswich, and possibly other Marian images into a bonfire at Chelsea, and England, once labeled "Mary's dowry" (Waller 2011), quickly saw the violent overturn of sacred images—particularly those connected to the sacred feminine.

The destruction of Walsingham and other sacred spaces left a mark on the landscape and an absence in the devotional lives of many people. The very reasons for the Reformers' desire to destroy the shrine contain the reasons why many mourned its loss and why they return to the shrine today. Protestant Reformers, such as Andreas Karlstadt, were well aware of the power that sacred images

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[1]   As Gary Waller points out (*Walsingham in Culture*), archaeological evidence points to a date of construction early in the twelfth century, thus after the Norman Conquest.

and places had over the spiritual imagination. Reformers saw their task as a restoration of Christianity to a state of "purity"—to a time before the corruptions of hierarchy and superstitions. They drew their justification from their readings of the Bible. Their suspicion of sacred spaces originated from both Old Testament fear of idols and from Christ's assertion to the Samaritan woman that, in the coming age, God will not be worshipped in a particular geographical location but "in spirit and truth."

The Reformation drove a deep wedge in English worship history, for it posited a way of looking at the spiritual universe that effectively expunged much of the material world. As Walsham (2011) argues, "The brands of Swiss Reformed and later Calvinist theology that came to exert the dominant intellectual influence on its evolution in Britain and Ireland involved an uncompromising rejection of the idea that the material world was capable of containing and submitting salvific grace" (82). Many Reformers believed that "Contrary to the claims of the Church of Rome, the Lord was no respecter of physical location. Nor could the property of holiness be conferred upon sites, objects, or structures by blessing or consecration" (Walsham 82). For example, in the *Survey of Popery* of 1596, Thomas Bell attacked the idea that "visiting stocks, stones and dead mens bones" could have any effect on one's salvation (quoted in Walsham 83).

In the eyes of many Reformers, space could not be sacred; pilgrimage did not have an effect on the souls in Purgatory; and sacred spaces and good works could not transfer grace. Indeed, in addition to being vain and useless, the belief in the sacredness of place proved a form of idolatry that endangered the individual's salvation and threatened to bring down the wrath of God on an idolatrous people. Anti-Catholic polemicist William Fulke argued that to go on pilgrimage was "to runne a whoring after Idolls" (Walsham 84). The conflation of sexual impurity and idolatry has connections with Old Testament analogies between Israel and an adulterous wife. Not surprisingly, this language of sexual impurity appears frequently in the Reformer's description of the Marian shrines.

The Reformers often cited Old Testament Mosaic law to justify their assaults on sacred spaces. They linked Roman Catholic sacred images and devotional practices to the idolatry of the Israelites. Furthermore, many argued—this time based on the New Testament—that no physical spaces, even shrines or churches, are more sacred than any other space. However, in doing so, they ignored the fact that Jewish culture and worship did believe that certain places were holy and set apart. Indeed, God consecrated the Temple as a place of worship. God's spirit dwelt in the Ark of the Covenant and the Holy of Holies of the Temple. In fact, the Old Testament uses the same Hebrew word, מועד (moed), to refer to sacred time and sacred space (VanGemeren 1997). Thus, even on the level of language, we see the ancient Israelites' connection of time that is set apart (for religious observance and festivals) with space that is set apart for worship, including the spaces where God is said to dwell. As such, when Jesus tells the Samaritan woman that, in the coming age, people will worship God neither "on this mountain nor in Jerusalem" but "in the Spirit and in truth," his words can be understood as a way of opening up the possibility for the sacred to move beyond Jerusalem. (John 4: 20–24: New International Version). His words do not necessarily foreclose on the possibility that material space can be sacred.

While Jewish law clearly policed the boundaries of the sacred and nonsacred, the Jewish and the Pagan, ancient Jews did not question the idea that space and time could be sacred. Thus, in order to support their beliefs about sacred space, Reformers had to argue that Jewish ideas about sacred space no longer applied under the New Covenant while simultaneously using the Old Testament to undergird their argument for the destruction of idols. Perhaps because of their awareness of this contradiction, the Reformers focused most of their energies on policing the boundaries of the sacred, linking medieval Catholic worship to the pagan nations that surrounded Israel.

