Across the Bridge of Sighs: Reading a Christian Theology of Melancholy

Laura-Claire Wilson

Student No. 4178852

Supervisor: Professor John Milbank

Dept. of Theology and Religious Studies

University of Nottingham

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Abstract

In this thesis, I will proceed by the examination of exemplary texts in the western Christian understanding of, and engagement with, the concept of chronically melancholic and destructively sorrowful states. I will begin with influential texts from the ancient west and near east, such as The Book of Job, and the Pseudo-Aristotle, that have provided the touchstones and archetypes of the subject throughout – and beyond – the historical period covered, as well as contemporary narratives whose concerns and themes instructively throw salient features of the former icons into high relief. Thereafter, I shall trace these themes and their development through the work of those Christians who have most powerfully and significantly dealt with the concept of melancholy theologically.

In doing so, I will argue, certain significant patterns of interpretation and thematic weighting become apparent. In the narratives surrounding melancholy heroes, we find a personal interlocution with the divine that characteristically takes place in a public context. This is because they contain both a revolutionary critique, and radical reintegration, of a fractured society along compassionate lines. This compassion is interpersonal empathy in the face of the ultimately incomprehensible contradictions and limitations of human life - both in terms of theodicy, and the particularities of every individual's melancholy, which is grounded in the metaphysically-ambiguous nature of

humanity, whose limitations reflect our melancholic distance from divine consummation - the very atmospheric dynamic of contemplation itself.

From Evagrius to Kierkegaard, sorrow is the kernel and fulcrum of both sin and moral development. To paraphrase Camus, sorrow is the *theological* question.

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Across the Bridge of Sighs: Introduction

The path we must all take – across the Bridge of Sighs into eternity.

- *Søren Kierkegaard*[1]

The first chapter of the Gospel of John has acted, for two thousand years, as the fundamental statement of Christian theological metaphysics; the narrative undergirding of the cosmos. Most familiar to English speakers in the rhythmic cadences of the King James Bible, the surety of salvation and the nature of God are guaranteed and expressed by the statement that, when confronted by light, darkness 'comprehended it not.'

Yet, for many contemporary Christians, it can seem as if it is, in fact, darkness that is not comprehended by light. Alarming proportions of western populations are expected to receive a diagnosis of mental ill-health of at last one form or another in their lifetimes. Yet there is little theological or broad-based pastoral response to this phenomenon, which is both a health crisis, and, more fundamentally, a challenge to the philosophical and spiritual resources of our societies. Indeed, the Christian response to the challenge of, for example, depression, is often haunted by the sinful spectre of despair, and, motivated to

[1] S. Kierkegaard, *The Diary of Søren Kierkegaard, ed. P. Rhode,* (Citadel, 1987), 24.

reject any possibility of the latter, can be hobbled its capacity to substantially engage with the former.

However, it is the absence of such a substantial engagement that, in fact, risks distress collapsing into despair. On this outer shore of human experience, the believer, submitting her daily experience to God, as she must, has the question forced upon her of the presence of divine in apparent meaninglessness, or, worse, in the perversity of injustice that misshapes a lonely world until it is 'out of joint.' When the fundamental Christian blessings of hope and joy are so circumscribed, both doctrine and narrative face challenges that must be met if their integrity is to be maintained.

Indeed, it is the very maintenance of this integrity that is the true Christian bulwark against the sin of despair, the responsibility for which lies as much with the church as it does with the individual believer. Not only is it incumbent upon the Body of Christ to visit the sick and to liberate prisoners, but also to receive with tenderness those whose afflicted with less tangible pain and, if not necessarily to dissolve, answer or remedy the malady, then at least to respond to it, or to transfigure the pain by contextualisation and compassion.

Moreover, this reception is not only of relevance to the soul of the sufferer and their local church community. While the contemporary tendency to medicalise melancholy has historical roots in the corporeal accounts of chronic sorrow established by the ancient Greeks, a purely physical account largely brackets

out any social aspect of, for example, depression, beyond the most intimate and personal. Ironically, the modern preference for attempting objectivity has rendered this condition largely subjective in that its referent is purely reflexive and its pertinence solely to the sufferer. The effect of doing so is to elide the question of whether a broader context of disorder grounds the appearance of a melancholic state. Theologically, this renders not only the response to sorrow a personal matter for the afflicted and those with whom they might come into contact, but also avoids interrogating the idea that the cumulative sum of these various interpersonal connections and responsibilities lends both virtue, and sin, a social aspect. The alienation of the melancholy has profound implications for the construction of the City of God. If one citizen is isolated in grief, the Kingdom remains unbuilt. If its citizens cannot pierce that darkness with the light of the Gospel, then they do not bear Good News at all.

The Christian response to melancholic states, however, must not be of a purely remedial nature. If, as indicated above, chronic, disabling sorrow has a social aspect, then the condition of the sufferer is not merely a personal issue, of concern only to the individual and their private circle, but also has implications for their wider community. The estrangement of one must be the concern of the whole, not only out of charity, but also to the degree that it interrogates the justice and integrity of that whole. In his perturbing dissonance, the melancholic may not only reveal his own distress, but also signal that there is a dropped stitch in the knit of society. Rather than repressed as an antisocial symptom, the protest of sorrow can have prophetic potential regarding both the

gap remaining between the ‘already’ and the ‘not yet’ of the Kingdom, and also of the compassion and action at present within our grasp as we move towards the Celestial City.

A response to melancholic maladies is desperately needed in the Church at the three levels described above: that of the individual believer’s relationship to God and their own faith, that of interpersonal connections, and that of the character of society itself. The urgency of this demand is particularly important to me: I have suffered from depression for half of my life; it has overshadowed my passage into maturity and shaped most, if not all, of my significant choices from my schooldays onwards.

Thus, I have never known an adult faith that has been neither marked nor motivated by the challenges of despondency, hopelessness and alienation. It has been the matter of my petitions and the subject of my meditations. It has not been possible for me to approach what is, today, diagnosed as a medical problem from anything other than a Christian perspective. I have not experienced faith as either antithetical to, or, what might even be worse, a sentimental panacea for, depression. Rather, I have found myself compelled to wrestle with questions that may be unanswerable, to find comfort in that compassion that inhabits a love that listens, and strength in the integrity demonstrated by those figures who have cleaved to faith while, at the same time, insisting on the validity of their experience.

That I am not the only one driven to interrogate my melancholy with my faith, and, indeed, my faith with my melancholy, has been made clear to me in the course of my research. The topic, without fail, generates curiosity and, frequently, engagement, in everyday conversation outside the academy. Moreover, it is perhaps the nature of the interest it elicits within an academic context that is most remarkable and revealing. It has struck me repeatedly that the response to papers and seminars I have given during the writing of this thesis has been as much pastoral as it has been theological. While the idea of a theology of melancholy can seem, on the surface, counter-intuitive, the narrative of Job is, for example, sufficiently familiar to render the notion less than completely alien. However, despite many fruitful, illuminating and enjoyable discussions regarding the logic of Thomas Aquinas' understanding of the passions, or the meta-irony embedded in Robert Burton's Anatomy of Melancholy, those questions and conversations whose impressions have persisted most deeply in my memory have been pastoral or personal. Ministers who count, among their flock, congregants struggling with mental illness need both theological and practical tools if they are to carry out their duty of pastoral care. Even more, individual believers desperately need reassurance, comfort and inspiration in the midst of their own struggles. The most moving experience of my entire post-graduate career was to be approached by a colleague after giving a paper at a conference to be told that she had 'really needed to hear' what I had to say that day.

On 'Reading'

On that particular occasion, I was presenting on the respective responses to melancholic distress found in the works of Dante Alighieri and Francesco Petrarch. I began my academic career as an undergraduate in history; however, it is now, as a theologian, that I find historical sources to be most germane. Indeed, for the Christian, who lives both surrounded by a cloud of witnesses, and also by the resurrected life of a specific historical figure in Jesus of Nazareth, the testimony of the past is no dead letter. The past may be a foreign country, but the New Jerusalem is the teleological home of all Christians, the momentum towards which shapes our particular pilgrimages, both through, and across, time. To engage with the theology of our predecessors is not merely an exercise in ancestor-worship, or, conversely, a sterilised autopsy conducted upon inert remains. Instead, our fellow-believers throughout the centuries may be seen as, in some sense, our contemporaries, part of the same corpus to which we are united, and whose faith is still vital in the living church. To theologise with history is to participate in the broadest life of the Body of Christ. Though, naturally, informed by the discipline of history itself in learning to read the language of the past, the theologian engages with her forebears as dynamic interlocutors. Indeed, one may understand theology as a both doctrine seeking the stability of eternity, but also as a 'narrativisation' of the faithful's understanding of their mission.

Thus, an examination of explicitly Christian grapplings with the subject of chronic sorrow, in adding to this narrative, also brings alive and makes

available and accessible this common wealth to contemporary believers. To these ends, I shall read selected exemplary texts alongside each other, and demonstrate that they align with, and co-illuminate, each other at suggestive points such that they triangulate a particularly Christian understanding of, and response to, the problems of melancholia and its discontents.

In selecting texts for consideration, my choices were governed by several key considerations. Primary among these was that each texts must contain explicitly theological engagement with the themes of melancholy or chronic sorrow; in the case of Common Era texts, this engagement must take place within a Christian framework. While, as noted above, the Christian attitude to unhappiness is often freighted by the sinful spectre of hopelessness, nevertheless, given the undoubted influence and compelling charisma of texts such as Job and Ps-Aristotle, it is unsurprising that the concept has required a degree of theological engagement. Indeed, recent scholarly interest has focussed on, variously, the character of the monastic vice of *acedia*[2], and early modern treatments of melancholy as a matter for the care of souls. Nevertheless, though the nature of historical engagement has often remained fragmentary and considered largely under the rubric of the personal virtue and vice of the individual, the reading offered below establishes a far broader understanding of melancholy's implications and relevance, extending its

[2] A. Crislip, "The Sin of Sloth or the Illness of the Demons? The Demon of Acedia in Early Christian Monasticism", *Harvard Theological Review 98* (2005), 143-69; J. Schmidt, *Melancholy and the Care of the Soul: Religion, Moral Philosophy and Madness in Early Modern England,* (Ashgate, 2007).

purview and theological import, not only to the believer's relationship with God, but to also the health of human society.

In pursuing this understanding, I chose to restrict myself to written sources, despite the prevalence and power of the melancholic motif, particularly in renaissance art, and most exemplarily in Dürer, as I am not a trained art historian. Similarly, as I am not trained in the contemporary discipline of psychology, nor in the history and theory of psycholanalysis, crucial in late modern thought regarding melancholic states, I have decided to restrict the scope of this thesis to pre-twentieth century thinkers in order to avoid an incomplete engagement with the sources. Finally, my interest in rhetoric and intention to focus on the interpersonal and social aspects of Christian responses to these problems rendered verbal elaborations on the themes most relevant. Not only the lexical nature of the text, but their formal characters, and internal mechanisms, too, informed my focus, even as they began to present distinctive patterns. I repeatedly found that those works which confronted melancholy states with the kind of theological interrogation in which I am interested expressed that struggle within dialogic and dramatic forms. Equally, I found that even those more analytical works dealing effectively with melancholy frequently tended to rely on narrative as a means to elaborate the essence and attributes of melancholy, whether in its daily form, or in the logic of its

progress.[3] The final selection of texts presented in this thesis reflect the efficacy of these formal qualities in constructing an understanding of sorrowful states that can both plumb the depths of the sufferer's own internal trauma, while, at the same time, reaching outside of the individual's psycho-drama to its relevance for his or her wider community.

Indeed, I will argue that, in fact, the most significant cause and consequence of malignant sorrow that emerges upon this reading is, in fact, one of social, and more broadly cosmic, disintegration, and that the psychic alienation experienced by the sufferer is itself a part of this larger process. Not only is the relationship of the individual to the divine questioned as part of the crisis, but so also is the relationship of the individual to society, and the relationship of that wider society to God.

In this light, therefore, the duty of the Christian towards her melancholic brother becomes clear: in the re-establishing of those social bonds broken, rooted in the simple inconceivableness of the Divine, through the expression of compassion. One of the most striking features of the texts explored below is their understanding of how despair comes to be possible, and self-harm, under its influence, can even seem rational. The narrative approach to moral psychology referenced above here becomes a vehicle for compassion as well as

[3] In considering the ways in which literary texts (and the literary aspects of more analytical texts) can contribute to scholarship regarding historical constructions of melancholy, I hope to bring the techniques and readings pioneered by scholars such as Erin Sullivan into the theological sphere. See esp. E. Sullivan, *Sadness and Selfhood in Renaissance England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

comprehension. At the same time, framing discussions of melancholy as drama, dialogue, or disputation not only opens this state up to the possibility of compassion, but also enables it to speak to the disjointedness endemic to a fallen world. It might thus be argued that the misery attendant upon becoming aware of such renders this unhappiness potentially instructive. Monastic thinkers have long understood sadness as salutary and tears as cleansing. However, the theological consideration of melancholies as reflective of wider macro-crises elaborated both through and alongside the texts examined below embraces the antique classical notion of the melancholy hero and transfigures it into a prophetic approach to the contradictions and limitations of human life.

That predicament that I will refer to as 'melancholic' or 'sorrowful' I designate as this potential state. It can disintegrate into acedia, an originally monastic vice characterised by diffuse thoughts and abstraction used as a balm for dissatisfaction. It can also decay into outright despair, and revulsion for the necessities and circumscriptions of earthly existence. Either case can lead to a further rupturing of social bonds and further alienation from God, one's fellows and from oneself. However, if melancholy is addressed and interrogated in faithfulness, it becomes open to the comfort of the Divine, and even to theophany, while also embodying a prophetic critique of injustice on earth. That ontological difference which is so confounding is revealed to be, not a question to be answered, but an (or, more properly, the) answer in itself. The healing integration of the melancholic, paradoxically, is revealed to be rooted

in the most foundational unlikeness of all: that which characterises the Creator Who creates the created.

Selection of Texts

The narrative that most obviously exemplifies this movement is, of course, that of the Book of Job, whose titular hero's lonely arguments with man and God's sparse narrative is counterpointed by its soaring rhetoric and dense thematics. So familiar and dominant is the figure of Job, his language, in translation, ingrained in the bedrock of that of English-speakers, and his expressions of protest so paradigmatic, that the text can be hard to consider afresh in a moral theological context, so formative it has been in any Christian consideration of sorrow, misery and the ambiguities of despair.

In order to cast these familiar features into high relief, therefore, I have considered and contextualised Job alongside two other, if less familiar, narratives from the ancient Near East in order to bring out common rhetorical notes themes. Both the Egyptian *Dialogue Of The Man With His Ka* and fragmentary Euripidean tragedy *Bellerophontes* accentuate the formal aspects of Job's dialogic nature and its implications, but also the mysterious, inexpressible nature of those theophanies experienced by the protagonists, whose vigorously expressed sorrow scandalises as much as it elicits sympathy.

Each of these three texts understand misery as a theological and social matter. A final pre-Christian text of crucial importance to western consideration is the *Problemata* of the Pseudo-Aristotle, whose famous association of melancholy with genius has had a decisive impact on thinkers until the present day. However, its construction of melancholia as a humoural condition links its volatility to heroism, and, when read alongside the narratives of Job and Bellerephon, the latter whom the Ps-Aristotle cites as exemplary, the social relevance of this malady in ancient texts is underscored.

Having established a reading of the most influential pre-Christian texts on melancholy, and turning to attitudes to sorrow among Christian theologians, I aim to sketch the fundamental moral skeleton assembled in the desert laboratory of the early monks, with sorrow at its central joints, and the secular flesh that moved on top of its framework in the *Confessions* of Augustine. Moving into the high mediaeval era, I examine how Thomas Aquinas elaborated on these earlier works with humanity and compassion, while composing a commentary on the Book of Job that whose understanding of the nature of its protagonist's struggle is characterised by his own novel vocation as a professional theologian. The synthetic structure elaborated by the Angelic Doctor also provides the architecture for Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*, whose dramatisation of the soul's journey through vice and virtue follows both Thomas and his monastic predecessors' example in locating melancholy at the crux of that pilgrimage.

In contrast to the middle age's emphasis on sorrow as an engine of moral-theological development and a call to communitarian compassion, the Renaissance's more individualistic and intellectual attitude is first alluded to in the works of Francesco Petrarch, Dante's successor as Italy's foremost poet, and decisively formulated by the Florentine philosopher Marsilio Ficino. In linking melancholy primarily with academic genius, while, largely, excising its moral character, led to an aesthticisation of this malady that neutralised both its personal and its prophetic potential. This, perhaps less muscular, ideal of melancholy is typified in John Milton's early works, *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso,* whose appropriation of monastic imagery is not matched by an interest in that tradition's moral psychology. The seventeenth-century Oxford scholar, Robert Burton, in his encyclopaedic *Anatomy of Melancholy,* seems to recognise these ambiguities and complicates his era's understanding of that topic with memories of the efficacy of pre-Reformation regular life, as well as the contemporary struggles of, and injustices faced by, his fellow scholars. Yet the sprawling omnivorousness of his anthology is unable to contain a coherent account of the condition or an effective therapeutic method.

Despite the fascination of the Romantic Era with the mystique of melancholy established by these thinkers, it was not until the work of Søren Kierkegaard that an account emerged that married the psychological acuity of the Romantics with a theological depth largely abrogated by his more recent predecessors. Indeed, in the Danish philosopher's pseudonymous texts considering those conditions he terms 'despair' and 'anxiety' is found a dynamic understanding

of such maladies as being at the centre of moral development that embraces much of the spirit and structure of mediaeval interpretations. Coupled with his engagement with the narrative of Job, Kierkegaard's thought takes up the threads of individual struggle, social dislocation, and prophetic witness to the broader community, culminating in the inexpressible, unimaginable experience of theophany.

