POTENTIAL THEOLOGIES:
SCHOLASTICISM AND MIDDLE ENGLISH LITERATURE

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Abstract

This dissertation is an intellectual and literary history of medieval theology, spanning the eleventh and fourteenth centuries. In particular, it considers the development of theology from the beginnings of scholasticism (starting with Anselm of Canterbury’s Monologion) to its poetic instantiations in the later Middle Ages. Observing how theologians thought about their own discipline – especially in prologues to commentaries on Peter Lombard’s remarkably influential Sentences – I trace changing attitudes to Scripture, rationality, and knowledge, and argue that a crisis in scholasticism opened up new possibilities for doing theology in poetry. Against some prevailing views, Potential Theologies: Scholasticism and Middle English Literature affirms the continuing relevance of scholastic thought to literary studies. At the same time, it rewrites the history of theology by taking seriously the contribution of medieval poets. The decline of scholastic theology paradoxically lead to its powerful return in narrative, as witnessed in fourteenth-century poems like Pearl and Piers Plowman. These poems (the two examples explored) represent new theologies that emerge from the ruins of scholasticism – potential theologies that critique yet continue the tradition of their predecessors. Fragments of that older discourse are reconstructed as poetic visions or narrative experiments. In the hands of the Pearl-poet, sophisticated ideas about physics, money, and the sacraments are used to present a novel economy of salvation. Langland, however, offers the figures of Clergy and Piers as alternatives for divine knowledge, even as he registers the disappearance of scholastic theology in its current form.
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Note

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Introduction

I’ve told people I’m a medieval historian when asked what I do. It freezes conversation.¹ – W. H. Auden

While working on this dissertation people would often ask me what it was about. I would usually be at a lost for words, but eventually mumble something about “medieval” and “theology” and occasionally “poetry”… and thankfully, the conversation wouldn’t get much further than that. As I continued on in my research I thought a clearer, more definitive answer would emerge. But as the years passed, I would have no such luck. There would be the same conversations, the same questions, the desperate attempt to fill the air with an authoritative, confident-sounding answer. Then it occurred to me, while preparing this introduction, that maybe that’s what this work was about: about not being sure of its subject, or being quite unable to say what it was about. I had taken on, perhaps unwittingly, the stance of the theologians and poets I had been reading and thinking and writing about, medieval thinkers who had, with each successive generation, queried what they were doing under the name and banner of “theology.”

If this dissertation is about something, it is about the difficulty of determining and clarifying the nature of what is called theology. As I studied the authors here, roughly in the order of presentation, it seemed to me that what troubled them was not merely points of necessary doctrine or debates that had to be settled. What troubled them was the enterprise

on which they were about to embark or had already embarked, the reflexive questioning of
what they were doing as theologians. What each of them had in common – whether they
dwelled in monasteries or universities or courts, or were less easily placed within any
recognizable institution – was the persistent question of what theology was, a question which
could be said to constitute a seminal part of theology itself. This was indeed, and most
explicitly, the case for bachelors who sat at the feet of theologians, wishing to become
scholastic masters themselves. Were they to succeed, it would be required that they write a
commentary on Peter Lombard’s *Sentences* – and therefore a prologue discussing in fuller
detail their position on theology: its subject matter, its method, its genre, its epistemological
status. This institutional imperative has made it possible to chart, as I do in the second
chapter, the development of Christian theology as it emerged as a professional discipline in
the experimental years of the twelfth-century and resulted, just two centuries afterward, with
its own collapse or self-implosion, brought about by an unfulfilled yearning to be the most
rigorous and logical of the sciences.

But the question could be asked less explicitly by medieval authors, for monks
embarking on a series of uttered investigations, or for poets working with alliteration and
line and stanza, whose theoretical ruminations on theology can be traced in the appearances
and metamorphoses of certain personages, or even more implicitly in the texture and
linguistic movement of the narrative itself. The third and fourth chapters are my attempt to
gauge how Middle English poets are thinking through this very problem of theology near the
end of a tumultuous yet remarkable century – that is, the fourteenth – when the direction of
theology as an academic discipline is in seeming disarray and crisis. “Crisis” is a familiar
word for us in the humanities; and perhaps it is some comfort, but only a little, to see in
theologians a similar anxiety about their own discipline, a felt need to justify theology as truly
scientia, with a method and an object given to serious inquiry. The prime difficulty, of course, was figuring out who or what this object was and under what conditions ordinary humans like us, wayfarers yet to reach the gates of heaven, might access such allegedly scientific knowledge. Many superb and subtle answers were given; but the question was destined for academic irrelevance. That was true of Oxford at least, although the question of theology did not go away entirely. One of the claims I make is that religious poems in England (Piers Plowman and Pearl are my examples) continued to interrogate the matter of theology, its materia circa quam. This was done under the guise of new, surprising, often labile figures – Langland’s Piers, the dreaming “I” of Pearl – whose perceptions and visions signal an enlargement, and in that sense an alternative, to the narrow conceptual aspirations of scholastic theology. Yet interrogation also occurred at the level of form, in the unfolding of verse and narrative, in the relentless transformation of allegorical figure and semantic valence, in structures created by means of length and rhyme and tricky concatenation. The poems themselves demonstrate, with a peculiar but no less worthy rigor, the indeterminate nature of theology: they give us a sense of vertigo which is characteristic of the theological enterprise, of its being incessantly subject to doubt.

This granted, we can imagine a line of continuity between the scholastics and the religious poets, existing not by agreement of answer to the same questions, but by a constant and often radical interrogation of theology as a superior type of knowledge. These medieval authors are connected, that is, by a shared concern to revisit the foundations of their own discipline, even the bases for which it may be deemed a proper discipline. Theology is rethought in every generation. This is seen quite dramatically, and almost a century before scholasticism’s nascent arrival, in Anselm of Canterbury’s Monologion (1076-7), an unusual and creative work which is the focus of the first chapter. It is this work of meditation, rather
than the more celebrated *Proslogion*, that marks a decisive break from the received monastic habits of exegeting and compiling Scripture. In bracketing Scripture (if only temporarily) Anselm performs a sort of phenomenological reduction akin to Edmund Husserl’s, suspending all reference to the sacred page in order to begin theology anew. The role of Scripture remains a perdurable problem. Thomas Aquinas’s answer – that it is, like sense perception, the “material” out of which kernels of theological truth may be extracted – is perhaps the clearest of the scholastics: it frames the problem, which is a problem of cognition, in terms of Aristotelian potentiality. In other words, Scripture is preliminary to theology, which actualizes, by intellectually conceptualizing, the myriad of narrative and generic forms of Christianity’s Book. The multiple modes of Scripture are neatly streamed into the single mode of *ratio*. Not all scholastics would agree completely, of course, but the notion of potentiality remains a powerful way – powerful at least in their vocabulary – of describing and ultimately justifying the transition from *sacra pagina* to *sacra theologia*. (In John Duns Scotus’s hands, it becomes a way of legitimizing a special wayfarer theology without, but not contradicting, the call of biblical revelation.)

Taking a leaf out of the scholastic playbook, I wonder if we could also speak of another transition – from theology to poetry – as one of potentiality. Scripture or natural potencies of believers, depending on the scholastic, could be actualized as *scientia* under a ratiocinative mode. Might scholasticism be itself, in turn, the potential for other forms of discourse, for what we now classify as religious literature or vernacular theology? This is not to discount wholesale those models of imitation, displacement, borrowing, appropriation, simplification, or general “influence”; the venerable one of *translatio studii et imperii*; or more
recent theories that give weightier emphasis to the shaping agency of the vernacular. On the contrary, it is to say that the movement of one discursive form to another is much like translation – is indeed, at times, a kind of translation – which includes, in Richard Ullerston’s words, “expounding, revealing, explaining, or unlocking the meaning latent in words.”

Commenting on Ullerston’s defense of the vernacular at Oxford, in particular his vying for English as a suitable vehicle for God’s Latin, Vincent Gillespie suggests that vernacular translation “could involve a parallel process of theological explication and exploration that might be analogous to the agendas and procedures of academic theology, which takes the hidden truths of Scripture and subjects them to technical scrutiny through the specialized languages of the university schools.” Going a step further, vernacular literature could be justified after the manner of the schoolmen, in exploring and making explicit what was latent not only in Scripture but, because of its difference of mode, in academic theology. Narrative reveals what is hidden, buried, or implicit in the theological abstractions of the schools; it shows what theology otherwise cannot show. Religious literature therefore reverts back to the mode – what Bonaventure called the mode of narrative – in which much of Scripture is written. It responds to the source of Christian tradition in kind. It is not a naïve reversion, however, but one which has the train of scholastic thought behind and alongside it. After all, the desired goal for many of its wayfaring exponents – a vision of heavenly life, union with 

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4 Gillespie, “Vernacular Theology,” 413.
God, witnessing and embodying the sufferings of Christ (e.g., Julian of Norwich) – is not unlike that of scholastic theology: something higher or deeper than biblical revelation; a taste of beatitude; a glimpse of true knowledge and insight and wisdom.

Scholastic theology is literature in potentiality. It seems necessary, then, to translate not just the Vulgate but, in the broader sense, the Latin of the professionals into literature’s accessible word. Accessibility did not always entail a dumbing down of thought, and in more notable and speculative writings the exact reverse was true. This is, at any rate, the view of Nicholas Watson and his followers, who have made claims for the unique capacities of the vernacular – which was at least Latin’s equal, more relevant, and sometimes more apt to receive certain kinds of divine revelation. Emphasis is thus given to explorations of doctrine where vernacular writers excel, their ability to show up blindspots or contest orthodox opinion. They ponder Christ’s incarnation, his lived humanity. They seriously consider the possibility of universal salvation. They yearn for richer and personal experience. And their very choice of topics, given short or dismissive shrift by clerics, symbolize the reach and universality of the vernacular itself. Indeed some scholars, including Watson, have made much about the natural or “kynde” or mother tongue, its greater intelligibility, superiority, and egalitarian streak, its having “immediate access to people’s feelings and [being] easily comprehensible – as Latin is not, even to those who can understand it.” For those who now read (and write) in the tongue they speak, the language provides more than “access to knowledge”; it could “signify clarity and open access” to audiences not yet addressed.

7 Evans et al., “The Notion of Vernacular Theory,” 327. Author’s emphasis.
The greater reach of the vernacular at this historical moment is not in doubt, although its (putative) universalizing tendencies are not unique. Nor was it without problem. As Aristotle observed long ago, the languages of different nations are varied and multitudinous: written marks and spoken sounds “are not the same for all men.” Universalization would demand, as missionaries know, translation into every spoken and written tongue. (Or it would demand that a single dialect of English would be made the world’s lingua franca – or at least Christendom’s lingua franca.) On the other hand, what material signs point to – “affections of the soul” – “are the same for all” (Aristotle again). So affections or passions of the soul, interpreted as concepts that reside in mind, are already universal – that is to say, natural – among humans. That is why a prominent strain of medieval thinkers, Anselm for one, seek a language, what turns out to be a logical language, which is purified from all conventional speech and writing and which is, despite appearances, not Latin but strictly mental. They seek to distinguish proper from improper, logic from grammar, narrow from broad, true from false, but also the true and false from the neither true nor false. They search out misleading instances of usage which cloud the precision, clarity, and, yes, immediacy of thought that constitutes mental language.

If mental language is universal, it is the true and irreducible basis for all knowledge and all communication, the deep structure of articulated sound. Among the scholastics, William Ockham is best known for formulating thought as a language (i.e., mentalese); but he was also instrumental in pretty much denying theology’s status as a strict science, thereby

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9 So perhaps the divide is not between lay and learned, English and Latin – or rather that it is more fundamentally between conventional and natural, mental and spoken/written language. The former division gains force once thought is construed as a particular language, say English.
banishing it, in principle, from the realms of *scientia* and logical calculation. Not that theological topics were completely freed from logical scrutiny. But once the grain of theology moves away, because of its failure, from *scientia* as its ideal, it cannot sustain the goal of being intelligible according to the conceptual rigor of mentalese. Could it be that this movement, in which theology becomes another sort of theology (or something else entirely), is accompanied by a shift towards the vernacular, not only as a vehicle of theology, but as the language of thought itself? Put otherwise: is the scholastic desire to sculpt a universal, mental language channeled into the notion of the vernacular’s universality? These are, to be sure, bold speculations, which would surely take another thesis to prove. Yet I raise them in an effort to register the larger implications of this study, which maps out the preconditions, and some of the consequences, of theology’s fascinating development.

Critics working the (ever expanding) field of vernacular theology have made us keen to the liveliness of mind and feeling in authors writing in Middle English – and not only authors, but their audiences. In striving to “distance scholarship from its habitual adherence to clerical, Latinate perspective” (in the words of one influential scholar), one unfortunate effect has been, all too often, to ignore or discount the rich intellectual history that preceded it – the failure to register the continued relevance of scholastic thought. This dissertation, then, can be read as a corrective to (or more strongly, an intervention in) the current state of

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11 Or that the theory of thought as a mental language – its deep, universal structure – is connected with the rise of English as a dominant language?

12 Watson, “Censorship and Cultural Change,” 823 n. 4. Barbara Newman has usefully spoken of the mode of “imaginative theology,” which is distinct from (though not mutually exclusive with) scholastic, monastic, and vernacular modes of theology. Unlike the scholasticism, which “presupposes an immense faith in the power of reason, particularly dialectic,” “imaginative theology … ‘thinks with’ images” (in the more capacious and modern sense). And unlike vernacular theology’s main concern with authority and access, “[i]maginative theology … focuses on *how* theology might be performed; it draws attention to theological method and epistemology.” And that, also, is what scholastic prologues primarily focus on. My dissertation could be seen as a tracing of scholastic and imaginative modes – and how we get from one to another. See Newman’s *God and the Goddesses: Vision, Poetry, and Belief in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 294–304.
medieval studies in literature. It traces the long history of scholastic theology, in its inception as a university discipline, and a bit further back in Anselm’s radical introduction of *ratio* into meditation. Against this development of scholasticism, we can see more clearly how the remnants of that particular discourse – once it has lost its authority and collapsed in the fourteenth century – are used and repurposed in poetic works, often in unpredictable or novel ways. The *Pearl*-poet takes up some sophisticated ideas of the Oxford Calculators (who flourished, after Ockham, in the thirties and forties) to present economies of salvation, for example, while scholastic and theological terms thoroughly inflect Langland’s poetic language. Indeed, *Piers Plowman* goes one step further: it registers the disappearance of contemporary theology. In both cases there is a residual scholasticism present, although neither poem can nor should be reduced to a Thomist or Scotist or Ockhamist position. The goal is not allegoresis.

Perhaps I should apologize for writing a dissertation on theology in an English department, but in my defense I would say that medieval poetry itself drove me to concerns and quandaries that were fundamentally theological. Poetic texts are not scholastic texts, but they can share a profound affinity in their tireless search for the divine. Indeed, this study can be understood as four investigations into the nature of the divine, which are also investigations of how the divine might be known. Taken together, it may be read as an

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13 Even Vincent Gillespie has noted “some overstatement and tabloidization in writings of other scholars building on his [i.e., Watson’s] observations, which are often more tentatively and cautiously expressed than might appear from their headline impact on the field” (“Vernacular Theology,” 406). In the special issue on the religious turn in *English Language Notes* 44 (2006), some scholars caution against the “theology” in vernacular theology, which can obscure the literary qualities of poetry (C. David Benson), narrow the field of genres to be considered, ignore “the limitation of traditional religious discourses” (Katherine C. Little), treat theology as “primarily a form of doctrine” (Kate Crassons), or function as a shorthand for assumed binaries (Linda Georgianna). There is no mention of scholasticism – none, that is, except as a byword for Thomism. But a return to scholasticism does not mean Thomism *redivivus*, as is pointed out by Marcia L. Colish, *Remapping Scholasticism* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2000). Aquinas is important for good reason; but so are the other schoolmen and poets that turn up in the pages of this dissertation.
intellectual history of theology (albeit an internalist one), which embraces vernacular literature as a powerful critique, as well as a continuation, of the Christian tradition.
From Dialectic to Signification:

Anselm’s *Monologion*

In the opening book of *De doctrina christiana*, Augustine announces the work’s purpose and structure:

There are two things which all treatment of the scriptures is aiming at: a way to discover [modus inveniendi] what needs to be understood, and a way to put across to others [modus proferendi] what has been understood. [Duae sunt res quibus nititur omnis tractatio scripturarum, modus inveniendi quae intellegenda sunt et modus proferendi quae intellectus sunt.]

These two principles or *modi*, as Rita Copeland points out, “correspond … to two divisions of rhetoric, *inventio* and *elocutio*,” i.e., discovery and presentation. Yet by framing them in terms of biblical exegesis, Augustine manages, in a single sentence, “to reorient *inventio* completely.” In other words, Augustine transforms the *modus inveniendi* of classical antiquity into a *modus interpretandi*, replacing the Ciceronian topics that furnished argument for dialectic with a single topic – that is, the sacred text of Scripture. *Inventio* is a thus method that no longer draws from conceptual, abstract “places” but is wholly concerned with a written text: “the text itself has become the *topos* – the region of argument – from which what has to be

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said will be extracted.”

A monk of the eleventh-century, Anselm recapitulates this metamorphosis throughout his writing career. As Alex Novikoff has shown, the school of Bec was a crucible of pedagogical innovation, an origin of the scholastic disputatio that would soon dominate university life. Clerics and layman there were instructed via a “Socratic form of debate,” and leaders like Lanfranc engaged in polemics and biblical commentary according to disputation. As his successor, Anselm revived the “dialogical/disputational quality of inner meditation,” whose targets were not Augustine’s Manicheans but “pagans, unnamed heretics, and especially Jews.”

In Monologion, his first truly innovative work, Anselm makes a clean break from his peers: he composes a meditation that excludes the text of Scripture from the outset. Proceeding under the aegis of dialectic, he mounts an investigation in which the dialogical is fused with the meditative, the reader disputing with himself and within himself. Without using Scripture as a guarantor of his claims, the meditation itself traces something like the movement from the modus inveniendi to the modus interpretandi: it starts with a strictly propositional approach to the initial question, which eventually gives way to an extended discussion of signification – that is, to the mode of interpretation. But unlike Augustine’s manual, its hermeneutical focus or “region of argument” is not the written text of Scripture (made up of conventional signs) but a text of a different order – mental signs or concepts imagined as a text. While the creation of the material text is, I suggest, preceded by an exemplum – a kind of mental blueprint – Monologion could itself be an exemplum, that is, that which produces a mental text in the practice of meditation.

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3 Ibid., 156.
4 Alex J. Novikoff, “Anselm, Dialogue, and the Rise of Scholastic Disputation,” Speculum 86, no. 2 (2011): 397; for commentary as dialogue, see Ann Ryan Collins, Teacher in Faith and Virtue: Lanfranc of Bec’s Commentary on Saint Paul (Leiden: Brill, 2007). While Novikoff suggests that the early meditations are also dialogical in some respect (399 n. 54), I wish to emphasize the innovativeness of Monologion – written seven years later, and a good deal longer.
In the larger frame of Anselm’s output, this mental text does not cancel out Scripture but is, in a sense, a precondition for its interpretation. For from internal dialogue we move to the external dialogues of his later works, from inventio to interpretatio in which exegetical problems come to the fore. (Of course, this modus inveniendi has returned in altered form – a Boethian one – that presumes dialectic’s superiority over rhetoric.)\(^5\) Thus, for instance, the later treatises concerning truth, freedom, and the diabolical fall, each in “question-and-answer form” [per interrogationem et responsionem] are “pertaining to the study of Holy Scripture” [ad studium sacrae scripturæ].\(^6\) Which is to say that through Socratic dialogue, they at once unravel the implications of key biblical verses and provide a model for exegesis. In a complicated turn, dialectic is unhinged from the generic form of dialogue, the latter repurposed for interpretive work.

In its founding act that excludes Scripture, Monologion prepares the way for belief. More precisely, it is a clearing of conceptual obstacles and threats that impede the work of theology and Christian life itself. But the temporary suspension of Scripture does not lead (as some presume) to a rigid distinction between “reason” and “faith,” but paradoxically allows for its proper reappearance in the rest of Anselm’s oeuvre. That is, the insight gleaned from this early, radical clearing is mobilized in the later works of Anselm, which deal specifically with passages from Scripture. Hence biblical exegesis is conditioned by a logical sensitivity that guards against interpretive mistakes. So, for example, biblical statements like “God causes evil” or “God causes something not to be” are turned into their opposite; for as the teacher in De casu diaboli remarks, “we should not so much cling to the improper words that

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\(^5\) Copeland, Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages, 152–54.

\(^6\) De Veritate, prologue. In Anselm, Basic Writings, trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2007); S. Anselmi Cantuariensis Archepiscopi Opera Omnia, ed. F. S. Schmitt, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: F. Frommann Verlag, 1984). Unless otherwise noted, this translation and Latin edition will be used throughout.
conceal the truth as diligently seek the proper truth that lies hidden in many forms of expression.”

This is the direction in which the monk goes. But it is as important to remember where he begins: that at the heart of the Anselmian project is an exclusion that precedes all theological work, and *Monologion* is training for that work – training on the ground of dialectic.

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In dialectic, the art of *inventio*, the theory of topics names a systematic way of finding arguments. An argument, which Boethius defines as “a reason that produces belief regarding something that was in doubt,” is needed to resolve a question – “a proposition that is in doubt” – which represents the starting point for any disputation.\(^8\) By supplying the crucial link between the terms of the question (the subject and the predicate), an argument allows us to affirm or deny the doubtful proposition – and so establish whether the predicate inheres in the subject. For example, the question “whether man is a substance” needs another term for it to be resolved; we might choose the term “animal” and so generate the syllogism:

Every man is an animal.

Every animal is a substance.

Therefore, every man is a substance.

\(^7\) *De Casu Diaboli*, chap. 1. Henceforth DC.

\(^8\) In Anselm, *Basic Writings*, chap. 1; *S. Anselmi Cantuariensis Archiepiscopi Opera Omnia*. Further references are indicated in the text with the abbreviation DTD.
Here “animal” is the middle term that joins “man” and “substance,” so that one side of the question can be ultimately affirmed (“every man is a substance”). The linking term however can also disjoin the original terms, as in the question “whether trees are also animals”:

An animal is an animate substance capable of perceiving.

A tree is not an animate substance capable of perceiving.

Therefore, trees are not animals.

Whether genus (“animal”) or definition (“an animate substance capable of perceiving”), the added term is an intermediate in both cases, which is why Boethius says “an argument is nothing other than the discovery of an intermediate (mediatas), for an intermediate will be able to conjoin the extremes, if an affirmation is being maintained, or to disjoin them, if a negation is being asserted.” Inventing a dialectical argument can be reduced to finding an intermediate.

How do we find these intermediates? For Boethius, they are drawn from what is called a “maximal proposition,” which is in general identified with a “Topic” [locus], or “foundation [sedes] of an argument.” In Book II of De topicis differentiis, maximal propositions, or maxims, are considered the place where arguments are found; they contain arguments by being propositions for which nothing more general (hence maximal) could be offered:

There are some propositions which not only are known per se but also have nothing more fundamental by which they are demonstrated, and these are called maximal and principal [propositions]. And there are others for which the first and maximal

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9 Boethius, In Ciceronis Topica, trans. Eleonore Stump (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 297/1050. Henceforth ICT. For Boethius, a “term” can be a single word or a phrase. The examples contain, respectively, universal and indefinite propositions; the first is a categorical syllogism, the other, not. An argument cannot be identified with the middle term of an Aristotelian syllogism, although it can function in that way.
propositions provide belief. So of all things which are brought into question, the very first to be agreed to must be those which can provide belief for other things in such a way that nothing more known than they can be found. For an argument is what produces belief and more readily believable than what is proved. Hence those maximal [propositions] known per se so that they need no proof from without must impart belief to all arguments.

Such a proposition is sometimes contained within the boundaries of an argument, and sometimes it supplies force to the argument and makes [it] complete from without. (DTD, 1185A-1185B)

As self-evident expressions that provide belief for what is in doubt, maximal propositions are present within an argument or give “force” from without; they are general principles which can be applied to particular cases. The maximal proposition “whatever the definition is absent from, the thing defined is also absent from” suggests an argument which consists of a certain definition, say of “animal” (“an animate substance capable of perceiving”), which is sufficient to generate premises that yield a conclusion. And as a place [locus] contains within itself the quantity of a body,” Boethius explains, “so these propositions which are maximal contain within themselves the whole force of secondary propositions and the deriving of the conclusion itself” (DTD, 1186A).

So arguments are particular instances of maxims, just as individuals (in one metaphysical model) are instantiations of universals. Yet as soon as he presents maxims as the source for furnishing belief, Boethius claims the true foundation of an argument is their

10 There is some debate as to whether an argument supplies the intermediate terms or the premises themselves. Either way, an argument bridges the gap between question and conclusion. See Niels Jørgen Green-Pedersen, The Tradition of the Topics in the Middle Ages: The Commentaries on Aristotle’s and Boethius’ Topics (München: Philosophia Verlag, 1984), 68–71.
differentiae. In this way Boethius moves beyond Aristotle (whose topics function similarly as maxims) by displacing these general principles with a division of an even higher generality. Thus propositions like “things whose genera are different are themselves also different,” “the nature of conjugates is the same,” “where the cause is, the effect cannot be absent” – all maximal – can be grouped respectively under the differentiae “from genus,” “from conjugates,” “from causes.”

In all there are twenty-eight differentiae, which act as a shorthand for the kinds of maxims that might pertain to a certain question. Since “the Topics which are the Differentiae of [maximal] propositions are more universal than those propositions, just as rationality is more universal than man,” differentiae are fewer than their species (i.e., maxims); hence “those things whose number is not so great that they rapidly escape the memory of the student can easily come within the scope of a science” (DTD, 1186B). It is the manageability of things that allows them to enter science’s domain. Unlike Aristotle’s Topics, which lists a bewildering number of commonplaces, Boethius’s De topicis differentiis organizes them into a system for easy, accessible use, ready to be memorized. As Eleonore Stump puts it,

It is as if Boethius’s predecessors had taken Aristotle’s Topics as a boxful of blueprints or recipes for arguments, rather than as an art of teaching the nature of predicables, and had been dismayed at the great number of blueprints. To facilitate remembering the Topics, they gathered them together into groups across the grain of

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11 For a full enumeration, see Stump’s notes to DTD, 139-141.
12 Cf. ICT, 281/1052: “But since such [maximal] propositions must be many – in fact nearly innumerable – we are still in need of something that will enable the reasoning of our investigation to advance further. By dealing carefully with the theory, we can consider the differentiae of all maximal, universal propositions and can collect the innumerable multitude of maximal propositions known per se into a few universal differentiae.”
13 In which case, they also become mnemonic places in the mind.
the predicables: some Topics are about conjugates, some about contraries, and so on.\textsuperscript{14}

In his \textit{Topica}, Cicero (one such predecessor) divides the whole of topics into two groups: those “intrinsic or inherent in the very nature of the subject,” including “things which are … closely connected with the subject,” and those “extrinsic or brought in from without.” Topics are intrinsic or extrinsic according to an argument’s proximity to the terms of the question. The Greek Themistius (c. 317-390), however, adds a third grouping – the intermediate – under which he can accommodate “arguments drawn neither directly [proprie] nor indirectly [conjoncte] from the substance itself nor from things posited without but rather from the case of the things themselves, that is, with a certain small change, from the very things introduced [deductis].” (They are, in full, topics from case, conjugates, or division [DTD, 1192B-1192C].) Part of Boethius’s project in \textit{De topicis differentiis} is to reconcile his predecessors, which he accomplishes by reducing Themistius’s threefold division into Cicero’s two. As a result, Boethius places all differentiae, save one, under the division of the intrinsic. What remains is the extrinsic topic “from authority,” which can provide reasons “readily believable,” but never “necessary.” It is in some sense not a topic at all, not a site of invention insofar as it is “devoid of art” and “consists in testimony” (ICT, 387/1168).\textsuperscript{15}

Whether intrinsic or extrinsic, the taxonomy of differentiae provides access to a multitude of arguments which find their support, or inventive aid, in maximal propositions. But these propositions, despite their claim to be “known per se” and indemonstrable,

\textsuperscript{14}“Dialectic and Boethius’s \textit{De topicis differentiis},” in DTD, 202. Page numbers are indicated in the text. \textsuperscript{15}Cf. Marcus Tullius Cicero, \textit{Topica}, trans. H. M. Hubbell, Loeb classical library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949), IV, 24. “Extrinsic arguments depend principally on authority. Therefore the Greek call such means of argumentation \textit{atechnoi}, that is, not invented by the art of the orator.”
“principal” and indeed “maximal,” are not quite the same as the first-principles characteristic of Aristotelian demonstration. While “a demonstration … is a deduction that proceeds from necessities,” and is so allied with a species of modal syllogism in which all propositions are necessary, dialectic is “the skill of deduction which uses what is readily believable” ( ICT 274/1045). In demonstration one part of the question or “contradictory pair” is assumed; but in dialectic the question is truly open: either part could be argued for. These differences can be accounted for in terms of purpose. Of the four disciplines (i.e., philosophy, dialectic, sophistry, rhetoric), dialectic is the one whose chief aim is persuasion. Unlike dialectic, the discipline of philosophy strives at truth and cares little for quick assent. As a consequence, the dialectician is interested in reasons that are “readily believable”: what someone will assent to within the confines and time-limitations of a debate. Philosophers, on the other hand, seek “necessary” arguments that begin from self-evident truths and proceed via the syllogistic moods, regardless of their persuasive success. Besides the specialist training it requires, the “trouble with demonstration as a means of making arguments,” to quote Stump again, is pragmatic: “very many propositions one would like to prove are a long way from the self-evident truths that are first principles. To prove such propositions by demonstration requires going through all the steps from first principles…. The argument is more or less equivalent to teaching all of the science in question up to the desired conclusion, and the process becomes too long and tedious to be useful in debate” (190).

Thus to confuse dialectic and demonstration – disputation for categorical syllogism, for example – would be a mistake: for “the art of topics would begin to collapse into demonstration; the art of finding arguments would be the art of producing a proof of some proposition from the first principles of the science appropriate to that proposition” (182).

Nevertheless it is the dialectical topics that can supply reasons for demonstration’s ulterior purposes. In that sense, dialectic is the ground for all disciplines — for the discourses of reason, or logic — even if what it covers is not applicable to all. Put another way: topics are a sort of warehouse supplying the logical matter for discursive form; they represent the potentiality of every argument waiting to be actualized in syllogism. Despite their divergences in purpose, which manifest in their usage of arguments “readily believable” (dialectic), as opposed to those “necessary” (philosophy), both disciplines share common ground when an argument happens to be both “readily believable” and “necessary.” This commonality, for Boethius, is evidence of dialectic’s usefulness to even philosophers, but it is also a source for ambiguity, at least on the side of dialectic: for disputation cannot know whether its conclusions are necessary unless demonstration makes a judgment on its behalf.

Anselm’s *Monologion* takes its cue from Boethian dialectic, and not the later, more formalized arguments from Aristotle’s *Prior* and *Posterior Analytics.* In Boethius’s classification, the meditation is neither purely dialectical, nor is it just philosophy. It is rather working at the

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17 By “syllogism” I mean it in the way Boethius does: as a general form of argument that can include, for instance, the categorical syllogism, but also expressions that are not easily accommodated by the *Prior Analytics,* like indefinite propositions.

18 It is true that Boethius tends to align certain arguments with necessity: “arguments drawn from definition, genus, differentia, or causes most of all provide force and order to demonstrative syllogisms; the remaining arguments, to syllogisms which have the appearance of truth and are dialectical” (DTD, 1195A-1195B). It is not clear, however, which subset of necessary arguments are also believable. Anselm does not confine himself to arguments deemed necessary: he uses the full extent of the topics. Further, the “necessary” topics seem to be the Aristotelian predicables. But what counts as “necessary” is problematized by Anselm’s rejection, or severe qualification, of applying any of the Aristotelian categories to God. For Anselm, God’s necessity (as existing) is contrasted with created ephemerality — all creation is nothing, or barely nothing, in comparison to God. Yet created things can fall under the sign of the categories; which means the categories, also, are hardly necessary.
juncture of dialectic and philosophy. Indeed, a negotiation of the disciplines is already present in the prologue’s opening –

Some of the brethren have often eagerly entreated me to write down some of the things I have told them in our frequent discussions about how one ought to meditate on the divine essence, and about certain other things related to such a meditation, as a sort of pattern for meditation on these things. Having more regard to their own wishes than to the ease of the task or my ability to perform it, they prescribed the following form for me in writing this meditation: absolutely nothing in it would be established by the authority of Scripture; rather, whatever the conclusion of each individual investigation might assert, the necessity of reason would concisely prove, and the clarity of truth would manifestly show, that it is the case, by means of a plain style, unsophisticated arguments, and straightforward disputation. They also insisted that I not disdain to answer even the simple and almost foolish objections that would occur to me.19

– as well as that of the first chapter:

If anyone does not know, either because he has not heard or because he does not believe, that there is one nature, supreme among all existing things, who alone is self-sufficient in his eternal happiness, who through his omnipotent goodness grants and

brings it about that all other things exist or have any sort of well-being, and a great many other things that we must believe about God and his creation, I think he could at least convince himself of most of these things by reason alone, if he is even moderately intelligent.

There are many ways in which he could do this, but I shall set forth the one that I think would be easiest for him. After all, everyone desires to enjoy only those things that he thinks good. It is therefore easy for him to turn the eye of his mind sometimes toward investigating the source of goodness of those things that he desires only because he judges that they are good. Then, with reason leading and him following, he will rationally advance toward those things of which he is irrationally ignorant. (M, 1)

From these passages, it seems that the meditation is placed within the orbit of dialectic. After all, the aim of the work is persuasion: that the reader be convinced of beliefs concerning God and creation. The point of departure, though one of many, is deemed the “easiest” [promptissimum], originating as it does in desire. And while it proceeds by “reason alone” [sola ratione], it is a reason that speaks in “a plain style, with unsophisticated arguments and straightforward disputation” [plano stilo et vulgaribus argumentis simplicique disputatione]. This is no work for the specialist, no hearer skilled in Aristotelian syllogistic; indeed, it is part of Anselm’s fiction to imagine himself, and subsequently the reader, as

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20 “Si quis unam naturam, summam omnium quæ sunt, solam sibi in æterna sua beatitudine sufficientem, omnibusque rebus aliis hoc ipsum quod aliquid sunt aut quod aliquomodo bene sunt, per omnipotentem bonitatem suam dantem et facientem, aliaque perplura quæ de deo sive de eius creatura necessarie credimus, aut non audiendo aut non credendo ignorat: puto quia ea ipsa ex magna parte, si vel mediocris ingenii est, potest ipse sibi saltem sola ratione persuadere. Quod cum multis modis facere possit, unum ponam, quem illi aestimo esse promptissimum. Etenim cum omnes frui solis iis appetant quae bona putant: in promptu est, ut aliquando mentis oculum convertat ad investigandum illud, unde sunt bona ea ipsa, quae non appetit nisi quia indicat esse bona, ut deinde ratione ducente et illo prosequente ad ea quæ irrationabiliter ignorant, rationabiliter proficiat.”
devoid of any knowledge: “whatever I said there is put forth in the role [persona] of 
someone who, by thought alone [sola cogitatione], disputes and investigates within himself 
things that he had not previously realized.” It is the adoption of this mask, or persona, which 
allows Anselm to write the work that was insisted upon by his monastic brethren. It is also 
the mask that enables his brethren (and other monks) to read it, to participate in the fiction 
of religious ignorance. As such, what began in oral discussion (colloquìa), a conversation 
between a prior and his fraternity on the “divine essence” [divinitatis essentia], is 
transformed into a written work in which the major conceit is someone having a 
conversation with himself. The dialectical origins of the work are transformed into the 
reader’s performance: questioner and answerer are modulated into a single discourse, the 
reader occupying both positions at once. Accomplishing the act of persuasion is not Anselm, 
nor some authorial speaker, but the reader himself. It is he who must “convince himself,” 
the “someone” who might “easily speak silently within himself in this way…” [Facile est 
igitur ut aliquis sic secum tacitus dicat…].

That last line, which could be said to introduce the meditation proper, conditions the 
rest of work. Thereafter the proceedings are framed by a self-persuasive act that is entirely 
internal. The shift from external disputation to internal dialogue is decisive: the Monologion 
retains the scene of dialogue, but is subject to meditation’s presumed interiority. It is also 
subject to a severe constraint: the ruling out of the “authority of Scripture” as a mode of 
persuasion (auctoritate scripturæ … persuaderetur). Instead, conclusions are to be established by 
the “necessity of reason” [necessitas rationis] and “the clarity of truth” [claritas veritatis] – 
phrases which also name that which is to be revealed, or expressed. The speaker proceeds 
sola ratione in order to arrive at ratio without the aid of auctoritas. If the work’s form (forma) is 
determined by constraint, the meditation is founded on an exclusion that opens a space for
dialectic. Or is that philosophy? That clear truth is the end, coinciding with necessary conclusions, signals a claim to a rational demonstration, if not quite a scientific one. It is as if the work’s content is grown on the soil of dialectic, yielding the fruit of demonstration. Paradoxically *Monologion* is an attempt at demonstration on the ground of all dialectic, not merely necessary arguments.

