

Idolising History: The Thing about *St. Erkenwald*

The story of *St. Erkenwald* is by now well known to students of medieval poetic historiography; how, in the midst of Augustine of Canterbury's consecration of pagan London, a mysterious and troubling tomb is discovered in the foundations of what is to become St. Paul's, disrupting in the process both the straightforward 'planty[ng]' of the Christian faith and the social order which depends on it. The aim of this paper is to take seriously the very physicality of this tomb, a church in miniature, which resists attempts to be fixed within recorded history and collective memory. In the process, it will explore how the 'Thing-ness' of this object constitutes the centre of its historical riddle, and a threat to the narratives of cleansing, re-signification and appropriation upon which progressive historical teleologies rely. The medieval concept around which these problematics circulate is that of the idol. Using both Bill Brown's observation that 'thingness amounts to a latency [...] and an excess' and Jean-Luc Marion's argument that the idol 'consists only in the fact that it can be seen, that one cannot but see it', I will argue that the very unreadability of the tomb brings it into dialogue with the idols supposedly cleansed from Anglo-Saxon London and the architecture left behind. In the process it will become clear that the idol – held, wherever possible, at chronological or geographic distance – is an object-lesson for those insuppressible subterranean dynamics of history that refuse to stay dead and buried.