The concern that Catholics had merely appropriated pagan gods, even building their churches on the ruins of former pagan temples—along with the belief that idolatry proved a potent foe of the True Church—pushed some English Reformers to call for the utter destruction of everything that they considered idolatrous. The Reformers' primary targets were the pictures and statues that filled the medieval cathedrals. According to Becon (1844), these material objects had turned the cathedrals into "synagogues of Satan" and "the vile cages of all filthy and unclean birds" (65). According to their

readings of scripture, excessive focus on the material world interfered with true worship. However, within their argument for the eradication of images lay the reasons why some future Protestants would fail to connect with the faith. Ritual and the spaces in which rituals are performed allow the worshipper to move beyond the mundane world. Entering a separate space allows the worshipper to connect with the divine. Performing rituals in distinct physical spaces over long periods of time connects the community of believers to each other and to the "great cloud of witnesses" that comes before them. Thus, in ritual and in sacred space, we find the meeting of past and present, sacred and profane, God and humanity. In pushing aside the material world—bodies, buildings, images, and at times nature—English Reformers sowed seeds that would become problematic when they came to harvest during the Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution. Many people longed for tradition, ritual, and a connectedness to physical manifestations of the sacred. Removing these elements undermined the very sense of the transcendent that religion has always offered people. In literature, we find traces of the loss that would have attended the destruction of Walsingham and the entire complex of rituals and beliefs that saw sacrality in bodies and physical spaces.

The English Reformers destroyed much of the material culture of medieval Catholicism: between 1538 and 1540, about 400 monasteries and friaries and 50 nunneries were suppressed all across England (Waller 2011). While many structures were repurposed or utterly destroyed, in other cases, the ruins remained—a continual reminder of the sacred landscape of which they had formed a part. These ruins became sites of nostalgia for older forms of worship that connected the festive culture of the village to the sacredness of Christian mysteries, celebrating the shifting of seasons, the cycles of life, and the sacred. Philip earl of Arundel's passionate lament for Walsingham offers a picture of what those who mourned the destruction of the Shrines felt that they had lost:

> Weepe, weepe O Walsingham, whose dayes are nightes, Blessinge turned to blasphemies, holy deeds to dispites. Sinne is wher our Ladie sate, heaven turned is to hell, Sathan sittes wher our Lady did swaye, Walsingham oh farewell" (Dickinson 1956; 68).

Arundel's choice of words proves to be particularly relevant. In an attempt to combat idolatry, the Reformers have effectively introduced spiritual darkness. The "dayes are nights" and the "blessing" bestowed by Our Lady is replaced with "blasphemies" as sacred images are burned and the very Virgin herself is subject to abuse. Arundel argues that, in dethroning the Sacred Virgin, the Reformers have seated Satan in her place.

While fewer references to the shrine exist than we might expect concerning its former importance and its violent end, Waller (2011) persuasively argues for Walsingham's continued importance in Elizabethan popular culture. Waller suggests that the Shrine, like representations of the Virgin Mary, persists in memory through "fades" and "traces" (91). As was the case with the Virgin Mary, reformers soon discovered that memories imprinted in culture could not be erased as easily as images etched in wood and glass.

Oblique references to Walsingham appear in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in Ophelia's mad songs, suggesting that the destruction of this and other sites of Marian adoration formed a part of his literary consciousness.[2] Whatever particular confessional beliefs Shakespeare might have had, the shadow of medieval Catholicism lingers in his work. Marotti (2003) argues that "Shakespeare was haunted by the symbols, rituals, and beliefs of repressed Catholicism" (227). Shakespeare's work resonates with imagery, characters, and ritual practices drawn from medieval Catholicism. In addition to references to convents, saints, friars and nuns, pilgrimages, and Catholic holy days, we also find a number of instances where Shakespeare goes even further in his exploration of the faith of his ancestors.

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[2]   Shakespeare alludes to Walsingham in one of Ophelia's song, which makes use of the well-known Ralegh Ballad. The words "How should I your true love know from another one" (4.5.23–24) come from the late medieval ballad, which depicts a lover following his love who has gone to Walsingham on a pilgrimage. The lover asks a pilgrim coming from the shrine if he has seen her, and the pilgrim replies, "how shold I know yor true loue" (5).