Yet the appeal to necessity – what cannot be otherwise – is undermined just before the inner dialogue gets underway:

But if in this I say anything that a greater authority [auctoritas] does not teach, I wish to be understood in this way: even if I present a conclusion as necessary on the basis of arguments [ex rationibus] that seem compelling to me, I mean only that it can *seem* necessary [quasi necessarium] for the time being, not that it is therefore in fact altogether necessary.

If the prescription of the meditation requires the “necessity of reason,” the work’s necessity remains under doubt, uneasily resting as it does on the ground (possibly) shared by dialectic and philosophy. That is to say, philosophy is always threatened with being folded back into dialectic, the truth losing itself in the appearance of truth. Of course, philosophy seeks truth alone while dialectic solely aims at conviction; but dialectic convicts precisely under the guise of truth – even if it is finally oblivious to truth-values. For the topics have no purpose but “to reveal [demonstrare] a bountiful supply of arguments which have the appearance of truth” (DTD, 1182A).

It is on account of the exclusion, however, that the work’s necessity may be called into question: a *major auctoritas* (e.g., Scripture, Augustine) can trump the *auctor* Anselm, and implicitly the method of *ratio* he presents. In Boethian terms, we might say that the intrinsic
topics are placed under the judgment of the extrinsic. (The hierarchy of auctoritates over ratio, extrinsic over intrinsic, does not remain stable, and is overturned here and later in Anselm’s oeuvre.) But the work’s necessity is threatened by the auctoritates not only in terms of its truth; its very existence is at stake, as is evident in Lanfranc’s censure of the meditation in its early form. As the story goes, Anselm sent the “little work” [opusculum] to Lanfranc, his teacher, for approval, making allowance for its disposal should it be judged otherwise. And judged otherwise it was: Lanfranc criticized it for its non-reliance on Scripture and the Church fathers. At this point, events take a curious turn. Lanfranc’s reply is missing (lost? destroyed?), and all we have is Anselm’s rejoinder in the spring of 1077: “my intention throughout the disputation, whatever its quality, [was] that in it I should never state anything at all unless I saw that it could be readily be defended by canonical writings or by the words of blessed Augustine.”

It is no small irony that the letter that might have ordered the work’s destruction is destroyed. Lanfranc’s riposte may have backfired in a literal way, but its effects are still felt: the defense (though Anselm insists he is not defending, merely stating what he “took … over from someone else”) makes its way into the prologue, added shortly after, which as a whole registers the criticism of Lanfranc (without mentioning him, of course). There, Anselm presents himself as an unwilling participant in the creation of the work. Fulfilling the request of the brethren, who determine the nature and scope of the production, he is beset by the difficulties of writing and unsure of his ability to complete it. Only his brothers’ “modest persistence,” “eagerness,” and above all “charity” can overcome the “weakness” of his talent, and so accomplish the task at hand. Yet when it is finished, he wishes for it to be destroyed. But it is too late: the completed work has traveled beyond the reaches of his

monastery to scores of readers (and copiers), creating what Brian Stock calls a “fictive” audience – a reading public formed by a written artifact.\footnote{Brian Stock, \textit{The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries} (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 333.}

This is according to the prologue. It is calculated to undermine, or at least qualify, Anselm’s agency in the work’s genesis. But it is more than a defensive narrative operating under the \textit{topos} of humility. Against his will, the brothers persistently urge and demand the work to be completed, as if it were necessary. (A similar though more intense struggle is recounted of the \textit{Proslogion}'s composition.) The difficulty of writing it should not be underestimated. What Anselm creates is nothing other than a new form of theological discourse. In the eleventh century, the difference between illiteracy and literacy had become the difference between oral and written discourse. As Stock notes, Anselm takes that association a step further, viewing “irrationality and rationality … in the image of unstructured and structured language.”\footnote{Ibid., 335.} “Conventional speech,” Stock continues, “is a kind of theological popular culture. Logical reasoning is the equivalent of learned culture.” Thus the process by which one establishes a text, that is, a “concrete verbalization,” is a process towards \textit{reason}. The move from oral to written, unstructured to structured, is one of refining speech according to the principle of reason, so that “individual verbal investigations, which … are themselves taking shape as texts, are systematically organized into one text.”\footnote{Ibid., 333.} The difficulty of writing the \textit{Monologion} is to make this transition, which is not merely to transcribe oral discussion but to transform it into something of a different order – to write a text whose rationality is the platform for internal disputation. (Looking ahead, we will see...
that this text is conceived as a mental blueprint, and its performance a kind of thinking akin to divine creation.) Producing such a literary text is akin to doing theology.

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The “necessity of reason,” or its “cogency” (another translation of *rationis necessitas*), can refer to the organization of individual investigations and their collation into a single text. The first investigation begins with a question: “Since there are countless goods, whose diversity we both experience through our bodily senses and discern through the reasoning of our mind, are we to believe that there is some one thing through which all goods whatsoever are good? Or are different goods good through different things?” To the question whether good things are good through one or various things, an abstract principle “clear” and “quite certain” is invoked:

(1) “All things whatsoever that are said to be more or less or equally a certain way as compared to each other are said to be so through *[per]* something that is not understood as different but rather as the same in diverse things, whether it is detected equally or unequally in them.” (M, 1)

Roughly, things which have the same property (in varying degrees) have that property through one thing, not many.25 This seems to be a maximal proposition, which is particularized in the following instance:

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(2) “Just things are said to be equally or more or less just by comparison with other just things, they must be just through justice [just nisi per iustitiam].”

It is particularized once more when “just” is substituted with “good”:

(3) “It must be that they [all goods] are all good through something that is understood to be the same in diverse good things.”

But this resolution provokes another question about why the horse on account of its strength and speed is called good, while the robber similarly described is called bad. Anselm deals with the problem in terms of utility:

(4) “Nothing is ordinarily considered good except either because of some usefulness [utilitatem]” like health, or “because of some intrinsic value [honestatem]” like beauty.

Anselm brings that principle to bear on the current problem, having already established (3) from the maximal proposition (1):

(5) “All useful or intrinsically valuable things … are good through the same thing – whatever that is – through which all goods must exist.”

Then he makes this ontological claim:

(6) “Who would doubt that this thing, through which all goods exist, is itself a great good?”
As critics have noted, there is a slippage here between “good” as a universal property that is present in things, and “good” as itself an individual thing, a single entity. If we accept it as a general principle within the constraints of dialectic, self-evident or implicitly warranted (as its framing as a rhetorical question suggests), the following conclusions can be made:

(7) “Therefore, it is good through itself [per seipsum], since every good exists through it.”

(8) “It follows, therefore, that all other things are good through something other than what they themselves are [per aliud quam quod ipsa sunt], and it alone is good through itself [ipsum solum per seipsum].

Another general principle is introduced, after which the inference made is supported by a reason from comparison:

(9) “No good that exists through another is equal to or greater [æquale aut maius] than that good who is good through himself.”

(10) “So only he who alone is good through himself [solum est per se bonum] is supremely good.”

(11) “For something is supreme if it surpasses others in such a way that it has neither peer nor superior.”

At this point, “good” is made convertible with great things:

(12) “That which is supremely good is also supremely great.”

And great things, with existence:

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(13) “There is, therefore, some one thing that is supremely good and supremely great – in other words, supreme among all existing things.”

The argument of the first chapter, which in little more than thirteen propositions “establishes” the source of goodness, and possibly of existence itself, sets the tone and trajectory of the whole. Anselm’s procedures are often informed by topical theory, but they do not conform to the Boethian model in any simplistic way. The opening syllogism, beginning with a maxim that reaches swift instantiation, is soon complicated by the introduction of an ancillary question or objection, which requires a new maxim to find an answer; this, in turn, is folded back into an established conclusion, producing another proposition in need of further support, which begets additional maxims, conclusions… and questions. The hinge of reasoning is the maximal proposition: some propositions are rendered from ordinary knowledge, e.g., (4), others are more abstract in quality, e.g., (1), (6), (9). The opening proposition, for instance, achieves its unwieldy complexity from the fusion of three maxims of comparison: of the greater, of the lesser, and of equals (DTD, 1199B12, 1199C6, 1199C11). And the meaning of the preposition per, if initially enigmatic, is somewhat clarified in (2), whose assertion that “all just things” cannot be *iusti nisi per iustitiam* is the paradigmatic example of the topic from conjugates in Boethius’s commentary: “I call ‘conjugates’ all those things which are inflected in different expressions derived from one name, as, for example, ‘a just [man],’ ‘a just [thing],’ and ‘justly,’ derived from ‘justice.’ These are said to be conjugated among themselves and with ‘justice,’ from which their names flow” (ICT, 293/1064).27 The conjugal relation is doubly significant. Because *iustus, iustum, and iuste* are all derived from a genus (i.e., *iustitia*), conjugates, like the topics from genus and species,

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have “not only a linguistic connection to one another but also a certain harmony of nature, although they are not identical to one another. Justice is not the same as a just man, for everything that is inflected from something differs from and yet is connected to the thing from which it is inflected” (ICT, 295/1066). That they share a “certain harmony of nature” is confirmed by the maximal proposition “conjugates … have one and the same nature,” or “the conjugate of a thing can be associated with whatever that thing itself belongs to” (ICT, 297/1068).

But what if one cannot establish the source – Anselm’s primary concern here – on the basis of a word’s morphology? What if the names under scrutiny are identical in linguistic form? From which one name do the related others flow? Anselm had already broached these problems in De grammatico, an early instance of his dialectical output, whose opening gambit is “the question as to whether literate [grammatico] is substance or quality, so that when I have appreciated this case, I will know how I ought to view other items which are likewise predicated paronymously” [De grammatico peto ut me certum facias utrum sit substantia an qualitas, ut hoc cognito, quid de alis quae similiter denominative dicuntur sentire debeam, agnoscam.]28 Paronymous names – concerning things which “get their name from something, with a difference of ending” – appear as early as Aristotle’s Categories. “Thus, for example, the grammarian gets his name from grammar, the brave get theirs from bravery.”29 Grammar, or what later gets translated by Boethius as grammaticus, makes a reappearance in chapter 4: along with album, it is the standard example of a quality (“Qualitas, ut album, grammaticum”). In Priscian’s Institutiones grammaticae, however, grammaticus is taken as an example of an appellative term – basically a common or proper name. Like other appellatives,

28 I use the translation in Desmond Paul Henry, Commentary on De Grammatico: The Historical-Logical Dimensions of a Dialogue of St. Anselm (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1974), 1.000. Henceforth DG.
29 Aristotle, Categories and De Interpretatione, 1.1a12.
it is “naturally common to many,” and other adjectives may be attached to it (sapiens grammaticus); moreover, it signifies a substance.\(^{30}\) The ambiguity present in the form of grammaticus – its ability to be either nominative or adjectival without change – is played out in the history of the trivium. Anselm’s De Grammatico everywhere registers the name’s fraught ambiguity, and seeks to overcome it with a distinction.

That distinction is made after a long series of syllogisms in which the student offers arguments for denying one side (then the other) of the key question. Frustrated by the master’s continual rebuttals, the student again asks how grammaticus can be asserted to be at once a substance and a quality. After all, no one – not even a logician – says, “A literate [grammaticus] is a useful form of knowledge”: the word is treated as a substance rather than an accident. But if it truly signifies man and literacy (hominem et grammaticam), “why is not man likewise quality as well as substance? After all, man signifies a substance along with all the characteristics of man” (DG, 4.22). Taking into account everyday usage, which is later associated with “appellation,” the teacher replies: “man signifies precisely [per se] and as a single whole, the complete make-up of man,” because “substance is the chief feature, as the ground and possessor of the others” (DG, 4.231). Without substance, no characteristics would be; but since they “form as it were a single whole covered by a single meaning, they receive as their appellation the single name man.” Concerning the name man, signification and appellation coincide. In contrast,

literate [grammaticus] does not signify man and literacy [grammaticum] as a single whole; precisely [per se] it signifies only literacy [grammaticam], and obliquely [per aliud] it signifies man. Indeed, although the name literate [grammaticae] is appellative of man, it nevertheless may not properly be said to signify man. Further, even though literate

\(^{30}\) Priscian, Institutiones grammaticae, II.58.20.24, in Henry, Commentary on De Grammatico, 213.
grammaticus signifies literacy, it is not, however, appellative of literacy. Here I want to stipulate that the name of a thing is appellative of that thing when it is the name by which that very thing is itself called in the customary course of utterance [usus loquendi]. Thus assertions such as “Literacy is literate” [grammatica est grammaticus] or, “Literate is literacy” [grammaticus est grammatica] run counter to such customary usage; we say rather, “The man is literate,” or “The literate is a man” [homo est grammaticus, et grammaticus homo].” (DG, 12/4.232-4.234)

So through itself (per se) the name grammaticus signifies literacy, but only through another (per aliud) does it signify man. There is a distinction therefore between signification per se and signification per aliud: some names signify through themselves; others signify through another, with the aid of an external cause. As the teacher explains a little later, some background or contextual information acts as that cause. Say you see a white horse and black bull and are ordered to “hit it.” Confused, you ask “which?” and reply is “the white” [album]. So you hit the horse. Thus album, along with the particular scene, signifies the horse (DG 4.422-4.423). Signification per aliud, however, is not quite appellation, which is how a name is used in normal speech. Each represents a distinct way of getting at how language functions: signification is a theory of meaning, appellation concerns usage. Nevertheless they may overlap or part ways – as they do in the case of grammaticus, where its ordinary use is not logically precise.

The classification of grammaticus might be read as an index to grammar’s fortunes within the trivium. The word, at first an example of quality in Aristotle’s categories, is

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31 I follow Peter Boschung, From a Topical Point of View: Dialectic in Anselm of Canterbury’s De Grammatico (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 251.
32 Ibid., 250. Boschung argues, pace Henry, that signification per aliud is not the same as appellation for paronyms.
reinscribed as substance by Priscian. Anselm retains both valences but places them in a hierarchy that accords with the ancients. Grammar, briefly gaining the upper hand, is once more dominated by logic. This is the answer to the question posed by the title’s other ambiguity: is this a work concerning grammar, or logic? *De Grammatico* announces grammar as its subject, but the work ends up subordinating grammar under dialectic:

> [Teacher.] … logicians [dialectici] make written assertions about words insofar as they signify, and yet, in speaking, given the appellative function of those words, use them in a fashion which is at variance with those assertions; for the grammarians also assert one thing about a word considered as an exemplar, but quite another when it is considered in relation to the constitution of things.

> After all, they tell us that ‘stone’ is masculine in gender, ‘rock’ feminine, but ‘slave’ neuter, and that ‘to fear’ is an active verb whereas ‘to be feared’ is passive; yet no one asserts that a stone is male, a rock female, or a slave neither male nor female, nor that to fear is to perform an action whereas to be feared is to undergo an action.

*(DG, 4.620-621)*

So distinguished, dialecticians make written assertions according to the word’s proper relation to the constitution of things (*secundum rerum naturam*); grammarians rarely do, and cannot be trusted to say anything reliable about ontology.

The distinction between *per se* and *per aliud* could be said to structure much of the *Monologion*. Already nascent in the opening maximal proposition, it is formalized ontologically in chapter 6: “he who exists through himself [per seipsum] and that which exists through another [per aliud].” Since they do not “fit the same definition of existing,” Anselm first concerns himself with the how supreme nature exists separately. The
commonplaces of causation (efficient, material, instrumental) are of little help: they contradict whatever has been established (making the object of meditation disappear), and Anselm resorts to linguistic analogy – “that supremely existing or supremely subsisting, are related to each other not unlike ‘light’ and ‘to shine’ and ‘shining’ [summe existens sive summe subsistens, non dissimiliter sibi convenient, quam lux et lucere et lucens]” – in order to ward off the alternative of “nothing,” a cause unintelligible and absurd (“nothing can exist through nothing by itself”). When he considers the types of existence together – or precisely, how the “totality of things” exists through a singularity – Anselm must again resort to analogy in order to deal with how one can say that things (if they cannot exist from themselves, or from matter) exist “out of nothing” [ex nihilo]. He suggests that this ex nihilo can perhaps be meant in the way we say that someone poor has become rich or a sick person has returned to health. It can be understood as a certain quality – namely, a condition – that is liable to speedy change but leaves an underlying substance intact.

Both these analogies gesture toward a theory of existence that cannot be quite explained in Aristotelian or topical terms – or not, at least, without substantial renovation. Indeed, the bulk of chapters 11 to 27 are given up to showing how each of the categories cannot be properly applied in the usual way. For example, the supreme nature cannot be said to be just through justice but by being justice; the proposition “the supreme nature is just” is the same as “the supreme nature is justice.” All qualities that can be predicated of him really name what he is, his quiddity. The semantic function of a predicate is thus disrupted; instead of naming that in which the subject participates, the predicate is made equivalent to the subject, is another name for the supreme nature, which can be endlessly multiplied since each is founded on a tautology (just is justice). This tautology of naming is what legitimizes Anselm’s own practice of substitution, his slipping in and out of different names which, for
him, signify the same thing: supreme nature, supreme substance, supreme essence, supreme justice, supreme salvation, supreme beauty, supreme spirit, supreme _____ \((M, 16)\). After establishing that the rest of the accidents cannot be properly applied to the supreme substance, even the designation of “substance” comes under question: the word is only allowable if it is meant in the sense of “essence,” since “substance” in the Aristotelian world requires that the supreme nature participate in some common substance shared by all, whereas the point of its being supreme is its radical distinction from all creatures, its lack of commonality with them \((M, 27-28)\). The difference is so great that Anselm couches it in terms of existence itself: if this spirit, this so-named *substantia*, exists, all other things do not exist, or barely exist in comparison \((M, 29)\).

One way Anselm solves the problem of *ex nihilo* is to assert that the “totality of things” were *never* “nothing,” in the sense that they are always already existing in the mind of the creator. “After all, there is no way anyone could make something rationally unless something like a pattern (or, to put it more suitably, a form or likeness or rule) of the thing to be made already existed in the reason of the maker. And so it is clear that what they were going to be, and what sorts of things, and how they were going to be, was in the reason of the supreme nature before all things were made” \[Nullo namque pacto fieri potest aliiquid rationabiliter ab aliquo, nisi in facientis ratione præcedat aliquod rei faciendæ quasi exemplum, sive aptius dicitur forma, vel similitudo, aut regula. Patet itaque, quoniam priusquam fierent universa, erat in ratione summe nature, quid aut qualia aut quomodo futura essent\]. Moreover, that pattern or “form of things” \[rerum forma\] is nothing other than “an utterance of those things in his reason” \[rerum quædam in ipsa ratione locutio\]. Thus the question of creation and the rational means by which it takes place is linked to the doctrine of signification. Anselm compares the process of divine creation to an artisan’s
practice: “when a craftsman is going to make some work of his art, he first says it within himself by a conception of his mind” [cum faber facturus aliquod suæ artis opus prius illud intra se dicit mentis conceptione]. The form of things is like the mental conception of a craftsman, a kind of blueprint that must exist before he sets to work. Likewise, Anselm is himself a faber, a maker of this written text (out of the material of oral discussion) according to a conception; a conception of a written text before it is composed. Thus the composition of this text, by which the author conceives of a textual apparatus and is actualized in material form, is itself an analogy for creation, the way in which things in facientis ratione become things in themselves.

Yet the familiar analogy of divine creator as author is complicated by the word exemplum (extended to encompass forma, similitudo, and regula), which recalls the exemplo of the prologue in which the word is used to describe the written text (meditationis exemplo, or “pattern of meditation”) as well as its forma. So it seems that the exemplum of the divine mind, and the craftsman’s, would correspond not to an oral or mental pre-conception but to an exemplum that is the written text. The written text qua text is the blueprint, model, or conception that is to be realized in meditation. To read the text according to its purpose is to transform written words (as we will see shortly) into silent speech – in other words, to think. Thinking is precisely a creative act because it traverses the path from one medium to another. Mentally saying this text is a simulation of creation and therefore an experience that functions as one of its analogical explanations. But I am getting ahead of myself.

33 It is also the model manuscript from which subsequent copies are made, as clear from the prologue. See Albert Derolez, The Palaeography of Gothic Manuscript Books: From the Twelfth to the Early Sixteenth Century (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 30. “The exemplar is the model MS from which apopœtica – copied from the exemplar – is made. The written text is the model – the exemplum – from which other written copies are made: and this constitutes a spiritual act itself, like prayer or fasting.”
What saying involves is articulated by the theory of signification. According to Boethius’s translation of Aristotle’s *De Interpretatione* (the standard account), to signify is to establish an understanding (*constituit intellectum*). Signification occurs when a name (a noun or verb) is uttered and heard; it produces an understanding and “he who hears it rests.” Signification only happens when the link is completed, i.e., when saying a name *establishes* an understanding in the mind. Under this psychologico-causal model, the utterance of the name by itself is the efficient cause. This is signification *per se*. As we have seen, Anselm extends this account in *De grammatico* by positing a signification *per aliud*, which requires an additional cause to complete the link; though a name said *per aliud* is an efficient cause, it needs something else— a material, an instrument, some other knowledge—to produce an effect. Thus signification *per se* is necessary, while signification *per aliud* is not. In chapter 10 of *Monologion*, Anselm rehearses his version of signification to explain what he means by “utterance” [*locutio*], that is, the three ways we can *say* the same thing:

1. Perceptible signs: “signs that can be perceived by the bodily senses” [*sensibus corporeis sentiri possunt sensibiliter utendo*]: e.g., the name “man,” *homo*.

2. Imperceptible signs: “thinking imperceptibly within ourselves the very same signs when they are outside ourselves” [*eadem signa, quae foris sensibilia sunt, intra nos insensibiliter cogitando*]: e.g., the silent (*tacens*) name “man.”

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Mental signs: “saying the things themselves in our mind” [res ipsas … intus in nostra mente dicendo] by either:

a. “a corporeal image” [corporum imaginatione]: e.g., a mental image of a man’s body (his sensible appearance, sensibilem figuram); or

b. “an understanding of reason that corresponds to the diversity of things themselves” [rationis intellectu pro rerum ipsarum diversitate]: e.g., thinking a man’s universal essence (“rational, mortal animal,” animal rationale mortale).

This typology of signs is based on Boethius’s translation: written and spoken words (voces) are marks (notae) of the passions of the soul, i.e., mental concepts which are likenesses (similitudines) of real things (res). Mental signs are natural and universal and all other words are invented on their account. Anselm’s version, however, introduces the notion of imperceptible speaking as an intermediate stage between outward signs and inner thoughts, alluding to the precise kind of word one uses to say this meditation: Facile est igitur ut aliquis sic secum tacitus dicat… That is to say, Anselm makes a place for silent reading – the inaudible pronunciation of words – and presents it as a mode of thinking that precedes the examining of things themselves. Saying leads to thinking leads to seeing, though each can be used interchangeably and are often conflated: “no other word seems as similar to the thing of which it is a word … as the likeness that is expressed in the gaze of the mind of someone who is thinking the thing itself” [nullum aliud verbum sic videtur rei simile cuius est verbum, aut sic eam exprimit, quomodo illa similitudo, quæ in acie mentis rem ipsam cogitantis

\[35\] It is not clear whether the tacitus dicat of chapter 1 is the same as the idem nomen tacens cogito here. It seems that Anselm introduces imperceptible signs to distinguish it from mental signs, which are not simply spoken words said silently but signs which are like the thing they signify, either formally or essentially.
exprimitur]. The third way obviously takes precedence in Anselm’s account: moving from bodily to imperceptible signs to imagined and essential utterances, we progress closer to the likeness of the thing. But as Peter King has shrewdly noted, the movement seems to double back on itself when we reach the end; if a corporeal image of a man is more like the thing itself than the word homo, then animal rationale mortale lapses back into the domain of signs.36

Signification is presented in terms of locutio rather than of voces. Anselm connects the third kind of locutio (which I will translate as “locution”) to the innermost locution (intimatio locutio) by which the Creator makes the whole world. But this locution is the Creator’s understanding (there is no gap between them because both are eternal; an utterance is always understood) and curiously achieves the same ontological status as the utterer: “For if this utterance [locutio] is consubstantial with the supreme nature in such a way that they are not two, but one spirit, then of course that utterance is supremely simple, just as the supreme nature is. Therefore, it does not consist of several words [verbis]; rather, it is one Word [locutio], through whom all things were made” (M, 30). But how can the distinction between res and verbum – encapsulated in the dictum “every word is the word of something” – be maintained if we grant this locutio, soon to be called a verbum (in chapter 32), is of one substance with the supreme spirit? To avoid its dependence on created things (which are patterned after the Word, not vice versa), Anselm must locate this verbum within the supreme essence. The Word is a word of itself, which, unlike other words, has the ontological status of the thing it signifies: precisely because it is the thing it signifies. Since the word is essentially identical to the thing, the supreme spirit and its utterance cannot be distinguished

36 Peter King, “Anselm’s Philosophy of Language,” in The Cambridge Companion to Anselm (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 87. According to King, if “likeness is a matter of accuracy, not pictorial resemblance, in the means we use to conceive of something,” then Anselm can escape this problem.
according to *res* and *verbum*; that distinction is overturned in favor of what might be called a Trinitarian semiotics, a system of signs that is internal to the supreme essence.

Of course, such a system is modeled on the human mind, whose capacity to remember and understand itself “by reasoning silently within itself” [sola tacite disputando] is proved in the act of meditation: “as my mind is doing now” [sicut nunc mens mea facit] (M, 32). The deictic *nunc* returns the reader to the experience of meditation as it is happening, to this moment in which “the rational mind understands itself by thinking itself.” For when it does, “an image of itself is born in its thought. Indeed, that very thinking of itself is its own image, formed to its own likeness as by its own impress” (M, 33). In the semiotics of the mind, thinking is both a verb and a noun, *locutio* (speech-act) and *verbum*, the thinking of thinking. Difference in the mind is conceived in terms of begetting, an impression of the mind which can only be comprehended by the faculty of reason (*ratio*): “when the rational mind understands itself by thinking itself, it has within itself its own image, born from itself – in other words, its thought of itself, formed to its own likeness as by its own impress – although it is reason alone that can distinguish the mind from this image of itself. This image of the mind is its word” (M, 33). Making this distinction, thinking about thinking, is the exclusive precinct of reason, a *judgment* of the mind. As we might recall, when a sign is uttered something is brought to the understanding; the thing signified, of course, remains separate from the mental sign. When the mind signifies itself, however, the mental sign and thing signified coincide: there is no difference between the mind and what is brought to the understanding. We could go so far as to say that the operations of the mind exist only insofar as they can be distinguished, that is to say, judged.\textsuperscript{37} That moment of self-reflexive signification, and the logical deductions made from it, are themselves signs of the divine

\textsuperscript{37} The difference between mind and image, sign and thing (which is collapsed here), is not the same as the act of judgment, which is the making of *conceptual* distinctions as opposed to “real” ones.
relations: memory (which must precede the image) signifies the Father; understanding, the Son; love (without which the others would be “idle and useless”), the Spirit.

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*Monologion* could be understood as a discourse in which the purported object of meditation continually threatens to disappear. Early on, once the supreme nature has been established as the greatest of all things, it seems to be “nothing” insofar as it does not exist through some other cause or nothing itself (M, 6). Likewise this “nature” or “substance” seems to be nothing according to the Aristotelian categories, unable to be circumscribed or designated by accidental or substantial terms. In the face of such a danger, a dialectical reversal is often made: the supreme essence is understood to exist in such a way that its creation is rendered as (almost) nothing (e.g., M, 28). But the danger manifests itself repeatedly: for example, a comparison of the rational mind to the Word gives rise to a deduction in which the Word is made mute, and Anselm must reverse the order of the analogy in order to break the silence (M, 32). The meditation reaches a climax when Anselm ponders whether the entire discourse has been about nothing, a total waste of time: “if [the supreme essence] is ineffable, how can our conclusions be correct?” More pointedly, “if the familiar meaning of words is foreign to him, none of my reasoning applies to him. How then is it true that something has been discovered about the supreme essence if what has been discovered is vastly different from him?” Anselm responds:

We often say many things that we do not properly express as they really are; rather, we signify through some other thing what we are either unwilling or unable to express properly, as when we speak in riddles [per aenigmata loquimur]. And we
often do not see something properly as the thing itself actually is, but through some likeness or image, as when we look at someone’s face in a mirror [in speculo]. In this way we do indeed both say and not say, or both see and not see, one and the same thing. We say and see through some other thing [per aliud]; we do not say or see through its own distinctive character [per suam proprietam]. (M, 65)

We say and do not say, see and do not see. But the structure of this double saying, as in a riddle (aenigma), is not merely a positive followed by a negative, a plus then a minus. It is a saying which is negated by a larger denial, a positive withdrawn into a greater than the positive. For the conception of external things (things perceptible by the senses), Anselm notes, “produce something in my mind that is much less than – that is in fact vastly different from – that which my mind is trying to come to understand through their tenuous signification [tenuem significationem]” (M, 65). There is a likeness that is outstripped by a greater unlikeness, an ineffability that precedes expression. A riddle allows something to be said but also, in its negation, opens a space for what cannot be said. The *per aliud* here, however, should not be confused with the *per aliud* of *De grammatico*. Or rather, tenuous signification is *per aliud* signification without a supplement – without some context or background knowledge that can complete the causal link between sign and signified.

Tenuous signification is at one remove from normal signification: what is brought to mind is more dissimilar than similar to the thing signified.

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38 See Augustine, *The Works of Saint Augustine*, 5:9.15. Here, *aenigmata* are a kind of allegory: “Of this trope, that is allegory, there are various species, and among them the one called enigma…. An allegory is nothing but a trope in which one thing is understood from another, as for example this to the Thessalonians: *So let us not sleep like the others, but let us keep awake and be sober. For those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk are drunk at night; but we who are of the day should be sober* (1 Thes 5:6). But this allegory is not an enigma, as its meaning is obvious except to the unusually slow-witted. An enigma, to put it briefly, is an obscure allegory, like *The blood-sucker had three daughters* (Prv 30:15).”
The general problem of signification – and particularly its misfiring or failure – was keenly addressed by Anselm with respect to negation. In the discussion of *nihil* in chapter 11 of his *De casu diaboli*, the teacher asks: does *nihil* signify nothing, and therefore not signify, or does it signify something, and therefore signify its opposite, in other words, contradict itself? The *magister* posits that *nihil*, made equivalent to *non aliquid*, signifies differently from the usual case: “since there is no way to signify the exclusion of something except by signifying the very thing whose exclusion is signified – for no one understands what ‘not-human’ signifies except by understanding what a human is – the expression ‘not-something’ must signify something precisely by eliminating that which is something.” Negation always involves a double movement, a bringing-to-mind then a removal of the thing negated. *Non aliquid* both “signifies a thing … and in no way signifies a thing”: “it signifies by excluding,” not including (DC, 11). But if signifying consists in excluding, in the very process of erasure, the name *nihil* still remains; and all names must be names of something. Here the dictum that conditioned so much of *Monologion* reappears as an aid to exegesis. The teacher admits that “many things are said according to form that are not so in reality,” and so the “something” which is named by *malus* or *nibil* or *caecitas* (“blindness”) is not really a something but a quasi-something (*quasi aliquid*): “things that are not something are called something according to the form of the expression, in that we speak of them as we speak of things that really exist” (DC, 11). These names, so-called privatives, function like words with corresponding realities but only exist on the level of material signs, or grammar. They are similar to the vowel “a,” which both names and *is* the thing of which it is a sign (what later medieval logicians would call material supposition; M, 10). Yet a privative like *nibil* promises signification yet collapses back on itself, producing a chain of signs that ends where it begins: with a name.
If *nihil* has no corresponding thing, its procedure of signifying matches the structure of the devil’s fall, the larger topic in which the linguistic problematic is embedded. The general question is explained according to the logic of the gift, in which a gift requires both a giver and a receiver, but the giver’s status as giver is nullified if the receiver spurns it:

T: If I offer you something and you receive it, I do not give it because you receive it, but rather you receive it because I give it, and the giving is the cause of the receiving.

S: Right.

T: What if I offer that very same thing to someone else and he doesn’t receive it? Is it the case that he doesn’t receive it because I don’t give it?

S: No, it seems that you don’t give it because he doesn’t receive it.

T: So in this case not-giving is not the cause of not-receiving, and yet if I posit that I didn’t give it, that causes it to follow that he didn’t receive it. (DC, 3)

In other words, the giver is retrospectively made non-giver if the gift is not received; for there is no giver without receiver. In the case of the devil, who does not fail to obey a divine commandment (as it was with our first parents) but rejects its conditions of possibility: he abandons the will-to-justice as soon as it is received (e.g., DC, 27). Falling is thus a double movement of reception and abandonment (occurring simultaneously) and so reflects the psychological mechanics of privatives: positing, then removing, a sign from the understanding. It is as if the devil is “primed” to abandon a just will when it is given; his abandoning is pre-emptive, motivated by nothing other than himself. We might say, then, that privatives are modeled on the diabolical fall, that their failure to signify something other than themselves is paradoxically its power in representing a cosmological lack, an ontological aberration in the created universe. When asked what motivates the devil’s action, the teacher
finally concedes that “the devil is, as it were, the efficient cause and effect of his abandoning justice” (DC, 27).[^39] That answer would go against the one implied in the opening rhetorical question – “What do you have that you did not receive?” (“Nothing.”) – were it not for the “as it were” [quasi]: divine causation can only be ruled out by treating the devil as a special case – as one that functions on the level of grammar (a quasi-something), unintelligible in terms of itself. The gulf between grammatical and logical form is precisely that gap, the inability to explain adequately the diabolical fall.[^40]

This aporia, in slightly altered form, seems to hold when we confront the divinitas essentia. If the Monologion is a (pattern of) meditation on the divine essence, it is simultaneously about the impossibility of doing so, of admitting that its real subject is the human mind. Extending to tenuous signification to the rational mind – the “closest created essence” to its divine correlate, closer than anything available via sense perception – it becomes the consummate sign of the supreme essence: “the more diligently the rational mind tries to come to know itself, the more efficaciously it rises up to know him; and the more it neglects to look upon itself, the more it falls away from seeing him” (M, 66). But it is also the limit of comprehending the divine: “The mind can therefore most fittingly be said to be like a mirror for itself, in which it might see (if I may put it that way) the image of him whom it cannot see face to face.” This is the impasse that Anselm reaches, which is figured by the mind itself: the mind is its own mirror (speculum), able to observe itself in action and distinguish itself from itself, yet unable to reach beyond itself (external objects being lower

[^39]: Visser and Williams read this answer as completely definitive: “Anselm in effect argues that there is something creatures have that is not received from God: namely, the content of their free choices,” Anselm, 190.

[^40]: The teacher’s last words, a redescription of the fall in terms of “stealing,” is a return to the early stages of the dialogue, which suggests the problem is interminable, needing to be endlessly rehearsed.
down the hierarchy). It is the mind’s recognition of itself as metaphor, as merely imago, that marks the turning point of the meditation:

For if the mind alone among all created things can remember and understand and love itself, I do not see why one would deny that there is in it a true image of that essence who in virtue of remembering, understanding, and loving himself constitutes an ineffable Trinity. Or certainly it proves itself to be more truly his image by the fact that it can remember, understand, and love him. For that by which it is greater and more like him is that by which it is recognized as a truer image of him. (M, 67)

But how can the mind remember, understand, and love him unless it displaces itself as a thing (“an ineffable Trinity” of sorts) to a sign (“more truly his image…”)? What is this displacement but a kind of negation of itself – a seeing through and beyond itself that is the highest (creaturely) expression of the Trinity?

Thus we have a double movement: the mind observes itself in action before negating itself in an act of will: “the rational creature should strive for nothing else so much as to express through voluntary action this image that has been stamped on it through its natural ability.” Now let us remember that one of ratio’s uses is to designate a forma which is entirely internal and mental; or put negatively, what does not rely on anything external or perceptible (including other texts, like Scripture). If so, then even the author and itself (the material text) must be ruled out in favor of a “text” elsewhere: an immaterial, mental text that exists only in performance. Indeed, such a mental text comes into being according to the passage of thinking. Added to this is the voluntary denial of the mind (the meditator’s mind) in expressing the divine image, a paradoxical kind of negative will that goes by another name:
love. It is as if the recognition of the mind as trope opens up a negative space in which love – and later on, hope and belief – is made possible.