Man of Sorrows

It is perhaps significant that, in the discussions of sorrow contained in these texts, there is little mention of the Man of Sorrows, Christ Himself. Indeed, while the Son of Man has long acted as an icon of suffering and its endurance as a sacrifice - one thinks, for example, of Grünewald's Isenheim Alterpiece - the ambivalence towards sorrow itself in the Christian tradition has tended to distinguish sharply between ascesis and misery, and oppose any kind of sorrow to the virtue of joy. Even the works considered in this thesis construct melancholy and similar afflictions as transitional states, whose potential must be actively developed if it is not to collapse into something more corrosive.

Given this ambiguity, the reluctance of theologians and other Christian thinkers to explicitly consider Christ under the rubric of melancholy is reasonably understandable. Nevertheless, once the thought is admitted, several aspects of the Biblical and Credal narrative present themselves as suggestive. From Jesus' own exclamation in Gethsemane that He was sorrowful 'unto death' to the

ontological dislocation of His death and descent into hell, a reading of the Son of God as another type of the melancholy hero constructed in this thesis may be posited.

In first establishing what might be termed a 'theological anthropology' of sorrow, my aim has been to enable a fresh reading of Christ that can grasp the darkness of the Mount of Olives as much as in the light of Mount Tabor. In this sense, this thesis acts as a prolegomena to a Christological study that, in 'making strange' and, thus, making discernible the subjective melancholy of the saviour who suffered inner sorrow in addition to the blows of exterior sorrows, might return her own melancholy to the believer transfigured along with the saviour's own. Hence, in approaching the humanity of the Son of God from the moral philosophy developed by His faithful, one may transform those limitations and contradictions of human nature, and the fractured character of a fallen society, that He, too, experienced, through the saving work of His, and His Father's, divinity.

Prologue: Melancholy in the Ancient World

Just as Christianity did not emerge into a cultural vacuum, so Christian thinking on the topic of malignant sorrow drew on sources that preceded its inception. The most explicit, famous, and influential theorising on the topic of the preponderance of black bile that unbalances the body's humours, was that of the Ps-Aristotle in the *Problematic Physica.*[4] It is in this work that the fateful link between melancholy, even to the point of madness, and both heroism and genius, is made. The precise content of the text itself would be most instrumental to the thought of Renaissance scholars, who constructed an identity around its particular equation.[5] Nevertheless, as the Ps-Aristotle indicates by his citations of both Homer's *Iliad* and Plato's *Phaedrus*, a connotation between melancholy and genius and heroism was common to both Ancient Greek literature and philosophy.

The Homeric figure cited by the Ps-Aristotle is that of Bellerophon, a legendary hero who, as was common among legendary heroes, come to a bad end, cursed by the gods. The particular theological matrix invoked here is dramatised by Euripides in his tragedy *Bellerophontes*. The narrative reconstructed from the surviving fragments find the hero expressing his disgrace and his volatile melancholy through monologues and harangues that question, with shocking boldness, the justice, and even existence, of the gods.

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[4] Aristotle, *Problems II Books XXII-XXXVIII,* trans., W.S. Hett,. (William Heinemann: London, 1957).

[5] This will be examined below in Chapter 6.

However, he is chastened by a theophanic experience at the end of the play that problematises any easy moralising regarding the ex-hero's behaviour and suggests that there are potentially revelatory consequences to such melancholy.

The bias inherent in centuries' familiarity within the western canon may be partially guarded-against at this stage by comparison with a less familiar text. Thus, when the narrative of *Bellerophontes* is placed in comparison with other ancient texts that deal with melancholia, a second theme begins to emerge: that of social critique. The ancient Egyptian poem, *A Dialogue of A Man Tired of Living With His Ka*, repeatedly expresses an alienation, not so much from society itself, but from its persistent injustice. The dialogic form in which these complaints are couched serves to emphasise the prominent social aspect of this kind of heroic melancholy. The importance of justice, moreover, is emphasised by the contrast made with an antitype: the story of Cain and Abel. Cain's melancholic rage condemns him to a similar wandering fate as Bellerophon suffers in Homer, but, rather than expressing his grievance to the Lord, he turns against his own brother, in a epochal rupture of the most basic of social bonds.

The most influential expression of this model linking social criticism, dialogue, and protest directed towards the divine, is that found in the Book of Job. In its King James form, its poetry has formed part of the bedrock of the English language. Long before that, however, its central figure has provided the paradigm of sorrow for those traditions that draw on the Old Testament. In its narrative are found those features observed above: the central figure's exile

from society, a dialogic form, an expression of social dislocation, an address to the divine, and a final theophanic experience that confirms the protagonist's faith. Reading these diverse texts alongside one another, thus, offers a series of touchstones around which a concept of a transformative sorrow can be structured, one whose paradoxical faithful defiance can lead its melancholic hero to the divine.

Ancient Greece: The Problems and Bellerophon

To be a hero in the memory of ancient Greece was not straightforward. Rather, it was to be subject to unexpected reversals, to one's own *hubris*, and to the whimsical opposition of the gods. It is little wonder that Herodotus' Solon warns that one should call no man happy until his life has run its course completely: few of even the most exemplary figures in Hellenic culture could claim to have ended well, however glorious their achievements. Such disasters that befell them were not only matters of wealth or prestige: the fallen hero suffered psychologically, too. Indeed, this trope is so marked in the mythic heritage that the Aristotelian author of the *Probelmata Physica*, inaugurating a discussion of melancholia that would prove to be possibly the most influential in the history of western thought, exemplifies his thesis that great men tend towards melancholic characteristics by citing the stories of Heracles and Ajax, each of whom suffered from frenzy and madness.[6]

[6] Aristotle, *Problems*, XXX.1.

At the crux of this model is the 'mixed nature' of black bile, that, though naturally cold, is sensitive and responsive to stimuli, tending to become either very hot or very cold as circumstances dictate. Likewise, the melancholic is of a 'variable temperament' and the influence of the changeful bile can either temper or exacerbate his or her own tendencies. If managed, melancholy in moderation can render one, 'more intelligent and less eccentric, but they are superior to the rest of the world in many ways, some in education, some in the arts and others again in statesmanship.'[7] Indeed, the sensitivity of melancholy is, itself, a moderation of that sensitive frenzy that 'accounts for the Sibyls, soothsayers, and all inspired persons…' The Aristotelian goes on to note that, 'Maracus, the Syracusan, was an even better poet when he was mad.'[8] However, if neglected, especially in those who are of a melancholic character to begin with, it 'go[es] deep' and tends towards either despair or madness, as in the case of those heroes the Aristotelian cites at the start of the question.[9] The most apposite model of his hypothesis, it seems, is the shadowy figure of Bellerophon, the tamer of the winged horse Pegasus who, Homer writes, became one day 'hated by the Gods' and spent his last days 'eating out his own heart,' wandering on the Aelian plain.[10]

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[7] Aristotle *Problems* XXX.1.

[8] Aristotle *Problems* XXX.1.

[9] Aristotle *Problems* XXX.1.

[10] Homer, *The Iliad,* trans. R. Fagles (Penguin, 1992), vi.200.

The Aristotelian regards Bellerophon's 'craving for desert places' as characteristic of his melancholy.[11] Modern readers, equally, are apt to be forcibly struck by Homer's formulation of the hero's psychological state, memorably rendered in Chapman's translation as 'eating out his *core*.'[12] The poet, however, while attributing Bellerophon's sufferings to the disfavour of the gods,[13] states this connection absolutely baldly and offers no explanation or elaboration. Roman authors such as Pindar rationalised the Homeric narrative by attributing Bellerophon's exile to a divine punishment for attempting to fly to Mount Olympus on Pegasus. While White, too, argues that one is left to assume some act of heroic *hubris* behind this reversal,[14] the spare starkness of Homer's account might equally be read as obviating the need for explanation itself – indeed, as reflecting, in the microcosm of a few lines, the utter immateriality of human action in the face of necessity, fate and the will of the gods.

On such a reading, Bellerophon's melancholy might be understood as both the expression of, and a reaction to, this very predicament. Such a characterisation of the hero's predicament was explored by the dramatist Euripides in his tragedy *Bellerophontes*, that unfortunately survives today only in fragments as gnomic as Homer's minimalist narrative. Nevertheless, thanks to the work of

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[11] Aristotle *Problems* XXX.1.

[12] Homer, *Chapman's Homer: the Iliad and the Odyssey,* trans. G. Chapman (Wordsworth, 2000), vi.200.

[13] Homer, *Iliad,* vi.200.

[14] J. A. White, "Bellerophon in the 'Land of Nod': Some Notes on Iliad 6.153-211", *The American Journal of Philology,* 103, (1982), 126.

scholars such as Webster,[15] Di Giorgio and Riedweg, it is possible to partially reconstruct the framework of the play itself in order to read those fragments that do survive, leaving an eloquent, if tantalising testimony to Euripides' engagement with this particular figure of myth.

The central action of Euripides' tragedy is, indeed, Bellerophontes' attempt on Olympus on his winged horse. However, it is convincingly hypothesised by Di Giorgio and others, by comparison with Aristophanes' paratragedy in *Peace*, that seems to follow what fragments we possess of *Bellerophontes* very closely indeed, that the play *opens* with the hero already destitute, exiled and wandering, having lost both his kingdom and his children. Fortune has already turned against him off-stage and our introduction to the character establishes him as a virulent melancholic: as Cropp et al write in the introduction to their edition, he is a 'passionate, world-weary man.'[16] Indeed, it is this combination of heroic passion with jaded cynicism that establishes the character of Bellerophontes as ambiguous, abrasive, but nevertheless sympathetic.

Such an amalgamation, indeed, exemplifies what the later Aristotelian author would describe as the dual nature of melancholy. Caused by the abundance and agitation of black bile, the most volatile of the bodily humours, it proves remarkably sensitive to circumstance, and it is its capacity to intensify human responses, energies and abilities that, in moderation, provides a foundation for

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[15] T. B. L. Webster, *The Tragedies of Euripides*, (Methuen, 1967), 109-111.

[16] Euripides, *Bellerophontes* in *Fragmentary Plays I*, ed. and trans C. Collard, M. J. Cropp and K. H. Lee (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1997).

heroism, but, if pushed to extremes, can become the root of madness. Euripides' Bellerophontes retains his heroic energy and perceptiveness: several of the remaining fragments may be convincingly supposed to be the remains of dialogues between the hero and other characters in which the former cuts a striking, if mordant, figure in debate regarding the justice of the gods. This superhuman verve, finally, enables the outrageous endeavour that forms the play's climax: to fly on a winged horse (the last relic of his blessedness) to confront those dubious gods in their own territory.

It is tempting to read Bellerophontes' earlier, highly cynical and, indeed, atheistic statements alongside his flight as marking a character blinded to the gods by his own arrogance. Yet to characterise this venture as an act of impious *hubris* is quite inaccurate (and, indeed, is a mere re-arrangement of the Roman narrative into an even less convincing structure). In her sensitive and level-headed reading of similar 'impious' passages in the Euripidean corpus, Mary Lefkowitz writes that 'philosophising about the gods' is always an act of 'desperation' on the part of a character and, indeed, that the gods are shown, in the action of the play, to retain their traditional powers alongside the maintenance of their traditional moral inscrutability.[17] In a similar context, therefore, Dobrov can understand Bellerophontes' flight as, 'an act of desperate *piety*, as passionate as it was futile. [italics mine]'[18] Indeed, even the hero's

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[17] M. R. Lefkowitz, "'Impiety' and 'Atheism' in Euripides' Dramas" *The Classical Quarterly*, 39, (1998) 70-82.

[18] G. W. Dobrov, *Figures of Play: Greek Drama and Metafictional Poetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 91.

infamous declaration at the opening of Fragment 286, 'Does someone say there are indeed gods in heaven? There are not, there are not…'[19] does not strike one as 'positive and self-confident.'[20] Rather, the repetition, a rhetorical device very rarely used by Euripides, sounds rather more like a passionate expression of the desperation that characterises Bellerophontes' psychological state and his relationship to divinity.

This desperation is a response to the seemingly inequitable treatment of humanity by the gods. Bellerophontes is tormented by the utter disconnect between moral behaviour and earthly reward. Addressing what may be supposed to be an audience of peasants on the barren Aelian plain, he compares the despicable actions of tyrants and lazy men, and the gains such make, with the poverty and defeat often experienced by those of integrity. Indeed, Riedweg hypothetically but intriguingly extends the argument of the fragment, based on its structure and on other of Euripides' works, to include the cynical view that the gods seek to build up piety through fear and confusion by the 'jumbling' of human affairs.[21] However, the hero needs no more reason to doubt the justice, nature or existence of the gods than the extant text gives him: 'I'd rather die. It's not worth living, if people see bad men unjustly honoured.'[22] As Webster summarises the play, 'the gods should behave as skilful doctors,' but the reality

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[19] Euripides, *Bellerophontes*, Fr. 286.

[20] C. Riedweg, "The 'Atheistic' Fragment from Euripides' *Bellerophontes* (289 N.2) *Illinois Classical Studies* 15, (1990), 47.

[21] Riedweg, "Fragment", 39-53.

[22] Euripides, *Bellerophontes*, Fr. 293.

of human experience is far more complex, puzzling and, perhaps harder to endure:

> The doctor, too, should cure when he has looked at the disease… Men's diseases are some of them self-chosen, some of them visited by the gods… But what I want to tell you is this: if the gods do anything shameful, they are not gods.[23]

It is the insolubility of this problem that is at the root of Bellerophontes' melancholy and becomes its principal expression.[24] The intensification of this melancholy acts as a plot development towards the end of the play,[25] inspiring the fatal flight; indeed, it might be said that the melancholy is the tragedy's most important narrative engine. However, it is the complexity of Euripides' portrayal of the hero's malady that enables the action to be driven by one man's psychological vicissitudes without, seemingly, sacrificing dramatic interest or liveliness, while providing one of the most robust and subtle engagements with the themes of human despair and divine indifference in ancient literature.

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[23] Euripides, *Bellerophontes*, Fr. 292 Despite, or perhaps because, the context of this fragment is unidentifiable, it serves as an effective motto for the play.

[24] This expression, moreover, is a public one. On the influence of contemporary rhetorical techniques on Euripides, see S. Goldhill "The Language of Tragedy: Rhetoric and Communication", in P. Easterling, ed., *Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1997), 134.

[25] Dobrov, *Play*, 95.

Homer's spare but evocative description of Bellerophon's mental and emotional state, noted above, was doubtless known to Euripides and almost certainly one of his sources in constructing his own rendering of the myth. To 'eat out one's own heart' implies self-destruction, diminishment and dehumanisation as well as a degree of hopelessness that has no recourse but to turn in on itself. The playwright, meanwhile, elaborates on this suggestive account in several striking ways.

The self-destructive extreme towards which Bellerophontes' unhappiness tends is expressed in his assertion that 'it's better for a man never to have been born.'[26] Though a proverbial expression in ancient Greece, found, for example, in Theognis,[27] the hero's statement is not made in a mood of philosophic calm, still less one of tranquil resignation, but as part of an extended discourse on the 'misery', 'misfortune' and 'distress'[28] that attend upon every estate of human existence. His own misfortunes have driven him from his home and, indeed, his own estate, into an even more miserable condition, that of exile on a barren place, destitute and surrounded by peasants. This ambiguous (and, in ancient Greece, self-eroding) social condition of being homeless, lost and aimless not only furnishes the ground of his melancholy, but is also an arresting reflection of that same inner state. Bellerophontes has not only been deprived of home and family, and, thus,

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[26] Euripides, *Bellerophontes*, Fr. 285.

[27] Theognis, *Elegies*, in *Hesiod and Theognis*, trans. D. Wender, (London: Penguin, 1973), 425.

[28] Euripides, *Bellerophontes*, Fr. 285.

identity; his miseries have also deprived him of a transcendent moral and theological framework within which to understand human existence in the mundane world.

The hero responds to this predicament, not only with despondency, but also with fury. There is a measure of misanthropy expressed, doubtless by Bellerophontes and his supporters (if he has any), citing humanity's tendency towards 'envy'[29] and 'guile.' At one point it is claimed that 'all men have badness in their nature' which, if coupled with audacity, can make one's path in society smoother![30] Indeed, 'tricks and dark schemes are mankind's invention as cowardly remedies against need.'[31] Moreover, as we have seen, not only do men and women conspire to outwit justice, the gods seem indifferent to it. In fact, it seems as if it is the latter who bear the greater responsibility for the unintelligible moral disorder of the world and, by their apathy, doom *all* humanity, regardless. As the hero reflects, probably before his final flight, 'My misery! But why "My misery!"? My suffering is only human.'[32]

In turning his rage against the gods, Bellerophontes synthesises his various and diffuse complaints against circumstance and humanity and provides himself with a final resolution that is, in truth, the last resort: in flying to

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[29]Euripides, *Bellerophontes*, Fr. 294.; 295.

[30] Euripides, *Bellerophontes*, Fr. 297.

[31] Euripides, *Bellerophontes*, Fr. 288.

[32] Euripides, *Bellerophontes*, Fr. 300.

Olympus, he attempts to prove whether there is any order in the world at all. Indeed, this flight, like his exile, both expresses and enacts his desperation, determination and the lengths to which he is willing to push his interrogation of the justice of heaven and earth.