Some of Shakespeare's "ghosts" are tinged with a deep melancholy and longing. For example, the results of iconoclastic assaults, which left desolate ruins throughout England, find their way into Shakespeare's "Sonnet 73" with its evocation of "Bare ruin'd quiers, where late the sweet birds sang." Duffy (2003) argues that, "Shakespeare's one-line evocation of the ruins of England's monastic past, the ruins of England's Catholicism, can hardly have been casual and unselfconscious" (41). Some of Shakespeare's romances and comedies offer equally poignant memory of medieval worship and sacred space. In *The Winter's Tale*, for example, we find a narrative of loss, longing, and finally restoration. Shakespeare ends the play with a scene of wish-fulfillment in which the image of the sacred mother, abused and discredited early in the play, returns to heal the land left barren after her removal.

As I argued in "Return of the Sacred Virgin: Memory, Loss, and Restoration in Shakespeare's Later Plays," the entire structure of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* works to suggest Reformation iconoclasm and Marian wish-fulfillment. In the first half of the play, Shakespeare presents a world created, controlled, and dictated by the emblem of patriarchal authority, the king Leontes. The plot hinges on Leontes' sudden and inexplicable belief that his wife has been unfaithful to him with his best friend. Because of this jealousy, Hermione stands trial for adultery and apparently dies from the ordeal, while her innocent baby daughter, Perdita, faces death for her mother's imagined crimes.

Leontes fears adultery with an obsession that takes the audience quite by surprise. One moment he is looking lovingly on his pregnant wife; within only a few scenes, he is calling for her death. Significantly, Shakespeare removes the source of jealousy found in his source. Thus, Leontes' obsessive fear of adultery has no apparent motivation in the text. Because Old Testament writers often drew parallels between adultery and idolatry, Leontes' violent jealousy can be linked to the iconoclasts' violent attacks on the "false idols" of medieval Catholicism (Dunn-Hensley 2010). The rapidity of Leontes' shift in affections further supports connections with radical reformers.

Although the first portion of *The Winter's Tale* recalls the spirit of a Greek tragedy, focusing as it does on human failings, irrationality, and death, the second half of the play bursts forth with life and vitality, transporting the audience into a world of rural festivity. I would suggest that there were significant political reasons for this focus on festivity. Jensen (2004) notes that some sixteenth-century defenses of festivity "are tinged with a yearning not only for the imagined communal world of late-medieval England but also for the religious unity of a pre-schism church, a church that preserved the connection between festivity in the churchyard and liturgy in the church" (289). Indeed, at the time Shakespeare was writing the play, the notion of festivity formed part of the same political and religious debate as iconoclasm (Dunn-Hensley 2010). Reformers hacked the maypoles with the same zeal that they burned images of the Virgin.

The final scene pushes the connection between the play and Reformation iconoclasm even further as Shakespeare moves from nostalgia to wish-fulfillment as that which was lost dramatically returns with the miraculous "resurrection" of Hermione. Although in Shakespeare's source, *Pandosto*, the falsely accused queen dies, in *The Winter's Tale*, the Sacred Mother returns. *The Winter's Tale*'s final scene of dramatic wish-fulfillment reverses the destructive influences of Reformation iconoclasm, represented by Leontes' fury, through a staging of the return of the Madonna in the form of a sacred statue in a chapel. As Hermione takes the guise of a miraculous statue, the character evokes pre-reformation images of female power and piety. Shakespeare could not have created this final scene of the miraculous statue in a chapel without at least considering the role statues and other visible symbols of piety played in post-reformation theological debates.

The language surrounding the return of Hermione creates strong Marian connections. Upon seeing what he presumes to be the image of Hermione, Leontes marvels at the power that the statue has over him: "[t]here's magic in thy majesty, which has/My evils conjured to remembrance and/From thy admiring daughter took the spirits, /Standing like stone with thee" (5.3.39–42). Hermione's statue has the power to evoke remembrance and guilt from Leontes and stunned silence from Perdita. Perdita's response upon seeing the "statue" of her mother further pushes the parallels between Hermione and the Blessed Virgin:

> And give me leave, and do not say 'tis superstition, that I kneel and then implore her
> blessing. Lady, Dear queen, that ended when I but began, Give me that hand of yours to kiss.
> (3.3.43–46)

Use of the word "superstition" evokes Protestant arguments against Catholicism, while Perdita's desire to kneel before the statue and kiss it suggests pre-reformation devotional practice (Dunn-Hensley 2010).