[Even] every rational thing exists in order that it might love something more or less, or reject it altogether, according as its rational discernment judges that the thing is more or less good, or not good at all. So nothing is more evident than that the rational creature was made in order that it might love the supreme essence above all other goods, since he is the supreme good. (M, 68)

Returning full circle to the summum bonum that is the affective goal and enjoyment of rational creatures, negation gives one the freedom to achieve it. Or more precisely, negation coincides with that freedom: doing what one ought to do, fulfilling one’s telos. Opening the way for ethics, a displacement of mind also results in a displacement of love (amare), which is no longer located among a linguistic constellation (memory, understanding, love) but a theological one: if one loves God, and God rewards one with nothing other than himself, then hope, and ultimately active faith, must be entailed (M, 70-78). Not so much a proof as a clearing (of mistaken notions, threats, absurdity, overdeterminations), Monologion prepares the way for belief in a Triune God, and finally participation:

Therefore, since he alone is not only the good Creator but also the most powerful Lord and most wise Ruler of all things, it is utterly clear that it is he alone whom all other natures should lovingly worship and worshipfully love with all their power, from whom alone they ought to hope for good things, to whom alone they ought to flee from troubles, to whom alone they ought to pray for anything at all. Truly, therefore, he is not merely God; he is the only God [deus], ineffably three and one. (M, 80)
While the meditation might be considered as a self-consuming artifact – a work that demonstrates its own impossibility – frustrating its avowed purpose (to meditate on the divine essence) does not render it futile. It can still be productive – indeed, ethically productive – and no more so than the intractable aporia of the devil’s fall: for just as the absence of something can “cause” misfortune (in the case of evil), so the negation of mind can produce consequences which would otherwise not occur.\textsuperscript{41} *Intelligo et non intelligo ut credam.*

\textit{\{ 6 \}}

Some years after in the 1080s Anselm would write “three treatises pertaining to the study of Holy Scripture.” Although they were not composed “one right after the other,” as Anselm put it in a preface, they belonged together; unlike *De grammatico*, another dialogue, they shared the same “subject matter.” In the first of them, called *De Veritate*, the student immediately wishes to know what truth is. “For you yourself, in your *Monologion*, prove on the basis on the truth of speech that the supreme truth has no beginning or end…. And for that reason I am eager for you to teach me a definition of truth.” The “you” addressed is the “Teacher,” who is here conflated with Anselm (or his authorial persona), and whose earlier work, which had once eschewed any recourse to Scripture, now begins this three-part investigation of Holy Scripture. *Monologion* thus opens the way for biblical exegesis. Modern editors and scholars haven’t always taken Anselm at his word; but as technical or philosophical or peculiar his exegesis seems, the treatises, framed as dialogues, are motivated

\textsuperscript{41} See DCD, 26, where the teacher says: “the evil that is injustice is always nothing; but the evil that is misfortune is undoubtedly sometimes nothing, as in the case of blindness, and sometimes something, as in the case of sadness and pain…. Now when we say that injustice causes robbery, or that blindness causes someone to fall into a ditch, we must in no way understand this to mean that injustice or blindness causes something; rather, it means that if there had been justice in the will and sight in the eyes, neither the robbery nor the fall into the ditch would have happened.”
by issues that spring from Scripture.42 This is clearly seen at the start of the third treatise.

The discussion of the devil’s fall, which requires a painstaking anatomy of willing, is prompted by a question from the apostle Paul: “What do you have that you did not receive?” (1 Cor. 4:7)

Yet for all of Anselm’s remarkable innovations – including his novel theory of atonement in Cur Deus Homo – a more decisive, systematic, and far-reaching change would occur in the structure and dissemination of medieval theology. For that, we must look ahead to the middle of the twelfth century – and in particular, to that most influential of theological works: Peter Lombard’s Sentences.

42 On this point, see the translator’s introduction to Anselm, Three Philosophical Dialogues, trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2002).
From Scripture to Theology:

Prologues to Commentaries on Peter Lombard’s *Sentences*

[Walter Benjamin’s] ideal [was] of producing a work consisting entirely of quotations, one that was mounted so masterfully that it could dispense with any accompanying text.¹ – Hannah Arendt

What Benjamin seems to have conceived was a dialectical relation – a formal and thematic interfusion of citation and commentary.² – Translators’ foreward to *The Arcades Project*

The first stage in this undertaking will be to carry over the principle of montage into history. That is, to assemble large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut components. Indeed, to discover in the analysis of the small individual moment the crystal of the total event.³ – Walter Benjamin

Peter Lombard’s *Four Books of Sentences (Libri Quattuor Sententiarum)* may or may not be the perfect Benjaminian text, but it was certainly the most influential theological work written in the Latin Middle Ages, the urtext for every major (and minor) theologian from Alexander of Hales to Martin Luther. The reasons for its influence are complex. Ostensibly, with the rise

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¹ In the introduction to Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 47.
of university centers, there was a pedagogical need to be filled. Students were looking for a way to acquire a theology that would furnish their mind and prepare them as pastors. Teachers were looking to develop a work that, in Marcia Colish’s words, “went well beyond the bare essentials, that treated theology as a wholesale and coherent intellectual actively and … imparted the principles of theological reasoning and theological research to professionals in the making.” Many attempts – from the early monastic efforts of Rupert of Deutz and Honorius Augustodunensis, to Abelard’s (three) unfinished Theologiae and Hugh of St. Victor’s weighty De sacramentis fidei christianae – crowded the field, but Peter Lombard’s Sentences stood out for its comprehensiveness. While its four books – Trinity, Creation, Incarnation, Last Things – trace a single arc from eternity to time to the end of time, its metanarrative is locally ordered by the logical unfolding of successive questions. Pro and contra are adduced by means of authorities, with a determination that accords with Peter’s judgment. (Sometimes, of course, a question remained indeterminate.) The disputational format was more than a way of organizing auctoritates; its use was an exercise in method, a training ground for how to argue and to resolve conflicting statements.

Peter Lombard’s Sentences thus best fulfilled the high demand for a truly “systematic theology.” It constituted a montage of Christian doctrine that fitted together precisely selected excerpts into a single text. It was capacious and speculative while at the same time judicious; oriented by the Augustinian distinction between res and signa, use and enjoyment, its own signs were easy to access and reference under numbered chapters. (The famous distinctiones were a later addition.) Furthermore, it emerged out of Peter’s own beginnings as
an exegete, whose earlier work on Psalms and Paul’s letters outgrew, despite a few innovations, their generic constraints as commentaries.4

Any medieval theologian or philosopher from the twelfth-century onwards would have encountered the Lombard. The university curriculum now demanded it. The scope and size may have varied, but a commentary on the Sentences was a necessary requirement – the medieval dissertation, as it were, for attaining to master or teacher. The institutional imperative for a Sentences commentary makes it possible for us to trace certain scholastic attitudes, whether they concern doctrinal positions or shifts in thought, for example, in a less than haphazard way. As Colish notes in the preface of her pioneering study, “medievalists would be able to survey and map the terra incognita that remains in our knowledge of much of the history of speculative thought … if the Sentence commentaries of all the scholastics known to have made them could be studied in chronological order and in a comparative way.”5 Although this limits the scope of the territory, the terra incognita is likely massive. (And that is not considering those manuscripts yet to be dug up, transcribed, and edited.)6 In this chapter, I limit my own survey to prologues of commentaries on the Sentences, for the simple reason that it is here that medieval theologians were required to declare explicitly their position on theology – not merely on this or that theological position, but on the nature of the enterprise on which they were about to embark. In other words, it was in their prologues that theologians told us what they thought they were doing. We will get to the specifics soon.

4 Marcia L. Colish, “Peter Lombard as an Exegete of St. Paul,” in Ad Litteram: Authoritative Texts and Their Medieval Readers, ed. Mark D. Jordan and Kent Emery, no. 3 (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 71–92; For a graphic view of how Peter’s comments outstripped the biblical text, see Philipp W. Rosemann, Peter Lombard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Christopher De Hamel, Glossed Books of the Bible and the Origins of the Paris Booktrade (Dover, NH: D.S. Brewer, 1984). One of those innovations was a block quotation or paraphrase of the biblical text, followed by an extensive commentary – a format still in use today.
but what we will find is that their answers to the question of theology – often framed in terms of the “object” or subject matter of theology – is hardly uniform. It might seem self-evident that theology is on the study of God. However, it is far from clear what this might mean; and as we proceed through the work of four major commentators – Bonaventure, Aquinas, Duns Scotus, and Ockham – the question of what theology is, and how it might be justified, becomes increasingly complex and difficult. By the time we reach the fourteenth century, indeed, there seems to be a crisis in theology itself – of whether such a thing is a legitimate discipline at all, a worthy capstone to the knowledge attained from the natural and metaphysical sciences.

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Before we turn to the commentaries proper, Peter’s own prologue to the \textit{Sentences} is worth a look, since it was the initial springboard for earlier commentators. Both Bonaventure and Aquinas wrote prologues (\textit{prooemium}) to the Prologue, which introduced the four books of the \textit{Sentences} thus:

Wishing, with the poor widow, to give something to the Lord’s treasury out of our penury and poverty [de penuria ac tenuitate], we have dared to scale the difficult heights and to undertake a work beyond our own strength. We have grounded our confidence of completion and the reward for our labour in the Good Samaritan, who, after giving two silver pieces [duobus denariis] for the care [in curationem] of the man left half-dead [semivivi], promised to repay all the expense of the caregiver, who might have to spend more. The truthfulness of the one making that promise delights us, but the immensity of the work terrifies us; the desire to make progress spurs us
on, but the weakness of failure discourages us, and only the zeal for the house of God overcomes it.\(^7\)

Peter presents his work in the guise of two biblical parables. He declares his willingness to give out of his poverty – out of a lack or minimal reserve of strength. Like the poor widow, he cannot give more than he has. Yet his labor, as well as his reward, is “grounded” [statuentes] on the Good Samaritan’s promise. The Samaritan – who is Christ, as Origen first noted – comes to save the wounded man and pays two denarii to the caregiver. At least since Ambrose, the half-dead man represented the destitute condition of all men; the two silver pieces, “perhaps the two Testaments which contain manifest within them the Image of Eternal King.”\(^8\) Christ is the true neighbor to the undead man, to him a guardian (a regularly cited meaning of “Samaritan”); but he passes care of the man into the hands of the innkeeper. Christ has departed, but he has left others in his wake, to disseminate his words to all. The innkeeper is therefore the apostle Paul, anyone who preaches the gospel, the church fathers, or the overseeing bishop or archbishop, that is, “the Prelate whose responsibility it is to administer the teaching of Christ.”\(^9\)

The innkeeper’s responsibility is to nourish the undead to life through teaching. In this prologue, Peter applies the parable to himself: he is the innkeeper who might spend


more (supereroganti) than he has. The two coins, the two testaments, are the downpayment, a guarantee that further expenses will be paid in the future. But it is now the twelfth century, and the demands of the university – to teach several generations of theological masters – requires an expense beyond the initial deposit. Peter seems to think of his *Four Books of Sentences* as something in excess of Scripture, a contribution that follows from the Samaritan’s care but is nevertheless different. Glosses on supereroganti confirm this reading: the masters and saints of the Church add to Scripture, chiefly in expounding its sense. Yet their “addition” [additio], as Bonaventure carefully points out, is not the kind that “diminishes and subverts” (bringing plagues upon oneself) but preserves, making Scripture “shine forth” [dilucidat]. This latter, “completing addition” [additio complens] expresses what is consonant with Scripture, “because one explicates what is implicit.”

Charged with teaching the students of his day, Peter’s theological “textbook” is a continuation of the two testaments given by Christ.

In the rest of the prologue, Peter outlines further reasons for the work’s existence: to defend the house of God against “the errors of carnal and animal men, or rather how it is fortified,” “to open up the hidden things of theological inquiry,” and “to transmit information about the Church’s sacraments.” Neither does he wish to “resist the wishes of our zealous brothers” (prol. nn. 2-3). Through the “examples and doctrine” of the truth is faith guarded against the whims of heretics whose “dissenting movements of the will are followed by dissenting positions of mind” (prol. n. 4). One might wonder, however, if this is sufficient reason for constructing a wholly new theology. Are the errors of men enough to

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warrant this reaction? Or is it that heretics – or rivals before a decided orthodoxy had been reached – are determinative, though negatively so, in the development of doctrine? Peter’s defensiveness reveals, perhaps, the historical intertwining of heresy and inquiry – a Christian tradition shaped by its antagonisms.

Peter ends his prologue by insisting on the work’s necessity and labor (labor) for unlearned persons (indocti) like himself: if the “collection” [collecta] is not infallible, at least its relative brevity spares the reader the labor of trawling through multiple volumes of the Fathers (prol. n. 5). In this he echoes one of those Fathers, Augustine, who opened his De Trinitate to correction. All of this, as some of my quotations confirm, was glossed in earlier commentary fashion by Bonaventure. Heading his proem to his Sentences commentary was a biblical verse, Job 28:11—“The depths also of rivers he hath searched, and hidden things he hath searched, and hidden things he hath brought forth to light”—which introduces his approach to the work. Latching onto the word “rivers,” which opens “the way for us to foresee the fourfold kind of causes in the Book of Sentences, namely material, formal, efficient, and final,” Bonaventure applies this Aristotelian version of causality to Peter’s work, before finding in “rivers” four characteristics that correspond to each of the four books. “The juxtaposition of the old biblical approach with the terminology of Aristotelian metaphysics is striking,” Philipp Rosemann observes. Just as striking is the movement from the old biblical approach to the quaestiones of the commentary itself, which unmistakably proceed in the manner of the Sentences. That is to say, after a preliminary hiccup, Bonaventure’s commentary of the Sentences imitates the form of the Sentences. We see much the same progression in Aquinas’s prologue to his commentary on the Sentences. Instead of a verse from Job we find Sirach 24:40: “I wisdom, have poured out rivers. I, like a brook out of river

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of mighty water: I, like a channel of a river, and like an aqueduct, came out of paradise. I said: ‘I will water my gardens of plants and I will water abundantly the fruits of my meadow.’”¹² After an exegesis of the four things that pertain to God’s wisdom, things which also headline the content of the four books, Aquinas glosses all of Peter’s prologue (invoking Aristotelian _causa_ at times) before introducing the first _quastio_. By the end of the thirteenth-century, the conventional epigraph – the biblical verse which acted as a sort of allegorical frontispiece – as well as the exegetical glosses, would vanish from the genre of the _Sentences_ commentary.

The development of Peter Lombard’s _Book of Sentences_ is a complicated story of expansions and contractions, additions and fragmentations. One of its many threads concerns how the _sacra pagina_ became _sacra theologia_ – how, that is, the locus of interpretation shifted from Scripture (understood, despite its multiple modes, as a single unity) to theology as such. The act of compiling and ordering the sentences that make up the _Sentences_ already marked a drastic transformation, but that change did not take full effect until the thirteenth century. As the _Sentences_ replaced Scripture as the lecture material for the theological _ordinatio_, a practice inaugurated by Alexander of Hales, so exegesis was performed on the theological textbook. The _proemium_ of Bonaventure’s _Sentences_ commentary, for instance, elaborates a form of the so-called Aristotelian prologue, which adapted physical or

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metaphysical theories of *causa* to analyze a biblical text. Each of Bonaventure’s opening questions lines up nicely with the four causes (material, final, formal, efficient):

1. “What is the matter or subject of this book or of theology?” [Quae sit materia quodve subiectum huius libri vel theologiae?]
2. “What is the formal cause or mode of proceeding in this book of *Sentences*?” [Quae causa formalis quive modus procedendi sit in his libris Sententiarum?]
3. “Whether this book or theology is for the sake of contemplation, or that we become good, or whether it is a speculative or practical science.” [Utrum hic liber sive theologia sit contemplationis gratia, an ut boni fiamus, sive utrum sit scientia speculativa, an practica?]
4. “What is the efficient cause or author of this book?” [Quae sit causa efficiens sive auctor huius libri?]

Regarding the first *quaestio*, Bonaventure concludes that the “subject” is God himself, the *principium radicale*, the single point to which all things can be reduced. But the subject is also Christ, the *totum integrale*, insofar as “he comprehends the divine nature and the human or the created and the uncreated” [comprehendit naturam divinam et humanum sive creatum et increatum] and is “the head of the members” [caput membra]. Still, the subject could be said to be the *totum universale*, “the thing or sign” [res vel signum], or in a word, the objects of belief (*credibile*), “insofar as the credible passes into the reasoning mode” [prout tamen credibile transit in rationem modo] (prol. q.1, resp.). Taken together, these three answers attempt to cover the entire scope of the *Sentences*. They also mark a progression from God himself as subject to God as object – of Christ’s knowledge, then ours. The subject of the

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Sentences is, finally, not God the subject but the credibile, what is believed in rational form. The “matter” [materia] of the work, then, has less to do with the various sources out of which it is cobbled – Church Fathers, ecclesiastical rulings, the Vulgate, etc. – but what is potentially cognizable by the human knower: “the object of the power of the one cognizing it” [pro obiecto virtutis cognoscentis]. Bracketing concerns of the work’s origins, Bonaventure asserts that its matter is simply what the work is about, its object of inquiry (materia circa quam).

Which is why one must proceed, for the rest of the commentary, by a searching “thoroughly scrutatory and inquisitive of secrets” [perscrutatorius et inquisitivus secretorum] (prol., q.2). Unlike Scripture, which is composed according to the mode of narrative, theology is distinctly ratiocinative. As Bonaventure explains, “Sacred Scripture concerns the credible as credible [de credibile ut credibili],” while the Sentences “concerns the credible as made intelligible [de credibili ut facto intelligibili]” (prol., q.2). Though derived from the former, as optics is from geometry, the Sentences or theology (Bonaventure tends to elide the difference) are themselves a kind of revelation, directed “toward showing things hidden away” [ad revelandum abscondita]. (prol., q.3) While both are related in this way (subalternated, to use the technical term), they are drawn apart (distrabit) because Scripture’s certitude exceeds that of theological reasoning. One’s response to Scripture is not to proceed according to the same mode (modum narrationis [prol. q.2 c.4]) – not Scripture with scripture, but Scripture with reason.

Insofar as the credible passes into reason. It is the inclusion of the human knower in the subject, the credibile made intelligible, that marks the transition from Scripture to theology. Less tentative than Bonaventure’s, Aquinas’s commentary on the Sentences locates the unity of theological knowledge in God’s distinct knowledge of things, the “understanding of God”
[intellectus Dei] which is above all, contains all.\textsuperscript{14} “But if we wish to discover the subject which this comprehends all things,” Aquinas writes, “we can say that the divine being through inspiration is the subject of this science.”\textsuperscript{15} The subject may be God – more exactly, God’s knowledge – but discovery (\textit{per inspirationem}) of the subject is included, part of what it is to do theology. This is worked out with more clarity in his \textit{Summa Theologiae}. While Aquinas dismisses the genre of the \textit{Sentences} commentary as “the swarm of pointless questions, articles and arguments” (his new work offered as substitute), he is keen to establish the bounds of \textit{sacra doctrina}: “Christian theology is a science, for it flows from founts recognized in the light of a higher science, namely God’s very own which he shares with the blessed. Hence as harmony credits its principles which are taken from arithmetic so Christian theology takes on faith its principles revealed by God.”\textsuperscript{16} The source of divine science is the beatific vision, the sharing of God’s light with the saved. But as a vision presently barred, its traces are found in that compilation of artifacts called \textit{sacra scriptura}, the deposit of divine revelation (\textit{ST} Ia, q.1, a.2).

Aquinas declares that \textit{sacra doctrina}’s purpose is not to “prove” the faith as such, but “to make manifest some implications of its message” [\textit{sed ad manifestandum aliqua quae traduntur in hac doctrina}]. Like Bonaventure, Aquinas thinks of the history of Christian doctrine, including the present work, as a kind of manifestation, a working out of the rule of faith (that is to say, canonical Scripture) in the explicitness of human \textit{ratio}. While the heavenly “vision of the first truth” is but a “simple intuition,” our current grasp of the divine

\textsuperscript{14} Thomas Aquinas, \textit{Commento Alle Sentenze Di Pietro Lombardo}, prol. q.1, resp. “Ad hoc notandum est, quod aliqua cognitio quanto altior est, tanto est magis unica et ad plura se extendit: unde intellectus Dei, qui est alissimus, per lumen quod est ipse Deus, omnium rerum cognitionem habet distincte.”

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., I, prol., q.1, ad 4. “Si autem volumus invenire subjectum quod haec omnia comprehendat, possimus dicere quod ens divinum cognoscibile per inspirationem est subjectum hujus scientiae.”

\textsuperscript{16} Thomas Aquinas, \textit{Summa Theologiae} (New York: Blackfriars, 1964), Ia. q.1, a.2 resp. (Further citations in the text, prefaced by \textit{ST}.)

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is less than singular. Rather than gaze upon God “as he is in himself,” our form of knowledge is splintered into propositions, into the composite terms that make up traditional creeds. Not that “reality” is itself splintered (the reality toward which the believer’s act is directed), only the articles themselves. Despite their difference and variety according to historical circumstance, “what the articles stand for [substansiam],” Aquinas asserts, has not “increase[d] in the course of time, because all the things that later generations have believed in were contained, though implicitly [implicite], in what those who went before believed in” (ST IIaeIIae q.1, a.7 resp.). All articles, themselves a kind of “symbol” [symbolon] for faith’s truth, can be reduced to two: “that God exists and that he has providence over man’s salvation.” Passed down from apostles and prophets, rearticulated in the face of different heresies throughout history, the articles of faith as a whole comprise the baseline upon which theology can proceed. As Aquinas explains, “the articles of faith are to the teaching of faith what the first principles are to a discipline evolved by natural reason” (ST IIaeIIae q.1, a.7 resp.).

For theology to be a science, it needs to resemble the norms of Arisotelian scientia — not necessarily the strict standard of demonstration, but something close. It must, in other words, follow a scientific method: the discovery of first principles upon which logical inferences can be made. The articles of faith, then, stand in for first principles, for the metaphysical truths that become self-evident after a probing and reflecting upon nature’s bounty. Not out of nature but Scripture do the “principles” for theology emerge. Yet the teaching of faith, the unfolding of a single, intrinsic principle (God’s knowledge) in the Summa Theologiae, also “evolves by natural reason”: “Since grace does not scrap nature but brings it to perfection, so also natural reason should assist faith as the natural loving bent of the will yields to charity” [Cum igitur gratia non tollat naturam sed perficiat, oportet quod
naturalis ratio subserviat fidei sicut et naturalis inclinatio voluntatis obsequitur charitati] (ST Ia, q.1, a.8, resp. 2). Grace fulfils, rather than abolishes, a natural desire for the supernatural; therefore (notice the reversal here) reason works in tandem with faith to bring about charity. Reason assists faith by being the continuation of what, by faith, had been made self-evident to the believer.

In conceiving theology as scientia, or giving to scientia a wider reach than the strictest Aristotelian demonstration, Aquinas brings the human knower – and along with this human knower, the apparatus of cognition and logical deduction – into the center of theological inquiry. Like natural science, which proceeds from “sensory accidents of corporeal objects” to real nature, divine science works within the paradigm of demonstrationes quia (factual demonstrations). Our knowledge of God begins with his effects, with the creaturely order assimilable through sense perception. On this basis, certain propositions can be held about God’s nature, his attributes (e.g., “God is one”), but not the explanatory, deeply metaphysical kind that is the gold standard of Aristotelian demonstration: demonstrationes propter quid.17 (Ockham will come to fasten onto the latter as the only demonstration worthy of the name.) “Though we cannot know what God is,” Aquinas admits, “nevertheless this teaching employs an effect of his, of nature or of grace, in place of a definition, and by this means discusses truths about him” (ST Ia, q.1, a.7 resp. 1). “[O]f nature or of grace” [vel naturae vel gratiae]: in that double vel is a profound ambivalence about the role of the natural world in yielding up the secrets of the divine. The created world, treated as an effect, traces of divine handiwork, may give some clue to God himself. Yet the giving of Scripture seems to mark its necessity for adequate knowing – for knowing something beyond what can be understood from bodily things. Nature can only yield up so much. Soon, Duns Scotus will

set the trend for asking this question in pointed form: “whether the intellect of man in this life is able to know God naturally” [Utrum Deus sit naturaliter cognoscibilis ab intellectu viatoris]. Aquinas is aware that in this life the assumed veracity of first principles can easily slide into the probable domain of dialectical reasoning. Divine science – because of its source, also because of our distance (ontological, epistemic, temporal) from this source – is simultaneously more and less certain than other sciences. God’s authority assures us no higher certainty, but this very height limits our investigations.

Nevertheless, Aquinas insists on theology’s scientific mode. And to justify it he has to deal with the unwieldiness that is Scripture. Hence the opening of *Summa Theologiae*, its elaborate attempt to accommodate holy writ. No mere accommodation this is, of course, but a subtle rethinking of scientific procedure itself. Take his assertion that divine science differs from other sciences by its reliance on figurative language. Closer to poetry (“that most modest of all teaching methods” *quae est infirma inter omnes doctrinas*) than natural science, Scripture’s metaphoricity compels justification:

Holy Scripture fittingly delivers divine and spiritual realities under bodily guises. For God provides for all things according to the kind of things they are. Now we are of the kind to reach the world of intelligence through the world of sense, since all our knowledge takes its rise from sensation. Congenially, then, holy Scripture delivers spiritual things to us beneath metaphors taken from bodily things.

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18 John Duns Scotus, *Commentaria Oxoniensia Ad IV Libros Magistri Sententiarus*, ed. Mariano Fernández García, vol. 1 (Ad Claras Aquas (Quaracchi) prope Florentiam: Collegii s. Bonaventurae, 1912), I d.3, q.1. (Known otherwise as *Ordinatio*.)

19 “Dicendum quod conveniens est sacrae Scripturae divina et spiritualia sub similitudine corporalium tradere. Deus enim omnibus providet secundum quod competet eorum naturae. Est autem naturale homini ut per sensibilia ad intelligibilia veniat, quia omnis nostra cognitio a sensu initium habe. Unde
The Aristotelian commonplace that knowledge begins with the “world of sense” [sensibilia] is adapted to the wayfaring Christian. Without the beatific vision, deferred for now, something must take its place. The “bodily guises” [sub similitudine corporalium] act as substitutes for the immediacy of sense perception. Corporeal similitudes are still sensory, even if they have a lesser degree of materiality than physical objects. They do not belong to the world of intelligence which Aquinas aligns with spiritual realities. Neither external objects nor objects of the intellect, these similitudes are the images or phantasia that populate the imagination.

The imagination, whose precise role was debated in commentaries on Aristotle’s De Anima, is the faculty that mediates sense and reason. In Aquinas’s theory of cognition, when an object presents itself to sight, it transmits a certain “something” which the intellectual soul can assimilate and use. That “something” (whose ontological status was often in doubt) is the “intelligible species” of an object – an element or particle of an object, as the name suggests, intellectually understood. Like an analog recording made digital, a conversion – from sense object to image, and finally to concept – needs to occur; and the imagination plays a key part in the transition. As the limit of the sensory, the imagination renders objects as phantasms (phantasia), the form in which intelligible species may be extracted. While phantasms are necessary for contemplation – thoughts, Aristotle insists, “will not exist without images”20 – they are different from first intellections. Only thoughts (or “concepts”) are the components for propositions deemed true or false: “phantasia … is different from...

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assertion and negation; for a combination of intellections is true or false.”

This is “because phantasms are likenesses of particulars,” says Aquinas, “whereas intellections are universals abstracted from individuating conditions. Thus phantasms are indivisibles potentially and not actually” (432a12-14/105-113).

Phantasms are the potentiality of thought. The question, of course, is exactly how phantasms pass into thought, that is, how imagination’s potential becomes actual. This turns out to be quite difficult to answer. Consider the intellect. The intellect, as we know, is the place of what Aquinas calls species, the form without matter. But before it cognizes anything, the intellect is only potential. In a certain respect, the intellect does not exist unless it cognizes things, unless it is thinking. As Hegel puts it, “thought is in a sense potentially whatever is thinkable, though actually it is nothing until it has been thought.” The intellect in potentiality – possible intellect, as it came to be called – is like “a tablet on which nothing is actually written although many things can be written on it.” As the transient “place of forms,” the intellect only appears when it thinks, makes itself known as a thinking in activity.

If the nature of the intellect is potentiality, it requires a cause to be actualized in thought (or more exactingly, as thought). The cause, however, is not external to the intellect, but within. There is difference in the intellect, just as “the whole of nature,” Aristotle explains, consists of differences: “there is something which is matter to each kind of thing (and this is what is potentially all of them), while on the other hand there is something else which is their cause and productive by producing them all.” In the case of the intellect, there is one “which is of this kind by becoming all things, and there is so by producing all things, as a kind of

disposition, like light, does.” The intellect as productive cause: the so-called “agent intellect” which Aquinas understood as a “condition” [habitus], a certain “form and nature” which is distinguished from “privation and potentiality.” Unlike possible intellect, which flickers in and out of existence, agent intellect has a certain perdurability as habitus, as a determinate nature. This is not to say that agent intellect is the thoughts themselves (“in itself the determination of all intelligible things”), nor a “separated substance … that differs in substance from possible intellect.”24 It is instead like an artist at work, “a kind of immaterial active power capable of making things that are intelligible in potentiality actually intelligible.” As the power of thinking, agent intellect abstracts the intelligibles from phantasms, which the possible intellect is poised to receive.25 In this way, it causes phantasms pass into thought.

Relating how he became a philosopher in Acting Out, Bernard Stiegler writes that Aristotle’s discussion of the milien became decisive for “thinking movement, motion, and what one might call emotion as desire,” the “passage from potential to act.”26 In book II of De Anima, the milien is flesh in the case of touch, while, for sight, it is what Aristotle names the “transparent” [diaphane]. But we are oblivious to it. Just as sea animals “fail to notice whether the things which touch each other are wet,” so the fact “we perceive all things … through a medium” often “escapes our notice.”27 There’s good reason for this. The transparent, whether its nature is air or water (or whatever), is “not strictly visible in itself,” since in potentiality it is “colourless, as is also the invisible or barely visible, as dark things

24 Ibid., 430a17–19/366, 386. Aquinas is opposing the “philosophers,” including the influential Avicenna and Averroes, who interpreted Aristotle’s enigmatic statement – “In separation it is just what it is, and this alone is immortal and eternal” (430a18) – as a separate intellect which existed independently of individual souls.

25 “… just as possible intellect’s operation, which is to receive [percipere] what is intelligible, is attributed to a human being, so too is agent intellect’s operation, which is to abstract the intelligibles.” Ibid., 430a17–19/101–6.


seem to be.” Paradoxically, “it is the colourless which is receptive of colour, and the soundless of sound.” Only as an indeterminate substance can the diaphane take on light, just as a surface can receive color.

Light, however, is the actuality of the transparent, “the transparent qua transparent.” It is light that makes colorful sight possible, and can even draw attention to its own visibility as “a sort of colour of the transparent” (e.g., fire). The nature of the transparent may be “air, water, and many solid bodies,” but “it is not qua water or qua air that these are transparent.” As Herbert A. Davidson puts it, “if air is the medium, light is the entelechy of the air insofar as it is a transparent medium, although not insofar as it is air.” Following Aristotle’s suggestion, Aquinas compares agent intellect to light: “Light makes it [color] become actual color insofar as it actualizes the diaphanous medium so it can be moved by color; in that way color is seen.” Light enables the seeing of color in the same way as agent intellect illuminates species in phantasia. But what agent intellect actualizes is not the intelligible species but, following the analogy closely, the medium of species – that is, possible intellect. Like the transparent, possible intellect is indeterminate, capable of taking on intelligibles. It is not strictly thought in itself but a privation of thought. Only thoughtlessness is receptive of thought.

Possible intellect never shows itself as it is, but only as something else. One can infer its existence from its appearance in time, in a happening of thought. No wonder why we do not notice the intellect: its nature is potentiality. Yet the avowed immateriality of possible intellect, which is what distinguishes it from sensory media, means that it lacks a physical

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28 Aristotle, De Anima.
29 Ibid., 418b.
30 Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes on Intellect: Their Cosmologies, Theories of the Active Intellect, and Theories of Human Intellect (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 318.
31 Thomas Aquinas, A Commentary on Aristotle’s De Anima, 430a10–17/43–53.
basis in air or water or flesh. Does it have any basis, then (physical or non-physical)? If possible intellect corresponds to the transparent medium, the analogue of air (or water or solid bodies) per se must be... the imagination. Aristotle, remember, speaks of light as the transparent in actuality. In contrast, the transparent, potentially, is darkness.\textsuperscript{32} If light is the color of the actualized medium, “darkness, we may therefore say, is in some way the color of potentiality.”\textsuperscript{33} What, we might ask, is the darkness of the mind? Nothing other than phantasms. Imagination is the darkness of the intellect, what is “seen” when thought desists. With the intrusion of light, however, darkness does not entirely disappear. For thought cannot be done with phantasms, even in contemplation: “when one actually contemplates [speculatur] anything, one must at the same time form a phantasm for oneself.”\textsuperscript{34} The intellect may have acquired knowledge, but it still needs an imaginative supplement. “It is for this reason that damage to an organ hampers the use of knowledge that one has already acquired,”\textsuperscript{35} and perhaps, Aquinas concludes, all memory of affections will be lost when the body withers.\textsuperscript{36} Images, then, are the quasi-physical basis for thought, the intellect in dormancy – but they also assist the intellect in action.

To sum up the analogy: the imagination is the medium \textit{qua} air (darkness), while the possible intellect is only the medium \textit{qua} transparent (light). Possible intellect is truly nothing until it receives the intelligible species, which momentarily determines the form or shape in which the intellect is fashioned. To avoid the intellect’s lapse into a mysterious nothingness, Aquinas insists on agent intellect’s activity. This part of intellect is active as a certain condition (\textit{habitus}), thereby set apart from “potentiality and privation.” Nevertheless, agent

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{Aristotle} Aristotle, \textit{De Anima}, 418b3.
\bibitem{Aquinas} Thomas Aquinas, \textit{A Commentary on Aristotle’s De Anima}, 432a3–10/72–89.
\bibitem{Ibid1} Ibid., 432a3–10/90–96.
\bibitem{Ibid2} Ibid., 430a23–25/221–249.
\end{thebibliography}
intellect’s nature is still a kind of potentiality – not the potentiality of an ignoramus, but the
capacity for a poet to write, a builder to build, singers to sing.37 For the human knower, it is a
readiness to cognize. Like other capacities or dispositions, agent intellect seems to be
“between pure potentiality and pure actuality.” It is neither nothing, nor is it the completed
act itself. It is not “a separated agent intelligence, from which the intelligible species flow into
possible intellect” (as Avicenna claims). Instead, as a distinct power that belongs to each
individual, it preserves the intelligibles it activates, intelligibles which become, in a way,
capacities like agent intellect itself: “there are species in intellect in a way that is between pure
potentiality and pure actuality.”38 In that respect, intellect preserves its own potentiality,
retaining species that can be thought again without external aid.

Let us return (after this admittedly long excursus) to the Summa Theologiae. Aquinas’s
theological project is justified within a philosophical complex that assumes an Aristotelian
notion of potentiality. Indeed, theology’s response to Scripture is not only legitimate, but
necessary: Scripture without divine science is simply in a state of potentiality. As mentioned
earlier, the figurative language of Scripture functions as the initial step in scientific discovery:
it “mimics” (is homologous to) the sense perception that, in normal cognition, gives rise to
abstractions of an intellectual sort. More precisely, it effects an image of an object – the
species or residue of the object, what an object gives off when perceived. But in the world of
Scripture – and here marks its true difference from the usual scientia – the images themselves
double as signs: “the things signified by the words also themselves signify something.”

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37 Agamben uses the terms generic potentiality and existing potentiality to explain the difference. The first
is the nature of a human being to be able to have knowledge, grammar, etc., the second is a particular
ability to paint, etc. The second potentiality comes about through a teacher, one’s first brushstroke,
etc. In short, the first action is the beginning of a disposition – a principle, a clearing of the path for
repetition and development. Agamben, Potentialities, 179.
What is happening here, I take it, is a major renovation of the doctrine of signification. Boethius, the medieval fount of the teaching, translates the crucial passage of Aristotle as follows:

Therefore, things in speech are marks (notae) of passions in the soul, and things written [are marks] of those that are in speech. And just as letters are not the same for all, neither are utterances the same. But the things of which these [utterances] are primarily marks are the same for all [people, namely] passions of the soul. And what the latter are likenesses of – real things – are also the same.”

The opening of Aristotle’s *De Interpretatione* hints enigmatically at the linkages between language, things, and the “passions of the soul.” While letter signifies utterances – and utterances, understandings – only understandings are “that by means of which learn about the things themselves.” Boethius interprets “passions of the soul” as understandings (intellectus), for “unless someone suffers in his soul’s reason a certain likeness of the thing that he understands, there is no understanding. For when I see a globe or a square, I conceive its shape in my mind, and a likeness of it is formed for me, and [my] soul suffers a likeness of the understood thing.”

But the “passions of the soul,” which Boethius equates with the “conception[s] of the mind,” are neither “sense impressions or fantasy images” [sensus vel … imaginationes]: “For sensations are passions of the body, [not of the soul]. Therefore, if

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39 Boethius, *Commentaries on Aristotle’s De Interpretatione*, I, p. 3.5–11. “Sunt ergo ea quae sunt in voce earum quae sunt in anima passionum notae et ea quae scribuntur eorum quae sunt in voce. et quemadmodum nec litterae omnibus caedem, sic nec voces caedem. quorum autem haec primorum notae, caedem omnibus passiones animae et quorum hae similitudes, res etiam caedem.”

40 “… nisi enim quandam similitudinem rei quam quis intellegit in animae ratione patiatur, nullus est intellectus. cum enim video orbe vel quadratum, figuram eius mente concipio et eius mihi similitudo in animae ratione formatur patiturque anima rei intellectae similitudinem, unde fit ut intellectus et similitude sit rei et animae passio.” Ibid., I, p. 37.4–22; cf. II, p. 20.12–31; cf. Aristotle, *Categories and De Interpretatione*, 1, 16a3–8.
he had said that passions of the body are signified in this way by utterances, then we would rightly understand [that he meant] sensations. But because he stated that names and verbs signify passions of the soul, he must be supposed to mean, not sensations, but rather understandings.” Images and understandings are ontologically differentiated, the latter having to do, exclusively, with truth and falsity.