Moreover, on Lefkowitz's terms, this interrogation did not necessarily have to reach Olympus in order to succeed: quite the opposite. As noted above, in Euripides' works, the kind of desperation that questions the justice or even the very existence of the gods is eventually met and answered by a demonstration of divine power and, also, divine justice. However, as she notes, 'human wisdom is not wisdom, so far as the gods are concerned,'[33] and, equally, it might be said that divine justice is not, at least in appearance, justice so far as humanity may be concerned. The gods do not share human sorrows and, living without care, their impartiality is absolute and completely unsentimental. In the face of this inscrutability, the human predicament is one of ignorance. The import, therefore, of the demonstration of the persistent power of the gods, in this case that guards Olympus from Bellerophontes' flight by means of a mere gadfly, is that of the gulf between mortal and immortal and the necessity that limits the former in the face of the latter.

The lesson, thus, and its only expression, is to be found in earthly, and, it might be said, earth-bound, piety. This is not only to consist of paying honour

[33] Lefkowitz, "Dramas", 76.

to the gods that they consider to be their due,[34] but also in attendance to the duties of social bonds to family, countrymen and guests. Dying after his fall, Bellerophontes seems to find some measure of peace. He addresses himself with the assurance that, 'You were reverent towards the gods while you lived, always, a help to strangers and untiring for your friends.'[35] The hero finds a final resolution established in the integrity of his own piety, which, he has now learned, is his only moral resource as a man. Doing so, in the words of Aelianus, allows him to face his death as he had lived, 'heroically and magnanimously.'[36]

Several aspects of the Bellerophon narrative found in Homer and Euripides bear comparison with other ancient renderings of melancholic states. Dissatisfaction with society, wandering and exile, debate amongst peers and the inscrutable justice of the divine, as well as evocative and striking renderings of malignant unhappiness ad despair, are all themes explored in the Ancient Egyptian dialogic poem, *The Debate of a Man Tired of Living and his Ka* and the biblical narratives of Cain and of Job.

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[34] Lefkowitz, "Dramas", 75.

[35] Euripides, *Bellerophontes*, Fr. 311.

[36] cited in Dobrov, *Play*, 96.

Bellerophon and Cain

Another, and indeed, for the Judeo-Christian West, the archetypal, wanderer who questioned divine justice, is Cain. White points out that the term 'Aelian Plain' is itself a pun on the word '*alato*', that is, 'he wandered.'[37] This etymology is reminiscent of the Hebrew derivation of the Land of Nod, east of Eden, whither Cain is exiled. He notes that the two wildernesses constitute 'the same psychic landscape.'[38] It is arguable, too, that Cain's response to the Lord's rejection of his offering was not only wrathful, but melancholic: in an interesting article, Mayer Gruber suggests that the expression 'his face fell', especially when paired with expressions of anger in Akkadian literature, renders extreme sadness and posits that the combination of the two in the person of Cain renders the biblical figure depressive in the face of the destruction of his self-esteem by divine disfavour.[39]

In contrast to Bellerophon, who turns his anger against evil men and indifferent gods, however, Cain takes out his wrath on the innocent person of his brother, Abel, in favour of whose virtues he was snubbed. Essentially, Cain takes his predicament *personally*: his concern is not for justice *as such*, but rather for that which he considers his due, namely, a portion the equal of his brother's. His self-interestedness is signalled later in the story by his lack of

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[37] White, "Nod", 126-7.

[38] White, "Nod", 127.

[39] M. I. Gruber, "The Tragedy of Cain and Abel: A Case of Depression", *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, 69 (1978), 89-97.

remorse for his crime when it is discovered by the Lord, whose absence is marked, rather, with his concern for his own safety in exile. Any appeal to piety is lost on him. This is further evinced by his secrecy: unlike Bellerophon and, as we shall see, the Egyptian poet, and Job, there is no public debate or dialogue concerning divine justice in Cain's narrative, only a furtive trap in a field. In a sense, Cain lacks the courage of his convictions. We may surmise that his conscience was not clear enough to permit him to present his case before God. The private recourse that he sought is that against which the Lord warned him, saying,

> If you do well, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do well, sin is lurking at your door; its desires is for you, but you must master it.[40]

Gruber notes that 'accepted' may be equally rendered 'exalted', presumably in contrast to the 'downcast' aspect of Cain's face.[41] Yet, when read alongside other ancient narratives of melancholy, it may be seen that the Lord is not warning Cain against dispiritedness itself, so much as an impious selfishness that seeks only its own good without relation to its obligations either to God or fellow-man. It is for this reason that Cain's condemnation to exile and disgrace forms the conclusion of his story, not its beginning, and why, for him, there is no route out of the Land of Nod.

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[40] Genesis 4:7. All Biblical references NRSV.

[41] Gruber, "Depression", 90-94.

Bellerophon and the Man in Debate with his Ka

The *Ka* in ancient Egyptian thought is more than simply equivalent to a 'soul', though it is as such that it is commonly rendered. The *Ka* is a crucial aspect of personality, a kind of second self, the destruction of which is the true death.[42] It is the *Ka* that goes into the West – that is, into the afterlife – and for whose benefit the body is mummified and food offerings left in the tomb. It is significant, therefore, that this famous poem is conceived of as a debate between a man and this intimate aspect of himself.[43]

Like Euripides' Bellerophontes, therefore, the poet interrogates and debates his melancholy and despair over his life with an interlocutor. Indeed, again, like Bellerophontes at the end of his life, he seeks to come to terms with his despair in conversation with his interior self. In such a context, the heart and the *Ka* function as something more than a mere conscience: rather, they act as *witnesses*. This functions in the sense of both bearing witness to the history of the self, and as an advocate for the good of that same self. Thus, in an ironic role-reversal, the *Ka*, an aspect of the self most often associated with the afterlife, seeks to comfort his poet in his weariness of life and romanticisation of death by extolling the material pleasures of living, urging, 'Follow the

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[42] See E. Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: The One and the Many* (Cornell University Press, 1996), 44-47.

[43] R. B. Parkinson, trans and introduced, *The Dialogue of A Man and His Soul* in *The Tale of Sinuhe and Other Ancient Egyptian Poems 1940-1640 BC*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 151-165.

happy day! Forget care!'[44] Moreover, the framework of obligations and relationships that constitutes the kind of piety discussed above in relation to Bellerophontes and Cain, seems to pertain *within* the self, as well as with regard to others. The poet exclaims in accusation,

> This is all too much for me today! My soul has disagreed with me!
> Now this is beyond all exaggeration; This is like leaving me alone!
> My soul should not depart! He should stand up for me about this![45]

Interestingly, the wish that the *Ka* should show loyalty to the individual of which it is a part is one characteristically expressed in funerary texts, in the face of the trials to be faced in the Underworld.[46] Thus, this constitutes another striking and ironic displacement of tropes in the poem, that links the trials of life with those (fearsome and dreadful ones) awaiting the dead and emphasises that only a proper integration of self can navigate either. Implicitly, therefore, just as the man must strive to act morally and to provide himself with the proper pieties of prayers and spells in order to pass the tests of the Underworld

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[44] *Dialogue*, 67.

[45] *Dialogue*, 4-6.

[46] J. Wasserman, ed. and trans., *The Egyptian Book of the Dead, Revised Ed.,* (Chronicle Books, 2015).

come safely to the Land of Blessed, so the *Ka* must support the living self as it endures the vicissitudes and temptations of living.

Nevertheless, the internal web of piety and the external one are in no way separate but together constitute a single moral world. 'Grammatical details,' including a pluralised *you* used in address, suggest an audience for this debate between a poet and his own self. Parkinson suggests that this audience may even be a divine one;[47] it may be equally plausible to understand the audience thus addressed as the hearers of the poem itself. In either case, the performance takes place in a complex matrix that is neither strictly private or public, external or internal. Though, to modern ears, the debate enacted is an intensely intimate and existentialist dilemma, and, thus, likely to be understood individualistically, this performative context implies that a rather broader self is here addressing its fragmentation. It is a self that not only stretches across life and death (and does so, not only reciprocally but, in a sense, simultaneously) but is also, in its most intimate and passionate psychology, also an organic part of a society to which these same 'private' emotions and dilemmas are the subject of interest and obligation: in a word, of piety.

Indeed, the fragmentation of the inner self, expressed in the disjunction between the poet and his *Ka* is occasioned by, and reflected in, a societal fragmentation that leaves the poet feeling both disgusted and alone. He is not

[47] Parkinson in "Introduction" to *Dialogue,* 152.

only abandoned by his *Ka*; one passage is structured around the refrain, 'Who can I talk to today?' accusing his *Ka*, society and, implicitly, the audience, saying 'an intimate friend is lacking/ and one turns to an unknown man to protest.'[48] Repeatedly, the poet protests that brothers and friends 'are bad' and 'do not love'[49] but, rather, that selfishness has become the rule. He lists the deceptiveness, injustice and disloyalty he sees as rife around him. The bonds of obligation, faithfulness and affection on which human life is founded are in a state of rot.

The poet feels further alienated from society, complaining, 'Look, my name reeks!' and associating it with visceral images of festering fish and more conceptual, moral similes likening the 'reek' of lies told of the good. The refrain regarding the poet's 'name' is another reference to the *Ka*, associated with the persistence of the individual's name in the afterlife. Indeed, to gouge the name of the deceased from funerary monuments and furnishings was to condemn him to a final and complete death. In the individual's name, more than his memory lived. As the poet wishes for the sweet coolness of the West,[50] so he finds this essential expression of his living self distasteful, as if it is rotting in the stagnant summer heat.

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[48] *Dialogue*, 125.

[49] *Dialogue*, 104.

[50] *Dialogue*, 43.

However, given the pattern establishing the intertwined nature of the inner and outer lives explored above, one might also read this part of the poem as complementing the social lament it immediately precedes. The poet's alienation from himself and self-loathing are mirrored in the treacherous character of the social landscape. This complete estrangement from self and others is effectively and affectively reminiscent of the states of exile experienced by Bellerophon and Cain. Indeed, given the implicit textual association of the evils of life with the dangers of the Underworld, the poet might be said to dwell in that same disordered 'landscape.'

In the third and final lyric structured around a melancholic refrain, the poet longs for death, likening it to recovery from an illness,[51] a homecoming,[52] the smell of flowers.[53] In the West, a man is free from the vulnerabilities attendant upon life, becoming 'a living god' who can appeal to the Sun God himself for justice.[54] Thus, not only in death are the evils of life reversed and remedied, but also a reintegration of the self and society are achieved. For, as the traditional place of the *Ka* is in the afterlife, the poet's wish for death might also be seen as a desire no longer to be divided against himself as well as enjoying the re-establishment of a just order. This order, however, is founded on divine justice: implicit in the poet's eulogy is the complaint that he cannot appeal, in his present state, to the judgement and power of the Sun God.

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[51] *Dialogue*, 131.

[52] *Dialogue*, 138.

[53] *Dialogue*, 136.

[54] *Dialogue*, 142-144.

Perhaps seeing the terminal extremity of the poet's unhappy state, the *Ka* is moved to offer him its unconditional support at last, saying 'Throw complaint over the fence/ My partner! My brother!'[55] The reintegration of the self is signalled by the first use of the first person plural, and expressed in the *Ka's* counsel to both treasure life while being aware of the 'harbour' of the West. The bonds of mutual obligation are reinforced too (though retaining the same reversal of roles and priorities so striking throughout the poem), as the *Ka* urges the poet to 'love me here, having put aside the West/ and also still desire to reach the West, your body making landfall!'[56] Yet the *Ka* also acknowledges the rectitude of the poet's piety regarding the transition from life to death, wishing, 'May you make an offering upon the [funerary] brazier.'[57] In this crux between life and death, mortal and immortal, and the aspects of the self, honour must be paid to an order that, from the human perspective, may seem inscrutable.

Bellerophon and Job

Perhaps the most striking parallel to the story of Bellerophon, however, is that of Job. In their structural and thematic similarities both counter-illuminate and cast the other into relief. The dramatic action of each is inaugurated by the

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[55] *Dialogue*, 149.

[56] *Dialogue*, 151-2.

[57] *Dialogue*, 149.

destruction of a pious and prominent man's family, position and, indeed, reputation, which disgrace casts him both outside of society and into a black despair. The injustice of these events leads this man once renowned for his piety to question divine equitability and even power with a rigour and consistency that horrifies its hearers as blasphemous, and, indeed, as further evidence of the protagonist's fallen state. This dialogue, even when it addresses the divine, is directed towards those peers of the hero who have rejected and belittled him: in arguing with, and for God, Job argues, also, in favour of his own impugned rectitude, and a justice that seems to have been forgotten.[58] Nevertheless, the latter continues to resist his interlocutors' arguments, pressing his case in appeal to the power of the gods or of God. In answer, divine power is demonstrated, though, equally, it resists the terms of the argument, but rather simply asserts its transcendence. In the face of this 'answer', the piety of the protagonist is re-established and resolution achieved.

Job, however, is of a different, and stronger, character than Bellerophon. His 'exile' is, in its inception, self-chosen through piety: he goes outside of his dwelling place, rending his clothes in mourning, and scraping at his sores with a potsherd. He is described as sitting 'in the ashes' and 'on the ground.' His friends do not recognise him from the distance. However, Job further experiences isolation from society in the treachery of those former friends

[58] Westermann has memorably and helpfully described the form of the book as 'a dramatisation of the lament.' W. Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms,* (John Knox Press: Westminster, 1981), 11.

who are 'afraid' of his 'calamity.'[59] He has become 'a laughingstock.'[60] The only 'place' he can claim is that of outcast: "He has made me a byword of the peoples, and I am one before whom people spit.'[61] Like Bellerophon, he is isolated both from his place in society and from the identity in which he was once established.[62]

From this experience, Job wrings some of the best known and most eloquent expressions of despair found in literature. He curses the day of his birth, 'let thick darkness seize it! Let it not rejoice among the days of the year; let it not come into the number of the months.'[63] He wishes to have died in infancy, that he 'would be lying down and quiet: I would be asleep; then I would be at rest…' rather than living as 'one in misery…and bitter in soul… and who [is] glad when [he] finds the grave.'[64] Like Bellerophontes, Job identifies the human condition itself as one of misery, asking rhetorically, 'Do not human beings have a hard service on earth… Like a slave who longs for the shadow… so I am allotted months of emptiness…'[65]

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[59] Job 6:21

[60] Job 12:4

[61] Job 17:6

[62] More broadly, Perdue sees in Job the reflection of small landowners who shared the exile of the Jerusalem elites: L. Perdue, *The Sword and the Stylus,* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2008).

[63] Job 3:6

[64] Job 3:20-22

[65] Job 7:1-3

Moreover, like Bellerophontes, and the anonymous Egyptian poet, Job's grief is intensified by the injustice he perceives in the society around him. The first and most intimate dislocation Job experiences, however, is the rejection he suffers from his friends. Their lack of compassion for his suffering is even more egregious than their imputing of sin to the man they have known for years. This is encapsulated by Estes' description of Zophar's attitude, whose,

> 'censorious chiding shows how little he has sensed Job's hurt. Job's bewilderment and his outbursts are natural; in them we find his humanity, and our own. Zophar detaches the words from the man… Zophar's wisdom is a bloodless retreat into theory.'[66]

More broadly, Job notes the way in which the wicked use violence to oppress the vulnerable.[67] He asks, 'Why do the wicked live on, reach old age and grow mighty in power… no rod of God is upon them… They spend their days in prosperity and in peace they go down to Sheol.'[68] Thus, the wicked are granted that final boon for which Job himself longs, the comfort of death, but which is not granted to him.

However, it is a specific ideal of justice, grounded in the Jewish tradition, and centred in the action of God in the world, with which Job contrasts the

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[66] D. J. Estes *Handbook on the Wisdom Books* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2007), 61.

[67] Job 24:1.

[68] Job 21:7-13.

inequities of earthly life. By divine justice, as Job understands it, the power structures of mundane society are reversed. 'He leads princes away stripped and overthrows the mighty.'[69] It is these figures, not the just Job, who should be made to 'wander in a pathless waste.'[70] Job's melancholic alienation is, in fact, the ironic image of what divine justice *should* dole out to the unjust.

Indeed, it is in the tension between two truths that Job is suspended in his misery: that both he *and* God are just. Despite his 'friends'' repeated insistence that he must have performed some great wickedness to merit so great a punishment, Job maintains his innocence and integrity, saying 'Far be it from me to say that you are right; until I die I will not put away my integrity from me. I hold fast to my righteousness, and will not let it go.' Like Bellerophontes, his 'heart does not reproach [him] for any of [his] days.'[71]

Nevertheless, Job also affirms the inscrutability and majesty of God. Even all the wonders of creation 'are indeed but the outskirts of his ways; and how small a whisper do we hear of him! But the thunder of his power who can understand?'[72] Thus, even in the original formulation of his complaint, Job has already reached that state of understanding regarding divine power and mortal limitations that Lefkowitz identifies as the resolution of Euripidean tragedy. However, it is, in fact, Job's very possession of this understanding as the

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[69] Job 12:19.

[70] Job 12:24.

[71] Job 27:5-6.

[72] Job 26:14.

foundation of his world-view that enables him to pursue his interrogation so tirelessly.[73] Indeed, given its address, in piety, to the Lord, it might be said to take on a liturgical character. He asks, 'how can a mortal be just before God? If one wished to contend with him, one could not answer him once in a thousand.'[74] He knows the limits of his own understanding, saying 'Look, he passes by me, and I do not see him; he moves on, but I do not perceive him.'[75] There is no 'umpire' or mediator to say to him "What are you doing?"[76] The contrast with Bellerophontes, thus, lies in Job's persistent piety towards the majesty of God: he curses himself, but never the Lord; he does not doubt God's power nor distrust his prerogative. This is both symbolised and enacted in the difference between Bellerophon and Job's 'exiles' . While Bellerophon restlessly wanders, Job remains in one place, waiting on the Lord.[77] Thus, it is

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[73] That the understanding of the reader, and of Job himself, develops throughout the book, and on the move from 'less to more adequate understandings' in the context of the 'hymn to wisdom' see A. Lo, *Job 28 as Rhetoric: An Analysis of Job 28 in the Context of Job 22-31* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2003).