At the point of revelation, Paulina's rhetoric takes on aspects of the type of magic associated with pre-reformation religious devotion, telling the assembled audience that they must "awake" their "faith" (5.3.95). They must, in other words, return to a time of miracles, and those who find the miraculous to be "unlawful business" must "depart" (5.3.96–97). Once faith has been reawakened, Paulina can instruct Hermione to "descend" and "be stone no more" (5.3.99). Upon seeing his wife alive, Leontes accepts Paulina's "magic": "If this be magic, let it be an art/Lawful as eating" (5.3.110–111). Leontes' words suggest the possibility that "superstition" and "sacred magic" need not be associated with contamination and heresy. Hermione is not dead, and, in one fabulously theatrical moment of wish-fulfillment, neither is the sacred virgin. That Hermione is actually a living woman does not erase the powerful image of the statue, representing a woman discredited and apparently destroyed, returning to restore life and joy to a king and land that have long mourned her loss (Dunn-Hensley 2010).

In 1922, Father Hope Patton's dream would—like Paulina's presentation of Hermione—restore the Virgin to the chapel and to the world. And the world seems to have been awaiting her arrival. That people of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries would embrace a medieval form of worship in some ways comes as a surprise. After all, Campo (1998) is certainly accurate when he argues that modern pilgrimage "appears to be at odds with our widely held belief in the progressive development of the West into a complex modern civilization based on science, technology, and reason, rather than on magic, religion, and irrationality" (3). Perhaps, however, it is the very "modern" nature of our postindustrial world that drives people to the ancient pilgrim roads. Postindustrial belief in human progress, fed by industrial and technological advances, poses the idea that humans are continually moving toward a greater, more enlightened state of being—a state that will eventually see the abolition of hatred, war, bigotry, pain, and suffering. When this idea crashes into the global reality of the genocide, the senseless wars, and the continual presence of bigotry of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, as well as the personal reality of loneliness, disconnection, suffering, and death, many people begin to seek something beyond the material world. Thus, it is—perhaps—not surprising that, in the 1920s, as the British people recovered from the devastation of WWI, Father Hope Patton began a project to restore the shrine at Walsingham. Today, the shrine thrives. According to 2011 national census data, during the spring, summer and autumn months, the village of Walsingham swells as the 613 permanent residents welcome thousands (as many as 200,000–300,000) of visitors (Coleman 2016), who annually flock to the ancient pilgrim roads to join themselves with the sacred. Even those who worship in traditions that have historically opposed pilgrimage and the idea of sacred space now find themselves drawn to material iterations of the sacred.

What do pilgrims want from Walsingham? Simon Coleman's critique of the contemporary shrine might give us some indication. According to Coleman, Walsingham "seems deeply 'impure' in its mixture of relics, religious props, a kitschy gift shop, but also in the sheer incoherence of the vision of Christianity that it presents" (55). If Walsingham speaks to people, it is not so much through doctrinal statements and theology but through its material culture, "which deals in paradoxes and 'mysteries' ... that permit numerous forms of engagement, however, glancing or ambivalent" (Coleman 2016). Coleman's description of the impure mixtures, the paradoxes that one finds at Walsingham, could serve as a description for Robert Lowell's surprising poetic evocation of Walsingham in his elegiac long poem "The Quaker Graveyard at Nantucket." In 1946, in the wake of two great wars, Robert Lowell wrote his elegiac "Quaker Graveyard." The presence of Walsingham in Lowell's long poem proves jarring. The bulk of the seven-part poem weaves mourning for Lowell's cousin and friend, Warren Winslow, killed in an accidental explosion on a Navy destroyer in NY harbor during WWII, with references to *Moby-Dick* and the barbarity of the New England whaling industry. Spurr (2010) describes the

poem as a work that "mediates upon the spiritual death of America in the twentieth century, tracing its origins to the death-dealing whaling industry of his Puritan progenitures who took the biblical injunction about man's dominion over sea creatures as justification for their cruel slaughter" (238). The sacrifice of creation and environment on the altar of progress informs the poem's dark and often apocalyptic imagery.