But isn’t it the case, one might wonder, that when we say “Socrates” (or “John” or “Simone” or whomever) an image of the person is brought to mind? Or, at the very least, as the example of the geometer’s square suggests, that the understanding cannot do without phantasia? Boethius concedes that fantasy images are “certain primary shapes on which the intelligence leans,” like the outlines of a painting before brush is put to canvas, but they are nevertheless “something imperfect,” incomplete. “Whatever appears as verbs and names, they do not signify sense impressions or fantasy images, but only the quality of the understandings.” To signify, then, is to establish an understanding – but not an image or sense impression. As Boethius’s Aristotle writes, “[verbs] spoken in isolation are names and signify something. For he who speaks [them] establishes understanding and he who hears [them] rests.” This classic statement excludes the passions of the body (otherwise described as the sensory soul) from signification, even if the road there – from utterance to understanding – must pass through the incomplete phase of imagination.

41 “sensus enim corporis passiones sunt. igitur ita dixisset passiones corporis a vocibus significar, tune merito sensus intellegeremus.” Boethius, Commentaries on Aristotle’s De Interpretatione, II, 27.20–22.
42 “sensus enim atque imaginatio quaedam primae figurae sunt, supra quas velut fundamento quodam superveniens intellegentia nitatur.” Ibid., II, 28.28–29.2.
43 “quaecumque in verbis nominibusque versantur, ea neque sensus neque imaginationes, sed sed solam significare intellectuum qualitatem.” Ibid., II, 29.13–16.
43 I use Spade’s summary definition, derived from Boethius’s translation of De Interpretatione 3, 16b 19: “[Verbs] spoken in isolation are names and signify something. For he who speaks [them] establishes understanding and he who hears [them] rests.” Spade, “The Semantics of Terms,” 188.
Aquinas acknowledges that “even the conception of the intellect can be called a passion,” “because we do not understanding without phantasm, which requires corporeal passion.” For this reason, “the Philosopher calls the imaginative power the passive intellect.”

But in the same commentary on *Peri Hermeneias* (the other title under which Aristotle’s *De Interpretatione* was known), Aquinas sides with Boethius, insisting that “‘passions in the soul’ must be understood here as conceptions of the intellect, and names, verbs, and speech, signify these conceptions of the intellect immediately according to the teaching of Aristotle.” Whether a name or verb is uttered by itself, or as part of a statement, it always “determines the intellect,” setting the hearer’s mind at rest. The opening question of the *Summa Theologiae*, however, makes the imagination a resting place for the hearer. To signify is, first of all, to establish an *image* of the thing. Only in the second instance do images themselves signify in the more usual way – producing an understanding in the hearer. In doing so Aquinas incorporates cognition into his account of biblical signification. The first signification – “whereby the words signify things” – stands in for the direct perception of sense objects; while the second – “whereby the things signified by the words in their turn signify other things” – treats the resultant images as signs which can be received by the intellect. In short, the similitudes of Scripture bring to mind *phantasia*, which themselves function as words which make up a “text” in the imagination. This phantasmatic text is like any other text insofar as it consists of words (albeit imagistic ones) that signify; but what they signify is entirely different from convention. The name “lion” may signify the (intellectual) concept *lion*, but in biblical parlance, “lion,” on the basis of its image, can signify *Christ*. At the second level of signification, then, an alternative relation of image and concept is formed.

45 Ibid., 2.5/25.
46 Ibid., 5.17/50.
Not merely a stop along utterance’s way to concept, the imagination is the juncture at which conventional language becomes spiritual. Indeed, we could say that this secondary signification, this signification of signification, is a *divine* (rather than conventional) imposition which corresponds to God’s comprehension of himself.

The foregoing account is complicated by Aquinas’s attempt to wed *his* version of signification to the multiple senses of Scripture – or, what amounts to the same, his writing of the tradition of biblical hermeneutics in terms of signification. So his crucial formulation – “the things signified by the words also themselves signify something” – refers, in the immediate context, to the literal sense (the Old Law, Christ’s actions) which in turn signifies the spiritual sense (the New Law, our actions). Yet in the same article (article 10), Aquinas expounds the parabolic sense (*sensus parabolicus*), which seems to be a representative instance of biblical metaphor and similitude. (Remember that they constitute the initial step in scientific discovery, giving rise to the knowledge of “spiritual things.”)

The parabolical sense is contained in the literal sense, for words can signify something properly and something figuratively; in the last case the literal sense is not the figure of speech itself, but the object it figures. When Scripture speaks of the arm of God, the literal sense is not that he has a physical limb, but that he has what it signifies, namely the power of doing and making. This example brings out how nothing false can underlie the literal sense of Scripture.\(^47\)

\(^47\) “…dicendum quod sensus parabolicus sub litterali continetur, name per voces significatur aliquid proprie et aliquid figurative; nec est litteralis sensus ipsa figura, sed id quod est figuratum. Non enim cum Scriptura nominat Dei brachium est litteralis sensus quod in Deo sit membrum hujus modi corporale, sed id quod per hoc membrum significatur, scilicet virtus operativa. In quo patet quod sensui litterali sacrae Scripturae nunquam potest subesse falsum” (*ST*, 1a. 1, 10, resp. 3).
Parabolical words signify figuratively then properly. The “arm of God” signifies a physical limb, a figurative thing which itself signifies God’s “power of doing and making.” This description has the exact structure of the literal-spiritual nexus of signification. But the second signification (a divine attribute) is identified with the literal sense – and there isn’t, not here anyway, some further signification beyond the sensus litteralis.

So here’s the problem. Figurative language (which corresponds to sense perception) can lead to proper signification (the literal sense), and the literal sense can signify the spiritual one. But we don’t get from figurative words to the spiritual sense – the signification of proper signification – as if all three levels belonged to an ascending hierarchy. If figures of speech signify what is, in the end, the literal sense, that sense also founds and underpins the spiritual. As Aquinas is keen to emphasize, the spiritual sense “is based on and presupposes the literal sense” [super litteralem fundatur et eum supponit] (ST Ia. q.1, a.10 resp.). If this seems confusing, it is because Aquinas is trying to reconcile two distinct theories of interpretation. Traditionally the literal sense leads to the spiritual senses – usually the allegorical, the tropological, the anagogical. From Gregory of Nyssa to Hugh of St. Victor, the literal (or historical) grounds the rest of the quadriga, forming a superstructure or ark, like Noah’s.

Beginning with the sensus litteralis, the devout reader of Scripture ascends to the higher realms of spiritual understanding. Yet in Thomist signification the literal sense is not only a beginning. It is also constitutes the end of the process, the proximate aim of reading Scripture. That is, the world of Scripture leads to conceptions of the intellect; and it gets there by means of another signification in the case of figurative language. (We might say that Aquinas introduces secondary signification – the hearer resting at the level of the imagination

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– to explain how the poetic mode, or metaphor, can be accommodated within a conceptual, i.e., intellectual, framework.) Thus the literal sense is less the means by which the spiritual is obtained, but the center toward which both figurative and spiritual tend. The spiritual sense is “based on” [fundatur] the literal sense in that the latter is not exceeded, not surpassed for higher planes; rather, the spiritual circles back to it. Indeed, Aquinas is willing to say that the spiritual just is the literal in another guise: “nothing necessary for faith is contained under the spiritual sense that is not openly conveyed through the literal sense elsewhere.” Whatever is signified by the literal sense (i.e., the spiritual sense) has its equivalent formulation elsewhere, in the other parts of Scripture. In the final analysis, the literal sense signifies itself.

Aquinas insists on the literal sense because he sees in it a path from Scripture to theology. If the sacra pagina is to be turned into sacra doctrina, it must be made adequate to the form of a logical demonstration – in other words, it must be leveled, or reduced, to the sensus litteralis. For it is on the basis of the literal that demonstration can occur: conceptions of the intellect, first apprehended, composed and divided second of all, resulting in true knowledge. Within the coordinates of the Aristotelian soul, Aquinas incorporates the poetic mode of Scripture (metaphor, parable) in an analogous process of wayfarer cognition. The imagination, in Aquinas’s schema, is his way of including biblical narrative while simultaneously curtailing its ultimate force. Phantasms constitute another level of signification – a fantastic text, if you

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49 “... nihil sub spirituali sensu continetur fidei necessarium quod Scriptura per litteralem sensum alicubi manifeste non tradat” (ST, Ia. q.1, a.10, ad 1). Ocker, *Biblical Poetics Before Humanism and Reformation* has argued that with Aquinas the distinction of literal and spiritual is considerably weakened. See also the remarks on Aquinas’s metaphorical understanding of the spiritual sense in Denys Turner, *Eros and Allegory: Medieval Exegesis of the Song of Songs* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 1995).
will – through which figurative language is tamed and the literal reached. Aquinas follows hence from Bonaventure in explaining how the narrative mode becomes ratiocinative. On the eve of the fourteenth century, however, the achieved compromise of Aquinas’s divine science – his subalternated science deriving from God’s revelation – is severely questioned. As the search for a stricter, more rigorous science comes to dominate the theological brief, the problem of Scripture becomes less and less a concern. The human knower, which Aquinas had introduced into his construal of *sacra theologia*, takes center stage. Epistemology, particularly the intricate workings of cognition, is now the topic that fills the early pages of *Sentences* commentaries.

When we open the pages to John Duns Scotus’s *Ordinatio*, his revised Oxford lectures on the *Sentences*, there is no biblical verse acting as an epigraph. The commentarial foreword which we find in Bonaventure and Aquinas is entirely absent. Nor is there any of the glossing on the original lines of Peter Lombard. Rather, we are immediately confronted with a single, detailed question: “whether man in his present state needs to be supernaturally inspired with some special knowledge he could not attain by the natural light of the intellect” [utrum homini pro statu isto sit necessarium aliquam doctrinam specialem supernaturaliter inspirari, ad quam videlicet non posset attingere lumine naturali intellectus] (*Ord.* prol. q. 1, n. 1). Scotus will agree: there is a supernatural need. His antagonists, however, philosophers of an Aristotelian (likely Averroist) temper, claim that “all the knowledge he needs could be acquired by the action of natural causes” (*Ord.* 1 prol. q. 1, n. 5). Possible and agent intellect, working together, unimpeded, can produce “an act of knowledge regarding any intelligible object whatsoever is possible” (*Ord.* prol. q. 1, n. 6) Our cognitive apparatus, they say, works perfectly well, our powers being naturally adequate to the task of receiving any knowledge, whether by apprehension or deduction from first principles (*Ord.* prol. pars. 1, nn. 9-10).
In response, Scotus makes a novel argument: humans have a natural desire for a life only supernaturally achieved. That life is one of beatitude and immortality, the eternal “face-to-face vision and enjoyment of God” (*Ord.* prol. pars. 1, n. 16). Humans ultimately desire God himself, the final cause toward which the wandering Christian tends.\(^{50}\) But the content of this eschatological vision cannot be grasped according to our natural powers. While Aristotle “maintained that perfect happiness consists in the acquired knowledge of the pure Spirits,” those separated substances equated with God and the angelic movers (intelligences) of the cosmos, Scotus avers otherwise: “of all the actions that we experience or know to exist, there are none that reveal that the vision of the pure Spirits is in accord with our nature” (*Ord.* prol. q. 1, n. 14). It may be that through the study of metaphysics we can acquire a general concept of God, but never a *distinct* one.\(^{51}\) Our knowledge would be a hazy mist were it not for supernatural revelation – for what the end is, and how to attain it. We would not know, for instance, that “beatitude is granted as the reward of merits which God accepts as worthy of such a reward,” that “just these things suffice,” and our contingent state of affairs “depends solely upon the divine will” (*Ord.* prol. q. 1, nn. 17-18) It just so happens that this economy of salvation – as opposed to some other – is the one God ordained for us. God might have commanded us to run a mile or do cartwheels, but he chose the less athletic rites of baptism and supping at the altar. Of course, “it is possible for God by his absolute power to save anyone,” sans sacrament or meritorious act; but as Scotus reminds us, it is not his “usual way of acting” (*Ord.* prol. q. 1, n. 55).

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\(^{50}\) Desire is not necessarily, not even primarily, affective. Also known as the natural appetite, it is, Wolter explains, “simply an ontological relationship between is simply an ontological relationship between any faculty (or the soul) and that which perfects it. Thus the intellect has a natural appetite for truth; the faculty of sight has a natural appetite for seeing; the ear for hearing, and so on.” Allan Bernard Wolter, *The Philosophical Theology of John Duns Scotus* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 140–41.

\(^{51}\) See *Ord.*, prol. q. 1, nn. 45-47, for Scotus’s explanation.
The novelty of Scotus’s argument is that the human desire for the supernatural is *natural*. Under the usual constraints of Aristotelian cognition, a capacity can receive what it is readily disposed toward – an ear can hear voices or sounds or melodies, for example. In this way, capacities are like actions. There is an agent and a recipient. A sense organ is normally happy to receive certain actions, as when the ear hears music, but it can be violated by a contrary action: a loud, deafening noise (a jackhammer, death metal). As Scotus explains, “this potentiality is either natural or violent,” “naturally inclined towards the form it receives” or suffering its opposite. There’s another alternative though:

But when the recipient is compared to the agent from which it receives the form, then there is naturalness if the recipient is referred to an agent which is naturally ordained to impress such a form in such a recipient. Supernaturalness is had, however, when the recipient is referred to an agent which does not impress this form upon this recipient naturally. (*Ord.* prol. pars. 1, n. 57)

One can be naturally ordained to receive something supernatural. The capacity is natural, but the agent, and the agent’s act of impressing, is supernatural. And all of this is “ordained,” just as fire tends to produce heat. In other words, there is a hidden potentiality in humans which Aristotle and his commentators failed to discern.

Scotus goes to some length to prove the existence of this potentiality – or, philosophically speaking, to argue for its possibility. This is often done in the context of the intellect, which functions similarly to sense perception: “the possible intellect naturally desires [appetit] whatever can be known,” and “according to the Philosopher, is ordained to be moved to knowledge by the agent intellect and the phantasm” (*Ord.* prol. q. 1, nn. 7, 61). Scotus doesn’t dispute this (naturally speaking), but adds that the Philosopher’s picture is far
from comprehensive. Objections like “nature of man can be known naturally by man – for it is not disproportionate to his cognitive power,” or “[e]very natural passive faculty has some corresponding natural agent”: objections like that “assume that our nature or our intel lective power can be known naturally by us” (prol. q. 1, nn. 7, 19, 28). Hence anything natural is always actualized naturally – a false inference, says Scotus, because it only considers actions within the purview of the soul. But a “passive potency” – here, our natural appetite for the divine – does not always require the knowing movement of agent intellect; there’s another “agent in nature, i.e. in the universe as a whole, that can completely reduce it to act, namely the First or Supernatural Agent” (prol. q. 1, n. 74).

A good example is the mind. Contrary it may seem, but the mind doesn’t quite know itself, not at least as it will be when it beholds God “according to a special aspect” (prol. q.1, n. 32). As Scotus notes a little enigmatically, “although the mind is identified with itself, nevertheless it is not proportionate to itself as object, except according to general notions which can be abstracted from what can be pictured in the imagination” (prol. q. 1, n. 29). The mind’s distinct yet future knowledge of itself is obscure: currently distanced from itself, the self-reflexive gap is bridged by phantasms. What the philosophers leave out, then, is the possibility that “some nature has the ability to receive a perfection greater than that which lies within the reach of its own active causality” (prol. q. 1, n. 75; emphasis mine).

Left to ourselves, certain natural potencies would be paradoxically impotent. We could be mentally functioning just fine, “the agent intellect and sense image … fully active.” Yet “many propositions we need to know [would] remain unknown or neutral. The knowledge of such propositions,” Scotus continues,

must be given to us in a supernatural manner, because no one could naturally discover them and teach them to others, for on natural grounds alone, if they are
neutral to one, they are to all…. The original transmission of such knowledge, however, is called revelation” ( prol. q. 1, n. 62).

Revelation, for Scotus, consists “of the articles [of the Creed] and of other things revealed by God in Scripture” ( pro. q. 1, n. 56). More precisely, it is a propositional knowledge of truths or principles found in Scripture, including those not clearly stated. “Many necessary truths are not express in Sacred Scripture, although they are virtually contained [virtualiter contineantur] there as conclusions in the principles; the labor of doctors and expositors has been useful for the investigation of these things” ( prol. q. 2, n. 123). (That odd phrase, “virtually contained,” turns out to be critical for Scotus; we’ll get to it soon.) So the agent intellect, which normally abstracts intelligibles from phantasms, is (in this case) replaced by another agent, namely “that object which is able to cause such propositions as ‘God is triune’ and the like” – i.e., truths contained in Scripture – to be known ( prol. q. 1, n. 63). This supernatural object is what Scotus identifies as “the divine essence known in its proper nature.” Knowledge granted thus is “clear and perfect,” in contrast to the “obscure” revelatory proposition (which, in practice, is passed down by human teachers), “a knowledge which concerns an object unknown in its proper nature” ( prol. pars. 1, n. 63).

Still, both sorts of knowledge, being revealed, are more similar than different, the perfect as it were “eminently including” the imperfect. (n. 64) To receive either requires what Scotus calls an “obediential potency,” the intellect’s natural directedness toward something beyond itself ( prol. q. 1, n. 94). That potency is not the same as possible intellect, which is disproportionate to the supernatural agent (and so cannot be moved by it), and which would presuppose, in any case, a purely Aristotelian frame of mind. Instead, the obediential potency of the intellect – its innate propensity to assent to revealed truth – takes the place of possible intellect. Nothing else is needed to make the intellect fit for supernatural knowledge: “a
supernatural agent suffices to incline the intellect towards this truth by causing in it the act of assent which makes the intellect proportionate to this truth” (prol. q. 1, n. 94). In accounting for the appearance of revelation, Scotus has to reconfigure Aristotelian cognition. As already pointed out, he substitutes supernatural agent for agent intellect, obediential potency for possible intellect – but the result is not mere substitution. The supernaturally-tuned intellect does not cancel out our normal, everyday functions (though it remains a question what role, if any, the imagination plays in revelation). Cognition goes on as usual.

While perfect knowledge is reserved for God and the blessed, wayfarers – simple believers and theologians alike – must be content with less. Not that imperfect knowledge is insufficient for salvation (as Scotus makes clear in the second part of the prologue). As it stands, however, truths gleaned from Scripture, even propositionally, are hardly adequate for scientia. Why not? Because “our theology” [nostra theologia], to use Scotus’s term for revelation, “is a habit [habitus] which does not get evidence from the object; and also the theology that is in us about necessary theological matters, as it exists in us, does not more get evidence from the known object [objectum notum] than the theology that is about contingent theological matters does” (Ord. prol. q. 3, n. 168). We know from revelation that “God is triune,” but this fact does not flow from the object known, that is, God as we understand him at present. Despite the proposition turning out to be necessarily true (how we know that is another question…), the way we chance upon it is not scientific. An interpolation to the passage reads: “we do not know God under the idea of God, but from elsewhere; we believe it because we find it written.” Knowledge obtained from the written word cannot be easily grafted onto demonstrative science; because contingent, such propositions are disqualified from necessary deduction.
Could there another kind of theology which might qualify as scientific knowledge? Possibly. The early passages of part three, on theology’s proper object, contain a key distinction: nostra theologia ("our theology") vs. theologia in se ("theology in itself"). The former, as mentioned, is revelation or doctrine – more technically, “what is naturally had in our intellect about the object” by faith. Only the latter however is a science, the object of which “naturally manifests itself to an intellect commensurate with it” (Ord. prol. pars. 3, n. 141). If our theology concerns itself with what is (already) known, the dogma of Christianity handed down, theology in itself envisions what could be known by an ideal intellect. There are some obvious candidates: God, who naturally knows himself; the blessed, who know almost as much (or whatever God wishes to show of his essence). And then there’s the angels… But what about humans? Can a lowly wayfarer practice theology in itself? The Ordinatio prologue hints here and there at the possibility of “special knowledge,” but Scotus is more candid elsewhere. In a quodlibetal question on omnipotence, he says:

Apart from the immediate vision or intuitive knowledge, it is possible to have a most distinctive conception of an object which precedes scientific knowledge, and such a concept, which would include in the most evident way truths about principles and about conclusions, would suffice for having scientific knowledge of such an object. But for a person in the present life, any knowledge of God, except immediate vision or intuitive knowledge, is simply compatible with his pilgrim status. Therefore, it is possible for him to have such a concept of God that is both consistent with his pilgrim state and sufficient to know propositional truths.”

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The blessed have intuitive knowledge, which Scotus confidently assumes (perhaps because
he had proved it in *Questions on Metaphysics*. The basic inference: an inferior capacity – i.e.,
sensation – suggests the existence of superior, intellective one). Beatific knowledge is
somewhat like ours. When we see, the object is present before us; removed from the scene
of vision, we can nevertheless conjure up the object in our imagination. Similarly, the blessed
are in the presence of God, whom they intellectually “see.” Pilgrims, however, can
apprehend God in a way analogous to viewing things in the imagination – what Scotus calls
“abstractive cognition,” since, like phantasms, the “seeing” occurs in the object’s absence.
More formally,

sensation : imagination :: intuitive cognition : abstractive cognition.

Scotus characteristically speaks of abstractive cognition as that which “abstracts” (hence its
name) “the object from existence or non-existence, from presence or absence.” 53 Unlike
intuitive knowledge, it is a cognition indifferent to existing singulars, to the extramental
reality of things. The point of Scotus’s innovation, remember, is to articulate the conditions
under which a divine science for pilgrims is possible. 54 Pilgrims cannot yet enjoy an intuitive
cognition of God (as “an object itself and present in its real existence”), but they can
understand him at one remove, i.e. have an abstractive cognition which is a sufficient
prerequisite “for knowing the conclusion and understanding the principle.” 55 So the concept
formed is not the divine essence *per se* but its likeness; it is, in fact, nothing other than “an
intelligible species of the first object” (*Ord.* prol. pars. 3, n. 145); yet its compromised form is
finally no hindrance to doing *scientia*. “Since the notion [or definition] … can remain in the

54 Stephen D. Dumont, “Theology as a Science and Duns Scotus’s Distinction between Intuitive and
Abstractive Cognition,” *Speculum* 64, no. 3 (July 1989): 580.
soul even if the actual existence of the object does not remain, it follows that such existence is not essential to the object insofar as it can be known scientifically” (Quod. 7.25). What is essential is that the notion (or concept) of God is distinct, not that the object is present. As a result, Scotus deems the singularity of the object – whether concept or individual – as the true starting point of scientific investigation.

A word here about demonstration. In Posterior Analytics, Aristotle defines true understanding (ἐπιστήμη) as what is both explanatory and necessary: “we understand something simpliciter when we think we know of the explanation because of which the object holds that it is its explanation, and also that it is not possible to be otherwise.” A demonstration, however, is a scientific deduction “by possessing which we understand something.” Such understanding “must proceed from items which are true and primitive and immediate and more familiar than and prior to and explanatory of the conclusions.” Lacking any of these conditions, no demonstration will result. A demonstrative syllogism, ideally in the figure of Barbara, shows us that something is the case, and why – the demonstratio quia (factual demonstration) and demonstratio propter quid (explanatory demonstration) that we’ve already encountered. Of course, there is no demonstration without primitives, those first principles which, to avoid the problems of infinite regression, are paradoxically

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56 Ibid., 25:7.25. See also Ord. prol. pars. 3, n. 200: “the first object of God’s theology makes everything else actually to be known in his intellect, such that, if in the first moment of nature his essence is known first in his intellect, and in the second moment of nature the quiddities are known that contain virtually their own truths, in the third moment are known to him the truths that are virtually contained in those quiddities; if this is so, the order of the second to the third is not according to causality, as if those quiddities caused something in his intellect, but there is only an order of effects ordered in respect of the same cause, to wit, that his own essence causes those quiddities to be known first in nature, as it were, before the truths about them are known.”

57 Aristotle, Posterior Analytics, 2.71b10–1.

58 Ibid., 71b16–25.

59 See also Eileen Serene, “Demonstrative Science,” in The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy: From the Rediscovery of Aristotle to the Disintegration of Scholasticism, 1100-1600, ed. Norman Kretzmann, Anthony Kenny, and Jan Pinborg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 496–517. Barbara was the medieval mnemonic which encoded the syllogism (in our formal terms): All a is b; all b is c; therefore all a is c.
indemonstrable. According to the last chapter, principles are acquired through sensing and remembering, whose repeated action solidifies into experience; whence we intuit the universal, “the one apart from many.”\textsuperscript{60} Primitives are known by induction. And while the exact details of how we grasp the universal are notoriously scanty, one thing is clear: the apprehension of universals is already included in perception: “for although you perceive particulars, perception is of universals – e.g. of man, not of Callias the man.”\textsuperscript{61} Upon seeing Callias the individual, we register a pre-conceptual kernel: that he belongs to the (ontological) species \textit{man}. (Note that the perception of a universal is inarticulate; it is not, strictly speaking, a mental item or term.) In a sense, there is no gap between Callias and \textit{man}, because the particular contains or coincides with the universal.

Likewise, theological science begins with particulars. Except for Scotus the particular is a singular thing, a special object (God) whom we apprehend through abstractive cognition.\textsuperscript{62} The sensibles are bypassed; we are in the realm of the intellect. Scotus’s own account of this ideal wayfarer theology – proceeding from a certain intelligible species of God – is laid out in the third part of the prologue. The tune is familiar (theology’s matter or subject) but the Subtle Doctor cannot resist his own (dare I say subtle) variation: “It is asked whether theology is about God as about a primary object” [\textit{Quaeritur utrum theologia sit de Deo ut de primo obiecto}] (\textit{Ord. prol. pars. 3, n. 124}). In posing the question as such, Scotus reconstrues the traditional “subject” [subjectum] as “primary object” [primum objectum], partly to emphasize its priority and autonomy:

\textsuperscript{60} Aristotle, \textit{Posterior Analytics}, 100a2–9.
\textsuperscript{61} Aristotle, \textit{Posterior Analytics}.
\textsuperscript{62} Strictly speaking God (the singular) is not a particular, since he is not directly accessible through sense perception.
[The nature of the primary object is to be what first virtually contains in itself [continere in se primo virtualiter] all the truths of the habit of the science. Which I prove thus: first, that the first object contains the immediate propositions, because the subject of those propositions contains the predicate, and thus it contains the evidence for the whole proposition; now immediate propositions contain the conclusions; therefore the subject of the immediate propositions contains all the truths of the habit of the science.” (Ord. prol. pars. 3, n. 142)

By the phrase “first ... contains,” I mean that it is first in the sense that it does not depend on another but other things depend on it…. [I]f, per impossibile, all other things in the idea of the object [in ratione obiecti] were removed and only it remained understood, it would still objectively contain them. (Ord. prol. pars. 3, n. 144)

The primary object “virtually contains” the truths of divine science, which is to say that we can deduce all theological truths from a single concept. Once made the subject of first principles (“immediate propositions,” in Scotist jargon), it can generate true premises resulting in conclusions (“mediate propositions”). The “idea of the object” encloses within itself, as it were, the units of demonstration. As Edward O’Connor says, the whole process of “science, down to its most remote and particular conclusions, is in the last analysis nothing but the unfolding or explicitation of the intellectual contents of the primary subject.”

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Our theological science, as it might be labeled, could be said to be the discursive unfolding of what is already “there” in the initial concept, a making explicit of what is perfectly known by God. (This sounds like how Scripture becomes theology, with the obvious proviso that Scripture is gone from the picture – as is the imagination.) Of course, God or the blessed or theology considered in itself have no need for discursive elaboration. They know in a single glance; we do not. That is why the word “virtually” [virtualiter] accompanies “contains” [continere]: it is necessary human work to draw out the content of the primary object, even though the “idea” [ratio] might be sufficient on its own. This drawing out in time and language seems to share hallmarks of Aristotelian demonstration: the true singular, the first principles, the syllogistic generation of conclusions. This is what divine reason would look like if it were linguistically apparent. Yet it might seem a little perverse that the way we best come to know God is the condition excluded from his intellect. Our closest analogy of divine cognition turns out to be a heavenly exception. The other demonstrative conditions, that knowledge be certain and “about a necessary known thing,” and “that it be caused by a cause evident to the intellect,” apply across the board (Ord. pars 4, q. 1, n. 208). The third of these suffices for explanation, for demonstrationes propter quid, since the object brought forth in mind is simultaneously a sign of its cause.

Wayfarer theology is thus a knowing that suffices for scientia, at once necessary and explanatory. Its truths intrinsically flow from the primary object, which notion coincides with (a likeness of) the cause. Our knowledge is of an external agent who infuses an intelligible species of himself through a willed issuing of grace. {fn. reportatio} That mental

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64 “The last condition [of science taken strictly], namely that science is caused discursively from the cause to the thing known, includes imperfection and also potentiality in the receiving intellect. Therefore theology in itself is not a science as to this last condition of science; but as to the other three conditions it is a science in itself and in the divine intellect” (Ord. prol. pars. 4, n. 208). The “other three conditions,” to reiterate, are certitude, necessity, and evident knowledge of the cause.

object, not *ens* or *essentia* but precisely *haec essentia* (“this essence”), is distinct and universal in its virtual containing, its derived truths adequated to pilgrim capability.\textsuperscript{66} If it is true, as Scotus says, that “blissful vision” is “a sort of perfect simple apprehension” that “naturally precedes science,” our access to the divine is but a “habit” [habitus] which “regards immediate truths and mediate ones, not formally, but by implication, and its formally adequate object is the quiddity of which it is the likeness” (Ord. prol. pars. 3, nn. 145, 170).\textsuperscript{67} God, or at least the concept of God, is a singular universal, the knowledge of which encompasses all entities yet is undivided, “not numerically multiplied in them,” therefore not the genus from which species branch. Furthermore, the adverb in “virtually contains,” apart from signalling a discursive potential, distinguishes the first object from the commonality shared among objects that moves us to speak of a universal, “whatever is one and the same in all these items” we perceive (Aristotle).\textsuperscript{68}

If my description above seems a little strained or circuitous, it is part consequent on Scotus’s relentless effort to reduce *scientia* to a single, radical point. There are shades of Bonavature’s *princípiun radicale* here, but none of the hesitation: God is the true subject (and object) of theology, including divine science. Scotus may be correct that his newly-described theology is a science, but only given science’s criteria having undergone a seachange, accomplished no less than by reinterpreting Aristotle. Critics are perhaps a bit hasty to say that Scotist demonstration slights the importance of explanation, one of the twin pillars of *epístêmé* (in Latin, *scire*). After all, Scotus defines the “why” of knowing as tantamount to

\textsuperscript{66} “that ‘firstness’ is here taken from *Posterior Analytics* 1 [73b32-33], from the definition of ‘universal’ in the sense in which ‘universal’ indicates adequacy: the object would not be adequate to the habit unless it virtually contained everything that such a habit inclines one to consider, because, if it did not, the habit would exceed the object” (Ord. pars 3, n. 143).

\textsuperscript{67} There’s a question of whether the blessed practice science. They do, if a science is what is certain, necessary, and causally aware. In that sense, God even has a selfsame science. But these lack the seeming fundaments to deduction, and therefore demonstration, which is syllogistic discursion.

\textsuperscript{68} Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, 100a2–9.
finding the efficient cause, “a cause evident to the intellect.” But he is surely idiosyncratic when he takes the Aristotelian universal to indicate not a shared feature but an “adequacy” [adaequatio], as in the object’s adequacy or proportion to a disposition (Ord. pars. 3, n. 143). This adjustment seems symptomatic of a more general relation God has with his creatures— that is, as a relation of cause and effect, the agent causing an object to surface in consciousness. The object known by us, in turn, duplicates the causal powers of the agent. In a manner reminiscent of the Trinitarian relations, our habitual notion of God begets an understanding of subsidiary truths: “the intelligible species of A itself in memory is able to generate [gignere] knowledge of B in the intelligence. In this way, then, the first object of the intellect and of the science are the same; and then the first object distinguishes, not them, but what proximately follows them, which is immediate and mediate truth…” (Ord. prol. pars. 3, n. 145).

In declaring the present possibility of a wayfarer science, Scotus marks a decisive split within human theology. While revelatory truths belong to nostra theologia, a more exalted theology for pilgrims— one which qualifies as a strict science— is brought under theologia in se, an idealized knowledge of which God’s own theology is but one instance. An ideal knowledge implies a corresponding knower— in the case of rational creatures, an ideal human (or angelic) knower, whose capacities are tacit in the formulation of the first object. Thus the ideal knower, or rather the possibility of an ideal knower in this life, is the abiding focus and center of Scotus’s theology. To appreciate how far we have come, recall that Aquinas grafts the tradition of Scripture, sacra doctrina, onto a looser version of demonstration: the articles of faith made primitives upon which true and necessary deductions can proceed. In keeping with the Aristotelian theme, the articles themselves are grasped by “perceiving” the literal sense of Scripture— specifically, in its poetic mode. The process is streamlined via a
hermeneutics of verbal signification. Frustrated by the excesses that the Sentences
commentaries increasingly entailed, Aquinas’s Summa theologiae represents an ordered attempt
to explicate a truly divine science. On the other hand, Scotus separates sacra doctrina from
necessary theology, i.e. theologia in se, which is his way of saying that only the latter can be a
science. Anything derived from Scripture, no matter how noble its origins (a higher science),
no matter how logical sounding, can never attain to the status of scientia. Scotus’s
demarcation of traditional theology from science is simultaneously a shift from sacra theologia
to theologia in se, from the human knower to the ideal knower as such.

There is also a split within the human subject: between revelation and the possibility
of a higher revelation; between the pilgrim who knows contingent truths and the gifted
theologian, whose necessary truths go above and beyond Scripture. The diminished stature
of Scripture-based theology does not mean it is ignored. After all, Scotus devotes Book III,
distinction 24 of the Ordinatio (and the Reportatio) to “sacred Scripture, i.e. the Bible,” which
“is not handed down through the mode of demonstrative science” and does not beg at its
table for principles.69 The pertaining theological habits sound almost Thomist – establishing
the literal sense, grasping Scripture in its totality, supplementing its understanding with
philosophy (metaphysics especially), and applying syllogistic to principles known by faith.70
Add to this a biblical exposition that proceeds in demonstrative fashion:

Many necessary truths are not express in Sacred Scripture, although they are virtually
contained [virtualiter contineantur] there as conclusions in the principles. [multae
vertitates necessariae non exprimuntur in sacra Scriptural etsi ibi virtualiter
continenantur, sicut conclusiones in principiis]

69 “Scriptura sacra, scilicet Bibliæ, non est tradita per modum scientiae demonstrativae mendicando
70 O’Connor, “The Scientific Character of Theology according to Scotus,” 34–46.
Therefore our knowledge is de facto only of the things contained in Scripture and of the things that can be elicited from them. [Igitur theologia nostra de facto non est nisi de quae continentur in Scriptura, et de quae possunt elici ex eis.]

There is that formula again: “virtually contained.” Just as the first object of divine science virtually contains its intelligible contents, Scripture “contains” whatever has been drawn out (elicí, “elicited”) by the doctors of the Church. Truths derived from Scripture are immanent and show themselves as if patterned after demonstration. They come hierarchically ordered – as ordered as God’s intellect. Their logic is the logic of divine science.

And yet their nature is precarious and contingent. Sadly, our theology cannot attain to the rigour of human sciences; for despite exceeding them in certitude, it cannot be their queen. And this was an inadmissible conclusion for later scholastics.\(^71\) For this reason, Scotus installs a theology worthy of the name scientia – a divine science for wayfarers that begins with an intellectual, abstractive cognition of God. Our theology retains formal characteristics of science, down to the structure and order of expression; but its epistemological status has fallen. As a result of the increasingly stringent conditions for demonstration, theology fractures into theologies, each with its corresponding knower. Philosopher, believer, theologian, blessed, God, theology itself – for Scotus, the object of theology varies according to the knower (or possible knower). The only way to keep the pieces together is to insist on the unity of the conceptual objects. Whether “infinite being” or “this essence,” they are speaking about the same thing. They are univocal. The number of

objects are really one, a single concept which “possesses a sufficient unity in itself, so that to affirm and deny it of one and the same thing would be a contradiction.” Given their unity (albeit under different modes), each can equally “serve as the middle term of a syllogism” without loss of cogency.

When Scotus moves our theological science to the realm of possibility – and so beyond the reach of all but the specially graced – the separation of theology and science is almost complete. He constructs a special theology that fits demonstration like a glove, securing a divine science at the cost of *sacra theologia*, and paradoxically at the cost of divine science itself.

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By the time we reach William Ockham, our feet firmly planted in the fourteenth century, not even this ideal version of theology is admitted. Theology is sundered completely from science. Perusing Ockham’s prologue to his commentary on the *Sentences*, this decisive break might not be readily apparent. After all, his first question asks “whether it is possible for the intellect of the wayfarer to have evident knowledge [notitiam evidentem] of the truths of theology [de veritatibus theologiae].” 72 (The answer is yes.) But it’s in the second question that Ockham lays out the criteria for a demonstrative science, and in which he answers – and strenuously refutes – the basis for which Scotus can claim a *propter quid* demonstration of theology.