[74] Job 9:2-3.

[75] Job 9:11.

[76] Job 9:23.

[77] On Job's non-spatial journey that, nevertheless, re-enacts narratives of moral-spatial journeys, such as Psalm 23, of 'rescue from (metaphorical) death and restoration to 'enhanced life,'' see D. J. Green, "The Good, the Bad and the Better: Psalm 23 and Job" in S. L. Cook, C. L. Patton, J. W. Watts, eds., *The Whirlwind: Essays on Job, Hermeneutics and Theology in Memory of Jane Morse*,(Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 69-83.

rather, Job's piety that allows him to pursue his questioning beyond his mortal limits.[78]

It is perhaps for this reason that the divine answer received by Job is more memorable, and, if more terrifying, then more generous, than that received by the Greek hero.[79] For, while the Lord re-asserts the unsearchability of his divine majesty so impressively that it is even borne in anew on Job, this personally-delivered affirmation confirms, first one pole, and then the other, of Job's twin assertions of God's justice and his own.[80] In his persistence and integrity, Job has spoken rightly of God. Indeed, it is the doubting friends, who did not support the protagonist in maintaining his innocence who, perhaps, equally implicitly have cast doubt on the integrity of God, for the

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[78] Indeed, this 'remaining in receptivity' enables ''wrestling' with the creator, especially over issues of justice, must continue. Actions that are divine must be questioned and brought into judgment. Unlike the friends' contention, humanity's role is not that of passive recipient of divinely allotted destiny, but that of questioning, challenging and sparring with a God whose silence or even overt behaviour may distort the ground of life. And even in the intensity of agony, Job does not end his indictment of God and quest for justice, for struggle would have ceased, human participation in divine creativity would have ended, and the universe would have collapsed. Justice is no static, ideal norm transcending creaturely life, but a process enabling human and divine encounter and shaping authentic participation the world.' L. G. Perdue, *Wisdom in Revolt: Metaphorical Theology in Job (Bible and Literature Series 29*, (Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 262.

[79] 'Job has been changed by a more intimate experience ofGod which the theophany conveyed. His previous contact with God was all hearsay.' R. M. Murphy, *The Book of Job* (Paulist Press, 1999), 99.

[80] Indeed, Habel suggests that in the construction of the whirlwind speech 'there is a measure of the comic with the controlled, the bizarre with the beautiful, the serendipitous with the serious. Yahweh challenges Job to show the discernment necessary to keep this paradoxical world in balance.' N. C. Habel, *The Book of Job (O.T. Library)*, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 535.

two, the Lord and his 'true servant' are here shown to be bound up.[81] Thus, in failing so, at the least, in their duty to their friend even Job's would-be comforters have been part of that rupturing of the bonds of piety that unmoored an honest man into misery.

Conclusion

Thus, it may be seen that in these disparate, but thematically linked, texts, melancholy, in the ancient world, can be less despairing, and more a desperate kind of faith. Taking place within a moral-metaphysical context of piety towards the divine and to one's fellow human beings, the experience of malignant unhappiness expresses the rupturing of these constitutive bonds, whose corresponding fragmentation is experienced as both devastating and destructive. By their addressing their complaints in the public sphere, figures such as Job and Bellerophontes indicate that, even as they are exiled, they still exist in relationship with society, and, indeed, that their melancholy functions almost 'prophetically', the fractures in society revealed by their experience being thus rhetorically reflected back to their peers. As demonstrated by the

[81] Indeed, Davis reads the term 'integrity' as 'a kind of innocence. It is not the original innocence of Paradise or of childhood, born of inexperience and easily corrupted to arrogance, but rather that which comes, after much pain… In his first innocence, Job played by the rules as he knew them and expected God to follow suit. In his second, more radical innocence, Job gives himself up, without reservation or expectation, to the God whose uncircumspect generosity regularly ignores the matter of deserving, and thus allows the world to exist (cf. Mt. 5.45).' E. F. Davis "Job and Jacob: The Integrity of Faith" in S. L. Cook, C. L. Patton, J. W. Watts, eds., *The Whirlwind: Essays on Job, Hermeneutics and Theology in Memory of Jane Morse*, (Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 119.

lonely ancient Egyptian poet in dialogue with his *Ka*, the misery engendered by isolation can drive sufferer to wish for death.

However, perhaps the most distressing aspect of the kind of melancholy expressed above is the indifference of God or the gods to impiety and injustice. While Cain's bewilderment regards only his own personal tribulation, the sympathetic bafflement of both Bellerophon and Job leads each into an interrogation of divine justice whose apparent impiety conceals a dire determination to demand integrity of both gods and men. Thus, the social disorder condemned by our melancholy heroes is extended to include this seeming indifference of the gods. Society, it implied, is cosmic, and ultimately continuous between humanity and the divine. Without heaven's justice, earthly relationships have no guarantor.

Though the flight of Bellerophontes is undoubtedly the most dramatic enactment of this predicament, it is nevertheless the narrative of Job whose hero, in maintaining his stability – and thus, the consistency of his piety – is vindicated in the face of divine majesty, rather than destroyed. It is the story of Job, too, that foreshadows the figure who, above all, stood in the gap between the piety of God and of man, and who could, finally, press, enact and resolve these thousand-year questionings: Jesus Christ.[82] How his followers engaged

[82] Indeed, Kealy considers that 'The author clearly experienced Gethsemane suffering firsthand, the well-known 'dark night of the sour, in which reason searches for answers which faith and the common wisdom are not supplying [*sic*]. The book is a clash between faith and experience, between Job's extreme suffering and his conviction…' S. P. Kealy, *The Wisdom Books of the Bible: Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, Ben Sirach and the Wisdom of Solomon: A Survey of the History of their Interpretation,* (Lewiston, Queenston, Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2012) 119.

with this matrix in the light of his life, death, and resurrection, will be examined in the following chapters.

Chapter One: The Fathers of the Desert and Evagrius of Pontus

For Bellerophon, as for Job, the wilderness, that is, the desert, was not just the physical location of their torments, and their miserable rejection by society, it was the psychic icon of their sorrow, too. The opposite of civilisation and the homeland of loneliness, to live in the desert was necessarily to be an outcast, and inevitably to be madness.

By the first Christian centuries, little had changed. The deserts were occasionally walked by bandits and outlaws but they were the native territory of demons, the dead, and, latterly, of the pagan past. That men and women should choose to make their home there, that, moreover, they would choose to do so in pursuit of holiness, would not only have seemed counter-intuitive, it would have been ridiculous.

Yet within a few short decades, beginning in the latter half of the third century, a remarkable number of Christians made the decision to move to the desert and live in community or in anachoresis,[83] in sparse conditions, and practising striking asceticism and keeping a constant vigil over their own thoughts and feelings. In this laboratory of the soul, these early monks laid the foundations

[83] The classic survey remains D. H. Chitty, *The Desert A City: An Introduction to the Study of Egyptian and Palestinian Monasticism Under the Christian Empire*, (Blackwell, 1966). A more recent survey of the literature is W. Harmless, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). On the varieties of early monasticism, see S. Rubenson, "Asceticism and Monasticism (Eastern)" 643-647 in A. Cassiday, F. W. Norris, eds., *Christianity: Constantine to 600*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

of Christian personal ethics and developed a psychology of sin and virtue that remains with us in our own practice today. In so doing, they closely observed both the dangers and the potential attendant upon the individual monk as he or she attempted to colonise the desert - the very homeland of melancholy.

Indeed, the monastic movement, especially in its early years, might be understood as describing, and transforming, a melancholic movement, as sketched out in the previous chapter. The fundamental act of flight to the desert itself may be seen as an act of protest against a corrupt and unjust society. Indeed, the monastic movement itself was born and flourished within, alongside, and in opposition to, a context of severe political, social, cultural and theological schism. To many of the early monks, it seemed impossible to reconcile their obligations as Christians, as they understood them, with life in the cities of the late Roman Empire. This impulse could range from a zeal for 'perfection' by Gospel standards, as on the part of St Anthony, who sold everything after hearing Christ's advice to the rich young man,[84] to those who found the temptations of licentious Alexandria an insurmountable challenge to continence. The inflexible codes of the rural village, too, with their vengeful ballast, could act as impediments to the pursuit of a heart as meek as the Lord's. Either locale, moreover, frequently imposed the necessity of marriage upon a man or woman with a healthy sex drive which, as Peter Brown perceptively notes, would impose heavy financial obligations upon the supporting father -

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[84] Athanasius, "Life of St Anthony" in H. Ellershaw, trans., *Select Works and Letters,* P. Schaff and H. Wace, eds., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Series II, Volume IV* (New York, 1924, repr. 1957).

and, one might add, the often-dangerous and always onerous task of motherhood upon the women.[85]

Thus, the contemporary secular society is frequently constructed in the monastic sources as, at the very least, strongly potentially disordered for the Christian. Its concerns and temptations were antithetical to the Christian way of life, conducive neither to interior virtue or broader social justice.

Yet the remarkable reaction of the Fathers and Mothers was to embrace this alienation from society and enthusiastically enact their status as outcasts. From the earliest and most paradigmatic expression in the literature of what rapidly became institutionalised as the monastic ideal, the earliest retreatants are understood as *colonisers* of this desert space. Rather than being forced into the wasteland, they actively go to the wilderness in order to claim it and make it holy.

Even anachoresis, however, does not constitute a rejection of society *per se*. Rather, the monastic vision of society was broadened to a cosmic scale. Firstly, the desert monk battled those demons who had made those empty, inhospitable places their home. Though the iconic battles of St Anthony with the demons of the tombs has long been a favourite and imaginative theme in the tradition of Christian art, as he physically encounters hordes of grotesque monsters, the

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[85] P. Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity,* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 217.

crucial conflict was joined on the territory of the individual soul. Demons would seek to entice, to terrify, or to persuade one into sin and dismantle one's Christian vocation. In struggling against them, the monks and nuns understood themselves to be integrating their psychic, spiritual and physical locales into a broader cosmic society - the Kingdom of God. That the natives of the melancholic spaces often attacked monks by appealing to sorrow and wistfulness will be explored in greater detail below.

Moreover, even amongst the strictest of the hermits, desert monasticism regarded itself as a society of its own. Codes of hospitality with regard to visitors were strong.[86] Outside of institutional monastic communities, novice solitaries would submit themselves to a spiritual elder.[87] Scattered monks would gather together for Sunday liturgies[88] or in council.[89] Troubled brothers and sisters would travel to ask for advice from noted elders.[90] Numerous areas, indeed, became somewhat densely populated by anchorites, and few Abbas or Ammas of note succeeded in putting off clustering disciples completely. Indeed, the desert society itself was not cut off from that surrounding it.[91] On a prosaic level, monks would engage in simple manual labour, such as weaving

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[86] B. Ward, trans., *The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christian Monks,* (London: Penguin, 2003), 13.7, '"My rule is to welcome you with hospitality and send you on your way in peace."'

[87] *Desert Fathers*, 14.5 'They said that Silvanus had a disciple in Scetis called Mark, who possessed the virtue of obedience in large measure'

[88] *Desert Fathers,* 3.6 '…some brothers were sitting together at the love-feast.'

[89] *The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christian Monks*, 9.9 'Once there was a gathering of monks in Scetis, and they discussed the case of a guilty brother…'

[90] *Desert Fathers*, 5.29, 'A brother, being tempted by a demon, went to a hermit…'

[91] Indeed, 'Once Mark's mother came to see him with many attendants.' *Desert Fathers,* 14.6.

baskets from palm leaves, in order to earn money for food,[92] and would also hire themselves out as seasonal farm labourers at harvest time.[93] Moreover, as the fame of the desert grew, a traffic that almost amounted to tourism grew up between the city and the wilderness, as secular visitors came to encounter, to marvel (or gawk) at, or to learn from, this mirror-world.[94] In its rejection of social norms, the desert began to integrate the broader world to itself.

Both these social ties and social contrasts not only fostered a corporate identity amongst the dwellers in the desert: they were also functioning social connections. The vigour and reality of these connections is evident in the prominence in the literature of advice regarding difficulties in dealing with one's brethren, from the pettiest annoyances upwards.[95] That this achieves such importance even outside the formal structures of a stable regular order or community only underscores the importance to the monastic ideal, from its very inception, of the construction of an alternate society.

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[92] B Ward, trans., *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection*, (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1975), Cistercian Studies Series No. 59*,* Pistamon 1, 'A brother asked Abba Pistamon, "What should I do? I get worried when I sell my manual labour."'

[93] *Desert Fathers,* 14.14 'A brother from Scetis was going out to harvest…'; 17.20 'Three monks once went to harvest…'

[94] *Sayings*, Arsenius 28 'When Abba Arsenius was living at Canopus, a very rich and God-fearing virgin of senatorial rank came from Rome to see him.'

[95] *Desert Fathers,* 15.59, 'A brother asked a hermit, "If a brother brings me gossip from the world, abba, shall I tell him not to tell it to me?"'; *Sayings*, Sisoes 1, 'A brother whom another brother had wronged came to see Abba Sisoes…'

The justice of such a society, however, cannot be taken for granted; nor did it necessarily resemble the justice of the cities, far less that of the rural villages.[96] Rather, the integration - of monastic - and thus, ultimately, cosmic - society had its building-blocks in the souls of individual monks and nuns. Thus the Apothegmata repeatedly stress the importance of forgiveness and the toxicity of interpersonal anger amongst brothers and sisters, particularly if it is left to fester. Justice is more often identified with mercy, and reflection upon one's own sins, than with punishment.[97] Just as the monks colonised the wild locale of the outcast, so they identified with the sinner. Punishment, on this schema, becomes penance: a reintegration of the sinner with a cosmic society whose crucial link lies in her own heart.

The consequence of this attitude was twofold. Firstly, elder monks would exhort troubled disciples by mercy, compassion and identification. This is exemplified by Abba Bessarion's reaction to a sinful brother being expelled from a service: 'Abba Bessarion got up and went with him, saying, "I, too, am a sinner."'[98] Rather than isolating or othering a fallen-away brother or sister, they would meet them in the experience of their temptation or frustration.[99] Moreover, they frequently advised against immoderateness in ascesis or self-castigation, preferring instead to focus on interior perseverance: 'Anton said,

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[96] W. Harmless, *Desert,* 236.

[97] *Sayings*, Moses 2 'The old man said to them, "My sins run out behind me and I do not see them, and today I am coming to judge the errors of another." When they heard that, they said no more to the brother but forgave him.'

[98] *Sayings,* Bessarion 7.

[99] Abba Isidore would adopt troubled brothers and 'cure them by his patience.' *Desert Fathers,* 16.5

"Some wear out their bodies by fasting; but because they have no discretion this only puts them further away from God."'[100] Compassion to oneself, as well as to one's brethren, was the fundamental bond that built monastic society, and anchored it to heaven.

The second, and historically more influential, consequence, was the emphasis on the cultivation of one's own self-awareness as a sinner. While the experience of the monastic life as tedium - known as *acedia* - or the calamitous sorrow of despair, both of which will be discussed below, were understood as destructive of both the monastic vocation and Christian life, the godly sorrow of *penthos*, frequently translated into English as compunction, has a prominent - and pervasive - place in the Apothegmata and many of its associated hagiographies.[101] In a striking example, the Roman noble Abba Arsenius is said to have 'had a hollow in his chest channelled out by the tears which fell from his eyes all his life while he sat at his manual work'.[102]

Such an awareness of one's own pervasive sinfulness might be said to be both the fruit of the desert, and the streams that watered it.[103] Rather than signifying a neurotic self-abnegation, this grief of the wilderness crystallises a particularly Christian evolution of the intertwined tropes of melancholy and heroism: a

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[100] *Desert Fathers,* 10.1.

[101] D. Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism,* (Oxford University Press, New York: 1993), 185-192.

[102] *Sayings*, Arsenius 41.

[103] *Desert Fathers,* 3.27, '"Tears are the promised land."'

persistent awareness of the injustice pervasive in a fallen world, and an intimate awareness of the locus of this injustice within oneself. Thus,

> 'Jacob said, 'Like a taper giving light in a dark little room, so the fear of God comes into a man's heart and enlightens it, and teaches him all that is good and all the commandments of God.'"[104]

This transformation and reintegration of wider society begins in the very innermost recesses of the individual soul, because the same germ of sin is lodged within both. Thus, for the monk to stand prophetically outside society, to be the voice of opposition that cried from the wilderness, was, in facet, to identify himself radically *with* it, and to grieve over the injustice that he brought into the world, and not only that which he, or others, suffered.

Thus it may be seen why sorrow, even in the possibly inextricable grief that is *penthos*, is distinguished from despair, and from that *acedia* that shall be discussed below,[105] and can even be salutary. As Amma Syncletica is recorded as saying,

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[104] *Desert Fathers,* 3.7

[105] A. Crislip, "The Sin of Sloth or the Illness of the Demons? The Demon of Acedia in Early Christian Monasticism", *Harvard Theological Review 98* (2005), 143-69.

> There is grief that is useful… [that] consists in weeping over one's own faults and weeping over the weakness of one's nature, not to destroy one's purpose, and attach oneself to the perfect good.[106]

Furthermore, the locus of the transformative power of melancholy, for the Christian, becomes more pointed, occurring as it does in the awareness of her own sinfulness and the way in which she, herself, is part of the disintegration of society. Theophany is thus not experienced in wonder alone, but in the more intimate miracle of mercy and of grace. The power of God is revealed in his *necessity* to any human striving for justice. The Christian melancholic hero throws her case before God not simply as a last resort in the face of a disintegrating society, but also as the only option in the face of her own disordered self.