That the slaughter of whales would provide an apt metaphor for the destructiveness of American progress comes as no surprise. In very real ways, the whale industry—like the contemporary petroleum industry—savaged nature to feed the American industrial machine. As Spurr explains, "The pacifist Lowell's grief for his cousin, one of the war dead, is caught up in a larger lament for the spoliation of life and nature that is American history, under God, since European settlement" (2010). In the penultimate section of the poem, into this bleak contemplation of destruction and death, Lowell inserts a short poetic sequence focused on Our Lady of Walsingham. In this section, which takes us across the ocean into the Old World, we find some glimmer of hope. The section on Walsingham operates as a vision, where a suffering sailor has been brought to the Old World, to nature, to tradition, to the Shrine where "once the penitents took off their shoes/And then walked barefoot the remaining mile." This section speaks of the beauty of countryside—small trees, a stream, hedgerows. But it also speaks of the otherworldly—a stream that "flows under druid trees" and "Shiloah's whirlpools." The evocation of the ancient pagan sacred groves and the Biblical pool of Shiloah, which offered healing, paint a picture of ancient ways of knowing and being. This older, more traditional way involves a connectedness with nature and community that is lost to an age that barbarously slays the whales (linked earlier in the text to Christ) in order to fuel the engine of progress, a progress that leads to wars such as the one that took Lowell's cousin.

The second stanza takes us into the holy house to see the image of the Virgin, and again we are surprised. Lowell's description of the Virgin follows that of Edward I. Watkins in *Catholic Art and Culture*, and, on the surface, it seems less a description of transcendence than a comment on the disconnection between the sacred and the material. Indeed, in his notes in the margins of the poem, Randall Jarrell calls the image of Mary "as frightening as anything could be" particularly after "the beautiful natural setting of the first part of this section" (Spurr 2010). Lowell describes the Virgin in unflattering but accurate lines: "Our Lady, too small for her canopy/Sits near the altar. There's no comeliness/At all of charm in that expressionless/Face with the heavy eyelids." Indeed, this is a fair assessment of the image. However, Lowell sees beyond that, for her face "Expressionless, expresses God." Reminiscent of the suffering servant of Isaiah's messianic prophecy who "had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him" (Isaiah 53: 2: New International Version), Lowell's image of the Virgin may not be physically striking, but her meaning transcends the materials that make her. The poem tells us that "She knows what God knows, /Not Calvary's Cross nor crib at Bethlehem/Now, and the world shall come to Walsingham." According to Spurr, "The Virgin (as her image indicates) has been transfigured beyond the scope of human empathy" (241). One may ask where humans can find hope in such a transcendent figure. Spurr suggests that "the Virgin represents, for Lowell, an idea that is utterly transcendental, but which must, nonetheless, be physically approached and, so far as possible, appropriated . . . " (241). As Spurr points out, the text not only "summons up a religious past" but a "spiritual present," and it is a present that will communicate with the entirety of humanity (240).

The Catholic faithful of 1538, who mourned the destruction of the Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham, may never have dreamed that the Shrine to Our Lady would be rebuilt, and that the worship songs of people from a continent away would one day be lifted under the high altar. However, that is the case. Still we might wonder what draws people to this shrine. I would suggest that former Archbishop Rowan Williams' May 2004 sermon, delivered on the occasion of the National Pilgrimage to The Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham, might hold a clue. In the sermon, Williams argues that Mary's role in the incarnation provides a model for all Christians: "For centuries, Christians have kept coming back to the idea that what happens in Mary is what has to happen to some degree in each of us . . . God's everlasting gift of himself that is the Son, the Word, emerges from her to begin that life

which will change everything in creation." As Williams reminds his listeners, "we are called to the same job, to give God room so that we may be changed, so that the eternal Word will live in us and speak and act in love to others." Williams suggests that, if we are "still enough to reflect and absorb the light flowing from God the Holy Trinity," then we will experience "something so wonderful that it can put into perspective the fears and pettinesses that we think are real life, and silence us for a moment, letting true life in." This position of silence and contemplation that allows us to absorb the divine light can occur anywhere—but it seems particularly likely to be found at places such as Walsingham, sacred spaces somehow between Heaven and earth, the past and the present, where people can connect with tradition, place, and the sacred

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