The second question reads like so: “whether the evident cognition of those theological truths is knowledge strictly so-called” [utrum notitia evidens illarum veritatum theologicarum sit scientia proprie dicta] (Op.Tb. prol. q.2 a.1 n.1). Before responding directly, Ockham addresses the conditions for scientia and its strict delineation from other kinds of knowledge. According to Ockham,

a proposition knowable by knowledge [scientia] strictly so-called is a necessary proposition that is dubitable but naturally suited to become evident through necessary evident propositions, by syllogistic discourse applied to it.

[propositio scibilis scientia proprie dicta est propositio necessaria, dubitabilis, nata fieri evidens per propositiones necessarias evidentes, per discursum syllogisticum applicatas ad ipsam.] (Op.Tb. prol. q.2 a.1 n.1)

What is strictly knowable, propositionally, is necessary, dubitable, and evident. Excluded then are contingent propositions, but also what cannot be known except through the process of reasoning. What comes to be known must be subject to genuine doubt; for nothing is taught or learnt if we already know it – if the conclusion is known per se (per se nota) or simply a first principle (Op.Tb. prol. q.2 a.1 n.4). Moreover, the conclusion can only be arrived at through the application of “syllogistic discourse,” thereby excluding those instances in which a proposition “only becomes evident through experience gained by intuitive knowledge [notitia]” (for instance, the fact that “heat is able to heat” [calor est calefactivus] is grasped by seeing or sensing) (Op.Tb. prol. q.2 a.1 n.6).

Even if experience seems to fall outside the requirements of scientia here, it constantly reappears throughout the discussion of Question Two. While Ockham narrowly defines demonstration as “a syllogism productive of knowledge from necessary premises, so that the
premises are naturally suited to cause knowledge of the conclusion” (thus distinguishing it from dialectic or sophistry) (Op.Tb. prol. q.2 a.1 n.11), he admits that there are “many first principles” derived from experience, no matter how hard pressed, that are “resolvable into nothing prior, that is, that can be inferred and known from nothing prior, which still are not known per se.”

[Some conclusions are demonstrable through principles that are known per se, so that in the last resolution they stop at principles that are known per se, so that in the last resolution they stop at principles that are per se known, but others stop at principles that are known not per se, but only through experience. Thus there are many attributes that cannot be known of their subjects in any way except through experience alone, for instance, that heat is able to heat and that weight inclines downward. (Op.Tb. prol. q.2 a.1 n.20)

Try as we may, there are some principles that cannot be known through the understanding alone. Sometimes we just have to go outside and look around.

In moments such as these, Ockham is positing another sort of evident knowledge – an experiential knowledge – that is occluded by his strict definition of demonstration. Science can be built not only on principles per se nota, but also on principles derived from experience. In fact, there is a large body of knowledge which cannot proceed otherwise, and Ockham suggests the repeated experience of a common phenomenon – that is, a subject “common to several species” – often suffices for a first principle, unless “a most specific species is the subject” (e.g., heat can heat). In that case, “one experience does suffice” (Op.Tb. prol. q.2 a.2 n.16). Having admitted to scientia proprie dicta’s ignorance in some matters, precisely in those “arts … not attained within the soul itself” (Op.Tb. prol. q.2 a.1
n.21), Ockham argues that even the same conclusion – one reached by demonstration, the other by experience – are equally legitimate. True, they each constitute different causes; but that doesn’t mean they can’t bring about the same effect, just as sun and fire, though “distinct in species,” “both produce heat” (Op.Tb. prol. q.2 a.2 n.10). In the second article of this question, where the bulk of this discussion occurs, it is as if Ockham is anticipating his next move – the dismantling of a proper theological scientia – and is trying out an alternative, inductive way of knowing that does not proceed from “principles that are known per se” (c.f. Op.Tb. prol. q.2 a.1 n.21).

Sure enough, Ockham delivers on his promise to answer the main question in the third and final article. His objections are squarely directed at Scotus, who believes “that there can be knowledge so-called of such truths, that is, knowledge why it is so from the prior. And this opinion first implies [declarat] that essential perfections can be demonstrated why it is so [propter quid] and of their essence from what is prior; in the second place that it is the same concerning notions; and in the third place also concerning relations to what is external.” Ockham will go on to name and extensively quote “the Subtle Doctor” before launching an unrelenting and multi-pronged attack. Although the details of the arguments can get quite complicated, Ockham’s energies are primarily channeled toward the working assumption of Scotus’s ideal theological science – that the singular concept of God virtually contains the units of demonstration that unfold in discursive form. In the Parisian Sentences, written some years after the Ordinatio, and again in the Quodlibetal questions, Scotus attempted to develop this with more rigor:

There is an order of the forms [rationes] under which God is conceivable, so that the form of essence is entirely first, and the other forms following are prior or posterior as they are nearer to or more remote from this. (Qtd. in Op.Tb. prol. q.2 a.3 n.8)
This is possible on the basis of a fundamental statement that would be known as the *propositio famosa Scoti*:

whatever order things would have if they were really distinct, they have a similar order according to reason if they were distinct according to reason.

Scotus continues:

Now if essential forms were really distinct from one another, they would have an order in which they follow on the essence, therefore if they are distinct according to reason, they have such an order according to reason.

The famous proposition relies on a counterfactual: if things “were really distinct,” they would be ordered the same as in reason. *Ratio* follows the order of things, even the hypothetical order of things. Scotus elaborates with the same conditional how this would play out with a “perfect immaterial essence” (i.e., God):

if essential perfections were really distinct, for instance, if there were a real distinction between the perfected immaterial nature, the perfected intellect, and that through which an object proportioned to the intellect is present to it, as well as the act itself of understanding, and beyond these also another act of understanding concerning secondary objects virtually contained in the primary object, in that case there would be a real order among these such that the perfect immaterial essence is really prior to the act of understanding the object, and the act of understanding a primary object would be really prior to the act of understanding a secondary object.

(Qtd. in *Op.Th.* prol. q.2 a.3 n.9)
If the divine nature were really distinct, it would be ordered from the essence to the perfected intellect, right down to an understanding of a secondary object. Of course, God is not really distinct in himself. He is simple, admitting of no parts – although it is true that we can nevertheless have several concepts of God. On that Scotus and Ockham could agree. What they couldn’t agree on was whether “the divine simplicity prevented any ordering of these concepts” (as Stephen Dumont puts it).\(^73\)

And it is the *ordering* of these concepts that proves to be crucial, because without it, there can be no scientific demonstration – no *demonstrationes propter quid*, that is. Without an order we would lack the knowledge that emerges from self-evident premises. All we would have are *just those* premises, a bunch of principles known *per se*, but not generative of anything truly novel. Ockham therefore hacks away at the “order of forms,” or *rationes*, the Scotistic mechanism that enables the making evident of theological truths. Apart from questioning the inference that the order of things match the order of reason – or that “some things can be one really and nonetheless distinct according to reason” (*Op. Th*. prol. q.2 a.3 n.54) – Ockham denies, even in principle, the distinctions conceivable of God, those graduated distinctions so necessary for finding a middle term while allowing us to begin in doubt.\(^74\) For example, Ockham asks whether there can be a common quidditative concept for both God and creatures – a *common* concept that can be used as middle term in order to produce a demonstration. For the sake of argument, let us form what looks like a demonstration: the premises “every being is good” (which we formulate as creatures) and “God is a being,” which lead to the conclusion “God is good.” Notice, however, that the terms of the first

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\(^74\) After all, “human being and whiteness are ordered as subject and accident, and so not as their corresponding concepts are ordered” (*Ord*. q.2 a.3 n.55). The concept of *whiteness* does not inhere in the concept of *human being*. 
premise are cannot subordinated in the usual way. If “being” and “good” are quidditative  
(*quidditativus*) – i.e., express some essential nature – they are synonymous; hence good cannot  
be made a species of being. (It was a medieval commonplace that what has being is good.  
The privation of good, or evil, has no being.) Which means that if we were to divide “being”  
into its immediate species, those species would be “created” and “uncreated.” Similarly,  
“good” would be immediately divided into the same species, with God being an instance  
(the only instance) of the latter. But as Aristotle pointed out long ago, “in the case of  
immediate items understanding is indemonstrable,” because there is nothing prior to these  
items, or terms, that make up the proposition (in this case, “God is good”). Indeed, all the  
attributes of God work in the same way. None of them can be placed under another in a  
Porphyrian tree; rather, each become separate genera under which the same division applies:  
“But every such [common quidditative] concept is immediately divided into God and  
creature, as, for instance, the first division of wisdom is that some wise things are created  
and some uncreated, and similarly some intellect is created and some uncreated and some  
goodness is created and some uncreated, and so on” (*Op.Th.* prol. q.2 a.3 n.16).  

Ockham pushes the argument to its logical extreme, but the point, I think, is clear:  
there is no quidditative concept that is shared by God and creatures. There cannot then be a  
proper demonstration, because we lack a middle term. Put otherwise, there is no quidditative  
concept of higher generality that can encompass both God and creature. And the basic  
reason, as mentioned before, is divine simplicity. Since the attributes of God – wise, good,  
omnipotent, etc. – are synonymous with God himself, his divine essence, the structure of  
predication is not one of inherence (or causality or potentiality) but *identity*. As Ockham  
writes, “every such concept is a quidditative concept … because there is no distinction, real  
or rational, between the divine essence and the divine intellect or the divine will. Therefore
the concept of goodness, or whatever such concept, is quidditative, and consequently no such concept can be demonstrated of God” (Op.Th. prol. q.2 a.3 n.16). If Scotus or his followers were to reply that “aside from the essence there is a formal distinction of attributes, and that distinction suffices for one concept to be quidditative and the other denominative” [praeter essentiam est distinctio formalis attributorum, et illa distinctio sufficit ad hoc quod unus conceptus sit quidditativus et alius denominativus], Ockham will have none of it: “none of it saves the Doctor” (Op.Th. prol. q.2 a.3. n.24). Why? Because for Ockham, a concept of God, including his attributes, is either absolute or connotative; it does not admit of distinctions, even formal distinctions that apparently exist in the thing itself (a parte rei). As a result, it is not possible to form a denominative concept, a concept said to be virtually contained in a quidditative one.

Whenever the whole reality of something is expressed through one concept and then another, there is no reason why one should be quidditative than the other. But if there is no distinction in reality at all between the divine essence, the divine intellect, and the divine act of understanding, nothing imaginable can be expressed through one concept more than the other; therefore either both will be quidditative or neither will. (Op.Th. prol. q.2 a.3 n.17)

And if it is suggested that there might be a concept that “expresses the same [thing], but not in the same mode” [exprimit idem non eodem modo], Ockham argues that “these different ways cannot be assigned unless it is somehow because of a certain non-identity on the part of the reality” [non potest assignari talis diversitas modorum nisi aliquo modo propter aliquam non-identitatem a parte rei] (Op.Th. prol. q.2 a.3 n.18).
 Needless to say, there cannot be a certain non-identity on the part of the reality. Befitting his reputation, Ockham is ruthless when it comes to ontological entities which are neither here nor there – not quite real, but nonetheless existing. Just as he dismisses those meddling species so pervasive in scholastic views on optics, so he refuses any quasi-real distinctions within the Godhead. He is sceptical, that is, of a formal distinction within God, a distinction that ultimately depended on the existence of common natures. Scotus had cited Avicenna’s line – “Horseness is nothing more than horseness; nor does it exist in sensible things, nor in the soul” – as evidence there was something that could neither be reduced to a universal or a real individual. This “something” was a third entity: a common nature that, though not separate from a sensible thing, could be individuated by Scotus’s famous haecceity (“thisness”), or real individual difference. In Armand Maurer’s words, a common nature was “a specific essence [that] has an entity of its own which is indifferent to being in the mind or in reality; in the former it is universal, in the latter it is individual. Of itself, however, it is neither of these but the simple essence that is captured in its definition.”

Ockham read Avicenna’s line differently. Avicenna just meant that “horse is not defined as being either one thing or many, nor as existing in the soul or in things outside,” and “not … that horseness is some entity which is neither on thing nor many and neither outside the soul nor in the soul. For this is both impossible and absurd.” Rather, Ockham notes, “Avicenna was using the term ‘horseness’ as equivalent in signification to several expressions, either taken alone or with the mediation of a verb and copula.” In other words,

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“horseness” is not an entity that is indifferent to the mental and the real; it is simply a term that is indifferent to universals and individuals, able to stand for either under different suppositions. By shifting the interpretation from metaphysics to a discussion of terms, Ockham dismantles the essential order of rationes, the Scotist edifice on which a theological scientia might be built. Lacking it, we cannot logically (i.e., formally) distinguish between God and his attributes, not even between his essence and his persons. We are simply left with unresolvable contradictions like “God is three and one,” which must be taken on faith. Nothing else can be further deduced – at least, nothing by the rules of logic.

Making common natures a matter of semantics – and therefore not about common natures at all – meant that an ideal wayfarer science was, in the end, deemed impossible. We might start from the articles of faith, but there seems to be no logically ordered way to get off the ground. The situation isn’t entirely hopeless, even by Ockham’s standards; but the alternatives are hardly consoling. Amidst the six conclusions to the second question, most of them negative, Ockham tries to construct some demonstrations that might be made regarding God. He makes two concerted attempts. In the first, he returns to the syllogism previously mentioned – ‘every being is good, God is a being; therefore God is good’ – and suggests that perhaps we could take “good” not in an absolute way (and so run into the earlier problems of divine identity) but connotatively. Good, then, would not be taken as synonymous with being, but as that which wills or does or produces good. In Ockham’s language, it would obliquely, not primarily, signify good. With this in mind, “connotative and negative concepts common to God and creatures can be demonstrated of the divine essence,” on the further condition that “if any such concept cognized of the divine essence

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78 In simple supposition, “horseness” stands for the concept of horseness (“horseness is universal”); in personal supposition, for the individual horse it signifies (“horseness is individual”). For a fuller explanation, see Maurer, “Method in Ockham’s Nominalism,” 438.

79 See William Ockham, Summa Logicae, vol. 1, n. 10 for absolute and connotative names.
in itself can be doubted” (*Op. Th.* prol. q.2. a.3 n.42) Granted that such a concept, whether intuitive or abstractive, is not subject to doubt, it would only be available to the blessed (or the specially graced wayfarer). That would be somewhat promising were it not for Ockham’s deflating concession that, like “a syllogism from what is posterior without qualification,” the resulting demonstration is “not of the highest sort.” (*Op. Th.* prol. q.2 a.3 n.42)

So much for the first possibility. The second, on the other hand, addresses the criterion of doubt more directly. Someone who had “intuitive or abstractive knowledge [notitiam]” of God, like one of the blessed, cannot doubt the proposition “God exists.” But a wayfarer *can*. So if a wayfarer was later blessed or damned or, by the absolute power of God, given “a distinct cognition of the divine essence,” she would be able to make a syllogism on the basis of an earlier ignorance. Remembering her doubt as a wayfarer, a blessed person could construct a true demonstration: “The divine essence exists, God is the divine essence; therefore God exists.” (*Op. Th.* prol. q.2 a.3 n.46) One might wonder what is gained here for creatures already in God’s presence. (Why bother with a demonstration like “God exists” when you behold him face to face?) In any case it matters little, since (Ockham is quick to note) “these two premises are not possible for us, but can only be grasped by someone understanding intuitively or abstractively deity itself in itself. And therefore only for such individuals are those conclusions that are demonstrable in themselves from what is prior and cannot be demonstrated of God through anything common used as a middle term.” (*Op. Th.* prol. q.2 a.3 n.46) But if these premises can only be grasped by such blessed individuals, they will lack the doubt of the wayfarers so necessary to obtaining a demonstration *propter quid*. Thus it is not only wayfarers who, by themselves, cannot practice

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80 Martin Lenz describes a variation of this: the doubt of a wayfarer and the intuitive knowledge of an angel could produce a demonstrative conclusion. See his “Why Can’t Angels Think Properly? Ockham against Chatton and Aquinas,” in *Angels in Medieval Philosophical Inquiry: Their Function and Significance*, ed. Isabel Iribarren and Martin Lenz (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008), 155–70.
a strict theological science; no such science is possible for the blessed, perhaps even for God himself.

In short, there might be a divine science if creatures of differing rank and realm work together; but as a lone wayfarer or one of the blessed, no theological scientia is possible. Scotus’s ideal wayfarer is brought to full scrutiny, and its possibility is found wanting. And there is no replacement forthcoming – no last gasp effort to save theology’s disciplinary status as a science. We could almost say that Ockham’s act of refusal here is tantamount to theological suicide – a suicide, because it occurs within theology itself, and by one of its most influential practitioners. Little wonder that the question “is theology a science?” fell away as a pressing concern for his successors; after Ockham, commentaries on the Sentences took on a noticeably fragmented character. The Oxford commentaries of the 1330s, for instance, better resembled the less systematic quodlibets.81 Rather than proceeding question by question, masters picked a small number which they deemed worthy of debate. Even then, the questions, while retaining the same wording, functioned more as skeletal frames, new occasions to pursue inquiries traditionally associated with the arts curriculum (especially in logic, physics, and cognition). However much the human sciences had encroached upon theological territory, they were held in abeyance by the supremacy of divine scientia. Once theology suffers a disciplinary crisis and is found to be incapable of explanatory demonstration, and hence without the highest sort of knowledge, it is shorn into innumerable fragments. Amidst the ruins, natural philosophy gathers steam; others return to

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81 William J Courtenay, Schools & Scholars in Fourteenth-Century England (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 251–2. Indeed, Courtenay tells us that questiones de quodlibet became rare in England after 1320. One factor: “questions originally given as quodlibetal disputations may have been incorporated into revised editions of Sentences commentaries.”
Scripture and the letter of the Lombard’s text. Yet theology’s scholastic demise is also, paradoxically, its own possibility to be otherwise – to be rethought and reconstituted as something other than Aristotelian science. In the ruins of theology emerges a new way of approaching it: a theology that moves beyond scholasticism yet is also, in some sense, a return to what was prior. That is to say, it is a return to narrative.

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Interlude

What happens when the matter of scholasticism is transformed into narrative? How is scholastic thought reconstructed in and as poetry? The negative answer is that the established mode of theology – the mode of ratio – no longer dominates; theological discourse can unfold in ways that are other than propositional. The positive answer is more complicated. Religious poets are still in search of a certain access – a vision or perception that was sought, but ultimately denied, by the scholastic enterprise. The efforts to delineate and achieve a wayfarer theology – in Aquinas’ *sacra theologia*, and more ambitiously in Duns Scotus’ idealized version – linger on. The search is carried out differently by minds of different stripes, seeking out and making their own theologies.

Take the poem *Pearl*. The anonymous poet who wrote it near the close of the fourteenth century was schooled in, or at least keenly aware of, the frenetic activity of the universities. Strands of scholastic obsession – the sacrament’s power to confer grace, the rethinking of qualities in number, the role of money in explaining these theories (and, for us, their historical emergence) – appear, but not in their technical vise; they become ways of articulating how one might enter heaven, and what it’s like there. The poem does what many scholastic commentaries do: it uses the liberal arts – in particular, the metalanguage of logic – to explore and clarify what are ostensibly theological questions.¹ Thus heavenly life is described and debated in terms of medieval physics and economics, which results in a poetry

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that reconstrues the economies of salvation and blessedness. Once the dreamer is granted a peek at heaven in the poem's latter stages, description turns into versified repetition: namely a repetition of Apocalypse. The dreamer's heavenly vision heaven is overwritten by biblical narrative.

That would be one answer to our initial question: that theology returns to its source and to its source's mode. The poem's narrative is reinscribed with the words of Scripture, which overtake the foregoing scholasticism of its earlier moments. Yet the poem does not finish there – or, in accordance with the poem's incessant movement, does not ever finish. In the same way, the meaning of its words – above all, its specially marked words – do not shift as much as perpetually transform, something that could be also said of its moral or legal or theological positions. Unlike a scholastic determination, its “poynw” (to use the poem's vocabulary) are never fully settled. Does this indecisiveness, this irresolution – made more apparent by Pearl's formally exacting, rule-bound structure – say something about theology itself? This would seem to be the case when I ask of the poem what its subject matter is. For it is not clear, finally, what the poem is about; and our difficulty in gaining that clarity – indeed, the impossibility of it – reveals to us something else: the indeterminate nature of theology.

This brings us to another question: are these sorts of poems, first, theological works? Are they a mode or species of theology? I ask this specifically of Piers Plowman in the fourth chapter, which seems to be obviously theological. As it turns out, there is a figure – in a narrative populated by allegorical figures – who goes by the name of Theology, and who is curiously absent for the most of the poem. When he does appear, it is not in the best of circumstances; Theology comes off looking second best. He is an impotent voice against the corrupting forces of False and his cronies on Meed. And when he represents an object of
study, perhaps the university discipline itself, Theology gives up little more than darkness – a darkness that conceals love. Somewhat paradoxically, his appearances in the poem (and there is only one more, where he is talked about *in absentia*) trace the gradual disappearance of scholastic theology. If theology is to be done, it is not to be done in the name of Theology. You can understand, then, why it is difficult to answer the question directly. *Piers Plowman* registers the demise of theology as it was currently practiced, yet it offers, under different names, new ways of seeing and thinking. Indeed, the poem is itself a narrative experiment which tries – out of the darkness – to grope after a knowledge that is more direct or deeper than commentaries or *summae* which are grounded propositionally. Nowhere is this seen better than in the inimitable character of Piers. The poem enacts and narrates what I call a theology without theology.

But before we reach the rich, frequently incongruous images of Langland’s work, let us turn in the next chapter to an equally bewildering poem: the Middle English poem which begins with “Perle.”
Let me ask a scholastic question. What is the poem we now call *Pearl* about? What is its subject matter? The opening lines seem to offer an answer:

Perle pleasaunte, to prynces paye
To clanly clos in golde so clere:
Out of oryent, I hardyly saye, \textit{assuredly}
Ne proved I never her precios pere.\footnote{Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, eds., \textit{The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript: Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight} (London: Arnold, 1978), 1–4. Subsequent lines indicated in the main text.}

It is about a pearl. But who or what is this pearl? Is it any one thing? Further, what is assuredly – “hardyly” – said? That it comes from the orient, or that he cannot equal her in rank, in scarcity, in price? Is it a “hit” or a “her”? Whatever its identity, however unique, it is lost somewhere among grass and dirt:

Allas! I leste hyr in on erbere;
Þurȝ gresse to grounde hit fro me yot.
I dewyne fordolked of luf-daungere
Of þat pryuy perle withouten spot. (9-12)
The first-person “I” of the poem languishes, deprived of love and also of power, “fordolked … / of þat pryuy perle withouten spot” (11-12). The jewel that was spotless, without blemish, is simultaneously without place (another meaning of “spot”) and perhaps unlocatable, undetermined and perpetually afloat, within the poem’s linguistic economy.

Like the speaker, who loses his precious pearl in a garden, the poem’s meaning – our attempts to make sense of it, to state what it says explicitly in language – is always slipping out of our hands. The speaker, who becomes the dreamer (as he is often called in scholarship), is in many ways the reader’s embedded representative. When he chances upon the figure of the maiden, the dreamer asks whether she is the pearl that he has lost:

‘O perle,’ quoth I, ‘in perlez pyȝt,
Art Thou my perle þat I haf playned,
Regretted by myn one on nyȝte?...’ (241-43)

In answer to his address – “perle” triples as proper name, metonym, and common noun – she says that his perle is hardly lost (“your perle is al awaye” [258]) and, furthermore, rebukes him for seeking something as transitory as a withered rose instead of “a perle of prys” (272): supposedly a gem enclosed in a box in a garden. (This box, that “cofer so comly clente” [259], is usually glossed as “treasure chest” as well as “coffin,” but which could be a pyx enclosing the eucharistic host.) In the space of three stanzas “perle” has, it seems, become a name, an adornment, a daughter, something found, something lost, a gem exceeding all of these, possibly a host.

What the dreamer undergoes similarly applies, of course, to the poem and to the poem’s readers: we cannot easily say what the poem is about. True, we can say that it has 1212 lines, 101 stanzas, 20 groups of stanzas, so-called concatenation words for each group
(except for line 613): in medieval terms, the poem’s *forma tractatus*. Beyond that, it gets harder. When we think we’ve found what we’re looking for, we only stand to lose it again, just as the dreamer sinks back into grief for desiring a lesser, unattainable thing. The dreamer knows this precariousness. At several points he states that the human tongue cannot categorically say what he sees. Yet he does say something, even when the splendor of the dreamy forest which he tries to describe – “The derthe therof for to devyse” – is doubly negated: “Nis no wyy worthé that tonge beres” (99-100). Later, he beholds the maiden for the first time and notices “a wonder perle withouten wemme / Immyddez hyr breste watz sette so sure.” His comprehension is not as sure as the pearl’s location:

A mannez dom moȝt dryȝly demme
Er mynde moȝt malte in hit mesure.  
I hope no tong moȝt endure
No sauerly saghe say of þat syȝt,  
So watz hit clene and cler and pure,
Þat precios perle Ther hit watz pyȝt. (221-28)

That sight, he tells us, cannot be said in words, not in the English tongue at any rate. It is a pearl that can neither be measured, its size assessed, its spotlessness judged. What the dreamer sees – the pearl, the maiden, the unfolding vision – is in excess of human expression.

Yet it would be a mistake to consign the poem to a simple negation, even if its most self-reflexive moments recognize and articulate the inadequacy of speech. Of course, the

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2 Of course, in Middle English a double negative doesn’t necessarily cancel itself out, as is the case in “Nis no…”
poem exists insofar as its words, like jewels, are set in ink and parchment. (The poem makes explicit the link between words and jewels, hence the poetic and artisanal craft of finding and setting.) But the words, as they are experienced by us readers, undergo a constant displacement in which the apparent fixity – of structure, of linguistic placement – is belied by the vertiginous shifts and accretions of the poem’s language. Perhaps we can still think through the linguistic economy of the poem in terms of negation, but in an Anselmian sense. For Anselm, starting with the basics of Boethian signification, sought to extend the theory to encompass negation. In De casu diaboli, notably, the teacher resolves the student’s question of whether the word nihil (“nothing”) – which he analyzes in terms of non aliquid (“not something”) – signifies anything. His answer is yes, if we consider it as a name not in the usual manner of signification, a bringing to mind an understanding, but in the usual manner plus another step. “For it [non aliquid] signifies by excluding; it does not signify by including” (DCD, 11). Negation is therefore a twofold process, a gerund, an inclusion followed by an exclusion. It is the ongoing removal of mental concepts.

The process of negation might be thought complete once the concept is removed, but something still remains. This troubled Anselm’s teacher, who revisited the question in the same dialogue. The concept, granted, has undergone erasure; but the name nevertheless signifies something – or, as the teacher says, “not really something, but a quasi-something.” What “evil” (malus) and “nothing” (nihil) – Anselm’s two examples of privatives – “signify is something, not in reality, but according to the form of the expression”: “we speak of them as if [quasi] they were something when we say ‘He did nothing’ or ‘He did evil’ … in the same way in which we say ‘He did something’ or “He did what is good” (DCD, 11). In other words, privatives mark an absence, yet they persist as spoken and material words as well as grammatical forms. They name a quasi-something. The teacher’s attempt to account for
negation in terms of signification reveals something other than signification, a name that becomes untethered to a thing.

There are plenty of negations in *Pearl*, the sort that signal a failure of speech or ineffability (no, not, noȝt, none, nor, nis…) – or, more generally, a negation of the descriptive project. Much has been written on this aspect. But what interests me are keywords such as “perle” which reoccur throughout as concatenations or otherwise, and which undergo, and keep undergoing, semantic and linguistic transformation. Following Anselm, we get exclusion and retention at once: each new instance replaces the prior sense, but repetition preserves the word. A case in point is “paye,” closely connected in the first line to the subject: “Perle pleasaunte, to prynces paye.” That last word can be read as (possibly aesthetic) “pleasure” or “satisfaction”; near the end of the poem, it is connected with reconciliation, Christ’s blessing, his body and blood; and it takes on a specifically economic valence (as a verb) in the middle: “‘Lede, pay þe meyny /… gyf vchon inlyche a peny’” (542, 549). We have a single word, then, that comes to encompass three dimensions or economies: aesthetic, sacerdotal, and monetary. The poem indeed could be understood as an extended exposition of “paye,” whose possibilities accumulate and expand, linking and leading us to the poem’s beginning – and so to read the poem again anew.

The thesis I wish to advance has to do with these economies – that of salvation in particular, and its corresponding economy in heaven. The economy of salvation, which is the literal center and central problematic of the poem, is based on two different models of justice; and that difference – between arithmetic and geometry – is the source of debate and confusion throughout. That, at any rate, is my attempt at a description, which I extend to the heavenly economy itself with the aid of scholastics, whose ingenuity in natural philosophy – namely, quantifying qualities – allows for a novel way of conceiving the one and the many.
Before we reach such heady heights, however, I will give a close reading on the key passages, according to the difficulties of the poem (which demand exegesis), and to a little-acknowledged tradition of interpretation – on the parable of the laborers – that connects salvation and money. After disentangling these different though related aspects of the poem, I will return to the more general linguistic problematic, to the poem’s economy of language.

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In *Pearl*, the retelling of the parable is prefaced by mention of God’s kingdom, specifically its “court,” which

‘Hatz a property in hytself beyng:
All þat may þerinne aryue
Of alle the reme is quen other kyng;
And never other yet schal depryve,
Bot vchon fayn of oþerez hafyng,
And wolde her corounez wern worpe þo fyue,
If possyble were her mendiýng.’ (445-52)

The property of the kingdom of heaven, peculiar to itself, is that all its inhabitants are kings or queens. There are no countesses or damsels here, no dukes or earls neither. (Thus the dreamer’s first impression is refuted: “Her semblaunt sade for doc oþer erle” [211].) What is presented, but not explained, is a hierarchy without a hierarchy – a realm in which competition for rank and position is replaced by wishes for another’s bettering. Five-fold improvement (“mendiýng”) isn’t a real option, only the possibility to desire that it be so. This
is what is meant that “never other yet schal depryve.” In such a world, kings or queens do not imply inferiors; nor do kings or queens presuppose a zero-sum economy in which the prestige of one entails someone else’s diminution. Yet the empire admits of an arrangement stranger still:

‘Bot my lady of quom Jesu con spryng,
Ho haldez þe empyre ouer vus ful hyȝe,
And þat dysplesez non of oure gyng,
For ho is quene of courtesy.’ (453-6)

A hierarchy remains intact insofar as the mother of God is placed at the helm. She is the queen of queens. And that is because, the maiden says, she is the “quene of courtaysye.”

Mary is the empress – perhaps the “makeles quene” to which no other is titled (784). She rules over the other kings and queens. More than that: she reigns over the whole empire, including the baser realms of earth and hell. How can this be? She is, after all, the “blessed bygnner of vch a grace,” graced herself in the begetting of our remedy – and in that sense, the origin of every grace. But what sort of kingdom, whose royal constituents are equal, seems to admit of inequality? Recognizing the tension, the maiden invokes a famous Pauline metaphor:

‘Of courtaysye, as saytz Saynt Poule,
Al arn we membrez of Jesu Kryst:
As heued and arme and legg and naule
Temen to hys body ful trwe and tryste,
Ryȝt so is vch a Krysten sawle
A longande lym to þe Mayster of myste.’ (457-62)
While the source text (1 Corinthians 12:12-31) speaks of “one Spirit” who baptizes all into a single body, the maiden describes incorporation as a function of “courtaysye.” This, apart from the bodily specificity of “naule,” is the obvious change: the body of Christ, the *corpus mysticum* of which all Christians are various members, is a picture of “courtaysye” – a courteous economy. The paraphrase is no throwaway addition or substitution. Earlier Mary is called, several times, the “quen of cortaysye,” also “cortayse quen” (432-3). The same “cortaysye” is concatenated with “court,” the kingdom inhabited by Christian royalty over whom Mary reigns (443-4). It is “by cortaysye,” i.e., without resentment or spite, that beatified souls conduct themselves as kings and queens, and the means of their crowning (468, 480). And it is “Courtesy” – a principle or an agent – that the dreamer complains is “to fre of deed” (481).

The word *courtesy* then describes the rule of Queen Mary – of how the empire over which she rules is governed and arranged, the managing of a divine economy which dispenses charity and grace. *Courtesy* is also, by extension, the organizing principle which dictates the ethos of heaven. It is a mode of living, an attribute of the faithful, as is clear in the maiden’s earlier rebuke:

\[ \begin{align*}
\text{þat jueler lyttle to prayse} \\
\text{þat leuez wel þat he sez wyth þe,}
\end{align*} \]

*loves*

And much to blame and vn cortoyse

\[ \begin{align*}
\text{þat leuez oure Lorde wolde make a lyþe,} \\
\text{þat lelly hyþte your lyf to rayse,} \\
\text{þaþ Fortune dyd your flesch to dyþe. (301-6) }
\end{align*} \]
On the face of it, “vncortoyse” is the failure to believe that God would raise him to life (as he did for Christ), but it is also a failure to heed the inescapability of death. It is as if the vision – the “seeing” is complicated by its framing as a dream, an imaginary space between earth and heaven – obscures the fact of his mortality, his death-bound flesh. That seeing is “a poynt o sorquydryȝe,” a prideful believing in only what one can understand through sense perception. It treats the “one skyl,” the judgment of sight (as it were), as definitive.

The speaker isn’t finished. He ventures another query, wishing no offense. And sure enough, his query rises to the pitch of an outrage:

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What more honour moȝte he acheue
Pat hade endured in worde stronge,
And lyued in penance hys lyuez longe
With bodyly bale hym blysse to byye?
What more worschyp moȝt he fonge
Ben corounde be kyng by cortaysé? (475-80)
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What sort of “cortaysé” is it that would allow one “not two ȝer in oure þede” to be made a queen? Being so young, she could “neuer God nauȝpere plese ne pray, / Ne neuer nauȝpere Pater ne Crede” (483-85). So why is she a queen rather than, say, a countess or damsel, leaving the higher ranks open to the long-suffering penitent? Surely that “Cortayse is to fre of dede,” he claims: too generous in action, too lax (in a more telling sense of “dede”) in requiring work. The dreamer cannot believe that God would “wryȝe [labour] so wrange away,” i.e., blunder so badly (481, 488).

As we near the center of the poem, its central problematic comes into focus: the economy of salvation. We are led there by the linking word “date.” That confounding word
comes to frame a debate on time and reward, which is triggered by the dreamer’s complaint about the maiden’s new life: “‘Bot a quene! – hit is to dere a date’” (492). Her retort? A retelling of the parable of the vineyard, which, she reminds him, is “melez in your messe” (Matthew 20:1-16). If we trace the use of “date” in this section (section IX) it reads, first of all, as “rank” then as “limit” (or rather God’s unlimited goodness: “‘Þer is no date of Hys godnesse...’” [493]), before acting, more familiarly, as a marker of time. Even then, what “date” marks is not exactly stable. At first it is a season, then a day; yet when this day is almost past, it overlaps with the canonical hour of vespers (“euensonge”); finally all time converges with the eschatological Day of the Lord.

This is the “date” that the “lorde con know,” yet the lord of the parable chides the laborers for not knowing that the day had not begun – for standing idle. Sloths! In their defense, they say they have been waiting to be called. Presumably they had been there when the first group were summoned to work; they are given their chance, as is a final group an hour before dawn. Twice (though not the third time) an explicit contract is given. “Into acorde þay con declyne / For a peny a day” and “I yow paye in dede and þouȝte” (509-10, 524) are lines which set an agreement between labor and payment. The contract becomes increasingly important, especially once we move into the next section, whose keyword is “more.” When the early workers receive a mere penny, they demand “more.” After all, they complain,

More haf we served, vus þynk so,
Þat suffred han þe dayez hete,
Þenn þyse þat wroȝt not hourez two,
And þou dotz hem vus to counterfete. (553-6)
In other words, we deserve more than a penny each, having served more, labored more, sweated in the sun. But in paying us the same wage, you liken them to us. You make us equals. In doing so you rip us off: you imitate, feign, commit forgery. To which the lord replies:

Quy bygynnez þou now to þrete?

Watz not a pené þy couenaunt þore?

Fyrre þen couenaunde is not to plete;

Wy schalte þou þenne ask more? (561-4)

Why indeed? A covenant was made, and covenants shouldn’t be broken or modified or contested. It is his prerogative, the lord adds, to do what he pleases: “More, weþer louyly is me my gyfte – To do wyth myn quatso me lykez?” The maiden follows the gospel of Matthew in repeating the parable’s moral – the first shall be last, the last first – which reverses the order of payment and apparently explains the equal apportioning. The lesson seems to be that no direct relation can be drawn from reward to hours worked. The worker’s labor is disservered from payment.