As suggested above, however, the transformative and revelatory experience of *penthos* existed on a *continuum* of sorrow and dissatisfaction alongside less salutary and, indeed, destructive states. Characteristic of the desert project, as we have seen, was the careful observation and cultivation of the spiritual, as well as the physical, life. Thus, as the early monks explored the geographical and psychic landscapes of the desert, so they mapped it in order to guide both their contemporaries and their successors. The pitfalls and potentials of sadness and grief were woven into an ethic of Christian life that exerted an influence as decisive on both theology and practice as the writing of the Ps-Aristotle in the

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[106] *Sayings,* Syncletica 27.

succeeding centuries. Nowhere did this exposition achieve as much clarity as in the work of Evagrius of Pontus.

Evagrius of Pontus

Evagrius of Pontus lived and fought for his spiritual life in the city-like desert of fourth-century Egypt, after scandal had exiled him from a more bustling, and tempting, urban scene. His ascetic retirement was not into a life of ease, but became the elucidation and elaboration of a theory and practice of Christian monastic practice that drew on both high Alexandrian theology, with its roots in neo-Platonic philosophy, and the evolving traditions of the coenobites and, particularly, the anchorites who had followed St Anthony into the wilderness.[107] As Cassiday writes,

> …he was the disciple of Macarius the Great and also studied with Macarius of Alexandria; he visited John the Seer of the Thebaid; his teaching influenced Palladius and Cassian, who were both important witnesses to the desert saints… He thus provides us with firsthand evidence of what the theology of the desert fathers could be like.[108]

[107] For a brief biography, and a history of subsequent controversies, see A Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus* (London, New York: Routledge, 2006), 5-22.

[108] A. Casiday, *Evagrius*, 3.

The level of education amongst the early monks was not homogeneous, though our knowledge is skewed by the tradition's transmission of a certain anti-intellectual strand demonstrating a wariness of classical learning, and even of the possession of books, including those of scripture.[109] This tendency, however, though always latent in Christian spirituality (one thinks of Thomas a Kempis) may also reflect an era of controversies and anathematisations, both within the desert and in relation to the wider church that silenced speculative monastic thinkers such as the Tall Brothers, and at which Evagrius of Pontus was at the centre. Those critics contemporary with him were alarmed by his elaboration of the Tall Brothers' distaste for the application of concrete images to God as part of a theological system which, at times, seemed to push beyond orthodoxy. Indeed, it was these controversies that so damaged Evagrius' reputation that it was not until the mid-to-late twentieth century that the bulk of his works were rediscovered and re-examined (and controversy still abounds).

Nevertheless, as Evagrius himself wrote, 'if you are a theologian, you will pray truly, and if you pray truly, you will be a theologian.'[110] His theological writings were not systematic but rather the expressions of a life of prayer and abstinence. Despite his (perhaps somewhat justified) reputation as a Gnostic prone to a prejudice towards the immaterial, Evagrius' writings are not intended to be purely theoretical and objective works of speculation, but are

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[109] *Desert Fathers,* 6.12 'A brother said to Serapion, "Give me a word." But he replied, "What can I say to you? You have taken what belongs to widows and orphans and put it on your window-ledge." He saw that the window-ledge was full of books.'

[110] Evagrius, quoted in K Corrigan, *Ashgate Studies in Philosophy and Theology in Antiquity: Evagrius and Gregory: Views of the Soul in Late Antiquity* (Ashgate, 2009) p. 163. See also, Cassiday, *Evagrius Ponticus* 5.

rather the fruits of progress in a particular form of the Christian life. Written in the form of *kephalai* (chapters) rather than the continuous prose of a treatise, they are intended to inform and to guide the monk, especially the novice, as appropriate to his maturity in his vocation.[111] Particularly in the more hands-on works, such as the *Praktikos* (*Practical Theology*) and the *Peri Logismon* (*On Thoughts*), Evagrius draws directly from his own experience, and that of his brothers, in reflecting on the human struggle to stay pure in the desert and the forces opposing this good fight. The solitary anchorite, it might seem, whose life is less complex, has fewer enemies with whom to contend; but alone with his thoughts and the uncertain movements of his own heart, it is he who faces the demons of the desert directly, and in whom the struggle of the human composite of body, mind and soul to purify itself from sin.

The place of sadness and sorrow lie at the crux of Evagrius' scheme of sin and its remedy. This most mutable of the 'thoughts' could have decisive consequences for a individual's salvation or its opposite. Like other sins, however, the monk struggled with it in the context of a wider cosmos in which demonic forces played on his obsessions, and in the form and direction of his thoughts. The devices of the demons had to be explored, explained and remedied. The monk had to be given the weapons and encouragement that would allow him to take part in the struggle, and the wisdom to discern the roots of sin and those of virtue. He also had to understand the mechanics of his

[111] Especially with respect to the *locus* of instruction, see on 'fellowship' with one's fellow ascetics, and the wider Christian world, through worship, hospitality and apologetics, see A. Cassiday, *Reconstructing the Theology of Evagrius Ponticus*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

own mind in order to trace the processes by which he became entangled in those 'thoughts' that, in some sense, are the very form of sin in humanity. Only once this framework was grasped, could the elucidation of the particular thoughts of sadness and *acedia* be adequately dissected.

Those demons faced by St Anthony and his successors, for Evagrius, form the lowest stratum of a vertical cosmology. Characterised as 'heavy', the most attached to material pleasures and selfishness, it is they who inspire, manipulate and capitalise upon those thoughts in humans that inspire the irascible and concupiscible passions. In line with other aspects of the literature of the desert, Evagrius understands the individual monk's struggle with his own conscience and weaknesses as equally a grappling with infernal forces.

Sin is, thus, both (spirituo-)social and individual, occurring in the interaction between the two. Even to modern eyes, the detailed and consistent characterisation of demons as specific actors in the desert drama is too prominent and lively to be explained away as metaphor or disdained as myth, the interaction of these forces with humanity are subtle and occur as much on a subjective level as they do on an objective one. The demons make use of the human individual's foibles, histories and habits, not just to destroy an enemy, but to make their adversary *like them*: characterised by selfishness, wrath and greed, with a thick and heavy being, fallen far from heaven, and enmeshed in their parallel, demonic economy.

To do so, the demons employ a number of tactics, and in his practical works, it is Evagrius aim to inform the monk of those weapons likely to be used against him, and to supply strategies by which the combatant may defend his integrity and defeat evil thoughts.[112] At the extreme, these can include sensory hallucination of flames in the cell, and the attack of terrifying monsters.[113] Though reminiscent of Athanasius' narration of Anthony's solitary moral struggles in the Inner Mountain, such occurrences are attested in the *Apothegmata*, and, despite their fantastic nature, Evagrius emphasises the trustworthy veracity of the accounts on which he draws. Yet Evagrius develops this tradition further, beyond the attempt to confound and horrify with unearthly powers usually attributed to demonic hallucinations. A conscientious psychologist in his theology and practice, he ties the experience of hallucinations and 'fantasies' to the sin of pride: as the proud man's attachment to his own self and status distances him from God, he succumbs to cowardice and paranoia and begins to imagine danger to his person lurking everywhere. Indeed, in this state, the monk can be said to be 'abandoned' by God to be 'the plaything of the demons.'

The hallucinations and fantasies conjured by the demons do not only prey on the monk's conscious mind, but in his dreams, too. Indeed, this is a tactic

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[112] Indeed, his *Antirrhetikos* is a handbook of Biblical citations with which the monk can counter specific demonic temptations: Evagrius, *Talking Back: A Monastic Handbook for Combating Demons*, trans. D. Brakke, (Cistercian Publications, 2009). For analysis, see L. Dysinger, *Prayer and Psalmody in the Writings of Evagrius Ponticus*, (Oxford University Press, 2005), 132-145. D. Brakke, "Making Public the Monastic Life: Reading the Self in Evagrius Ponticus' Talking Back", in D. Brakke, ed., *Religion and the Self in Antiquity,* (Indiana University Press, 2005), 233-259.

[113] Evagrius, *On the Eight Thoughts* in *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus* trans. and introduced R. E. Sinkewicz, (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2006), 73-90, § 27.

commonly and troublingly employed to destabilise the monk and draw him into sin. For Evagrius, whose spiritual programme advocates a great deal of self-cultivation and control, that one should be taken by surprise in the vulnerability of sleep is particularly worrying. Thus, evil spirits use dreams to destabilise the concupiscible and irascible parts of the soul, rendering them less controllable and, the following day, more prone to fall to temptation. Conversely, 'those inclined to anger and irascibility are apt to fall victim to frightening visions.'[114] More subtly, the experience of shameful or terrifying dreams can humiliate and dishearten the monk during his waking hours, or, indeed, compound the distress of one already troubled.[115]

Demons, on this account, emerge as the ultimate 'false comforters', needling their victims' foibles and excavating weakness, searching out the locus of blame, and turning trouble back upon the troubled soul. The Fathers' understanding that disintegration occurs within the soul as much as within society is suggested here. The teleology of demonic conversation emerges as alienation and self-enclosure, and their phantasmal visions purely self-referential, trapping the cooperating victim in a hall of mirrors of their own obsessions. Rather than remedying their own sins as a means of establishing just communities, and participating, ultimately, in the kingdom of God, the sinner is swallowed by the consciousness of their own sin. The aim of the demonic forces is to fracture humanity by this perverted, claustrophobic

[114] Evagrius, *Thoughts*, 27.

[115] Evagrius, *Thoughts*, 27.

counterfeit of the *penthos* discussed above. The society of hell is a series of atomised cells, in contrast the communities of hermitages or the vaster *coenobia* of Evagrius' contemporaries.

The defence advised by Evagrius against these underhanded attacks is a conscientious intensification of the ascetic programme that, for him, underlies monastic life and spiritual progress. Its foundation lies in 'abstinence' and, indeed, Evagrius advises that the irascible and concupiscible parts be 'starved' of their vigour through bodily deprivation of satisfactions as basic as sleep and food.[116] However, the concept of abstinence in Evagrius is both broader and profounder than it may sound to modern ears. As elegantly summarised by Robert E. Sinkewicz, it is 'the intelligent consideration and control of bodily and mental impulses.'[117] Thus, dreams are to be regulated not only through physical ascesis but through psychological attention: 'anchorites… must keep watch over their heart with every vigilance.'[118]

The goal of such self-awareness is to deprive the demons of the materials of evil of which they take advantage in order to tempt the monk. However, though the temptations offered by the evil spirits can uncover the sinful desires that remain within the monk despite his efforts, those unclean forces are dependent

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[116] The regulation of both mental and bodily appetites through physical regimen was a commonplace of ancient medicine that persisted into the early modern age. See, for example, Marsilio Ficino's *Three Books on Life,* discussed below, Chapter Six.

[117] *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus* trans. and introduced R. E. Sinkewicz, (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2006) p. 68-9.

[118] Evagrius, *Thoughts,* 27.

on their own observation of externally observable behaviours to determine the character of their adversary. 'The Lord alone is a knower of hearts.'[119] They thus become the mirror-image of the monk is his own conscientious observation. Therefore, abstinence from behaviours associated with sin, such as speaking ill of people, offers the demons fewer weapons in their campaign against one. Indeed, as Evagrius notes, 'The demons arm themselves with evil actions; once armed they treat harshly those who armed them.'[120] The agency of these beings is intimately bound up with the behaviour and spiritual state of individual humans, while not being reduced to such. Even more so, it is this claustrophobic entanglement that characterises the nature of the demonic threat, which is a paradoxical enemy that, though it comes from without, stimulates self-harm from within. In this, as noted above, the demons become the meticulous reflection of those they stalk, and aim to trap them inside that very reflection, alone in a wilderness made for one.

Ultimately, even Evagrius has to admit that, the hand-to-hand combat of abstinence notwithstanding, 'beneficence and mercy are particularly effective' against nocturnal fantasies, for example.[121] This is because, 'hardly any of the virtues do the demons fear as they fear gentleness.'[122] Offering as examples not only the great Old Testament heroes Moses and David, but also the model of the Saviour himself, Evagrius characterises gentleness as the mastery of

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[119] Evagrius, *Peri Logismon,* in *Greek Ascetic Corpus* pp. 153-182, § 37

[120] Evagrius, *Logismoi,* Appendix 3.

[121] Evagrius, *Logismoi,* 27.

[122] Evagrius, *Logismoi,* 13.

irascibility and the passions, noting that even if bodily abstinence is accomplished, spiritual sin such as anger may remain.[123] However, 'the mind of anchorites become difficult to capture when it flees to the plain of gentleness,' for there, free of the thoughts and impulses that bind it to selfish ways, it offers no weakness to demonic attack. The therapeutic importance of compassion in addressing the distressing combat with the demonic was, as noted above, also advocated in the *Apothegmata,* where we have seen it function as the fundamental structuring force in the monastic world. This gentleness, achieved through the dissolution of the passions, strikingly illuminates the famous Evagrian spiritual goal of *apatheia*. It also reflects the distinction between human nature and the demonic in a manner drawn from the experience of the desert: an apothegm relates how Evagrius' mentor, Macarius the Great, was confronted by the devil, who berates him, 'Macarius, I suffer a lot of violence from you, for I cannot overcome you. For whatever you do, I do also. If you fast, I eat nothing; if you keep watch, I get no sleep. There is only one quality in which you surpass me… Your humility. That is why I cannot prevail against you.'[124]

The Place of Humanity in a Moral Cosmos

Gentleness, however, is only to be offered to people. The war against the demons is to be pursued with vigour: indeed, that is why God bestowed upon

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[123] Evagrius, *Logismoi,* 13.

[124] *Desert Fathers,* 15.26.

humanity its irascible aspect, while its counterpart the concupiscible was given that we might love and cherish the good and work for its protection and furtherance. The heroic rage of Job and Bellerophon, on the Evagrian scheme, has its natural home on this particular battlefield, and finds that the scope of its war has broadened from the earthly-social to the cosmic. Humanity finds its place in the middle of Evagrius' moral cosmos, beneath the angels and above the demons, and pressed on both sides by each. He notes that, though each class of supernatural beings can make an impact on our lives, we have no influence over them in their respective realms.[125] This unsettled place of humanity on Evagrius' vertical axis is what lends mortals their dynamic character, and enjoins upon their participation in a moral cosmos.

It is the proper goal of humanity, therefore, to purify its nature by abstinence and 'renunciations'[126] in order to approach a state more akin to that of the angels. Though he avers that the progress of the monk is never straightforward, Evagrius envisions a certain order of development in the practical life.[127] Conceiving of the advancement of virtue in the metaphor of a journey, he writes that the monk must travel without distraction or delay *through* the desert (in which he was physically and geographically located) to his destination in the *heavenly* city, just as both Job and Bellerophontes were transformed by their wilderness experience, and thereafter rejoined their communities.

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[125] Evagrius, *Logismoi,* 19.

[126] Evagrius, *Logismoi,* 26.

[127] D. Brakke "Making Public the Monastic Life: Reading the Self in Evagrius Ponticus' Talking Back" in D. Brakke, ed., *Religion and the Self in Antiquity* p. 225.

The renunciate solitude of the wasteland is not an objective in itself – indeed, it is to be actively travelled *through* by means of asceticism, prayer and contemplation. We are not yet angels, but, instead, still engaged in the battle against sin. Rather, the monk aims for a more populous homeland, though one equally unlike the cities that many, including Evagrius himself, had left. The monk's travels are directed towards an existence *amidst* the sons of heaven, united by the bonds of *agape* and the kingship of Christ. This is the heavenly city, the ideal society.

To this end, Evagrius enumerates three renunciations: of the things of the world, of evil through grace and zeal, and of 'ignorance of those things which are naturally manifest to people in proportion to their state.'[128] This latter formulation, emphasising what, for Evagrius, is the angelic character of the pursuit of knowledge,[129] also implies a peculiar characteristic of his *gnosis*. Though he is firm that there is knowledge and advice inappropriate to novices in the monastic state, and therefore exercises discretion in his writing, this particular *kephalaia* seems to suggest that ignorance is as blameworthy as knowledge is praiseworthy.[130] Certainly amongst monks, whose lifestyle is

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[128] Evagrius, *Logismoi,* 26.

[129] 'Angelic thought' is contemplative and ruminatory: it seeks out the reasons of things in a manner philosophical and scientific as well as theological. They 'are concerned with the investigation of the natures of things and search out their spiritual principles.' It might be seen as a kind of wonder at God's creation that praises the Creator by its curiosity. Such a wonder at the works of the divine provided a counterweight to the struggles of Job and Bellerophon - and, indeed, might be said to be the theophanic fruit of their own interrogations. Evagrius, *Logismoi,* 8.

[130] It also seems to imply that movement on the vertical axis is inevitable and stasis impossible: if one is not actively moving upwards, one is sinking.

based around the first and second renunciations, Evagrius envisions a practice of reflection and contemplation as a necessary complement *for everyone*. Despite the rigour of his ideas and ideals, Evagrius does not seem to be, in principle, an elitist, but rather an urgently eschatological intellectual.

Indeed, it is upon the achievement of these three renunciations that the monk is granted 'the knowledge of discernment' from the Lord, 'for it is not possible to receive knowledge of more numerous things if one is neglectful of those already known.'[131] Discernment, an evocative term in the desert, reflecting right judgement as much as knowledge, and one of the heroic virtues of the Fathers and Mothers, is here envisaged as the goal of the monks' practice and prayer: 'And a blessed thing it is to serve the knowledge of God.'[132] It is this discernment that is needed in order to steer between the sorrow of sin and the salutary sorrow *for* sin. Indeed, it seems that this is the end of *apatheia*, for, having achieved the state of impassibility and stilled the mind from its passionate 'wandering,' the monk 'encounters those incorporeal beings who fulfil its spiritual desires.'[133] These 'incorporeal,' that is to say, angelic beings, offer, in some sense, a fulfilment of human nature, just as the demons attempt its destruction, indicating that, for Evagrius, human destiny lies upward, and integrated into a broader cosmic order.

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[131] Evagrius, *Logismoi,* 26.

[132] Evagrius, *Logismoi,* 26.

[133] Evagrius, *Logismoi,* 26.

The engine that drives this ascension (or, indeed, descent) is what seems to be, for Evagrius, the most vital part of the human being: the mind. Though he insists on the fundamental importance of bodily disciplines, the overwhelming bulk of his work focus on the observation and discernment of a monk's *thoughts*. The term is a crucial one in the Evagrian corpus. His *On the Eight Evil Thoughts* is the foundation of the western enumeration of the seven deadly *sins*. The Greek term used by Evagrius that is translated into English as 'thoughts' is suggestive, too: *logismoi*, its root in *logos* (word), implies, not merely a dumb impulse, but a complex, and often conscious psychological construction by which temptation is received and processed.

It is in his elucidation of these chains of thoughts that Evagrius' gifts as a psychologist are most in evidence. We have seen above how he described the descent of the prideful person into malignant fear. Similarly, he describes how an avaricious monk with many possessions experiences anxiety and sadness on their account; worse, his attachment to material things makes him utterly unable to accept death.[134]

He also examines, with practical examples, the interactions by which good thoughts and bad thoughts can oppose and neutralise each other:

> I get a thought of offering hospitality… but this gets cut off when the tempter comes along and suggests offering hospitality

[134] Evagrius, *Logismoi,* 3.7.

> for the sake of being seen by people, but then this is cut off when a better thought intervenes, which… compels us not to do this for the sake of people.[135]

Despite the dubiousness of Evagrius' doctrine that two thoughts cannot be held in the mind at the same time,[136] the narrative quoted above graphically illustrates the constant struggle for virtue in human consciousness and the subtlety with which good and evil intentions can elide into each other. It also demonstrates the constant activity of the human mind, existing in a moral cosmos, upon the *noemata* (impressions) with which it is perpetually bombarded, either naturally, or through the promptings of the demons. Evagrius insists on the decisive moral character of ruminations: for example, dwelling, while at prayer, on a dispute with a fellow monk blasphemously deifies him, 'for certainly what the mind sees while praying is worthy of being acknowledged as god.'[137]

This provides a psychological rationale to the *Apothegmata's* insistence on forgiveness and the establishment of social ties within the desert community, as well as its emphasis on vigilance with regard to one's interior movements. Thoughts are graphically value-laden: they are manipulations of perceptions and desires, and, thus, a world built inside oneself. It is not difficult to see how

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[135] Evagrius, *Logismoi,* 7.

[136] Evagrius, *Logismoi,* 24.

[137] Evagrius, *Logismoi,* 37.

the construction of the outer world could come to be influenced by distortions in the construction of the interior, and, thus, how personal vice can lead one to misperceive and mis-construct society more broadly, and therefore build a community in one's own unjust image.

Thus, Evagrius' use of the term 'sees' is significant: *noemata* are the impressions made upon our mind by our senses. Thus, for Evagrius, thought regarding material things can be described as chains of images or fantasies. However, in order to process, manipulate, and move amongst, these images and impressions - that is, to think at all - the mind must create an equally graphic self-image: that of its own body, which, as a mark of its own subjectivity, lacks a face, 'for it is incapable of creating a form of this within itself since it has never seen itself.' Nevertheless, 'with this figure then our mind does everything interiorly – it sits and walks, gives and receives in its intellect.'[138] Being thus personally embodied renders even rumination social, with its fundamental mechanism involves a virtual 'self' navigating sensory impressions and subjective passions, and, moreover, subject to the suggestions of the demons that populate a moral cosmos.

Nevertheless, *noemata*, and even materiality itself, are not in themselves evil. Indeed, in a charming parable, Evagrius describes them as a 'flock' given to each individual: 'The Lord has confided to the human person the mental

[138] Evagrius, *Logismoi,* 25.

representations of this age, like sheep to a good shepherd.'[139] It is to guard these precious impressions, as noted above, that humanity has its irascible and concupiscible parts, and the image of the flock charmingly integrates the responsibility one has to broader society regarding one's own personal vices and virtues. The responsibility of the shepherd does not only extend to guarding the flock, but to its proper pasturage, too, for our 'sheep' are fed on whatever virtues or vices the monk cultivates, and Evagrius warns his reader not to graze them alongside the passions, but rather, especially in times of weariness and discouragement, to 'graze our sheep at the foot of Mount Sinai,' in contemplation of 'the rock of knowledge.'[140]

The Passions and the Thoughts

Just as the impressions of one's senses are not to be received into the 'fields' of the passions, so, equally, the existence of impure thoughts in the monk is predicated on the persistence of the passions. Selfish and desiring drives such as avarice, lust and pride corrupt the proper working of the mind and trap it in a deceptively horizontal material realm. It is because of this damaging impact that Evagrius terms such passions, 'contrary to nature.'

In the *On the Eight Thoughts* section of the *Praktikos*, he offers a loose genealogy of the passions, describing, not only how one can lead to another,

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[139] Evagrius, *Logismoi,* 17.

[140] Evagrius, *Logismoi,* 17.

but also how intertwined they all are: overcoming one passion, it seems, only leaves the monk open to the onslaught of the others.[141] Moreover, as has been noted more than once above, all these passions and thoughts disintegrate, in their ultimate frustration, to one: sorrow. The place of this 'thought' in Evagrius' theology for the first time crystallises the pitfall and potential of this experience for the Christian pilgrim on earth.

At the gateway to sin stands gluttony. Evagrius writes, 'He who controls the stomach diminishes the passions; he who is overcome by food gives increase to pleasures.'[142] The reversal of proper priorities produced by this seemingly simplest of sins is pithily described: "A glutton's soul rejoices at the commemorations [feasts] of the martyrs; that of the abstinent person imitates their lives.'[143] Thereafter, while 'abstinence gives birth to chastity; gluttony is the mother of licentiousness.'[144] The individual, then, having given in to temptations relating to pre-rational drives, succumbs to the vice that marks precedence given to consumption at the rational level, too: avarice. Evagrius writes that it 'nourishes the remaining passions like evil branches.'[145] The three concupiscible vices establish in the monk that selfishness that makes the subsequent irascible vices possible.

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[141] On this topic, too, see W. Harmless, R. R. Fitzgerald, "The Sapphire Light of the Mind: The *Skemmata* of Evagrius Ponticus," *Theological Studies* 62 (2001), 498-529.

[142] Evagrius, *Thoughts*, 1.2.

[143] Evagrius, *Thoughts*, 1.21.

[144] Evagrius, *Thoughts*, 2.1.

[145] Evagrius, *Thoughts*, 3.1.

Anger, then, is 'a longing for revenge.'[146] An impassioned response to an insult to or frustration of that self nourished and cherished by the concupiscible desires, it participates in their irrationality: "the irascible person is troubled by senseless thoughts… the movement of irascibility thickens the intellect of the angry person… a thought of resentment darkens the mind.'[147] As it obstructs the rational part, so it dehumanises: 'The angry monk, like a solitary wild boar, saw some people and gnashed his teeth.'[148] The passion is linked repeatedly with other wild animals, including foxes,[149] and, as we have seen, the angry monk is troubled by visions and dreams of wild beasts.[150] The image implies irrationality and ravenousness that links the irascible vice back to the concupiscible, but contains a transfiguring graphicness that underscores how humanity is diminished and disfigured by the progress of a chain of sin.

Indeed, all passions destroy humanity and the rationality that is at is core. Vainglory is 'an irrational passion'[151] and, worse, 'alone among the thoughts… embraces the whole inhabited world,' thus introducing the impressions of 'abundance of matter.'[152] This demon has a sense of humour. Evagrius writes, 'The monk afflicted with vainglory is an unpaid workman; he undertakes the

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[146] Evagrius, *Thoughts*, 5.1.

[147] Evagrius, *Thoughts*, 4.3; 4.5; 4.6.

[148] Evagrius, *Thoughts*, 4.4.

[149] Evagrius, *Thoughts*, 4.13.

[150] Evagrius, *Thoughts*, 4.20.

[151] Evagrius, *Thoughts*, 7.1.

[152] Evagrius, *Logismoi,* 14.

work but gets no pay.'[153] It hollows out the efforts of the monk and makes him a mockery of himself, unawares. This obliviousness 'strengthens the mind that has fallen away from God… if there are many witnesses present. Then fasting, vigils and prayer are light matters, for the praise of the multitude rouses the enthusiasm.'[154]

It is easy to see how pride follows, then, upon vainglory. 'A flash of lightning foretells the sound of thunder; vainglory announces the presence of pride.'[155] Evagrius describes its rationale as such: 'The one who has distanced himself from God suffers the disease of pride in ascribing his achievements to his own efforts.'[156] Having distanced himself so decisively from the truth of the relation of humanity and divinity,[157] the prideful man exists precariously and alone, out on the precipice of sin. Evagrius uses the imagery of 'a great height [above] an abyss,'[158] 'a rock broken off from a mountain,'[159] and as a 'spider web' through which the proud man 'falls through and is borne downwards.'[160] We have seen how the proud man is subject to terrors and fantasies due to his extremely unstable position. The metaphor of descent and ascent on the vertical axis reaches its apotheosis with pride. 'Pride cast the archangel from heaven and

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[153] Evagrius, *Thoughts*, 7.4.

[154] Evagrius, *Thoughts*, 7.20.

[155] Evagrius, *Thoughts*, 8.2.

[156] Evagrius, *Thoughts*, 8.5.

[157] Evagrius, *Thoughts*, 8.12.

[158] Evagrius, *Thoughts*, 8.3.

[159] Evagrius, *Thoughts*, 8.4.

[160] Evagrius, *Thoughts*, 8.6.

made him fall to earth like lightening. Humility leads a person up to heaven and prepares him to dance with the angels.'[161]

Sadness and *Acedia*

If anger is a longing for revenge, then, 'sadness is a dejection of soul and is constituted from thoughts of anger, for… the frustration of revenge produces sadness.'[162] The frustration of avarice produces sadness, too,[163] as will the frustration of vainglory.[164] Like anger, too, sadness 'takes away the perceptions of the soul.'[165] Indeed, situated at the centre of Evagrius' schema of the sins, sadness follows behind each, like a sting in the tail. Evagrius' metaphors become nightmarishly maternal-parasitic: sadness is 'a worm in the heart that consumes the mother that gives it birth… when sadness is begotten, it provokes much toil, and since it stays even after the birth pains, it causes not a little suffering.'[166] It destroys that on which it feeds. To be 'bound by sadness' is to have been 'vanquished by the passions' for 'sadness is constituted by the frustration of an appetite, and an appetite is joined to every passion.'[167] It is

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[161] Evagrius, *Thoughts*, 8.11.

[162] Evagrius, *Thoughts*, 5.1.

[163] Evagrius, *Thoughts*, 5.17.

[164] Evagrius, *Thoughts*, 5.18.

[165] Evagrius, *Thoughts*, 5.25.

[166] Evagrius, *Thoughts*, 3-4.

[167] Evagrius, *Thoughts*, 5.10. Like Thomas Aquinas after him, Evagrius understands dejection as frustrated desire, but takes the observation much further into what reads as a condemnation of desire itself, while Aquinas understands humanity as a naturally passionate creature whose desires, body and soul, tend towards the good. For Evagrius, however, as noted, humanity's fulfillment is ultimately incorporeal and spiritual, and so he identifies the passions almost solely with sin.

implied that, not only is sadness the common consequence of abandonment to the passions, it might even be said to be inevitable. Moreover, from this inevitability, there can be no return: only "one who has overcome the passions will not be *dominated* by sadness [italics mine].'[168] Sadness is the obverse side of the pleasures of the world.

Indeed, sadness is a peculiar sin, for while the others tempt the sinner with satisfaction and pleasure, sadness actively destroys pleasure, even spiritual pleasure.[169] Moreover, 'A monk afflicted by sadness cannot move the mind towards contemplation or offer up pure prayer, for sadness poses an obstacle to all that is good.'[170] Here, sadness interrupts that metaphor of progress through the desert by which Evagrius describes the monastic life. As well as obstructing his path, it weighs down the traveller, too, linked with 'fetters on the feet'[171] and being 'bound in irons.'[172] This, then, is the greatest danger of sadness: while other passions exacerbate the beastliness in humanity, sadness dampens the divine.

Evagrius therefore reflects on the counsel of St Paul to the Corinthians regarding the treatment of a sinner.[173] On the one hand, the fallen brother is to

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[168] Evagrius, *Thoughts*, 5.11.

[169] Evagrius, *Thoughts*, 5.5.

[170] Evagrius, *Thoughts*, 5.6.

[171] Evagrius, *Thoughts*, 5.7.

[172] Evagrius, *Thoughts*, 5.8.

[173] 1 Cor 5:5; 2 Cor 2:7-8

reflect with sorrow on his transgression, for only by 'being handed over to this demon' could he repent.[174] Nevertheless, the Apostle warns the Corinthians thereafter to 'confirm your love towards [their brother], lest he be overwhelmed by too great a sadness.' The most overwhelming sadness, it seems, is that of a brother who has fallen, for the demon of sadness obstructs his prayer with memories of his sin.[175] The logic of the demonic, as ever, is to cut its victim off from community, and entrap him in a hopeless self-containment. Thus, while sadness must be used, it must be *mastered* as much as any other passion. If it becomes dominant, it 'begets thoughts that counsel the soul to make its escape or force it to flee far from its place'[176] and condemn itself to the kind of self-abnegating isolation suffered by the Bellerophon of Homer. Evagrius ascribes this impulse to the 'saintly Job' but his choice of words here, in the *Peri Logismon*, harks back to the description of the sixth 'thought' enumerated in the *Praktikos*, *acedia*.

There is no direct translation of the term *acedia* from the Greek. In the Latin moral recension by Gregory the Great of this desert literature into the western Seven Deadly Sins, *acedia* became sloth, but this hardly captures its essence. Thomas Aquinas, too, mentions *acedia* under this rubric, but ascribes to it that erosion of spiritual pleasure it shares with Evagrian sorrow.[177] John Cassian,

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[174] Indeed, Evagrius further links the reception of John the Baptist's call to repentance to this kind of sadness. Evagrius, *Logismoi,* 12.

[175] Evagrius, *Logismoi,* 36.

[176] Evagrius, *Logismoi,* 12

[177] Aquinas, *Summa,* 1.2ae 35.1.

the Latin monastic theologian, renders the term 'weariness or dejection of heart,'[178] recalling Evagrius' slightly less sympathetic descriptor 'a relaxation of soul which is not in accord with nature [and] does not resist temptation nobly.'[179] He regards it as the monk's loss of 'perseverance'[180] in his vocation that, rather, 'considers his own satisfaction to be a precept.'[181]

Yet it seems that *acedia* cannot be adequately defined – it can only be narrated. In the *Praktikos*, he links it with the 'noonday demon' of Psalm 90. He describes how it lengthens the hours and how the monk will resort to any distraction to shorten them. Worse, then, the mind of the monk reflects upon its displeasures with its current residence, and the demon of *acedia* insidiously suggests that the monk is being restrained in his vocation by the stability at the heart of it.[182] He cannot read, but rather squirms and diverts his attention, thereafter giving in to hunger and sleep.[183] What is particularly dangerous about the demonic loquacity in this case is its very appearance of reasonableness: the acediac monk is able, with its help, to construct impressive and sensible structures to circumvent his duties and undermine his vocation while seemingly exercising the best part of his humanity, his reason. Rather than regarding his dissatisfaction as the symptom of a deeper spiritual malaise,

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[178] J. Cassian *The Institutes,* trans. B. Ramsey, (Paulist Press, 2000), 10.1

[179] Evagrius, *Thoughts*, 6.1.

[180] Evagrius, *Thoughts*, 6.5.

[181] Evagrius, *Thoughts*, 8.7.

[182] Evagrius, *Praktikos* in *Greek Ascetic Corpus*, 93-114, § 12

[183] Evagrius, *Thoughts*, 6.15.

either that of sadness or of *acedia*, he regards it as the problem in itself and, indeed, as a perception that rightly reflects reality. Thus, while sadness destroys the appreciation of spiritual pleasures, *acedia* is the disease of what part of the human remains.

Yet the passion of sadness, situated in the centre of the web of human desires, is not necessarily destructive. Evagrius admits to a certain 'godly sadness.' It can spur the soul to reflection upon, and grief over, its sins. Like the venom of a viper, 'administered in a manner beneficial to humans, destroys the venoms of other animals.'[184] If the 'warfare' of the demon of sadness is moderate, 'he renders the anchorite tried and tested, for he teaches him to approach none of the things of this world and to avoid all pleasure.'[185] Thus this passion, bound into the inevitable frustration of all the others in this finite world, can reveal the limited nature of all the others, if its observed with the conscientious self-reflection that is part of Evagrius' abstinence: 'when this spirit afflicts people, it can be for them an opportunity for a good repentance.'[186] Sadness, thus, is the only 'evil' thought that can be used for good, and the only demon who falls victim to his own wiles.

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[184] Evagrius, *Logismoi,* 12.

[185] Evagrius, *Logismoi,* 12.

[186] Evagrius, *Logismoi,* 12.