What can increase, curiously enough, is the mercy of God – a mercy linked in this stanza to the lord’s gift, his will and pleasure – and so is unconstrained by any human economy. It is in this puzzling context that the maiden applies the parable to herself. She is one of the workers who entered the vineyard late, at the eleventh hour of eventide; and having begun, has already been paid in full while others continue to labor in the field. The interpretation of this parable has a long and contradictory history. Typically, a single day in the field represents an individual life, the work of discipline or spiritual growth, or the entire span of humankind, the five ages of the world. The maiden’s retelling evokes the full scope
of tradition, but her reading picks up on the first of these, reversing the usual order (infants being the last, not first, group of laborers). In that it is idiosyncratic, applying the parable’s moral to her own interpretation. She highlights three groups of workers (rather than the original five), and thus represents the life stages of old age, youth, and childhood. Yet life – life as a wayfaring Christian – is projected from the end; a child is closer to entering heaven, but is also ominously closer to death, the precondition for full-fledged citizenship.

There is another interpretation less known, because it occurs not in commonplaces of gospel commentary or apologetics but in fervent scrutiny of the sacraments. As usual, Peter Lombard’s Book of Sentences is the starting point for scholastic elaboration. In distinction one of the fourth book, Peter declares that “a sacrament is properly so called because it is a sign of God’s grace and a form of invisible grace in such manner that it bears its image and is its cause. And so the sacraments were not instituted only for the sake of signifying, but also to sanctify.” Peter’s innovation – “but also to sanctify” – did not go unnoticed. Commenting on this passage, Richard Fishacre wonders how a sacrament may cause grace in the believer:

For it is this relation not by some nature – among nature however it is – but by will [voluntate], as denarius is money [pretium], nothing in it made by change [mutatione] or superaddition other than of relation. A covenant [foedus], therefore, which is an agreement (or contract) [pactum] between God and people, is in the sacraments (or

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4 Peter Lombard, The Sentences, IV, 1, 4.
oath, sum deposited in a civil process) [sacramentis]. From which by reason of such a
relation is in those signs the sanctity and in them, which is of God, is attributed.\(^5\)

The invisible grace conferred is no property of the sacrament, nothing intrinsic to the
material element of – in the case of baptism – water. A sacrament is better thought of as
money, like a denarius. The power of the sacrament, its grace-dispensing power, has little to
do with nature, and everything to do with divine and human covenant. As William
Courtenay notes, “[t]his new theory … places the operation, efficacy, and causality of the
sacraments (all of which it strongly defends) in a covenant or pact between God and His
Church rather than in some supernatural virtue, infused into the sacrament itself. Fishacre
terms this type of causality \textit{sine qua non or a voluntate Dei}.\(^6\) And Fishacre chooses to explain
this \textit{sine qua non} causality according to money, with a vocabulary (denarius, covenant,
agreement) taken from the parable of the vineyard.

He continues:

… if then it may stand, which [is] now baptism, just as if some minister of the king
were distributing a token made of tin [signa stanea] to the poor, which if they have
kept, through that [token] are received toward a meal of the king, but not
immediately, but tomorrow, when the king will eat, and then another minister of the
king will give, by the hour of the meal, a very similar [consimilia] or different [alia]
token to other poor people, it can be said that the earlier [prius] token given is of the

\(^5\) “\textit{Est enim haec relatio non a natura aliqua – in natura autem est – sed a voluntate, ut denarius fit
pretium, nulla in eo facta mutatione vel superadditione alterius quam relationis. Foedus ergo quod
pactum est inter Deum et homines, in sacramentis est. Unde ratione talis relationis est in signis illis
sanctitas et eis, quod Dei est, attribuitur.” Latin cited in William J. Courtenay, “The King and the
Leaden Coin: The Economic Background of ‘Sine Qua Non’ Causality,” \textit{Traditio} 28 (January 1, 1972):
191 n. 20.
\(^6\) Ibid., 190.
same efficacy with the last [ultimo] gifts, because either are made to enter and at the same time, to wit, at the hour of the meal.  

Fishacre extends his example, combining one parable with another. The other concerns a marriage feast (Matthew 22:1-15), a parable of unwanted invitations, punishments, and a man cast out and tortured on account of his lacking a wedding garment. Here, wedding garments are replaced by tokens which, distributed at different times and possibly of different material, have “the same efficacy.” They allow one to sup with the king.

Furthermore, the delayed aspect seems to emphasize the two covenants, Old and New, the Mosaic dispensation of circumcision now superseded by baptism. The earlier token, given a day in advance, is a promise, a sign of future eating, whereas “the last gifts” coincide, or nearly coincide, with the meal itself. In this adaptation of the two parables, the token is not the reward (as it is in the parable of the vineyard) but the means to getting it; and the meal with the king adds a final, eschatological dimension (rather than another day’s work).

Richard Kilwardby further mines the operation of the “sensible sacrament.” He explains that “it does not dispose or effect or cause as if having a quality or active power [potentiam] in itself,” as compared to fire’s propensity to heat. Rather, it is

… as if having to itself an assisting divine power, which at the present time of it makes and causes justice, and this it has out of a divine institution and his contract [pactione], which he ordained [instituit], and who rightly upholds our sacrament, upholds an inner, secret [occultem] operation of the justifying power of the divine.

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7 Ibid., 191 n. 20. “… si tune stetisset, quod nunc baptismus, sicut si aliquis minister regis distribueret signa stanea pauperibus, quae si servarent, per illa recipieretur ad prandium regis, sed non statim, sed cras, quando comedet rex, et deinde minister alius regis daret, hora prandii, consimilia vel alia signa alii pauperibus, posset dici quod signa prius data essent eiusdem efficiacie cum ultimo datis, quia utraque faciunt intrare et eodem tempore, scilicet ad horam prandii.”
Nothing but “divine agreement” is responsible for a sacrament’s justifying power, whose true operation remains hidden. It is like a king who frees a prisoner by virtue of his words (litterae). In such litterae there is no “certain active power ingrafted,” only a “potential signification [significativam potestatem] which is relative and instituted for this purpose [ad hoc].”

Letters have potential signification – which is to say that they are signs which have the power of causing external action, not merely intellection, by dint of royal imposition. Perhaps all signs, or names at the very minimum, have this potential: the capacity of serving (momentarily) as speech-acts, as signifying something other than a universal nature or essence. If so, this is exactly parallel to Peter of Spain’s “natural supposition,” the way “a vocal sound … endowed with signification in such a way to become a term” also “acquires a natural capacity to stand for (supponere pro) all actual and possible individuals partaking in this universal nature” (L. M. De Rijk’s summary).

Once endowed with signification, a vocal sound (now a term) can also supposit; but in Kilwardby’s case, the potential is in the term’s natural ability to take on an additional signification, an utterance that *enacts* rather than simply evokes or stands in for a present reality.

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8 Latin cited in ibid., 191–92n21. “Secundi dicunt quod sacramentum sensibile vere dicitur iustificare et evere dicitur causa ete vere dicitur disponere ad iustitiam sed extendendo nomina ista. Non enim disposit vel efficit vel causat tamquam qualitatem vel potentiam activam in se habens qua alteret et qualificet animam, sicut ignis agit per inditum vel innatum calorem, sed tamquam habens sibi assistentem virtutem divinam, quae ad eis praesentiam facit et causat iustitiam et haec habet ex institutione divina et pactione eius, qua instituit, ut qui rite susciperet suum sacramentum, susciperet internam occultam operationem virtutis divinae iustificantis. Nihil igitur in se habet sacramentum sensibile nisi quandam relationem qua associatum est, ex divina pactione, virtuti divinae iustificativae, per quod vel propter quod dicitur iustificare vel disponere ad iustitiam vel huiusmodi. Et ponunt [Fishacre et al.] exemplum tale: Litterae regis liberant de carceri non per aliam virtutem activam illis insitam, quae procedit ad liberandos solvendos et extrahendos, sed per significativam potentiam quae est relativa et instituta ad hoc” (c.f. Sentences, IV dist. 1).

While Fishacre’s example ties the token or *signum* to a specific meal, Bonaventure frees the sign from a limited act of exchange. What “the king establishes” [*rex statuit*] is not a direct relation of sign to commodity, but to nominal value: “they who have a certain sign [*signum*] would have one hundred marks [*marcas*].”\(^{10}\) Rather than exchange money for only food, one is free to use it for whatever one happens to need, anywhere in the kingdom. The greater flexibility of this sign – what Courtenay calls a “negotiable currency of ascribed value” – has its likely origin in promissory notes, which were later adapted as tokens in ecclesiastical and governmental institutions. By the thirteenth century, various tokens assisted in accounts and bookkeeping (“jettons”), acted internally as substitute wages, and became the means by which goods could be distributed to the poor. In this way, a church or confraternity could respectively manage its books, address a discrepancy between services rendered and yearly payments (made in real money), and better fulfil the practice of almsgiving.\(^ {11}\)

What Bonaventure called a *signum* later became a “lead *denarius,*” a term Aquinas attacks (without naming his target) as mere occasionalism, no more connected to value than a sculptor’s tan to his sculpture.\(^ {12}\) In Courtenay’s analysis,

> [b]y changing the metallic composition of the sign to lead and by making the purchasing power 100 pounds, the [anonymous] author underlined the lack of any inherent or natural value in the unit of exchange. Like paper currency which, although only paper, has a stated purchasing power and supposedly can be redeemed


for a stated amount, the lead *denarius*, although relatively worthless as metal, has a
stated purchasing power and redeemability of 100 pounds.\textsuperscript{13}

As a commodity, lead is cheap and plentiful, certainly unable to command a price of 100
pounds. Yet as currency it can be redeemed for 100 pounds. But pounds, of course, are
themselves a kind of currency – real money made of gold or silver. What gives a lead
denarius its force – its efficacy, its purchasing power – is the king’s willingness, his guarantee,
to redeem it for precious metal. This, combined with the belief in the ability of the king to
make good on his promise. Substitute currency is thus backed by a sovereign, who
establishes a ratio between currencies, between gold (or silver) coinage and minted lead. The
ascribed value of the leaden token is not arbitrary (as in a social contract), but relies on “a
currency as real as the concept of eternal life in the thirteenth century” (Courtenay again).\textsuperscript{14}

As real as the concept of eternal life. Properly administered and received, the sacraments
cannot fail to give the benefits of grace, of divine presence, of heavenly bliss; cannot fail
because guaranteed by God’s will. (Were it not so, God would be like a king debasing his
national currency, earning profit to the woe of his subjects.) When one is baptized in the
name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, the gateway of salvation is opened.
Meanwhile, one is fortified against sin and its deleterious effects.

\textsuperscript{13} Courtenay, “The King and the Leaden Coin,” 202.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 207. Oresme theorizes – and stridently opposes – the king’s debasing of currency in *De
Moneta*, written in the late fourteenth-century (and the only surviving tract of its kind). See *The De
Because it marks the entrance into the church, and is so prominently featured in early church narratives (such as the Acts of the Apostles), baptism was the sacrament of choice for patristics and the earlier scholastics. In the scholastic debate on sacramental causality, baptism is taken as paradigmatic. A token redeems a meal; the elements of water and word, analogically, confer grace. In both cases, the efficiency of the material sign is ratified by the sovereign will, whether it be human or divine. Causation occurs on account of a specific covenant, of something extrinsic to the sign's nature. Unlike the eucharist, baptism is a singular event. It is not iterable, as penance is. And that is because baptism is irrevocably tied to the beginning of salvation, to an original sin in need of erasure. As the maiden explains, having just retold the parable of the laborers,

‘Inoȝe is knawen þat mankyn grete
Fyrste watz wroȝt to blysse parfyt
Oure forme fade hit con forfete
Þurȝ an apple þat he vpon con byte…’ (637-40)

Bliss forfeited, death and the unrelenting flames of hell await. Divine response is immediate:

Bot þeron com a bote astyt; remedey at once
Ryche blod ran on rode so roghe,
And wynne water; þen, at þat plyt, precious
Þe grace of God wex gret innoghe. (645-48)

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Penance was once a singular event, but became iterable by the twelfth century due to the pressure it put on believers who, having already been baptized, were left with one chance – a chance they preferred to take on their deathbed. On this and other factors, see Thomas N. Tentler, Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), 5ff.
God’s grace waxes out of “þat welle [i.e., spring, fountain],” i.e., the “[b]lod and water of [Christ’s] brode wounde,” which is interpreted thus:

\begin{verbatim}
þe blod vus boȝt fro bale of helle,
And deleuered vus of þe deth secounde;
þe water is baptem, þe sope to telle,
þat folȝed þe glayue so grymly grounde, spear
þat waschez away þe gyltez felle
þat Adam wyth inne deth vus drounde. (651-56)
\end{verbatim}

Blood buys us out of hell; water washes clean our shared guilt in Adam. In a single wound are grace and means of grace – Christ’s atonement and baptism – by which we are restored to bliss. God wrought us for that. In this economy, the price of forfeiture flows mingled with its dissemination, the watery element reaping us the benefits. The truth of the wound is its power to dispel Adam’s sin. And the refrain ending this stanza, “And þe grace of God is gret innogh” (660), speaks of a grace equal to the debt of original sin.

God repays God what man owes, because man dishonors him and cannot make it up, requiring a God-Man capable of taking on all human sin, consolidating the debt and dealing with it in a singular, apocalyptic event, His death. This is, of course, Anselm’s \textit{Cur Deus Homo}, and the cosmic transaction is little detailed by the poet. That the maiden says “boȝt,” and does so without mention of a devilish ransom, bespeaks a familiarity with the theory.\(^{16}\) (It was quickly assimilated two centuries prior.) In the dialogue Anselm, as author and persona, argues that Christ’s spontaneous willing – his decision to live and suffer and die as a man –

pays the infinite price of human sin. “And what is more just than for one who is paid a price greater than every debt to cancel every debt, if the price is paid with the proper affection?” (CDH II, 20).

The debt is settled, once for all. But the scholastic age would further determine how credit was distributed: the precise conditions under which sacramental ritual quelled sin.

Christ’s Passion, Aquinas tells us, covers both “the common sin of the whole human race”

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I use the edition in Anselm, Basic Writings, with the abbreviation CDH. In Part One, Chapter Nineteen, Anselm (the persona) argues that a humans cannot be saved without having their sins recompensed. He introduces an analogy of a pearl which, once dirtied, must be cleaned before it is boxed; humans, tempted to sin, likewise cannot be restored without a fitting payment.

A[nselm]: Let’s suppose some rich man holds in his hand a precious pearl that has never been touched by any impurity. Suppose no one else can take it out of his hand unless he himself permits it, and that he plans to put it away in his treasury, where all his costliest and most precious possessions are found.

B[oso]: I conceive this as clearly as if it were right in front of us.

A: Suppose he permits some envious person to grab that pearl out of his hand and cast it into the mud, even though he could prevent this; and afterwards he takes it out of the mud and puts it away, still muddy and unwashed, in some clean and costly place, to be stored in that condition from then on. Would you think him wise?

B: How could I? Would it not be far better for him to keep and store his pearl clean rather than dirty?

A: Wouldn’t God be acting in a similar way? He held human beings in his hand, so to speak, in paradise; they were sinless, destined to be companions for the angels. If he had willed to prevent the devil, the devil would not have been able to tempt human beings; so he allowed the devil, enraged with envy, to cast them down into the mire of sin – with their consent, admittedly. So wouldn’t God be acting in a similar way if he led human beings, stained with the grime of sin and without any washing (that is, without any recompense), even back into the paradise from which they had been cast out, to remain in that condition for ever?

B: I do not dare deny that if God did this, the analogy would hold; and for that reason I do not grant that he can do it. For in that case it would appear that either he could not accomplish what he had set out to do or else that he had come to regret the good thing he had set out to do; and neither of those can be true of God.

A: Therefore, you must hold with the utmost certainty that without recompense – that is, without a spontaneous payment of the debt – God cannot leave sin unpunished and a sinner cannot attain happiness, even such happiness as he had before he sinned. For without recompense human beings would not be restored, even to the state they were in before they sinned.
and “the personal sins of individuals, who share in His Passion by faith and charity and the
sacraments of faith.” “Consequently, then, the gate of heaven’s kingdom is thrown open to
us.”\(^\text{18}\) The gates of heaven were closed by our first parents, whose primordial sin was
transmitted to us – without degrees, it must be said, since it was a sin in which “the gift of
original justice” was “taken away entirely.” It was a privation, then, not admitting of “more
or less.”\(^\text{19}\) The remedy for original sin was baptism. For baptism is the “universal medicine
for all sins,” what is “absolutely necessary without which no one can obtain salvation.”\(^\text{20}\) It is
in “Baptism [that] man shares wholly in the power of Christ’s passion, in that through water
and the Spirit he becomes one dead to sin with Christ, and in Christ born again unto a new
life,” that “we are likened unto Him,” that “a person finds release from the debt of all
punishment.”\(^\text{21}\)

The heavenly gates are shut yet again by individual sin. Baptism, used once, cannot
be drawn upon again. A single baptism for a single transmission of original sin, the logic
goes. What then? There must be another way to pry open the gates.

Grace innogh þe mon may haue

Pat synnez þenne new, 3if hym repente,

Bot with sor3 [sorrow] and syt [grief] he mot hit craue,

And byde þe Payne þerto is bent. (661-4)

Luckily there is “Grace innogh” (presumably from the same source) to cover extra
infractions, if only one repents with the correct measure of sorrow and grief and pain. But
these infractions and their undoing make up a large part of life, could be said to constitute

\(^\text{18}\) Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIIa q.41, a.5, ad.
\(^\text{19}\) Ibid., IaIIae q.82, a.4, ad.
\(^\text{20}\) Ibid., IIIa q.69, a.2, ad 3; q.66 a.9 ad; q.84 a.5 ad.
\(^\text{21}\) Ibid., IIIa q.85, a.5, ad 3; q.41, a.3, ad 2.
life itself. Hence the need for another sacrament: the sacrament of penance. After baptism, as Pelikan ruefully notes in his history of medieval theology, the sacrament “most important (despite the ambiguity of its having been instituted not by Christ, but already in the Old Testament or perhaps by John the Baptist) was probably penance, which was fundamental not alone to a full understanding of sacramental doctrine, but to the pastoral and disciplinary life of the church.” Later in this period, penance would gather pace and occupy the minds and pens of priests. Confessors would consult their thick manuals, hearing yearly their penitents, and – if satisfied – pronounce them absolved.

The penitent, the human who newly sins: this is the wayfarer’s lot, the state of the dreamer and everyone else. Or nearly everyone else. The sacrament of penance – confessing one’s particular sin, vowing not to do it again, and, being judged sufficiently contrite, given pardon (i.e., absolution) – restores each to his or her former place, safely back in the bonds of community and church. But there is another sort of person, namely the innocent, who is exempt from this seemingly universal problem (which is why penance figures so largely in the church’s history, and why Jerome calls it “a second plank after shipwreck,” as if the first was sure to give way). The maiden explains via a (scholastic) distinction. There are, she says, “[t]wo men to saue by God – by skylle,” i.e., by reasonable judgment:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{þe ryȝt wys man schal se Hys face,} \\
\text{De harmlez hāpel schal com Hym tylle. (675-6) } & \quad \text{man}
\end{align*}
\]

Righteous or harmless (i.e., innocent), both are saved and will see God’s face – the beatific vision.

24 Cited repeatedly in Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, e.g., IIIa, q. 84, a. 6.
Bot Resoun, of ryȝt pat con not raue
go astray

Sauez euermore þe innossent;

Hit is a dom þat neuer God gaue
judgement

þat euer þe gyltlez schulde be schente. (665-8)

The righteous might be saved rightly, but it is more right that the innocent are. It is more right insofar as it is more assured (never having been guilty) and is deemed closer to an ideal justice. The rightness of it is confirmed by “Resoun” itself, which is by parallelism another name for “God.” And the refrain of this section, “þe innosent is ay saf by ryȝt,” is calculated to disrupt the ready association of right with righteous, encouraged by the poem’s incessant concatenations. The innocent, though no conjugate or paronym of right, exemplify better what is right than the righteous ever could.

Is that what it means for God to save the innocent evermore? I would say it is not simply that the innocent are never led astray or turn to guile, incurring no debt of punishment. Or rather, this absence makes a certain justice possible, by which I mean calculable in a way not admissible for those sinning anew. The logic at work is arithmetical. It is an imagined line which is bisected midway between profit and loss. If the judge finds one part too long and the other too short, he will cut and reapportion until the two are equal in length. This justice, according to Aristotle, is directive or corrective justice (*iustitia directiva*). Its primary aim, which the medievals accepted, is equality. And assuming the exchanging parties are equal, a simple calculation can be made numerically – a plus here, a minus there, until the intermediate is achieved. As Aristotle writes, “when people get neither more nor

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25 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1999), V.4.6–13/1132a–1133a. Aristotle’s example is quite mathematical: “The judge restores equality, as though a line [AB] had been cut into unequal parts [AC and CB], and he removed from the larger part [AC] the amount [DC] by which it exceeds the half [AD] of the line [AB], and added this amount [DC] to
less, but precisely what belongs to them, they say they have their own share and make
neither a loss nor a profit. Hence the just is intermediate between a certain kind of loss and
profit, since it is having the equal amount both before and after [the transaction].” Aristotle
has in mind legal transactions, but he does not exclude the physical blows or injurious
calumnies that warrant compensation. The larger point, though, is that loss and gain can be
redressed, and it can be redressed confidently in the knowledge that no excess remains on
either side. By “numerical proportion” the equalization is certain, exact.

It is precisely this confidence that the innocent – all baptized infants – can claim.
Though true that Adam’s sin was of infinite price, Christ’s sacrifice was more than sufficient
pay – Christ, who was God, who humbled himself as a human and was made a slave. But the
superabundance of Christ’s payment is not to the point. What is is that “all sins are removed
by baptism” [per baptismum omnia peccata solvuntur] (to quote Aquinas). Since full
remission follows upon baptism, there is no lingering debt of punishment to be worried
about. There is equalization. As a result, the infant, if she stays an infant, is truly justified, at
least in Aristotelian eyes. The scholastics were mindful of this, and did not fail to address the
state of the infant:

In children there is no sin but original sin, and this does not consist in an actual
disorder of the will, but in a settled disorder of nature ... ; and in them the
forgiveness of sin takes place by a change in their settled condition through the
infusion of grace and of the virtue; but not by an act of changing their heart. [In
pueris non est nisi peccatum originale, quod non consistit in actuali deordinatione

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the smaller part [CB]. And when the whole [AB] has been halved [into AD and DB], then they say
that each person has what is properly his own, when he has got an equal share.” Nevertheless, it
proceeds by “numerical proportion,” i.e., addition and subtraction.

26 Ibid., V.4.13/1132b.
27 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIIa, q. 69, a. 2, ad 3.
voluntatis, sed in quadam habituali deordinatione naturae ... ; et ideo remittitur eis peccatum cum habituali immutatione per infusionem gratiae et virtutum, non autem cum actuali.]²⁸

Children can be but accused of original sin, a “settled disorder of nature” [habituali deordinatione naturae] which is less Aristotelian habit than privation or removal, an inclining away from justice.²⁹ Ockham insisted on God’s power to save the circumcised child, and Duns Scotus went one further by educing a rite for children born in pre-circumcision days.³⁰ A child, they reasoned, bereft of reason or any interior beliefs or motives, must have been saved ex opere operato, from the work done by God, a state of affairs still valid in the updated institution of baptism.

In children sin is merely potential, their only sin an inherited disorder which has been given remedy in full. Infants are in this way like Mary, who was “full of grace” [gratia plena] at Gabriel’s Have! and remained thereafter sinless (Luke 1:28). Whether preserved from original sin or not, Mary was surely without actual sin; so too are infants, on account of death.³¹ Neither actually sin. (This is why the maiden calls upon Mary first, perhaps in recognition of their affinity.) “But in an adult in whom there are actual sins, which consist in actual disorder of the will,” Aquinas notes, “sins are not pardoned, even in Baptism, without an actual change of will. This change is effected through penance.” [Sed adulto, in quo sunt actualia peccata, etiam in Baptismo, sine actuali immutatione voluntatis, quod per

²⁸ Ibid., IIIa, q. 86, a. 3, ad 1.
²⁹ Cf. Ibid., IaIae, q. 82, a. 1–2.
³¹ Jaroslav Pelikan, Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300-1700), vol. 4 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 38–50 addresses these issues concerning Mary.
poenitientiam.]

32 Somehow sin passes into act when a child survives and grows up. Suddenly he has inner beliefs and hidden intentions, a fully functioning reason and an active will which goes, inevitably, askew. Having reached the “age of discretion” (in the words of the Fourth Lateran Council) the adult is required to confess and do penance: a disordered will needs to be corrected by itself, by a will moving in opposition. Among the sacraments, penance was odd in that its “matter” [materia] was not consecrated but the object of removal (i.e., sin); more positively it was “the action performed both by the penitent sinner and the priest absolving” [actus exercitus tam per peccatorem poenitentem, quam etiam per sacerdotem absolventem].

33 Before absolving the priest had to determine a suitable punishment, measured according to what the sin was and how gravely it offended (venially, mortally), then tailored to the penitent’s current circumstances, his condition, his job, his status, the secrecy with which external acts could be carried out. As Alexander Murray notes, calculation was not one-sided. The priest had to strike a bargain, often needing to convince the penitent of his sin before negotiations could begin. Once underway, the priest had to assess his sincerity – whether truly contrite, or harboring a less worthy fear of punishment (attrition). Then could acts of punishment be assigned, and only then the longed-for pardon.

More complications could arise, of course, and did. I need only make mention of indulgences, the partial (though sometimes plenary) remission of sins which were granted on account of the church’s holiest members.


35 For a concise discussion, see Paul Anciaux, The Sacrament of Penance (Worcester: Challoner, 1962), 171–79.
remedies. And the penitents themselves varied too, knitted haphazardly in a vast social fabric. Assigning satisfactory acts could hardly be arithmetical, operations of subtraction and addition that resulted in an assured, knowable equality. It needed to be geometrical. I take that term from Aristotle again, who uses it after the mathematicians, “since in geometrical proportion the relation of the whole to whole is the same as the relation of each [part] to each [part].” In state distribution, for example, what makes for just treatment is the equality of *ratios* – at the minimum, the established relations between four terms (two people and their items). Joel Kaye neatly summarizes Aristotle’s reasoning:

Distributive justice [justitia distributiva] involves the distribution of common goods by a central authority in proportion as the recipient had proved himself worthy of reward through service. Since the quality of service and virtue is inherently unequal in men, distributive reward must also be unequal. The determination of distributive justice therefore requires the establishment of a ‘geometrical’ rather than an ‘arithmetical’ equivalence, in which greater service receives proportionally greater reward. (An arithmetical equivalence would entail all receiving a numerically equal reward.)

Unequal service demands unequal reward; honors are proportional to worth. This seems to be the species of justice invoked when the dreamer calls the maiden’s “tale vnreasounable.”

‘Goddez ry3t is redy and euermore rert,
Oper holy wryt is bot a fable.
In sauter a poynt determynable:

“Þou quytez vchon as hys desserte,
Þou hyȝe Kyng ay pertermynable.” (591-95) *supreme in judgment*

What is written in the Psalter is a “poynt determynable,” a matter of plain or literal speech (like the dreamer’s own). To say otherwise is to render Scripture, or some parts of it, “fable.” He proves this with a *reductio ad absurdum*:

‘Now he þat stod þe long day stable,
And þou to payment com hym byfore,
Þenne þe lasse in werke to take more able,
And euer þe lenger þe lasse þe more.’ (596-600)

In its full logical force, the time of labor is inversely proportional to reward. The result is a situation in which the more work is done, the less eligible one is for compensation. The corollary is just as absurd: the less done (ideally nothing?) means an increased capacity to gain more.

The dreamer’s mistake is to apply the same mode of equalization to everyone. For infants who have never sinned or wrought woe, an arithmetical calculation suffices. Loss and gain, Adam’s sin and the water of Christ’s wound, are balanced at a point determinable; equality is restored; the child is welcomed into heaven. But for the adult whose once-potential sin is actualized, and who incurs a personal excess of debt beyond the cover of baptism, such assurance is wanting. This is not only because debt is heaped up over a lifetime, but because life is changeable and subject to many factors. An adult’s sins must be weighed against his spiritual condition, his station and wealth, his previous sins; these in turn are weighed against inner motives and thoughts, and the quality of his repentance. Not even a *institutia distributiva* could deal adequately with shifting circumstance.
More promising was another kind of justice, still geometrical, but seeking equality in exchange. Aristotle labels it “proportionate reciprocity” — a reciprocity achieved by “diagonal combination” — and illustrates with an example tirelessly copied by medieval scribes:

Let A be a builder, B a shoemaker, C a house, D a shoe. The builder must receive the shoemaker’s product from him, and give him the builder’s own product in return. If, then, first of all, proportionate equality is found, and next, reciprocity is also achieved, the proportionate return will be reached. Otherwise it is not equal, and the exchange will not be maintained, since the product of one may well be superior to the product of the other. These products, then, must be equalized.\(^{38}\)

But how are the products equalized? Aristotle continues:

Currency came along to do exactly this, and in a way it becomes an intermediate, since it measures everything, and so measures excess and deficiency — how many shoes are equal to a house. Hence, as builder is to shoemaker, so must the number of shoes be to a house; for if this does not happen, there will be no exchange and no community. But proportionate equality will not be reached unless they are equal in some way. Everything, then, must be measured by some one measure …\(^{39}\)

Everything must be measured by money. Money is the intermediate, the medium by which all goods (and services) are equalized and exchanged without loss of equilibrium. Products are made equal by being made commensurate, that is, conceived according to a measure. In truth, measure is really “need,” which the medievals knew by the word *indigentia* — a human dependency “which holds everything together.” But the law of the land has made “currency

\(^{38}\) Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, V.5.8/1133a5.

\(^{39}\) Ibid., V.5.10/1133a5.
… a sort of pledge of need, by convention.” 40 In a sense currency mediates for need – is a reliable index of it. Currency, representing need and measuring it, acts as the link between builder and shoemaker, the builder’s house and the shoemaker’s shoes, thereby bringing about community and human flourishing. Aristotle is clearly aware that “things so different cannot become commensurate in reality,” but it suffices economically that “they can become commensurate enough in relation to our needs.” 41

In confession, the currency of penitential action (the sacrament’s materia) must be negotiated. A priest had guidelines for proceeding, including the Seven Deadly Sins and the Ten Commandments and a sheet of tariffs, but he would still need to balance the duration and severity of external acts with individual predicament and degree of repentance. 42 In other words, he would have to establish a sort of just price, an agreement with the penitent on what constituted fair recompense. The problem, as Martin Luther knew too well, was that the true state of sinners – their sincerity before God – was unknowable to priest as well as penitent. None (except God) was sure whether penance was sufficient, contrition perfect, whether a priest’s word had, as a consequence, truly absolved. (These doubts would famously lead Luther to abandon the penitential system itself.) 43 But there was a way round these difficulties, which was not to deny but to accommodate them in a less exacting system, that of estimation. Joel Kaye writes that in the thirteenth century, the “just price” [iustum pretium] was thought to be sometimes an “indivisible point of true equality between buyer and seller,” other times “a range along a continuum of value.” 44 The two sat uneasily together in

40 Ibid., V.5.11/1133a5.
41 Ibid., V.5.14/1133b.
43 Pelikan, Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300-1700), 4:134.
Henry of Ghent’s economics, who saw the practice of communal estimation as seeking an ideal point. However, Godfrey of Fontaines jettisoned the latter and “identified value and value equality with the actual process of aestimatio.” “For him,” Kaye tells us, “communis aestimatio did not merely approach a pre-existent, arithmetically determinable just price; it was the just price.”\(^{45}\) By the end of the century and into the next, the just price was understood as a latitude, a measure of need and utility (utilitas) which varied “according to differences in time, person, place, and condition.”\(^{46}\) For all its fluctuations, exchange was deemed reasonable if a contract was made by willing parties – a pact measured by money. As long as the price fell within the limits of a latitude – that is, a thing was not priced half below or above the going rate (laesio enormis) – the exchange was just. Peter Olivi and Duns Scotus, both pioneers here, “recognized equalization was a dynamic process determined through mutual agreement.”\(^{47}\)

The give and take involved in a sale (or even loan) required some uncertainty as to the final price (or future gain and loss). What was not in doubt was the transaction’s equality. The agreed-upon price was final and just. And so it was in the confession booth, where priest and penitent, having bargained a “price” of penance – e.g., days of fasting or prayers or actual money, as in almsgiving – could be confident of the words “I absolve you.” It did not matter whether one’s punishment fit the crime exactly. It was impossible to know anyway, so an estimation on a latitude – one guided by data gathered in the parish or sin tariffs (which functioned, perhaps, like artificial accounts of money) – would do.\(^{48}\) The

\(^{45}\) Ibid., 111.
\(^{46}\) Ibid., 124.
\(^{47}\) Ibid., 126.
sacrament did not lose its efficacy because its price was estimated. Of course, penitential actions in themselves do not pay off what is really an insurmountable debt. It is rather the promise of God, a loosing and binding of the keys vested in the minister, that deems them meritorious – as efficacious in channeling His grace. Acts of penance, whether three days of bread and water or a lifetime in solitary devotion, vary according to sinner and sin. If necessary, punishments may be substituted or combined, even shortened. Nevertheless, absolution is always the same, an infusion of grace and virtue, a welcoming back into the fold (although the quantity of absolution depends on how long one escapes death – how often one attends yearly confession).

If baptism is a tin token (à la Kilwardby and Fishacre), penance is closer to a lead denarius, worthless as a material commodity but redeemable within the heavenly kingdom. Both sacraments are “tokens” that guarantee an outpouring of grace; and they are guaranteed by God, whose sovereign will is ratified by the church. In the economy of heaven, substitute currency can be exchanged for “real” money, for grace and pardon and salvation. All the laborers in the parable, indeed, enter the vineyard and receive a penny. But the currency which each group trades with – or specifically the last group – is different. The labor of the earlier workers is the labor of penance, a sweating of the brow seemingly interminable because of its duration: the duration of earthly life. Their labor is a sign of debt, of a negative accumulation needing to be overcome by daily action. The price of remission is calculated according to factors thought to impinge on personal sin, a price constantly renegotiated per...
Pentitential actions are similarly not fixed in value, instead worth more or less in a given season, parish, or community. At most, canons of penance set a ratio between punishment and sin – say, thirty days on bread and water for falsifying weights – which the priest could deviate from.\(^\text{49}\) (This ratio was sometimes imposed by the pope, the church’s human sovereign.) While penance is determined by a complex geometrical model – the just varies within limits – baptism is amenable to a simpler arithmetic, a model in which the messiness of time, place, circumstance, and individuality is removed. Children are in that respect ideal, without a history and without the complications that can so easily entangle. Their debt can be simply measured and repared to a point: they enter the vine, they are exalted. They are, in the maiden’s later citations, the ideal inheritors to Christ’s kingdom.

So we have two different currencies within the same economy – two different economies, I’d suggest, were it not that penance presupposed baptism – and the difference is not only one of matter, but calculation. They are, in essence, two ways of calculating justice, which is to say equality under two contracts. It is as if God establishes an arithmetic ratio here, a geometric ratio there, the ratios representing competing visions of human life. Yet all the laborers, early or late, are paid the same. They are equalized insofar as each are given, as promised, a single penny – the “coin” of grace or salvation. Money acts as a medium for both currencies, making commensurable two incommensurable models of calculation. Arithmetic and Geometry cannot be adequately compared as such, but they are made “commensurate enough” (in Aristotle’s words) through the minimal unit of the penny. Notice what money does: as measure it is made the common term of diverse models (not simply items in exchange), determining not only the ratio of one currency to another (e.g., baptism or penance to grace) but a ratio between ratios of currencies (baptism to penance).

This does not mean, of course, that all terms can be calculated as if they were the same. The two ratios are incompatible in reality, but for purposes of salvation they are made alike by means of money. For this reason, both correctivand proportional justice can be reasonably and equally called “ryȝt.”

This might explain the strange response to the dreamer’s said *reductio*, his charge of injustice:

‘Of more and lasse in Godez ryche,’

þat gentyl sayde, ‘lys no joparde,

For þer is vch mon payed inlyche

Wheþer lyttel oþer much be hys rewarde ’ (601-4)

There is no uncertainty or risk of “more and lasse” in God’s kingdom, because variations of reward or compensation, whether “lyttle oþer much,” are equalized. Critics have found the final line here – “ ‘Wheþer lyttle oþer much be hys rewarde’ ” – especially tricky. The gentle lady seems to contradict herself, and there is scarce alternative but to disjoin payment and reward, construing the latter as a scale of joys distinct from mere salvation. But no contradiction need abound if this “scale” is understood as a latitude of reward – a range identified with equal and equitable payment. Whether one has toiled little or much, been forgiven by virtue of baptism or penance, all are equalized – commensurated – in the heavenly kingdom. Everyone is paid the same; all merits are measured on a latitude which becomes, in exchange, the just price. More and less *is* the same, “inlyche.”

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This is not to suggest there is no difference or variation in heaven. Recall that when the maiden describes life there, she first speaks of a property unique to the kingdom (“a property in hytself”) – that all are kings and queens without deprivation. The realm of equal kings and queens is nonetheless ruled by Queen Mary, *theotokos* who is also an empress ruling over wherever humans dwell or die. How can it be that everyone (every human, at least) is truly equal if one is above the others? And how are these others all kings and queens? Criticism has described this peculiar arrangement an “egalitarian hierarchy” – an apt phrase, to be sure, but which has the advantage only of more succinctly naming the paradox.  

What if we took this courtly “property” in its proper sense, that is, as a translation of the category of *qualitas*? Then kings and queens should not be understood on a scale that includes dukes and earls; royalty would itself be a “quality” of the kingdom – a quality that can be more or less intense.

*In stricto sensu* the majority of fourteenth-century philosophers say that qualitative forms do not undergo intension or remission. Only subjects do. A quality like heat or whiteness or even dearness does not increase. “Neither is an intense white more white than it be remiss, although it be greater, that is, more intense” [*nec intensa albedo est magis albedo quam sit remissa, licet sit major, id est intiosior*].  

Rega Wood explains this puzzling statement of Adam Wodeham as follows:

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parts of the same form can be added to the parts of dearness which were originally present, and the new parts together with the old parts make the substance in which the form inheres more dear. And wherever there is genuine latitude of form, it must be possible to add and subtract parts of that form to an underlying substance. When Peter become[s] dearer, his former dearness is not really intensified. Rather additional parts of dearness reach him and combine with the preexisting form to produce a form of greater intensity. Numerically distinct parts of a form combine to constitute a unified whole.\textsuperscript{53}

Supporters of this theory – the “additionists” – knew that bodies felt hotter or colder, that William was definitely tanned after a week in the sun. Yet they held fast to Aristotle’s dictum \textit{forma non suscepit magis et minus} (forms do not increase or decrease), denying “the evidence of their senses that such changes were gradual.”\textsuperscript{54} Intensity is really the succession of new forms, they argued. Their opponents (champions of the confusingly-named “succession theory”) agree; their quibble is over what happened in the process. A new form, successionists say, replaces older ones, which are actually annihilated. An eighth degree of heat, or whiteness, or grace does not contain the seventh and the sixth, all the way to zero; it just is the eighth degree, unbroken and indivisible. Additionists thought otherwise. All earlier forms are preserved when a new form arrived on the scene; nothing is annihilated; all are added together to make “a unified whole.” What was at stake, Edith Sylla notes, “is \textit{whether there is within the higher degree a part equal to the lower degree}” (her emphasis).\textsuperscript{55}

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 376–77.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 389.
Arguing the affirmative, John Dumbleton (c.1310-c.1349) drew out some startling implications of the additionist view. Unlike earlier theorists, who conceived degrees as “single numbers” and latitude as a “series of numbers,” Dumbleton imagined, according to Sylla, “a latitude … as similar to a geometric line, where any part of the line is similar to any other part and where a degree corresponds to a part of the line beginning at its origin and ending after a greater or lesser interval depending on the intensity of the degree.” A degree is nothing other than a latitude; and a latitude of quality can be treated spatially, as a “homogeneous continuum on which the only differences are differences in length, a longer segment of latitude starting from zero degree corresponding to a greater degree.”

Consequently, latitudes were amenable to Euclidean calculation. Degrees were like points on a line which were infinitely divisible; and since they (degrees) were identified with latitudes, qualities could be quantified, and so measured and compared. Latitudes were less abstract ranges than actual quantities – they were likely to be considered physical realities, even if abstractness (the possible range within limits) never quite went away.

When the dreamer asks the maiden who “formed” her “fayre fygure,” he is certain her “beauté com never of nature”: “Pymalyon paynted never thy vys, / Ne Arystotel nawþer by hys lettrure / Of carped þe kynde þese propertéz” (747-53). Aristotle neither spoke of those properties which could admit of true quantities. It was the innovation of the Oxford Calculators – most notably that of Dumbleton – to denominate varying intensities of heat, whiteness, motion, even faith, charity, and grace, in that precise measure: the quantification of qualities. In keeping with this medieval propensity to measure almost everything, we

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56 Ibid., 256.
57 Ibid., 263.
might apply a sort of “calculation” to the property, or qualitas, of heaven. A unique property of heaven, I propose, is that its kings and queens might be imagined as points on a single line. The line represents, of course, an intensible quality, i.e., royalty or royalness. It is a homogeneous continuum on which a part is similar to any other part and in that sense equal – commensurate, of the same system of measurement. The distance between any two adjacent degrees, for instance, would be equal (i.e., intervals of the same length). And though one degree could be said to be “greater” than another (for instance degree six over five), the greater always includes the lesser: none is annihilated, deprived. The inhabitants of heaven are related to each other as equal segments on a line. As discrete units, each are the same; but together they form a continuous and unified whole. This whole includes Queen Mary who, in keeping with Marian hermeneutics, would presumably be the maximal degree of intensity – the one accorded the greatest honor, yet of a piece with the saved.59

That each saved soul is identified with a qualitative point does not undermine its being part of a continuum. A “point” or punctum, as Ockham argued in the typically scholastic context of the Eucharist, did not really exist, was not an independent entity, could not be licitly slotted into a proposition as subject. 60 Rather, a point, if the word’s metaphoricity was not entirely emptied and replaced with a better-formed proposition, spoke of a “limit of or cut in a continuum.”61 Nicole Oresme, a Parisian who would take the

considered with the ontology of qualities, but “how to denominate a subject in which the intensity of quality varies from one point to another.” Edwards shows how a different latitude – a “degree of act,” gradus or latitudo actus – was applied to love and grace.

59 This is the theological method of “maximalism,” championed by Scotus, which accords more to Christ – and by extension, Mary – if it does not contradict Scripture or Church. See Pelikan, Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300-1700), 4:27, 49–50.
60 De Corpore Christi. In De Sacramento Altaris, trans. Thomas Bruce Birch (Burlington, IA, 1930), 36.22–38.5, 40.18–42.11.
insights of the Oxford Calculators in a decisive direction, accepted that for things to be measured as continuous magnitudes, “it is necessary [oportet] that points, lines, and surfaces, or their properties, be imagined [ymaginari]. For in them (i.e., the geometrical entities), as the Philosopher [Aristotle] has it, measure or ratio [mensura seu proportio] is initially found, which in other things it is recognized by similarity as they are being referred by the intellect to them (i.e., to geometrical entities).” He continues: “Although indivisible points, or lines, are non-existent, still it is necessary [oportet] to feign them mathematically for the measures of things and for the understanding of their ratios.”62 Twice Oresme grants the necessity of imagining non-existents for the express purpose of measurement. Geometrical “entities,” most of all the line, are universal measures by which the intellect proportions one thing to another. Indeed, these mathematical feignings are acts of imagination, necessary acts that make possible the intellect’s calculations. Oresme would go beyond the single continuum of the Oxford masters and develop it in two dimensions, essentially graphing intension against extension – but any more would take us further afield. The shared result which concerns us here is that points were necessary but imagined entities on a numbered line.

The natural philosophers distinguished between real and imagined entities even as non-existents played a more and more central part, being themselves more practical and indispensible to mensuration. It is as measurement, and not simply as an aid to it, that the fiction of points, lines, and surfaces came to acquire real force – in the comparison of qualities extended in space, of numbered degrees within and among latitudes. Just as time and space are commonly divided into smaller units (days/months/years, inches/feet/miles), so “numbers,” in general, “could stand both for discrete units and for numbered parts of a

It is this duality of unit and numbered part, discreteness and continuity, that makes sense of the “untenably paradoxical” situation which Casey Finch articulates so well: “Each soul is simultaneously king or queen – at once supreme and unique – and part of the populace, that is, ranged in a relational system.” The same is true for the anagogical vision of Revelation: “the intimate and individual relation of the soul to Christ in heaven is a kind of monogamous marital fusion of the soul with God. But … this relation is the same for each one among the 144,000 souls in the New Jerusalem. Meanwhile, Mary reigns over all, somehow displacing no one; her royalty shines above the others even as the others are, for their part, no less royal.”

Let me restate. The blessed populace of God’s kingdom is a continuous magnitude, a line or latitude which extends to, and is, the maximal degree. Mary, the reigning queen, is the last degree added to all the others (the first shall be last). Imagined as discrete quantities, each soul is a single unit, that is to say a point. Yet each are numbered parts of a continuum, altogether the same “hundred and forty thousand” (forty-four, in Revelation) whom St. John sees bounded in a “knot.” This granted, we could go one further and say that that knot, if truly a quality, must inhere in a subject (since the foregoing anti-Aristotelianism of the fourteenth century still reckoned that subjects, not forms, increase and decrease). So saved souls participate in God as heat in a body, as predicate in a subject, as, in other words, an intensible quality. Is that the meaning of their marriage to the Lamb? Yes. The blessed abide as quality in the Lamb, its subject. (Note that the blessed make up a single quality, although as quantities they are plural.)

Attentive readers may have noticed, however, I have skipped a decisive section of the poem and too easily skipped from royalty to spouses. And they would be right. So allow me to make the connection. Between the first and second vision – between kings and queens etc. and wedded virgins – is a jeweller (of another parable) who must sell his wool, linen, and sundry for an expensive pearl, no ordinary one but one spotless, a “perré pres” (valuable stone) through which he may attain the bliss of innocents. The so-called Pearl of Price (Matthew 13:45-6) is aimed at the dreamer, of course, a jeweller-merchant-type who must forfeit his livelihood in order to save it in the next. This pearl commands a dear price being a means of salvation (salvation is expensive); but as a means, it is not unlike heaven itself, having similar properties. Clean and clear, bright and “endelez rounde,” the “maskellez perle” is “commune to alle þat ryȝtwys were.”

Lo, euen immyddez my breste hit stode. (740)

So says the maiden. (Does she mean to undermine her previous distinction and call herself “ryȝtwys”? And in so doing admit that innocent vs. righteous is an earthly thing, not applicable to heaven-dwellers? That would seem to explain the parable’s placement, right after Jesus’s welcoming of the little ones. The maiden offers another means by which one can enter “ryȝt as a chylde” (723) – not as a literal child like herself, but by attaining to the same measure, the zero degree of an unblemished soul.) In any case, the penny of the laborers becomes a pearl bought by a lifetime of accumulated goods: both are identified with the means of salvation and, on occasion, salvation itself. And lest the reader think I too easily blur means and thing, the poem does precisely that, slipping here from pearl bought to pearl studded on virginal breast. That pearl is not quite exchanged for salvation – or if it is exchanged, it still
remains a thing worn by everyone there, a “token” of the peace enjoyed in New Jerusalem (742).

What is this maskellez (i.e., spotless) pearl, then, but a sort of currency? Like money, it is consumed in exchange – a fungible operating in the manner of food and drink. But also like money (at least for the later scholastics who relaxed the constraints of usury) it was considered a thing, similar to a deed of inheritance whose yearly returns were sold to a willing buyer. Furthermore, as an ornament – a physical object – it is a coin, discrete and round, comparable to a geometrical point for the average fourteenth-century consumer.

Each virgin is so adorned, as if numbered points on a heavenly continuum; the pearls, or coins, function as measures, expressing a line of 144,000 degrees in wedlock to the Lamb. (The sheer multiplicity of lesser pearls suggests a further, possibly infinite, divisibility.) Like the heavenly royals, the procession of virgins could be understood as geometrical, a gathering of points that is really an intensible quality. On each is a pearl of price, which substitutes for or corresponds to a tear in the Lamb’s body – a wound that bled and bleeds “outsprent,” its seeming lack a plenitudinous lack. Such woundedness makes the Lamb truly without peer (“makelez”). It also marks his difference, his maimed animality, out of which he (who is Christ) dresses his wives: with a makelez pearl. Blood gushes out even now from an eternal wound for sins committed anew, anticipating their needed atoning and forgiveness.

This vision is obviously an imagined vision: the dreamer’s body is left on the mound, his “ghost is gon in Godez grace” (63). Between earth and heaven, he ventures across the space of the imagination. It’s not quite as simple as that, of course. Think of the poetic speaker as dreamer recounting a vision seen in St. John’s words, and you have a sense of the

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65 Kaye, *Economy and Nature in the Fourteenth Century*, 112–13. The crucial move, made by Godfrey, was treating *redditus ad vitam* – “a hereditary right to receive the annual fruits of a certain piece of land” – not as a loan contract (and so usurious) but as a contract of sale.

66 Ibid., 112, 171.
narrative complexity at work. The frames of the poem are almost as intricate as the linking of repeated and related words, altogether forming a dense, clustered, interconnected universe. However complicated his predicament, the imagined scenario is an ethical test: whatever the ontological status of the dream, his responses have consequences for wayfaring and salvation. The dreamer fails at first, setting God’s “wordez ful westernays” (i.e., awry) in favor of the evidence of his sight (307). (He believes, wrongly, that he can traverse waves that seem to keep them apart.) But sight and word are not set in total opposition. Later on, the dreamer notices that the maiden bears a pearl “inmydde my breste” (her words), a “token of pes” which he associates with a certain “perré pres” so eagerly sought by a jeweller or merchant that all is sold to obtain it (730-55). Following on the heels of this section, the poem shifts decidedly to biblical narrative. Look at the gospels, the maiden says, and look again at the Apocalypse, where what I say is “sene” by St. John, who “seg[h[s] in gostly drem.” If the parable of the laborers glosses the courtly economy, the Pearl of Price is connected to a more privileged revelation: a peek at the heavenly cloister. A dream in a dream this is, though not quite a dream within a dream: the maiden says what John (says he) sees – she versifies Apocalypse as if she were quoting it – and the dreamer sees what John says: “As John þe apostel hit syȝ with syȝt, / I syȝe þat cyty of gret renoun” (985-6). Sight and word are interwoven; or better, the reading and speaking of Scripture is a sort of seeing, a “sight” that generates a ghostly dream. Aquinas’s remarks on the embodied similitudes of Scripture are pertinent here: they are a mode of perception giving rise to phantasms, to an imaginative world. The maiden’s reiteration of Scripture, then, signifies a phantasmatic “text” to which the dreamer is now privy. But this is no ordinary vision, even by the standards of divine

revelation. For it is a vision, in which kings and queens reappear as crowned virgins, the court now a monastery (and, at the same time, a city), within which sight reaches beyond normal perception, something like an abstractive vision which approximates beatitude, and which expresses itself discursively in the words of Apocalypse: “As John þise stonez in writ con nemme, / I knew þe name after his tale” (997-8). Because such vision – of heaven, no less – should “virtually contain” its own description (to use a favorite phrase of Scotus), any subsequent record of it would merely repeat St. John’s terms; it would reproduce Revelation.

The dreamer is therefore specially graced like the apostle, a “gret favor” procured for him so that he may confirm, by his own lights, the veracity of the maiden’s tale with another (968).

Being specially graced is clearly not enough: the dreamer wants heaven, and he wants it now. But he can’t have it yet, and his distance from the realities in heaven – his status, in other words, as a wayfarer – is compounded by the discrepancy of narrative, which demands closure but can only remain a promise. I suspect this problem is inherent to eschatology.

The laborers, if not entirely happy, are fully paid; a complete procession of virgins dwell in the glow of the Lamb. Yet the dreamer – as listener, as spectator – is not included among them, and, in the poem’s extension of that parable, still one of the laborers waiting for the day to end. When will it end? Is his loss too great to keep on living as a good Christian?

Roused from an attempted suicide, the speaker offers this final consolation:

For pyty of my perle enclyin,
And syþen to God I hit bytaȝte, committed
In Krystez dere blessyng and myn,
Þat in þe forme of bred and wyn
Þe preste vus schewez vch a daye. (1206-10)
Having committed his pearl (the referent of “hit”) in what seems to be baptism (line 1208 is a standard formula), Christ – or a pearl, or Christ as pearl – appears in the “forme” of the eucharistic host, the material wafer that somehow contains Christ’s body. The priest shows him under the species of bread and wine every “daye,” the species a sign of Christ’s presence upon consecration, that real presence a harbinger of union with his mystical body. *Hoc est meum corpus:* there is Christ’s body on the altar. And whether consumed in use or not – i.e., partaken of by believers – the eucharist is also a thing independent (technically *res sacramenti*), operating as money does.⁶⁹ Thus the sacrament on the altar is the horizon of the faithful, an experience of God as both spectacle and food.

But it is also a moving horizon, designed like penance to be iterable: for its repetition implies a rhythm of alienation and reconciliation that regulates the vicissitudes of Christian life. At the eucharist, we are incorporated into Christ’s mystical body, yet subsequently torn asunder at the appearance of mortal sin. The economy of the poem’s language, too (returning to our earlier question), follows this pattern. Words – especially concatenation words – are reiterable, always coming into view as fixed letters on the page; but semantically they keep withdrawing from us, just as the horizon of eucharistic ritual keeps withdrawing on account of personal sin and debt. And it is this debt that the poem mirrors in its semantic vertigo, in the way the poem’s keywords seem to negatively accumulate (or achieve a fluidity of meaning) while belying their determinate position.⁷⁰ The ending –

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⁶⁹ A speculation: is it a coincidence that money’s legitimacy as thing as well means develops in a theological climate – evident from the twelfth-century – which deems the eucharist, and not baptism, as the paradigmatic sacrament? Miri Rubin notes that “the host was to be white, round, thin and was usually inscribed with a cross, the letters IHS, and from the twelfth century, a crucifixion scene or the lamb of God.” See her *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 31.

⁷⁰ The tension between the word’s fixity – fitted as jewels in a necklace – and its semantic vertigo is structurally homologous to that of money. Coins were physically discrete bits of metal, but that did not mean they represented (or implied) degrees that were ultimately atomistic or indivisible. Rather,
He gef vus to be His homly hyne  
labourers/servants

Ande precious perlez vnto His pay.

– makes one last, radical transformation to the pearl: we become pearls, the very currency by which we are granted heaven and the form in which we inhabit it – to the prince’s pleasure. Are we yet another instance of “perle,” one degree of intensity on a latitude which is unified by its material form? No matter. Heaven awaits, and we can only begin once more – to be lost again, in the poem and in life, so that we might be found.

“[t]he majority opinion (including Burley and Dumbleton) was to deny the real existence of uniform or indivisible degrees.” Joel Kaye, “The Impact of Money on the Development of Fourteenth-Century Scientific Thought,” *Journal of Medieval History* 14, no. 3 (September 1988): 264.
Theology without Theology:

The Case of *Piers Plowman*

William Langland … makes it frequently clear that his poem of *Piers Plowman* should be classified as theology; its persistent question has to do with the salvation of the soul.”¹ – Judson Allen Boyce

Is *Piers Plowman* a work of theology? One way to broach the question of theology, which seems to expand in every direction when it is asked, is to look at the instances in which the *figure* of Theology appears. The “Index of Proper Names” to A.V.C. Schmidt’s B Text edition lists a mere two entries: one in passus two, the other in passus ten. George Kane’s glossary, under a synecdochal personification of doctrine, adds a third mention (also in passus ten).² The relative paucity of Theology as himself in a work so capacious and so devoted, as many critics have said, to the question of salvation should give us pause for thought. Why does Theology show up only twice, in what amounts to a cameo appearance? Is it that Theology is much less important than the other concerns of the poem? Or is it that Theology – not only as a figure, but as a locus or object of knowledge – hovers over the entire landscape of the poem, so that its appearances as a figure are just two manifestations

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of the theological? (Is the poem so thoroughly about theology that its representative, no matter how crucial, is only one form or aspect of the poem’s project?) I will return to these questions in due course, but for now I limit myself to Theology as the unconcealed, or at least visible, figure. This I undertake in the following two sections, the first regarding Theology as he appears in the context of the marriage of Meed. Here the interjections of Theology do not solve but – to anticipate my argument – prolong the mercurial value that attaches to Meed, which Langland presents as a problem of social and familial relations. The second section will find Theology in a more predictable and comfortable medieval milieu: among Scripture and the seven arts, and as the difficult if not elusive object of Dame Study.

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At the scene of Theology’s first appearance a marriage between Meed and Fals is in the process of being arranged and ratified. Favel goes before Meed and brokers it; Simony and Civil draw up and read the charter; and Wrong is quick to witness the document. Surrounding this bridal party of obvious deception is a catalogue of supporters and guests from all walks, traversing the full spectrum of society (“þe mene and þe riche” [B 2.56]).

The vision of “alle manere of men” – knights, clerks, commoners, officials of various stripes – is presented under the guiding eye of Holy Church, who had left the speaker, the “I” of passus two, in a dazed sleep (B 2.56, 52). At the beginning of the passus, Holy Church, continuing her earlier conversation, responds to the speaker’s request to “[k]enne me by som crafte to knowe þe false” (B 2.4). Knowing the Truth – which had been established as the best sort of treasure, the most worthy of pursuit – entails some knowledge of falsity, “the

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false,” if only by way of avoidance. Holy Church this time does not preach but tells him to look to his left side, where he will see “[b]oþe Fals and Fauel and here fere manye” (B 2.7). Fals, it seems, doesn’t come by himself but always with a certain Favel, a duplicitous pairing, as well as countless others (falsity takes on a multiplicity of forms and disguises, and not merely a single oppositional form).

The speaker does as he is told. What he sees, however, is a woman “[wonder]liche ycloþed,” so well-attired that she equals the glorious array of any king (B 2.9). This lady is Meed, of course, and the perceptual displacement or substitution – Meed for Fals – is no accident. Meed is yet another manifestation (like Favel and company) of Fals, or in the terms set by Holy Church, she is descended from a family which bear all the same hallmarks:

In þe popes Paleis she is pryue as myselue,
But sooþnesse wolde nouȝt so for she is a Bastard.
For Fals was hire fader þat haþ a fikel tonge
And neuere sooþ seide sîpen he com to erþe … (B 2.23-26)

As we can already see, Langland is offering an alternative version of Truth and Fals, truth and falsity, which is imagined here as a series of family resemblances – as lineage, kinship, or genealogy rather than strict values of a proposition (or a combination of propositions: either true or false together, or one true but not the other). But as we will also see, what is called truth and falsity cannot easily fall outside some of the most durable preoccupations of the medieval schools. Meed, claims her rival, was fathered, if not by Fals, by someone false and fickled-tongued, a liar in general. As his offspring,

… Mede is manered after hym, [as men of] kynde [carpeþ]:

*Qualis pater talis filius. Bon[a] arbor bonum frutum facit.* (B 2.27-28)
Like father, like son; like father, like daughter (as the C Text amends it). In a dream within a
dream that soon follows, Meed proves these dicta correct. She marries none other than Fals
Fikel-Tonge, a compound of her father’s traits, thereby true to her lineage by marrying a
version of her father. On the other hand, Holy Church declares her “better” parentage: “My
fader þe grete god is and grounde of alle graces, / Oo god wiþouten gynnyng, and I his
goode douȝter” (B 2.29-30). Holy Church’s origin is without a beginning, unlike Meed’s,
whose origin is not God but a devilish fiend, someone who must have, at some point in time,
begun. It is to Meed’s disrepute, Holy Church implies, that her fatherly origin coincides with a
beginning – whereas her own origin cannot be specified, has the distinct advantage of
proceeding from a source that never has not been. It is in this non-coincidence of origin and
beginning, source and temporality, that Holy Church derives her power – the dispensing of
“alle graces” – and her higher authority.

These comments are not incidental to my purposes, since they are directly
confronted and challenged by Theology, who appears (like so many characters in the poem)
seemingly out of nowhere. After lying low for the proceedings of the eagerly-approved
marriage, Theology angrily voices an objection to Civil:

… “Now sorwe [on thi bokes],
Such [weddyng] to worche to wrathe with Treuth;
And ar this weddyng be wrouhte, wo the bityde!
For Mede is mulier – of Amendes engendreth –
And God [graunted] to gyf Mede to Treuth,
And thow hast gyven hire to gy loure, now God gyf the sorwe!” (B 2.116-21)

4 In relation to anticlerical polemic, see D. Vance Smith, The Book of the Incipit: Beginnings in the
Fourteenth Century (Minneapolis, MI: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 148.
To Holy Church’s “Bastard” Theology adds a counterclaim: “Mede is *mulier – of Amendes engendreth –*” and is betrothed by God to Truth, not Fals. At stake, of course, is the legitimacy of Meed, whether she is a bastard or no, a legitimacy that is argued for in terms of genealogy. Theology offers what seems to be a rival genealogy, an entirely different lineage that descends from Amends and will result in a compact between reward and truth. However, the name and word Amends, understood as reparation, compensation, or restitution, conceals a less salutary backhistory, something or some act to be amended for.\(^5\) The connection drawn is in one sense etymological. Meed amends, i.e., compensates, for a former loss (be it injury, crime, sin, or inequality) – that is, Meed is a derivative form of amends, one possible offspring of compensation.

The C text, changing and adding along the way, recapitulates this section, clarifying the full details of Mede’s alleged parentage. Like a logician treating an exponible, Theology contests the genealogy of Meed by revealing its suppressed content. But the genealogical difference revealed is not as one pitted against another, but as a single ancestry split down the middle. Addressing Simony (and not Civil this time) Theology says,

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\text{Althow Fals were here fader and Fikel-tonge her belsyre,} \\
\text{*Amendes was her moder* by trewe menne lokynge,} \\
\text{And withouten her moder Amendes Mede nat be wedded.}^6
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What Theology offers, then, is not a rival genealogy but a modified one. More precisely, he admits to Meed’s fathering by Fals (which he extends another generation back to Fikel-tonge), thus largely agreeing to Holy Church’s initial account. (Strictly speaking, Favel is


name she gives to the father in C, perhaps to mirror in lineage what occurs in action: Favel
goes before Meed as both seed and marriage broker.) Theology insists on the priority of the
mother, without whom Meed cannot be married. But his insistence is overly shrill, for the
genealogy does not solve what we may call the problem of Meed – her legitimacy as heir and
licit reward – but deepens it by exposing its fundamental ambiguity, which is also the
ambiguity of how someone like Fals could be wedded to Amends except as a husband who
is necessarily there to be overcome.

In Theology’s genealogy is the granted possibility that Meed might not ineluctably be
false (as her father is), but an amending soul like her mother, willing to pay back what she
owes. Meed is of two moral dispositions, complementary yet opposed, if it is true that
lineage is destiny. In this respect, the two dicta cited above confirm that the child clearly
evidences the traits of the parent. But which parent? What Theology contests in his contra is
something more: not simply that Meed is born of irreconcilable conflict (or a conflict in
which one spouse obviates the other), but that her subsequent actions might retrospectively
determine her prehistory. For whilst genealogy could be said, with Holy Church, to
determine moral disposition, the true character of Meed cannot be ascertained until she acts
– which is, in this case, to be married. In some sense, of course, Meed has already acted, or
at least acquiesced to the machinations of Fals and company. Yet the verb “ymaried,”
used at several points to describe the scene (B 2.53, 76), suggests an uncertainty about the
marriage’s ratification. Is Meed married or not? It sure seems like it, according to the legal
proceedings presided over by Simony and Civil (whether he corresponds to ecclesiastical or,
more literally, civil law). But Theology throws a spanner in the works: the whole marriage is
a farce, a falsified charter, and its legitimacy – its legality and permanence – must be decided
at a higher court of appeal, namely the King’s court.
In Anne Middleton’s terms, Theology is a “countervening force” whose gruff interjection questions the power of his rivals, replacing theirs with an authority of his own. But the contest that Theology initiates shows that the debate cannot be resolved at its current level; the lawfulness of the Meed-Fals marriage, it is implied, cannot be determined by competing accounts of genealogy. This Theology acknowledges, whose appeals and threats signal the need for a higher Justice (or, as it turns out, the King) and a recognition of his own impotence to determine such a matter. Allegorically speaking, what is left undetermined is the exact relation of Meed to Fals and to Truth, a relation that takes on an eschatological dimension when the bridal party abscond, and once the King, despite his best intentions, fails to settle the dispute between her and Conscience. The final decision of keeping Reason and Conscience at the expense of Meed leaves her out in the cold, shut out from the King’s counsel and pronounced by the court commons a “hore” (4.166). As finally unmarried, but nevertheless an insatiable object of desire, Meed no longer occupies a fixed relation either to Fals or to Truth. What remains is the possibility of a future marriage. Thus, Theology’s proposal that Meed might be like her mother in refusing Fals and, in that refusal, reconstituting herself as someone fit for Truth is not completely misguided. Theology seeks to rejoin Meed with Truth, making heavenly bliss the reward for which the martyrdom of St. Lawrence is exemplary, albeit a high standard (C 2.132-9)

Replacing the oblique reference to labor in Luke 10:7 (dignus est operarius) with Lawrence’s sacrifice, the C Text aligns Theology’s viewpoint with that of Conscience in B. In

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8 See Smith, The Book of the Incipit, 149. “[T]he question of the meaning of Meed will not be answered on genealogical grounds. Yet Holy Church and Theology base their opinions of Meed almost entirely on appraisals of her lineage.”
his speech attacking Meed, who elides the differences of compensation, reward, and gift, Conscience distinguishes between heavenly and earthly reward, the latter of which he calls “mesureless meed.” Measureless meed should not be confused, Conscience insists, with “mesurable hire,” the exchange of goods and services and, indeed, no sort of meed at all.

What characterizes meed, although it is of two kinds or “manere,” is a certain excess, a ‘something’ that cannot be measured or is beyond commensurability (B 3.230-58). It is, in the terms used by medieval economics, outside the range or latitude of the just price (whether that price is singularly exact or an estimation), and therefore represents a laesio enormis, an extreme damage – in this case, to the poor, but also to the administration of the sacraments.

Theology is blatantly found to be off the mark; for the legitimacy of Meed’s lineage and marriage, though never quite affirmed or denied, is betrayed by what she does. Left alone and to her own devices, she cannot make “amendes” except in bribing her confessor – nor can she construe wages as but another kind of material compensation (B 3.35-63, 175-227). Meed, in other words, proves herself to be of the second “manere,” a powerful excess whose measurelessness, no matter how grand or efficiently circulated, cannot be converted into – made commensurate with – salvation. Deserted by Fals and Favel, she is refused marriage by Truth (or Conscience, his representative or substitute in passus III and IV). And although deserted by Fals and Favel, she is at the same time never quite abandoned. As her confessor (“coped as a Frere”) reveals to her, “Fals[hede] hadde yfolwed þee alle þe þise fift[e]n wynter,” much like the shadowings by Thought and Imaginatif of a clueless Will (B 3.35; 8.75, 12.3). (In fact, Meed’s “Falshede” might have been absolved by Liar himself, who was last seen leaping among some welcoming friars [B 2.233].) If the relation of Meed to her suitors was earlier left unspecified, this does not mean she is equally estranged from both;
one can still be true to Fals (but not Truth) in refusing or failing to marry. Indeed, one is just as true to Fals in spurning marriage – in being unstable, disingenuous, overweening, lecherous, in a word, false. For when one is false to Fals, in the sense of refusing betrothal (where truth means marital fidelity, agreement, allegiance, relational truth), one is paradoxically true as well.\textsuperscript{9}

The inherent paradox here was puzzled over in greater formality by university masters under the banner of *insolubilia*, certain propositions whose apparent truth-values could so easily turn into their opposite. Confronted with statements like “this sentence is false” (true or false?), the later scholastics sought to resolve, or at any rate contain, a disturbing yet common feature: they all seemed to be both true and false. Roger Swineshead, for instance, “distinguished the notion of truth from the notion of corresponding to reality,” locating truth in the sentence token itself and making correspondence – signifying what is the case – separate. (Thus a sentence was only true if it both conformed to reality and didn’t falsify itself in the process.) Taking a different approach, William Heytesbury argued that the “additional signification” of an insoluble was out of the ordinary, so it could be bracketed for the sake of logical debate, much like any other *obligationes*.\textsuperscript{10} What the marriage of Meed to Fals stages – and stages precisely in its indeterminacy, in the question of its legal force – is not a resolution of the problem, but its exacerbation. The persistent bivalence, we might say, is exploited in order to show how falsity – and the ethos of falseness – cannot so easily be wrested from meed. For if Meed is bound to Fals in marriage (and therefore true to him), she is false. Yet if she does not marry him (she is false to Fals) or makes him a cuckold, she is true to him, to the very character of Fals – and therefore false herself. Theology may block

\textsuperscript{9} Alford, *Piers Plowman*.
and endlessly defer the marriage, but his denial does nothing to unbind the secret pact between Meed and Fals, which holds even when they are apart. Theology’s analysis turns on itself: that is, the “amendes” he invokes becomes itself ambiguous. Nowhere is this clearer than in Meed’s ironic behavior at Westminister, the narrative of which demonstrates the insufficiency of Theology.

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If the figure of Theology is inadequate to its object Meed, who repeatedly falsifies his claims at Westminster, he reappears as an object himself in passus 10. After explaining to Will that she taught Scripture (and her seven siblings) the liberal arts, including some practical crafts as well as the traditional disciplines of grammar and logic, Dame Study moves onto the next step in the curriculum:

“Ac Theologie hap tened me ten score tymes;
The moore I muse þerInne, þe mistier it semeþ,
And þe depper I deuyne[d] þe derker me [þouȝte];
It is no Science forsoþe for to sotile Inne;
[Ne were þe loue þat līþ þerinne a wel lewed þynʒ it were].” (B 10.185-9)

Theology appears not as an himself, but rather as an object—an “it” rather than a “he.” More precisely, he has become an object of study and of discourse, talked about but absent. As the queen of the sciences, Theology ought to be the pinnacle of learning, the discipline that encompasses what has gone before and is their culmination. But when Study reaches the object of inquiry which everything before was supposed to a preparation, she is almost at a
total loss. The more she studies, the more she muses, the harder she tries, the “mistier” it seems; wishing to go “depper” into its obscurities, the “derker” are her thoughts. In an attempt to master it, Theology impairs cognition.

Study may well be targeting the more baroque sorts of scholasticism that flourished in the fourteenth-century, and anyone who has attempted to navigate a _quaestio_ from an Oxford master will likely experience the feeling of being lost – of losing the flow of an argument amidst a sea of distinctions, divisions, and lengthy excurses.\(^\text{11}\) Whilst Study seems to attack the schools for their excessive subtlety, their penchant for distinction and logical technicalities, her criticism is also directed at the results – or at least what bewilders and befuddles her. For the mistiness and darkness that surround the study of Theology seem uneasily close to the arts of divination:

Ac Astronmye is hard þyng and yuel for to knowe;

Geometrie and Geomesie [is] gynful of speche;

[That] þenkeyþ werche with þo þre þryueþ [wel] late,

For sorcerie is þe Sovereyn book þat to þat Scienc[e] [l]ongeþ. (B 10.212-15)

One of the three sciences that together constitute a triad, astronomy is “harde” and “yuel,” requiring strenuous and difficult labor, a mental absorption verging on obsession, as suggested in the verb “sotilede”:

“All þise [Sciences] I myself sotilede and ordeynede,

Founded hem formost folk to deceyue.” (B 10.220-21)

Although Study herself established this alternative triad to Dowel, which offers keenness of insight while in fact deceiving, there is an uncanny likeness of the subtlety of the dark arts to that of scholastic thought. Both require a sizable investment, an arduous commitment to plunging the obscure depths of their respective disciplines. (I am taking theologie to mean revelation which pertains to a specific, academic, institutional discipline, rather than the more general “revealed understanding” that is, as Nicolette Zeeman points out, more typical of clergie.) And therein lies the danger: a possibly lifelong diversion from, at this point in the poem, the pursuit of Dowel. As Study says, “If þow þynke to dowel, deel þerwip neuere” (B 10.219).

Of course, in that “þerwip” is included not theology but the claptrap disciplines of alchemy, necromancy, and pyromancy (B 10.216-18). Nevertheless, the wasteful effort in understanding what is designed “to deceyve” may be applied to the discipline of theology, whose darkness is worryingly indistinguishable from the darkness of the sorcerers. In one sense, the darkness is the exactly same: nothing is clear, everything is hidden from view. Yet the darkness of the sorcerers is deliberately cultivated by Study herself (in creating it or deciding to engage with it), a darkness which is supported by nothing other than the intention to fool. On the other hand, the darkness of theology represents a sort of limit to the discipline, if not a limit to studying itself. For at a certain point the excessive technicality of the schools – their incessant glossing, commenting, dividing, disputing – collapses on itself in a murky darkness. Language is so precisely and minutely probed that it becomes

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forbiddingly complex. The further *quaestiones* are probed, the more opaque they seem. Logical rigor fosters unclarity.

One might wonder, then, what use *studie* might be as it seeks to prepare us for a confrontation with divinity. Ever since Augustine, the liberal arts were often seen as crucial training for the interpretation of Scripture; *scientia* was the necessary prelude to *sapientia*, to the divine truths within God’s revealed word. The *artes sermicoales* were indispensable as a foundation, but only *as* foundation. For a defense of the arts – the kind found in the twelfth-century writings of Rupert of Deutz and, most notably, Hugh of St. Victor – was always placed alongside a “warning against their misuse.” As James Simpson writes of Study: “The fact that she does offer her own arts as a password implies how clearly she sees her role as one of serving Scripture.” In the schooling narrative that Study gives, however, Scripture also *precedes* the moment of Theology:

Logyk I lerned hire, and [al þe lawe after],
And alle [þe] Musons in Musik I made hire to knowe.
Plato þe poete, I putte [hym] first to boke;
Aristotle and opere mo to argue I tauȝte;
Grammer for girles I garte first write,
And bette hem wip a baleys but if þei wolde lerne.
Of alle kynne craftes I contreued tooles,
Of Carpent[ers and] kerveres; [I kenned first] Masons
And lerned hem leuel and lyne þouȝ I loke dymme. (B 10.173-84)

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This generally unsurprising list of disciplines, even in its inclusion of the mechanical arts ("alkinnes craftes"), enumerates what Scripture has apparently learned. (More surprising is the epithet "Plato þe poete," making the philosopher who banished poetry in the tenth book of his Republic a poet.) Langland presents Scripture as the congealed form of her siblings, "the sevene arts," including them all, as it were, in herself. Naturalized by family relations, the liberal arts pose no threat to Scripture. None of these cause Study any real problem; but they seem to be of little help once she touches upon Theology in the very next line: “Ac Theologie haþ tened me ten score tymes” (B 10.185).