Conclusion

The movement of the Fathers and Mothers of monasticism to the desert enacts a striking reversal of the melancholic movement traced above in the narratives of Bellerophon and Job. Rather than being cast into the desert by their sorrow and alienation from society, the earliest eremites and coenobites actively embraced this foreign space and built a society there, one that attempted to practice those virtues of justice, integration and mercy whose lack might be bemoaned in the cities and villages from which they had fled. However, in doing so, and in facing the native rigours and terrors of the wilderness, they were forced to confront the disorder within themselves as individuals that provided the primal barrier to the cultivation of the empty lands for God, and the building of a heavenly society on earth. The desert led them *to* sorrow, but it was in that sorrow that God could be found in a private, intimate theophany of forgiveness and grace. Suspended between the disjointed city of humanity and the unified city of God, the monks and nuns' striving for justice that was manifested in their desert communities took place, crucially, in the darkest parts of their own hearts, and sorrow became, not only the signal of a world out of joint, but the most significant step in its rebuilding.

This foundation could not be laid, however, without significant discernment. It was more than possible for sorrow to fester into despair or *acedia.* Thus, the psychological observations of the desert literature provide a crucial description of the tools used to contextualise and precisely describe the ways in which

sorrow should, and should not be used. The most systematic clarification of the multifarious natures of sorrow, and its proper approach, is found in the work of Evagrius of Pontus. The demons of the desert play on human foibles and weaknesses by the manipulation of embodied thoughts, drawing them into sinful preoccupations. Dreams and imaginings can trap an individual within these preoccupations, cutting them off from both the wider world, and the wonder of its Creator. Evagrius places sorrow at the centre of this psychology of sin, the result of each vice's inevitable frustration. Dissatisfaction can thus result in *acedia*, in which all relish is destroyed and stability undermined. The sufferer's attention is diverted from the work necessary for the cultivation of his or her soul, and on to the consideration of endless alternatives. Nevertheless, unique amongst the sins, in this doubly-twisted *contrapasso*, the devils' thoroughgoing sense of irony can serve to unbind their own best efforts. It is the very central place of sorrow that also allows it to act as a salutary signal to the sufferer, and guide him or her out of the spiralling labyrinth of sin and self-enclosure that the logic of each vice - all of which eventually interlock - demands. On the contrary, it is the merciful help of the monastic community that offers the troubled brother or sister comfort while he or she comes to recognise their own need for grace, and the life-long work of *penthos*.

Chapter Two: Augustine, Son of Tears

The previous chapter noted the importance of compassion in the early monastic ethic of community, and, further, how one of the most fundamental blocks of that community was the spiritual elder to whom the novice would lay bare his thoughts. The mode of 'confession' found a parallel expression in late antiquity that would be just as influential: in the autobiography of that name by Augustine of Hippo. The *Confessions* are addressed to God but presented to the world, and in them, the bishop gives an account of his boyhood and youth in the light of his later conversion to the Christian faith. While undoubtedly reminiscent of monastic practice, Augustine, student of rhetoric and possessed of a greater degree of urbanity than most desert-dwellers, infuses his work with fulsome philosophical and literary scholarship and panache. The *Confessions*, in a sense, perform the work of that *penthos* discussed above: it is both an act of compunction and a celebration of the wonder of God's mercy. As described by James J O' Donnell, they are a "a trophy torn from the grip of the unsayable after a prolonged struggle on the frontier between speech and silence."[187] The form of the piece thus dictates its mode: highly emotional and intensely personal, something that the accomplished rhetor would not have left to chance. Nevertheless, in doing so, Augustine not only demonstrated a similar self-disclosing compassion to that displayed by the elders of the desert, he also

[187] Augustine, *Confessions*: I, trans., and introduced J. J. O'Donnell, (Oxford: Clarendon Press: 1992), xvii.

engaged in an exploration of the issues surrounding the place of those emotions and preoccupations whose effect on his life he narrates.

The Confessions: Learning to Love and Lose

While the most familiar of those emotional struggles, especially to modern readers, is that of Augustine's discomfort with his own sexuality, his examination of his responses to, first, staged and, secondly, personally experienced, tragedy provide an instructive counterpoint to numerous themes already raised. Indeed, coming after his move to the city of Carthage, with all its lively indulgences and temptations, the bishop's musings on the topics of grief and misery immediately succeed what one suspects is their opposite face: a young man's longing for love.[188]

The place of desire in the motor of the human mechanism was noted, albeit negatively, by Evagrius in the economy of sin. Augustine, influenced by neo-Platonism, has a more generally positively understanding of *eros*, which therefore defines his youthful unhappiness, not as excessive, but as misdirected desire. He writes, 'As yet I had never been in love and I longed to love; and from a subconscious poverty of mind I hated the thought of being less inwardly destitute; I was in love with love, and I hated safety and a path free of

[188] On this, see M. Hollingsworth, *Augustine of Hippo: An Intellectual Biography*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 142-170.

snares.'[189] Nevertheless, Evagrius would not have been surprised to learn that the young Augustine sought to sate this craving - that he later recognised as being, in fact, for God - with possessive earthly obsessions that resulted in him being 'flogged with the red-hot iron rods of jealousy, suspicion, fear, anger and contention.'[190]

That the objects of his appetites, and the character of those passions themselves, lacked the substance proper to their (divine) end is reinforced by Augustine's next move in the text. Parallel to this self-lacerating pursuit of an ill-defined 'love', and, given its suggestive position in the text, akin to it, is Augustine's voluptuous pleasure in 'spectacles' – namely, tragedies. As he grows increasingly entangled in the emotional and psychological repercussions of his preoccupations and pursuits, so does he becomes enamoured of the representation of the fallout from the dramatic, fateful and pathetic narratives of grief.

Indeed, Augustine implies that reality and spectacle became mutually-reinforcing in their very reflection of the dramas of his own life. He does not comment on how theatrical narratives and tropes might have informed his own desires and his understanding of them. Nevertheless, the crucial point seems to be that theatre 'fuelled my fire'[191] of emotional need. Indeed, the Aristotelian

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[189] Augustine, *Confessions,* trans. H. Chadwick, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), III.i.1

[190] Augustine, *Confessions,* III.i.1

[191] Augustine, *Confessions* III.i.2.

notion of *catharsis* seems alien to the Latinate Augustine, who is more aligned with traditional Platonic suspicion of *mimesis*. There is no therapeutic value, for him, to be found in the identification of his own troubles with those played out on stage. He considers theatrical tragedy, instead, under the *oppositions* of pleasure and pain, and reality and spectacle.

The most dubious aspect of his youthful enjoyment of theatre for the older theologian is, in fact, the very enjoyment that he experienced in viewing the productions. He notes the immediate contradiction present: the emotional response to tragedy is one of distress, but that this heartache is itself experienced as gratification. Indeed, by visiting the theatre, one thereby actively seeks out suffering, in order to enjoy it. Thus, 'he wants to suffer the pain given by being a spectator of these sufferings, and the pain itself is his pleasure.'[192] Augustine notes, pertinently, that one would not wish to undergo the disasters portrayed on stage oneself. Personal suffering is simply miserable.

Furthermore, though compassion for others does involve personal suffering, it contains nothing of the elements of pleasure infused into the experience of attending a play. Indeed, for Augustine, 'authentic compassion' should 'contain no element of pleasure.'[193] Suffering is not 'loveable'[194] in and of itself.

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[192] Augustine, *Confessions* III.i.1.

[193] Augustine, *Confessions*, III.i.3.

[194] Augustine, *Confessions* III.i.3.

Moreover, while compassion is itself, good, and maybe even an 'object of love' in its 'tears and agonies,' it flows from 'friendship and fellow-feeling.' However, fiction cannot, on his model, be a satisfactory object of compassion because it precludes one from offering any kind of relief to the (unreal) sufferer. Rather, the spectator's object is 'only to grieve' and 'applauds the actor of these fictions more the more he grieves,' to the extent that 'if the spectator is not moved to tears, he goes away disgusted and criticising.'[195]

Augustine describes this very predilection of his as 'miserable.' Yet the 'griefs' he enjoyed were of a strange kind.

> Hence came my love for sufferings, but not of a kind that pierced me very deeply; for my longing was not to experience myself miseries such as I saw on stage. I wanted only to hear stories and imaginary legends of sufferings which, as it were, scratched me on the surface. Yet like the scratches of fingernails, they produced inflamed spots, pus, and repulsive sores. That was my kind of life. Surely, my God, it was no real life at all?[196]

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[195] Augustine, *Confessions* III.i.

[196] Augustine, *Confessions* III.i.4.

This addiction to the consumption of mimetic griefs, experienced, not out of compassion, or a desire for *catharsis*, but simply to stimulate sensation is not only, on Augustine's scheme, perverse, it also bears a resemblance to the kind of compulsions inherent in the *acedia* discussed in the previous chapter. Phantasmal and speculative, and by its nature constructed in opposition to reality, it is easy to see how, for one of Augustine's temperament, and of his suspicion of fiction, these kind of narratives could act in parasitic and diffusive capacity. It is equally significant that the grief experienced is described as shallow: *acedia* acts, above all, as distraction. In the context of the narrative of the *Confessions*, Augustine here used fiction to feed the obsessions that diverted his youthful self from the quest for God.

Aligned, too, with the indulgent *acedia* of the theatre, Augustine implies as his narrative continues, is the sophistry of the law-courts and the orator's arts, 'where one's reputation is high in proportion to one's success in deceiving people.'[197] If this is the nature of the legal profession by Augustine's later estimation, then surely it has its parallel in those spectacle whose success is marked, as seen above, by the inducement of tears from the performance of fictions. Augustine's may not only have identified with the characters portrayed on stage, but with the actors themselves.

[197] Augustine, *Confessions* III.vi.10.

A perhaps greater danger attendant upon the use of rhetorical techniques, however, suggests itself: their capacity to frame arguments not only deceitful with regard to legal matters, but also misleading and empty with regard to matters of the divine. Moreover, verbal 'sophistication' rendered the young Augustine suspicious, and even contemptuous, of the Scriptures. They 'seemed to me unworthy in comparison with the dignity of Cicero,'[198] whose *Hortensius* had sparked his interest in philosophy. Thus, he 'fell in with men proud of their slick talk, very earthly-minded and loquacious,' who, even speaking of Christ and the Holy Spirit 'used to say 'Truth, truth', and they had a lot to tell me about it; but there was never any truth in them'[199] despite their 'assertions and… the support of many huge tomes.' These were the Manichees, a heterodox sect with whom Augustine aligned himself. Augustine describes the poverty of their doctrines in terms of 'food seen in dreams [that] is extremely like food received in the waking state; yet sleepers receive no nourishment, they are simply sleeping.'[200] Manichaeism is here reflected upon as another insubstantial fiction whose shallow emotional satisfactions are, in fact, the host of a deeper spiritual rot and, at their core, empty, phantasmal *acediac* distractions from reality.

In instructive contrast, Augustine's mother, Monica, was, at the same time, undergoing a heart-rending grief of her own. Her son, we have seen, in

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[198] Augustine, *Confessions* III.v.9.

[199] Augustine, *Confessions* III.vi.10.

[200] Augustine, *Confessions* III.vi.10.

stretching his muscles as a rhetorician, disdained the rustic forms of Scripture, and its descriptions of archaic customs and lifestyles. He recounts that she wept for him to God, 'more than mothers weep when lamenting their dead children,' because she 'perceived the death that held me.'[201] Augustine repeats three times in his recounting, 'You heard her, Lord.' Monica is sent a vision, in which she is asked why she was 'sad and crushed with grief,' and is shown, in answer, her son united with her in the Christian faith.

In response to this dream, Monica receives her son back into her household, and welcomes him to her table: she is encouraged in love and compassion, and works to strengthen the bonds between her and Augustine. That this is a crucial part of her response to the vision is demonstrated by her role, thereafter, as mediator, not just between her son and God, but also in the opposite direction: between God and her son. Augustine attempts to rationalise his mother's vision as a relativising affirmation of his current philosophical quest, but this is an attempt that Monica immediately clarifies and dismisses. The young rhetorician, though presumably experienced in verbal fencing, was, we learn from the older theologian 'more moved by your answer through my vigilant mother than by the dream itself'[202] that he would eventually be converted.

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[201] Augustine, *Confessions* III.xi.19.

[202] Augustine, *Confessions* III.xi.20.

That Monica's misery, addressed to God, is answered with a visionary experience, and followed by the pursuit of a mediating role, moreover, is reminiscent of those patterns explored above. The further interest of Monica's case, however, lies in her longer-term reaction. She is indeed consoled, to the point of being filled with joy and hope throughout the subsequent nine years that would elapse before her son's eventual conversion. Nevertheless, though 'already cheered by hope but no less constant in prayer and weeping, never ceased her hours of prayer to lament about me to you.'[203] That her entreaties remained as acceptable to God as before is affirmed: while before the dream, God 'did not despise her tears,' afterwards, her 'prayer [still] entered into your presence.'[204] Indeed, when she entreats a bishop to debate the errors of the Manichees with Augustine, knowing that he had been handed over the sect himself as a child, she pleads with 'begging and floods of tears.' He refuses, regarding Augustine as still too enraptured in self-conceit and 'the novel excitements of that heresy.'[205] The bishop's confidence in the the eventual self-evidence of the Christian faith to the studious Augustine is admirable, but it did not satisfy the anxious Monica. The bishop remained unmoved with regard to engaging Augustine in argument, but, in dismissing the anxious mother he said, 'it cannot be that the son of these tears should perish.' These words Monica remembered 'as if they had sounded from heaven.'[206]

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[203] Augustine, *Confessions* III.xi.19.

[204] Augustine *Confessions* III.xi.19.

[205] Augustine, *Confessions,* III.xi.20.

[206] Augustine, *Confessions* III.xi.21.

A cynic may hear, in this last report, the dubiously-founded beliefs of a desperate mind, but, in Augustine's later account, as the most significant theologian of his age, his mother's misery, and her explicit expression of it to God was answered with a vision, with consolation, and, finally, with the answer to her prayers. She exists in that Jobean space of a misery that, nevertheless, still acknowledges that its saviour lives. Monica's response to that tension was to persevere in prayer, but never to deny or dismiss the persistence of the misery, or to consider it antithetical to hope, let alone to faith. Indeed, the expression of misery seems to have been, for Monica, at the same time, itself the expression of that hope and that faith - and, crucially, of her love for her son, as she wept for a world out of joint in her very own household. In the narrative of the C*onfessions*, this grief is efficacious and meritorious, even blessed.

To weep for a loved one, however, is not always positive. Though Augustine objected to the theatre on the grounds of its fictitiousness, love of real people could lead both to blessedness, as in his mother's case, or, as he soon discovered, to utter dejection. A close friend of his, a contemporary from his youth, died suddenly from a fever. Augustine had enticed this friend into Manichaeism, but the young man was baptised before he died, a temporary respite occurring after the sacrament was given, enough to allow him to

embrace his new state lucidly and reject Augustine's doctrines. A few days later, he was gone.

Augustine writes, in the words of Lamentations 5:17, 'Grief darkened my heart.' He sinks, almost immediately, into a consuming despair. 'Everything on which I set my gaze was death.' Perhaps because he and his friend had grown up together, the setting of his native town became particularly poisonous: 'My home town became a torture to me; my father's house a strange world of unhappiness; all that I had shared with him was without him transformed into a cruel torment.' He questions his soul, 'Why are you sad, and why are you very distressed?' like the Egyptian man to his Ka, but, in this case, the soul has no answer. The problematic constellation of memory, imagination and reality takes on a new, and deadly alignment in this case that deepens and darkens the emotional compulsions last experienced by Augustine in the theatre, and that also stands in contrast to Monica's grief.

In his friend, Augustine writes, he had 'lost the source of [his] joy.' He becomes addicted to compulsive weeping and fits of rage, concluding that, 'weeping… gives relief only when we cannot bear to think of things which formerly we enjoyed and which is pleasurable at the moments when we shrink from the memory of them.'[207] As he had once found pleasure in tears, he now finds in them only a temporary relief, 'but when my weeping stopped, my soul

[207] Augustine, *Confessions,* IV.v.10.

felt burdened by a vast load of misery.'[208] No diversion or beauty, not even light itself, offered comfort or distraction: 'I carried my lacerated and bloody soul when it was unwilling to be carried by me. I found no place where I could put it down.'[209] The older theologian ponders these particular effects of tears, acknowledging that they can, as in Monica's case, 'reach [God's] ears… [that] out of the bitterness of life sweet fruit is picked by groaning and weeping and sighing and mourning? Does the sweetness come from the hope you hear us?'[210] In Augustine's case, however, he does not consider hope possible 'for something that has been lost… I merely grieved and wept.'[211] He would not, given his beliefs at the time, feel the need to intercede for his friend after death, nor rejoiced in the hope of reunion. There are echoes, here, of his rejection of the application of the term 'compassion' to his reaction to theatrical spectacles: what relief could he offer the dead, or to himself, who has lost something, in this life, for good?

Augustine recognises here that his grief is consequent on the human condition. 'Misery is the state of every soul overcome by friendship with mortal things and lacerated when they are lost. Then the soul becomes aware of the misery that is its actual condition even before it loses them.'[212] He comes to

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[208] Augustine, *Confessions,* IV.v.10.

[209] Augustine, *Confessions,* IV.vii.12.

[210] Augustine, *Confessions,* IV.v.10 Whether his mother would have described her anxiety as 'sweet' might be questioned.

[211] Augustine, *Confessions* IV.v.10.

[212] Augustine, *Confessions,* IV.vi.11.

understand his unhappiness as something embedded in the contradictions of human existence. The knot is twisted further by the attitude to his own death that it stimulates in Augustine: he comes to fear it terribly, even as he tires of life:

> I suppose that the more I loved him, the more hatred and fear I felt for the death which had taken him from me… I did not wish to live with only half of myself, and perhaps the reason why I so feared death was that then the whole of my much loved friend would have died.[213]

Death, then, and death without hope beyond it, can be seen as the ultimate social disruption, one coded into humanity itself, and which, therefore, can render all social bonds ultimately pointless.