The liberal arts, then, incline toward an understanding of Scripture; they are a necessary and adequate preparation for sapientia insofar as they furnish one with a formidable, mainly hermeneutical, background. But acquired competence in the arts does not prepare one, it seems, for the difficulties of Theology – which, as it was famously constructed by Aquinas, was a divine science built upon the raw materials of sacred Scripture. In his Summa theologiae, Scripture is the beginning (rather than goal) of sacra theologia, the vast repository of divine revelation from which demonstrative principles – the articles of faith – were extracted. Speculative knowledge would arise out of a reasoning that proceeded from these essentials of Christian belief. If the liberal arts were traditionally ordered to Scripture, and Scripture was itself ordered to theological science, the theologie of Study represents a serious barrier to that progression. More than that, it calls into question the very possibility of a divine science, a sacra theologia, which, as it was later developed (or jettisoned) in the fourteenth century, became a permanent dead-end, an unachievable goal. Put otherwise, there is an unbridgeable gap between Scripture and Theology, whose latter object, if it could be said to have one, is barely seen or thought. No transition from sacra scriptura to sacra theologia can
easily – or with difficulty, for that matter – be made. And when one tries to overcome the irreducible chasm, darkness ensues.

So Theology is not merely difficult, as if one just needs to study harder. But neither am I suggesting that Theology ought to be discarded or wholly transcended. After all, despite all its apparent mystifications, Study acknowledges Theology’s value:

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\text{[Ne were the love that lith therinne, a wel lewed thing it were].}
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“Ac for it let best by Love, I love it the bettre,
For there that Love is leder, ne [lacketh] nevere grace.
Loke thow love lelly yif the lyketh Do-Wel,
For Do-Bet and Do-Best ben [drawen] of Loves [scole].” (B 10.190-93)

Because Theology is lead (“let”) by Love and contains the lesson “to love lelly,” i.e., loyally, it induces a certain desire – a love for it: “I love it the bettre,” says Study. It is the love which “lith therinne,” which is in Theology, not only in what it professes but in what it drives us to know, that rescues and finally differentiates it from other sciences, including sorcery. To be sure, in sorcery there is an intense desire to know, much like the rich lords who eat (and do armchair theology) to a gluttonous excess (B 10.49-58). Theology is not free from such byways and deformities, but it aims at something which is mobilized and driven by love, however misplaced in its approach (studying) or excess of approach (too much study). In other words, there is something in theologie which opens itself up to love. In more modern terms we might say that theologie is the symptom of desire rather than its fulfilment. Study yearns for a putative object that is beyond her reach, beyond the ken of books; yet what is

sought is more than the falsehoods of divination – something behind, or underneath, as it were, theology’s many subtleties. According to Study, that “something” has to do with Dowel, here a particular relation to the other in which, against the moral teaching of Cato’s so-called Disticha (a commonplace for elementary learning), guile is not met with guile:

Whoso glosep as gylours doon, go me to þe same;
And so shaltow fals folk and faëlees bigile:
This is Catons kennyng to clerkes þat he lereþ.
Ac Theologie techeth nought so, whoso taketh yeme;
He kenneth us the contrarye, ayein Catones wordes,
[And] biddeþ vs be as breþeren and [blissen] oure enemys
And louen hem þat leyn on vs and lene hem [at hir nede]
And do good ag[e]in yuel; god hymself hoteþ. (B 10.200-4)

If this seems little more than a rehash of Jesus’ turning the other cheek, we must remember that Study can only articulate theologie in terms of what she can understand (e.g., Cato, Scripture). This explains, I suppose, the oddity that Study speaks for Theology (now a “He”) even though she finds him unintelligible. (It also qualifies her statement here, for example when placed against the episode in passus 18 where Christ beguiles the beguiler, Lucifer, so as to fulfil and surpass the tit-for-tat logic of the “Olde Lawe.”) Or perhaps it is as figure, rather than as object, that she can be speak confidently about him (as opposed to “it”). Indeed, this is the same figure who Will names and denounces when he chides Scripture for telling “tales … that Theologye lerneth”: that baptism for grown Christians is insufficient; that “withoute more” – without love, help, and fulfilling the law – they will not enter heaven

(B 10.357, 379). Despite Will’s overweening complaint, made under the (dubious) pretext of predestination and amounting to an outright dismissal of clerkly learning, his _contra_ registers a grave dissatisfaction:

“This is a long lesson,” quod I, “and litel am I þe wyser;

Where dowel is or dobet derkelich ye shewen.” (B 10.377-78)

It seems to me that Theology may envelop one in a studious fog – but that is not all. Theology itself, I think, gestures toward another mode of knowing which it can only grasp _as darkness_. As an object, _theologie_ is impenetrable and cognitively disarming, liable to misuse. As a figure, he is hemmed in by a hackneyed repertoire consisting of the imperative to love and the threat of punishment (B 10.361-2, 376). Will’s defiance may not be completely justified, but his comment on Scripture – that she merely rehearse what Theology could say – is revealing. Scripture can articulate what Theology himself “lerneth,” but what she says is a recapitulation of the commandment to love – in her case, to love God and neighbor (Jesus’ summary of Old Testament law). What Study understands of Theology is also captured in Jesus’ interpretation of that commandment: love of neighbor includes enemies (Matt. 5:43-5). Both personages, then, if they are to speak of _theologie_, can only speak of him in terms of the so-called golden rule, a rule that extends to enemies. Scripture only understands Theology insofar as Study does. The “love” that leads and elicits action, however, is too vague for a Will who had mistakenly fastened on lordship and knighthood as the meaning of Dowel and Dobet: “Thanne is Dowel and Dobet,” quod I, “dominus and knighthood?” (B 10.336). Study

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had earlier suggested that *theologie* is drawn from “Loves [scole],” as are Dobet and Dobest, but Scripture can do little more than shore up the same theme. That is why Will is upset: he has been given no decisive answer. On the contrary, Scripture’s sermonizing has had the same effect as studying Theology: “Where dowel is or dobet derkelich ye shewen.”

Thus, what is worthwhile in *theologie* cannot be quite said or articulated by Will’s two interlocuters. Theology cannot be quite said when it is an object that escapes one’s grasp; and when it appears to be said, *something else* is really said in its mode as figure, as a “he” who renders *theologie* as the well-worn, though polemical, command to love.\(^{18}\) Not that the figure is completely unrelated to the object, since both center around a love that “lith therinn” in *theologie*. But what is clear in both cases – and we should add here his earlier fight over Meed – is that theology as it is currently stands, namely within the institutional context of the academy, must be reconstituted as an alternative theology – a theology that cannot go under the name of *theologie*. Langland therefore registers a critique of *theologie* without completely doing away with it. His critique is not purely negative, shutting *theologie* completely out, but gives room for another possibility of what it might be to do theology.\(^{19}\)

What might this new theology be? It is true that *theologie* persists in some sense, but never as itself. It is under erasure – crossed out, as it were – and no longer appears in any recognizable form. Rather, it is absorbed into other forms, other figures, other modes of

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\(^{18}\) Apropos are Cole and Galloway’s remarks: “we can be sure that no ‘-ism’ will ever work in describing its ‘belief,’ for the sole reason that Langland persistently and openly queries what is always taken for granted in the most straightforward, authorized kinds of creedal Christianity.” Part of Langland’s strategy, I think, is to question these creedal beliefs – not to dispense with them, ultimately, but to shock us into *thinking* them. See “Christian Philosophy in Piers Plowman,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Piers Plowman*, ed. Andrew Cole and Andrew Galloway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 147.

\(^{19}\) Zeeman, “Studying” in the Middle Ages,” 212. By claiming this I agree with Zeeman, though she makes the point only with regard to *studie*: “[i]t provides one key to the ideology which enabled medieval scholars to justify themselves the central role of the clerisy within their society. By the same token, however, *studie* could also be employed to formulate ideas of an alternative clerisy, a new ‘theology’ in the late Middle Ages.” The argument in this essay picks up where Zeeman left off.
discourse which take on its burden. This amounts to a preliminary answer to the questions I posed at the outset of the chapter, of why Theology hardly shows up in *Piers Plowman*. For the poem to pursue the work of a new and productive theology, it cannot labor under the name of *theologie*. How else might it labor? In what follows, I show that *theologie* is absorbed or reconfigured in two ways: first, as part of Clergy (and his marriage to Scripture); and second, as a certain perception associated with the later appearances of *Piers Plowman*. Each represent different alternatives to a narrow construal of theology. Clergy is more accommodating yet still limited, while Piers offers something radically new: a supercharged vision, a teeming narrative of imagination, that goes beyond the propositional logic of the scholastics.

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We saw that the medieval curriculum, moving through the liberal arts to Scripture, falters at *theologie*. In particular it is Study who falters, who scales a ladder that leads to nowhere. In her defense, Study had already offered another route before she got carried away – that is, she had implied that she herself was a “signe,” a password giving access to what surpassed her: Clergy and his newly-wedded wife Scripture (B 10.173-4). Considered in this vein, the liberal arts and Scripture are ordered not to *theologie* but to *clergie*, who encompasses a revealed knowledge wider than the confines of academic theology. Scripture thus occupies an ambiguous position: she was before *theologie* but is now before *clergie*.

Shortly after speaking to Study, Will finds his way to Clergy, whose first words affirm the authority of Holy Church:

“It is a comune lyf,” quod Clergy, “on holy chirche to bileue
To Dowel is to know and to believe (or to believe in order to know) what has been laid out in the tradition of the Christian Church. It includes, Clergy tells us, the teaching that God was uncreated (“pat gynning had neuere”), that his Son saved all humans from “dedley deèp and [pe] deueles power,” and that God is a trinitarian God – “Thre [propre] persones, ac nouȝt in plurel nombre” – who created man and beast. “For al is but oon God and ech is god hymselue” (B 10.241-8). Clergy expresses three familiar doctrines – on Trinity, Creation, and Christ’s atonement – that correspond, with the exception of eschatology, to the overarching loci under which theology was organized. (The clearest instance, which set the paradigm in Latin, is of course Peter Lombard’s Sentences.) They were clarified and established (“ordeyned”) by Augustine (especially, one presumes, in De Trinitate), whose source and authority (“Auctour”) derives from the Gospel writers, who themselves “bereþ witnesse” to Christ’s words: “Ego in patre, et pater in me est, et qui videt me videt et patrem meum” (B 10.249-53; c.f. John 14:9-11).

In these lines Clergy traces, with admirable compression, the complex channels of transmission by which the words and deeds of Christ become articles of faith. The relation of source and doctrine might be described as one of elaboration, authorization, or confirmation, but it is never explanation:

Alle þe clerkes under crist ne koude þis assoille,
But þus bilongeþ to bileue to lewed þat willen dowel.
For hadde neuere freke fyn wit þe feþþ to dispute,
Ne man hadde no merite myȝte it ben ypreued:
Clergy imposes a double limit on the handling of faith’s articles. No clerk, then or now, is capable of reasonably explaining the biblical verse above, whose more explicit formulations (starting with the early church fathers) only put its irresolvable tensions in starker relief. Clerks lack the “fyn wit” to “dispute” this Trinitarian proof-text, because it is not the sort of thing that can be subjected to the form of disputation. As E. Talbot Donaldson translates line 255: “For no clerk ever had wit acute enough to discuss faith’s reasons.” (One is reminded of Pascal’s famous line: “the heart has reasons, which reason does not know.”)

Faith, therefore, has a self-imposed limit: it has its own reasons, which that do not arise from sensory or intellectual capacities alone. Furthermore, faith enables a meritorious life within the Church, a faith whose “reasons” remain undisclosed to those who seek to analyze them. Indeed, it is that very seeking that could prove dangerous and paralyzing, as in the case of theologie. And even granted that faith could be proved – and this is the second limit – it would have no merit anyway. “Faith has no merit where human reason [ratio] supplies the proof [experimentum].”

So says St. Gregory. Which is why Clergy here forgoes proof as ratio (or racio) and recommends Dobet and Dobest as a practice of suffering in which one might work in one’s works what is taught by Holy Church: “Loke þow werche it in werk þat þi word sheweþ.”

Suffering by “the Boke” means to “be suche in thi soul e as thow semest withoute” (B 10.257-63). It means to be un-Catolike in one’s behavior, to match outward presentation...

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20 The MED has under assossed (v.), no. 4 (a) “To solve, explain (a riddle, problem, etc.)” and (c) “resolve (a doubt).”


with one’s interior disposition. It means also, perhaps, to exhibit in one’s life what is contained, and for the most part hidden, inside a book. Clergy can be understood, then, as a corrective to *theologie* – a chastened theology, a figure who reins in excessive theologizing. (It should be noted that I am not aiming for a comprehensive definition of *clergie*, if such a thing is possible. My more modest aim is to locate those moments in which it seems *clergie* overlaps with, or takes over from, *theologie.*) In other words, Clergy circumscribes the boundary of theological speculation: his name represents, in part, what cannot be known. Thus, even when much of Imaginatif’s brief is to defend Clergy in light of the faithful *rustici* (those ignorant but graced believers whose *paternosters* pierce heaven), or his advantage over Kynde Wit in matters of spiritual health (e.g., B 12.171-5), Clergy’s limits are always made palpable. For example, in passus 12, Imaginatif explains that

> “Clergie and kynde wit comþ of siȝte and techyng

> As þe book bereþ witenesse to burnes þat kan rede:

> *Quod scimus loquimur, quod vidimus testamur.*

> Of *quod scimus* comeþ Clergie, [a] konnynge of heuene,

> And of *quod vidimus* comeþ kynde wit, of siȝte of diuerse peple.” (B 12.64-8)

but his apt distinction of the two figures, rendered as an opposition between *quod scimus* and *quod vidimus* (what we know vs. what we see), is immediately qualified:

> “Ac grace is a gifte of god and of greet loue spryngeþ;

> Knew neuere clerk how it comeþ forþ, ne kynde wit þe weyes:

> *Nescit aliquis vnde venit aut quo vadit etc.*

> Ac yet is Clergie to comende and kynde wit boþ,

> And namely Clergie, for cristes loue, þat of Clergie is roote.” (B 12.69-71)
Clergy corresponds to a heavenly comprehension ("konnynge of heuene"); Kynde Wit, a more sober view of the world and its inhabitants.23 When it comes to the grace that springs from love, neither have a clue about “how it cometh forth” nor “the weyes,” the cause or the mode. (“Clergie” here, and often elsewhere, is used interchangeably with “clerke.”) The Spirit comes and goes where it pleases; it blows where it will, and we can only observe its effects.24

There is much to recommend in Clergy, but he can never determine the cause of grace. In three wonderful lines, Langland writes that while “holy goost” cleaves to “heuene,”

... loue shal lepen out after into þis lowe erpe,

And clennesse shal cacchen it and clerkes shullen it fynde. (B 12.140-1)

The leap of love is “caught” in a virginal womb; all clerks can do is discover the miraculous baby when he emerges. God’s wisdom shows itself in the incarnation, and clerks cannot but behold it. Yet clergie is not entirely impotent: he holds the keys of “cristes tresor,” the power to bind on heaven and earth; he appoints kings and knights; and his lineage is of the Levite priests (B 12.105-12, 126-30). Moreover, he administers divine grace in the rites of the sacraments. Clergy’s domain however is not to inquire into the cause of things – whether those are the four Aristotelian causes, or the specialized topic of sacramental causality. When Imaginatif gets to the topic of the sacrament on the altar, he does not ask how a material

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23 Hugh White, Nature and Salvation in Piers Plowman, 6 (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1988), 27. The “Boke” bears witness to John 3:11, which White reads in the verse’s immediate context: “Apparently Langland took the seeing / knowing opposition as parallel to that between terrana and coelestia. Clergie is in some sense ‘of hevene’ and kynde wit of the earth. This does not encourage one to suppose that kynde wit of itself offers access to Truth.”

element (bread, wine) might cause something immaterial. That is, he does not ask how a wafer, consecrated as a host, can impart grace to the believer, either by means of a dispositional or instrumental cause, a naturally ordered intentionality, or a divine pact which functions like money.\(^{25}\) (Nor does he ask the even more vexed question of what precisely happens at consecration.)

Instead, Imaginatif takes another tack. He traces the roots of *clergie* to writing – not to any writing, mind you, but the letters that Christ inscribed with his finger. Whilst the Old Law of Moses “that God wrote” condemned any adulterous woman to death by stoning, such a woman in John’s gospel is rescued from that fate:

A womman, as [we] fynd[n], was gilty of þat dede,

Ac crist of his curteisie þoruȝ clergie hir saued.

[For] þoruȝ carectes þat crist wroot þe Iewes knewe hemselue

Giltier as afor god, and gretter in synne,

Than þe womman þat þere was, and wenten awy for shame. (B 12.72-80)

Through Clergy, that is, through Christ’s characters (“carectes”), is the woman saved, and here Langland emphasizes the writing of Christ which judges her accusers, thereby acquitting the woman. Like the source of this passage (John 8:3-11), no mention is made of what Christ wrote on the ground – not even if they were in fact letters. It is only recorded *that* he wrote, notable enough for being the sole instance of Jesus writing (although it’s not there in the earliest biblical manuscripts). In this moment – which, incidentally, distinguishes Jesus from Socrates, who famously never wrote – Christ’s characters themselves remain hidden. Only their effects, not exactly visible either, are relayed: those of comforting and shaming, saving

and damning (B 12.81-5). Devastatingly, for the Jews they produce an incriminating self-knowledge.

As a writing that undoes the writing of the Old Law (by undoing, in the first place, those who claim to follow it), these “carectes” simultaneously institute the power of Clergy to consecrate:

For goddes body myȝte nouȝt ben of breed wiȝouten clergie,

The which body is boȝe boote to þe riȝtfulle

And deep and dannacioun to hem þat deyeþ yuele,

As cristes carectes confortede, and boȝe coupable shewed

The womman þat þe Iewes [jugged] þat Iesus þouȝte to saue:

*Nolite indicare et non indicabimini.*

Riȝt so goddes body, breȝeren, but it be worþili taken,

Dampneþ vs at þe day of dome as [dide þe carectes] þe Iewes.

Forþi I conseille þee for cristes sake clergie þat þow louye…” (B 12.85-92)

Returning to the same adulterous woman, a reiterative looping so characteristic of Langland’s fugal thought, Imaginatif compares Christ’s characters to his body. Both Christ’s characters and sacramental body (“goddes body”) conceal an effective power: the power to judge. Whereas Christ’s substance is hidden under the accidents of bread, his earlier characters are concealed within John’s narrative. It is as if consecration is a kind of unknown writing that inscribes Christ’s body on the ritual element of bread. Priests, of course, know the verbal formula on account of which transformation (or transubstantiation, or consubstantiation, or what have you) takes place. Yet they are ignorant of how exactly it takes place – of how the miracle, enacted with confident regularity at mass, comes to be.
This ignorance does not detract, however, from the sacrament’s efficacy, and might even be necessary to its supernatural operation. For Clergy himself does not save, but enables by a particular act of inscription the receiving of spiritual benefits. His role is in unifying the two signs of Christ, who prefigures his mystical body in his characters.

Clergy is thus the necessary (though not sufficient) means by which we are saved. The point is made negatively in an analogy of seeing and reading:

For as a man may nouȝt se þat myssel þis eyȝen,
Na moore kan no Clerk but if he cauȝte it first þoruȝ bokes. (B 12.97-104)

Without eyes, a man cannot see; without books, he cannot know (“kan no Clerk”). Books – books of logic and law, not to mention the Good Book – are the condition of knowledge. Some are the site where God’s speech leaves a trace (“seint Spirit … seide what men sholde write”); others prepare or codify. Taken together, they are a sort of organ of knowing and reasoning, the intellectual equivalent of sensory vision (B 12.102-4). Scripture and other authorized “bokes,” then, are the perceptual ground – the organ of clerking – from which Clergy proceeds. As such, Clergy represents the economy of salvation, an economy passed down through written signs: from Christ’s characters to lettered priests who appoint and instruct, who makes sin known, who administer the channels of grace. Clergy discerns what is known according to the potentia ordinata Dei, the ordained will of God (to use scholastic parlance). In short, clerie is Christ’s deputy on earth – “kepere vnder crist of heuene” (B 12.126) – whose version of theology carefully delimits the boundaries for speculation.

Although such boundaries might seem a sleight of hand, a mere trick distracting from truly hard questions, they can be spiritually useful: they tell us how we ought not to expend our energies, lest we are left wandering in a maze of darkness. So while Imaginatif
makes clear Clergy’s limits – he knows neither the cause of grace nor the whisperings of Kynde – they are not simply prohibitive. By enclosing the bounds of the permissible, one is forced to consider other modes of thinking, other ways of imagining not yet taken.

Imaginatif himself goes beyond Clergy and his wife when he claims that the salvation of the wise pagans, who bequeathed to us the vast riches of human scientia, is indeterminate – and therefore possible.

And wheiper he [i.e., Aristotle] be saaf or nouȝt saaf, þe soȝe woot no clergie,
Ne of Sortes ne of Salamon no scripture kan telle.
Ac god is so good, I hope þat siþe he gaf hem wittes
To wissen vs [wyes] þerewiþ þat wiss[hen] to be saued –
And þe bettre for hir bokes to bidden we ben holden –
For lettred men were lewed yet ne were loore of hir bokes. (B 12.270-6)

Indeed, Imaginatif entertains more than the possibility. He hopes that Aristotle, Socrates, and Solomon will be saved, against the clerks who insist, in Will’s words, that “no creature of cristes liknesse withouten cristendom worþ saved” (B 12.279). That salvation can occur without Christendom is confirmed by Imaginatif’s imaginative (though not exceptional) interpretation of the eighteenth verse of First Peter – Salvabitur vis justus in die judicii – which he applies to the well-known case of Trajan:

_Ergo salvabitur._ (B 12.281-2)

Trajan may not occupy the high ranks of heaven, but he is saved (if only just) by virtue of living up to what “hise lawe techeth” (c.f. B 11.140ff.). Or he is saved in conjunction with St.

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26 For a more modern defense, see Hans Urs von Balthasar, _Dare We Hope That All Men Be Saved? With A Short Discourse on Hell_, trans. David Kipp and Lothar Krauth (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988).
Gregory’s remembrance, who wept and did penance for him as recorded in the *Legenda Sanctorum*.

If St. Gregory earlier excludes merit from reason (*racio*) and proof (*experimentum*), his own example of compassion for Trajan suggests other *experimenta* by which faith can be interrogated. These are not quite the hypotheticals that the Oxford Calculators relished when they considered alternative scenarios *secundum imaginationem*. But they are experiments which are conscious of the fact that God’s ordained will (*potentia ordinata Dei*) always operates, in principle, alongside his absolute will, the *potentia absoluta Dei* so often invoked in medieval case studies. My point is not to involve myself in the well-trodden debate on scepticism, where the distinction of God’s ordained and absolute power often leads. I am more interested in what it makes thinkable: that which is not enclosed or fully contained by Christendom and *clergie*, of which Imaginatif’s conjectures are one instance. To go beyond *theologie* and *clergie*, however, is not necessarily to avoid the topics and problemata that are dear to them. Nor is it categorically to shirk “bokes.” (Despite his “baw for bokes!”) Trajan might not have been saved without a book – namely the *Legenda Sanctorum* which he himself cites, the book that recounts a Pope giving exception to the Christendom he represents and

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governs [B 11.140].) Rather, it is to fill up what is lacking in them; to proceed in a different manner or mode; to consider what is not yet thought. It is to conduct a narrative experiment.

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The question, though, is how that might be done. This is perhaps the wager of Langland’s project itself, the three (or more) attempts at composing *Piers Plowman*. I myself attempt no comprehensive answer. In the last section of this chapter, however, I wish to suggest that is what is dark in *theologie* and prohibited by *clergie* is something more clearly perceived by *Piers Plowman*. What *Piers* perceives, it seems to me, cannot be expressed propositionally in the manner of the scholastic disputation. In a sense, *Piers* is something like the ideal wayfarer that Scotus hints at every now and then in his *theology* – the wayfarer (as we saw in Chapter 2) specially graced by God in having an abstractive cognition of the divine concept. But I am getting ahead of myself.

It is not till the fifteenth passus that we are introduced to *Piers*’ unique perception. After the Pardon scene, Anne Middleton notes, there is a definitive “shift in *Piers*’ narrative valence from present authority to absent object of desire”: his removal from the scene only increases an intense longing for him, by the community and by the figure of Will, who is his deeply flawed substitute. Anima is quick to point out the flaws of Will’s “wille,” prodded by an apparently harmless joke about a bishop’s many names:

‘That is sooþ,’ seide he [Anima]; ‘now I se þi wille.

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29 Cole and Galloway, “Christian Philosophy in Piers Plowman,” 145. “The theme of intellectual and ethical *experientia* is announced with the narrator’s initial wandering and gazing, and the theme is explicitly articulated as the words of a clearly authoritative figure, whose likeness to Lady Philosophy from Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy* is more than superficial: Holy Church.”

Thow woldest knowe and konne þe cause of alle [hire] names,
And of [myne] if þow myȝtest, me þinkeþ by þi speche.’
‘Ye, sire!’ I seide, “by so no man were greued
Alle þe sciences vnder sonne and alle þe sotile craftes,
I wolde knewe and kouþe kyndely in myn herte.” (B 15.45-50)

Will’s prideful grasp for all the sciences is in fact his imperfection, in which he recapitulates the doubly original “[c]ouetise to konne and to knowe scienc[e]” – putting Adam and Eve out of paradise (and Lucifer out of heaven) (B 15.62-3). The knowledge of all sciences belongs to none “except criste oone,” whose counsel, which accords with the clerks, is not to know more than is needed (B 15.55, 68-9). Better for masters and “doctours” of divinity to instruct the unlearned in matters of sin and penance rather than to argue about “materes vnmesurable to tellen of þe Trinite” (B 15.70-4). As it turns out, however, even the “curatoures” of Holy Church – priests or clerks – who teach and administer the salvific economy are grossly imperfect: “A[c] þer þe roote is roten, reson woot the soþe, / Shal neuere flour ne fruyt [wexe] ne fair leef be grene” (B 15.101-2).

Endemic to that rotten root is the exchange of money for priestly services, which corrupts both gift and giver, preacher and listener. Free from such covetousness (whether it be for knowledge, money, or self-gratification), is “charite,” a word Will seizes upon when it is mentioned. Where is Charite? asks Will, claiming never to have seen him:

Clercis kenne me þat crist is in alle places
Ac I seiȝ hym neuere soþly but as myself in a Mirour:

[Hic] in enigmate, tunc facie ad faciem.

And so I trowe trewly, by þat man telleþ of [it,
Will desires to see “crist” whose name so easily becomes “Charite,” and whom he cannot see except darkly “as myself in a Mirour” – as the mirror that is Anima, or the self doubly reflected by him. (The slippage of Christ and Charité comes full circle in line 212: “Piers þe Plowman, Petrus id est christus.”)

‘By crist! I wolde that I knewe hym [Charite],’ quod I, ‘no creature leuere.’

‘Wiþouten help of Piers Plowman,’ quod he, ‘his persone sestow neuere.’

‘Wherþer clerkes knowen hym,’ quod I, ‘that kepen holi kirke?’

“Clerkes haue no knowyng,” quod he, ‘but by werkes and wordes.

Ac Piers þe Plowman parceyveþ moore depper

That is þe wille and wherfore þat many wight suffreþ:

*Et vidit Deus cogitaciones eorum.* (B 15.195-200)

Piers the Plowman perceives more deeply. What precisely does Piers perceive? Not what can be known “by werkes and wordes,” the visible cues or actions which belong to clerkly learning. No, Piers peers deep into “þe wille,” into Will and the will of everyone. He sees, as God does, the thoughts and intentions of all creatures: their schemes and devises, the inner actions that declare their true motivation. What Piers “parceyveþ” is beyond the observable world and the revealed understanding of *clerjye* – beyond the “colour” of people and the realm of words and works.

Piers therefore shares an affinity with Scotus’s ideal wayfarer who, in possession of a distinct, singular yet abstractive concept of God, has a genuinely scientific knowledge which is no need of revelation or doctrine. Or to put it more positively, this wayfarer is granted a perfect knowledge of God (second only to beatific vision) which includes all the truths of a
lesser, hence imperfect knowledge – the truths contained in Scripture and developed within the precincts of Holy Church. That is, Piers Plowman and Scotus’ wayfarer perceive what is before revelation; they go deeper to its roots, to the originary concept from which all revealed truths may be generated and put into discursive form. However, Piers does not appear to perceive a singular concept – or at any rate, he does not perceive that abstractive concept which generates propositions and syllogistic argument. What Piers is able to grasp is something perhaps more obscure: not just the external acts that issue from the will, but those interior acts of will which are hidden. In addition he sees the cogitationes that always precede action, the understanding of the intellect that primes (but doesn’t necessitate) the will’s extension into act. The perception that Piers enjoys is truly godlike. Even the blessed angels cannot see into the will of others – humans included – unless they decide to show them what’s on their minds. Their knowledge of will is dependent on our will.

Whatever it is that Piers does perceive, it is not a single concept that is slotted as subject term in a proposition, unfolding as a string of premises and conclusions as a result. Rather, I would like to suggest, it is a perception which unfolds in discursive form as a

31 See Chapter 2, section 3.

32 As Scotus explains in the prologue to his Ordinatio, “an elicited act of the will is action first, and a commanded act is so only because of it; therefore if a choice exists on its own, without order to a commanded, to wit because lack of matter of the external act, it alone will be truly action.” A bare choice is truly action; it is an interior act of will that needs no external circumstance to complete it. This is made clear by the example of money: “someone without money, to whom however money is presented in imagination, before the choice of any action becomes a principle moving to or commanding some action, if he chooses to distribute the money liberally should he have it, then, as far as the act and habit of virtue is concerned, no further prosecution of the act or distribution is required, because when some object has been presented in imagination about which an act of liberality can be done, the choice from which liberality is generated, or which is elicited from liberality, is possessed in its completeness; nor is there required any further prosecution of the act, or anything external, or any order to what is external, if the matter of the external act is lacking” (Ord., prol., p.5, q.1, para 288). In other words, the response to money, even if the money is imaginary, is still an ethical choice: it is an action which is complete in itself.

narrative – an ethical narrative that is generated from a privy knowledge of the will. Not that it needs to unfold for Piers, who “simply sees and knows.”34 (Remember that, for the scholastics, God knows in a single glance; discursive elaboration is a sign of our imperfection.) But it is the burden of human work – indeed, the work of the poem’s writing – to draw out what is already there in the deep vision of Piers. Through the figure of Piers Plowman are the contents of his vision elaborated for Will’s (and our) benefit. The second time Piers appears to Will is a few pages after Anima mentions him above. Not quite satisfied with Anima’s long monologue, Will queries again “what charite is to mene.” “It is a ful trie tree,” says Anima, which is followed by an allegorical reading of its parts (its root is mercy, its leaves are ecclesiastical law, its fruit is charity). But at the name of “Piers þe Plowman,” Will swoons and lays “longe in a louedream” in which Piers himself

… al þe place me shewed
And bad me toten on þe tree, on top and on roote.

With þre piles was it vnderpigeth; I perceyued it soone. (B 16.18-23)

Within this secondary dream, Will sees what Piers perceives; he is given access to a certain vision: “I perceyued it soone.” But the vision of “þe tree” turns out to be teeming with a surplus of mearing, such that each successive unfolding, starting with Anima’s, gives rise to more, sometimes incompatible, readings.

The three poles “stonde” and stand for the power (potentia) and wisdom (sapientia) of God, as well as the liberum arbitrium (with “help of þe holy goost”). The poles that are

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34 Cole and Galloway, “Christian Philosophy in Piers Plowman,” 152. “Langland gives Piers Plowman an ability scholastics can only dream of or, per Dame Study, simply fail at doing. So it is with a special, epistemological interest that Langland concocts the seemingly innocent allegory that is the figure of Piers Plowman, neither God nor man, neither scholastic nor plowman, yet oddly all of these things at once, rending ‘philosophye’ truly transcendent but deeply immanent.”
supposed to prop up the tree are picked up and wielded against the triple winds of World, Flesh, and Devil. Ever distracted, Will begins to have a thousand thoughts (“þouȝtes a þreve”) of the tree’s wood, particularly its kind and origin and commonality among the three piles. Are they made of the one wood? “That is sooþ,” quod Piers, who promises to tell him what the tree is called, but instead tells him the name of the ground: “The ground þere it groweþ, goodnesse it hatte.” Which he immediately follows up by insisting he has already told him what it means:

‘And I haue told þee what hiȝte þe tree; þe Trinite it meneþ.’

And egreliche he loked on me … (B 16.60-64)

In his irritation (“egreliche”) Piers signals a resistance, as if censuring the tendency to translate the image into Trinitarian doctrine. At the same time, he pre-emptively shuts down the talk so characteristic of doctors, clerks, and satiated lords – the impulse to chatter rather than, like true philosophers, to remain silent (c.f. B 11.411-22). Chastened, Will decides to ask about the fruit, defined triply (as matrimony, continence, maidenhood), before registering a wish to taste one – how about an apple?

At this point the sequence of readings takes a decisive turn, although it proceeds from an inexplicable line: “And Piers caste to þe cropppe and þanne comsed it to crye” (B 16.75). If the “it” that is cast is unidentified, what it sets off are the cries and groans of the fruit, who, apparently ripened, are shaken to the ground by Piers. Now it is not my intention to give a full explication of the so-called Tree of Charity episode, let alone a summary of its apparent meaning. On the contrary, I do want to point out that this episode resists any attempts to be made coherent and singular, its remarkable density and richness being unamenable to propositional analysis. As soon as the tree’s fruits have fallen and have been
snatched by the Devil, they become patriarchs and prophets who have been snatched. Piers’ quest to get them back, pole in hand, strangely morphs into a gospel retelling. With Piers offstage and Will silenced, a biblical narrative emerging from a voice elsewhere begins: “And þanne spak spiritus sanctus in Gabrielis mouþe / To a mayde þat hiȝte Marie” (B 16.90-1). The incarnation of God unfolds under the watchful eye of Piers, who tends another “fruyt” to be ripened and won in battle. Thus, it is through narrative that we are treated to a behind-the-scenes look at Christ’s life in history – a history which requires even God to wait and to learn:

And in þe wombe of þat wenche was he fourty woukes
Til he weex a faunt þoruȝ hir flessh and of ðigtyng kouþe
To haue yfouȝte wip þe fend ar ful tyme come.
And Piers þe Plowman parceyued plener tyme
And lered hym lechecraft his lif for to saue … (B 16.100-5)

Since Piers’ perception is a deep vision of temporality, he teaches the Son of God a “lechecraft” unlike any liberal or mechanical art. Piers perceives prophetically – what will be in the fullness of time (“plener tyme”) – and prepares Christ through the divine art of healing himself, in order that he might heal others, raise them from the dead, and take on death and the Devil himself. Against scholastic consensus (that Christ never learned but only his disciples did), Piers is tutor to Christ. Piers, in the manner of Kynde, is a greater Study whose learnings are ordered to an apocalyptic event, making “daye of nyȝt” (B 16.166). (No wonder Will is shocked into tears and, upon waking, roams around “as an ydiote.” So

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35 See Peter Lombard’s Sent. III, d. 13.
disorienting an event, even if dreamed within a dream, means a return to one’s former life is impossible.)³⁶

The “parceyu[ing]” of Piers is wilder than what Dame Study could hope to know, far greater than what clergie or scholasticism could muster. Because propositional logic is inadequate to the unfolding of Piers’ perception, it must be elaborated in a different mode: the mode of narrative. The turn to narrative is therefore a reversal of Bonaventure’s claim that the mode of theology is, unlike Scripture, reasoning (in rationem modo). If theology did not proceed by the mode which is native to Scripture (i.e., modum narrationis), Piers Plowman marks a significant moment in which theology is rethought as narrative. This is not, however, a simple return to Scripture but a return to its narrative mode through the mode of ratio. More specifically, it is a return that picks up the fragmented remains of a disillusioned scholasticism and reconstitutes them in and as a poem – a poem, as I have recounted in theologie’s transformations, which also gives a progressive narrative of that return.³⁷ It is in that sense that Piers Plowman could be said to be a work of theology without theology.

³⁶ B 16.167-70. I am reminded of the family in Pier Paolo Pasolini’s Teorema (1968), which cannot function the same (to say the least) once they all – maid, wife, son, father, daughter – are seduced and abandoned by a mysterious man.

³⁷ More radically, it might be a return to first philosophy, as hinted at earlier in Study’s enigmatic syntagm, “Plato þe poete.”


Nicomachean Ethics. Translated by Terence Irwin. 2nd ed. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1999.


Watson, Nicholas. “Censorship and Cultural Change in Late-Medieval England: Vernacular Theology, the Oxford Translation Debate, and Arundel’s Constitutions of 1409.” *Speculum* 70, no. 4 (October 1, 1995): 822–64.