Augustine is now undergoing the sufferings that, last seen on stage, he averred he would not wish to undergo himself. This time, he is not grieving a fiction, but a real person. However, this itself is a problem for the Manichee: 'the very dear friend I had lost was a better and more real person than the phantom in which I would have been telling my soul to trust.' He could not 'talk back' to his soul, as Evagrius would advise, as his understanding of Scripture was

[213] Augustine, *Confessions,* IV.vi.11.

hobbled to the point of immobility by the inadequacy and unreality of his concept of God. When Bellerophon glimpses Mount Olympus, or Job hears the whirlwind, they are granted an understanding of the divine as being past all understanding; Augustine's impoverished deity is not so efficacious in the face of human grief.

This, then, is the crux of Augustine's misery: 'My error was my God.'[214] Although, as he writes, 'I had become to myself a vast problem,' trapped in his own self-reinforcing compulsions and grief, his misery was insoluble on its own terms: terms which were rooted in nothing 'solid and firm… but a vain phantom.'[215] Within the landscape of Manichee theology, there was nowhere for his grief to go. 'If I attempted to find rest there for my soul, it slipped through a void and again came falling back upon me.'[216] Augustine formulates the perception of *aporia* that is the hallmark of misery, but is still a long way from the theophany by which misery is dwarfed.

Eventually, Augustine leaves Taagaste for Carthage once again, 'for my eyes sought for him less in a place where they were less accustomed to see him'[217] and, there, he is slowly comforted by 'the 'greatest source of repair and

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[214] Augustine, *Confessions,* IV.vii.12.

[215] Augustine, *Confessions,* IV.vii.12.

[216] Augustine, *Confessions,* IV.vii.12.

[217] Augustine, *Confessions,* IV.vii.12.

restoration [that is] the solace of other friends.'[218] However, he recognises that 'The reason why that grief had penetrated me so easily and deeply was that I had poured out my soul on to the sand by loving a person sure to die as if he would never die.'[219] Equally, he asks, 'Where should the heart flee to in escaping my heart?'[220] Love and misery are, for humans, intertwined. It was only many years later, that the older theologian perceived that 'all are dear in the one who cannot be lost.'[221] The ruptured bonds of reality cannot be repaired by phantasms or philosophy, but by the experience of the overwhelming nature of that reality itself. 'Let these transient things be the grounds on which my soul praises you,' he writes, 'but in these things there is no point of rest.'[222] Augustine's now-proverbially restless heart would lurch into the extremes of both *acedia* and misery until it came to rest in that divine hope that promised his mother that they would, one day, stand side by side.

Compassion Builds the City of God

If the *Confessions* are the testament of Augustine's youth, the *City of God* is the statement of an older man who has seen the world change unimaginably underneath his very feet. Written over a number of years, this attempt to

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[218] Augustine, *Confessions,* IV.ix.14.

[219] Augustine, *Confessions,* IV.vii.12.

[220] Augustine, *Confessions,* IV.vii.12.

[221] Augustine, *Confessions,* IV.ix.14.

[222] Augustine, *Confessions,* IV.x.15.

encompass, claim and transcend the classical legacy in the name of Christianity on its pilgrimage to the heavenly city. Its universal scope takes in the issues of sorrow and passion that we have examined in the theologian's earlier writing. It aims to treat them, however, objectively and universally, while placing them within a structure that examines and interrogates pagan literature in the light of faith, doctrine, and scripture.

Thus, in Book IX of *City of God*, Augustine considers the quarrel between the Platonists and the Peripatetics, on the one hand, and the Stoics, on the other, as to whether the wise man can feel passions at all. While he agrees with Cicero that this is largely a disagreement regarding terminology, as both 'champion the mind and the reason against the tyranny of the passions,'[223] he goes on to declare that, for the Christian, the question is not *whether* one should feel angry, but, rather *why*.[224]

Indeed, Augustine affirms that certain feelings are such that 'no sane judgement could reprove.'[225] The examples that he offers are those concerned with the welfare another soul: indigence with a sinner, sorrow for the afflicted, fear for one in danger. The rubric under which he sums up the passion 'more creditable, more humane, and more in harmony with the feelings of true

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[223] Augustine, *City of God*, trans. H. Bettenson, (Penguin: London, 2003) IX.4.

[224] Augustine, *City of God*, IX.5.

[225] Augustine, *City of God*, IX.5.

religion' is that of compassion, which he defines as 'a kind of fellow-feeling in our hearts for another's misery, which compels us to come to his help by every means in our power.'[226] It will be recalled that Augustine's objection to the sorrow produced by theatrical spectacle was that it offered no practical outlet for this impulse to help the sufferer. Compassion, we see, for Augustine, is a fundamentally active, social passion that exists necessarily in relationship and in community.

Augustine has further cause to contrast the limits of emotion and passion as considered by classical philosophy and under the *aegis* of Christianity in Book XIV. There, he scrutinises, specifically, the Stoic dictum that the wise man should have only 'dispositions' rather than 'disordered' emotions, and should certainly know no grief or pain.[227] However, he finds that the Stoic distinction between dispositions and disorders has no consistent terminology in classical authors[228] and while, in the previous chapter, he ambiguously writes that 'it is a nice question whether any instance can be found of its use in a good sense,'[229] he finds that it is indeed used in such a fashion 'especially by our Christian authors.'[230] He cites, as an example, the same grief of repentance that the

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[226] Augustine, *City of God*, IX.5

[227] Augustine, *City of God*, XIV.8

[228] Augustine, *City of God*, XIV.8

[229] Augustine, *City of God*, XIV.7

[230] Augustine, *City of God*, XIV.8

Fathers of the Desert understood as salutary, and whose pursuit some made their life's work.

Indeed, with regard, specifically, to the emotional life of Christians, Augustine affirms, they 'feel fear and desire, pain and gladness in conformity with the holy Scriptures and sound doctrine.'[231] While classical philosophers governed passion by reason, for Christians, passions are felt within the structure of the Creed. This, however, is not to understand faith as a set of criteria for judgement. Rather, '*because* their love is right, all these feelings are right in them [italics mine].'[232] Love, therefore, is elevated to the controlling passion that orders the others - and, indeed, the means by which the individual relates to doctrine.

Augustine is keen to demonstrate that this is so through the rhetoric of Scripture itself. Biblical exhortation leads believers to '*fear* eternal punishment and *desire* eternal life [italics mine],'; Scriptural encouragement leads them to 'feel gladness in good works'; the example of the disciples leads the faithful to both feel pain and gladness in temptations.[233] The rhetoric of the Old and New Testaments is so constructed as to elicit lively emotional reactions in its readers (and, especially in Augustine's day, listeners), and these reactions are aroused

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[231] Augustine, *City of God*, XIV.9

[232] Augustine, *City of God*, XIV.9.

[233] Augustine, *City of God*, XIV.9.

in order to develop, improve and refine their souls. Moreover, it is not only for one's own spiritual welfare that Scripture seeks to move its receiver. As we have seen above, Augustine insists that 'right love' has its concomitant in compassion. Believers are expected to be moved 'on account of those whose liberation they desire… they feel pain if they do perish and feel gladness if they are set free.'[234]

In order to demonstrate the validity of emotion for Christians, as well as to provide an imitable archetype, Augustine offers the figure of Paul for consideration. This most volatile apostle is described as 'Christ's athlete, taught by Christ, anointed by him, crucified with him' and yet one who 'boasted of his weaknesses.'[235] He exemplifies both compassion for others, 'rejoicing with those who rejoice, and weeping with those who weep,' and 'deep grief and ceaseless pain' for those outside the church, but also 'fears within', to the extent of 'desiring to depart and be with Christ.'[236] These feelings, Augustine writes, spring from 'love of the good and from holy charity… [and are] the consequence of right reason…[and] are exhibited in the proper situation.'[237] The crucial addition of love to reason is what energises his account of the emotions, and also what makes it so personal; even heroic. Paul is not only an

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[234] Augustine, *City of God*, XIV.9.

[235] Augustine, *City of God*, XIV.9.

[236] Augustine, *City of God*, XIV.9.

[237] Augustine, *City of God*, XIV.9.

example of correct behaviour; he is personally iconic, a figure on whom 'the citizens of God's City are happy to gaze at… with the eyes of faith.'[238]

However, the ultimate approbation for the appropriateness of the passions is the example of Christ Himself. Given that the Lord was equally as human as He was divine, when He is recorded as having experienced feelings, 'human emotion was not illusory in him.'[239] That Jesus felt grief when his message was rejected, or that he wept at Lazarus' corpse, or that he approached the prospect of his Passion with sorrow is indeed described as providential. Augustine's affirms that he could have willed it to be otherwise, but did not. *Apatheia,* indeed, for the Latin Augustine, is indeed an admirable ideal, but it is a condition of the next life, one that we should hope for, but that is not achievable in this present life. In contrast, if even Jesus wept involuntarily, as a result of 'praiseworthy charity,' then emotion is not evidence of simple human weakness, for in the case of Christ, 'whose weakness resulted from his power.'[240] Rather, 'if we felt none of these emotions at all… there would really be something wrong with our life.'[241]

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[238] Augustine, *City of God*, XIV.9.

[239] Augustine, *City of God*, XIV.9.

[240] Augustine, *City of God*, XIV.9.

[241] Augustine, *City of God*, XIV.9.

Thus sorrow, for Augustine, comes to be something that is not only potentially positive, but that is even necessary to a full human life. Indeed, to have lively feelings not only energises one's own development as a Christian, but builds up the wider City of God by the generation of active compassion. That this is so is demonstrated by the examples of the Apostle Paul and of Christ himself. The character of Christian sorrow, the answer to the 'nice' question of its possible meritoriousness, is, however, fundamentally outward-looking, and is determined by that 'right love' that is the primary emotional motor of Christian life.

Conclusion

It is perhaps inevitable that personality as complex as Augustine should have a complicated relationship with an emotion such as sorrow. In his youth, the older Augustine recounts, he experienced such states problematically and immoderately, both for their own sake, stimulated by theatrical productions, and in a self-perpetuating obsessive grief. This, he attributes to his youthful desires, and to his early Manichaeism's inadequate understanding of the divine. that, respectively, attached sorrow to phantasmal fictions, and thereafter left him unable to moderate or contain his grief for his friend. In contrast, however, his mother, Monica, demonstrated an efficacious Christian sorrow in her

concern for her son, that is rewarded by a theophany, and, eventually, the answer to her prayers.

Read alongside Augustine's later elucidation of the character of Christian sorrow in *The City of God,* it becomes evident that a significant lack in his youthful sorrow was the opportunity for genuine compassion. In affirming that the Christian may, indeed, feel sorrow, it is compassion that Augustine foregrounds in his proof-texts and examples, along with the emotional impact of the Scriptures on the moral development of the reader. The two are not unconnected: the moral development of the Christian is outward-looking, for it is by compassion that the City of God is built.

Chapter Three: Thomas Aquinas, Angelic Doctor

Thomas Aquinas, angelic doctor, both existed in and, in many ways, incarnated, a crux in Christian intellectual history. A product of the first flowering of the Universities, he taught at Paris at a time when the dialectical method of Peter Abelard had been fully developed for use in the schools, and was himself a pupil of the famed polymath Albertus Magnus. His magnum opus, the *Summa Theologiae*, systematically treats theological topics, both speculative and ethical, using Thomas' characteristic method, the *sic et non,* that sets out opposing views and adjudicates between them, and may easily be called the most impressive product of the medieval schools. Notwithstanding the contemporary controversies that, at times, caught Thomas in their wake, and his late-in-the-day nineteenth century anointing by the Vatican as something of an 'official theologian', his influence and fame grew steadily from his own day onwards. He is one of two theologians, along with Bonoventure, who exemplify and elucidate their subject in Dante's *Divine Comedy*; he is a frequent subject in art, especially in that commissioned by his own order, the Dominicans; he was made a Doctor of the Church in 1567, and his *Summa* was considered an authoritative text by the Council of Trent.

Nevertheless, just as much as his influence on theology as a mediaeval scholastic has been decisive, Thomas was, as noted above, a vowed religious, specifically, a member of the Order of Preachers. While his identity as a

Dominican doubtless spurred him towards an active conception of the theologian's vocation (though it should be remembered that the Franciscans, too, produced numerous influential thinkers), his inheritance from his forebears in the desert and the monasteries also structured his theological system. The Eight Deadly Thoughts of Evagrius, received through the Latinate John Cassian, find what is perhaps their definitive exposition in Thomas' theology, for example. It is through Aquinas that much of the moral psychology distilled by the desert fathers and their institutionalised successors, and mediated by earlier theologians such as Gregory the Great and Bernard of Clairvaux, has passed into mainstream theology, and become a structuring principle for all Christians, vowed or otherwise. It is no accident that Thomas' work on natural law, for example, is still studied by non-theologians: it was he who, to some extent, brought the desert back to the city - or, at least, to the republic of letters.

The Angelic Doctor's understanding of sorrow, therefore, is of the greatest importance for our evaluation of its place and effects. Fortunately, Thomas' careful and systematic method of proceeding explores the topic at length. Moreover, the integration of his system, psychologically, morally, and theologically, more effectively expounds the mechanisms of sorrow, and thereby clarifies the reasons for, and means of, its possible usefulness, as well as its disintegration into something more dangerous. The way in which sorrow can be a spur to learning, and the necessity of its being met by compassion, meanwhile, is explored in his Commentary on the Book of Job.

Thomas Aquinas' Psychology of Desire

While he indeed understood the exercise of the rational intellect as humanity's highest good, Aquinas' psychology is in practice structured by the impulse towards pleasure that is, equally, revolted by pain. However, Aquinas' particular insight is in his careful account of the complex interaction of the intellect and the appetites. Thus, the desire for pleasure and fear of pain are understood as precisely that: desire and fear. For Aquinas, emotions such as sorrow and fear are passions, located in the sensitive appetite of the soul, and arising from appetite; that is, desire.[242] The sensitive appetite interprets and orders the human power of apprehension as it identifying its objects.[243] Thus, echoing Evagrius' understanding that 'thoughts' arises in interaction with various stimuli, for Aquinas, the passions have a fundamentally concrete and temporal nature, requiring both apprehension and (albeit accidentally) motion.[244]

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[242] N. E. Lombardo, *The Logic of Desire*, (The Catholic University of America Press, 2011).

[243] T. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae 1.2ae* trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, (NovAntiqua, 2010) 22.2. 'The soul is drawn to a thing by the appetitive power rather than the apprehensive power: because the soul has, though its appetitive power, an order to things as they are in themselves: hence the philosopher says that "good and evil" i.e., the objects of the appetitive power, "are things in themselves."'

[244] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae, 2.2ae,* trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, (NovAntiqua, 2010) 22.1; also R. Miner, *Aquinas on the Passions,* (Cambridge University Press, 2009) 41. and P. King, "Aquinas on the Passions,", in S. Macdonald, E. Stump, eds., *Aquinas's Moral Theory: Essays in Honor of Norman Kretzmann*, (Cornell University Press, 1998), 101-132.

However, as this suggests, in something of a contrast to Evagrius as well, Thomas understands the human person as, fundamentally, a *desiring* creature. When we strive towards pleasures, we are reaching for 'goods', as we define them; the part of reason is to define these goods properly. Equally, we are repulsed by unpleasant 'evils'. This integration of passion and appetite in the Angelic Doctor's theology is not only a more moderate and pragmatic psychological schema than that of Evagrius, and not only does this synthesis provide a more satisfying model of humanity, it, as noted above, also effectively triangulates the mechanisms by which the passions operate within the individual, and can therefore identify more precisely the ways in which they can be employed.

Sorrow, in particular, occupies an extremely suggestive place within Thomas' schema. If, as noted, the human person is a fundamentally desiring being, then sorrow can be understood to exist as the obverse of that desire. Indeed, he begins by defining sorrow rather viscerally, as being, itself, 'a species of pain, as joy is a species of pleasure.'[245] Sorrow and joy, on this model, are the purest distillations of the human appetitive structure, and the fundamental bifurcation of our responses. That these responses are not mere reflexes, however, is something Thomas is keen to emphasise, even in the case of bodily pain, writing, 'Pleasure and pain can arise from a twofold apprehension, namely, from the *interior apprehension of an exterior sense* and the *interior*

[245] Aquinas, *Summa*, 1.2ae 35.2.

apprehension of the intellect or the imagination. [italics mine]'[246] The distinction between physical pain and sorrow itself is in its temporal range: while physical pain requires a present hurtful stimulus, 'sorrow can regard present, past and future.'[247] Nevertheless, both require a rational response to the painful apprehension of the senses. However, Thomas is no Stoic: like Augustine, whose writings he knows well, he does not believe that the wise man feels no, or at least gives no mind to, pain.[248] Rather, as we have seen, his anthropology understands pain and sorrow as both affects and effects of the desiring self: the shadow of the coins in the wishing well. This model allows him to take a nuanced and subtle view of negative emotional states and integrate them into Christian life.

Thus, '…desire becomes a case of sorrow, in so far as we sorrow for the delay of a desired good, or for its entire removal.'[249] Indeed, as '… desire is the first effect of love, which gives rise to the greatest pleasure,' the desires that arise from love, if thwarted, can be a cause of sorrow. Moreover, the memory of an absent beloved, recalled to the imagination, can mix sorrow and joy in a poignant that is nevertheless explicable to Thomas in Aristotelian terms, writing, 'pain itself can be pleasurable accidentally… in so far as it recalls a

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[246] Aquinas, *Summa*, 1.2ae 35.2 As noted above, Thomas and Evagrius share an understanding that the mind *operates* upon physical stimuli, and does so using imagination as well as rational constructs.

[247] Aquinas, *Summa*, 1.2ae 35.2.

[248] Drawing on Aristotle, Thomas writes, 'both pleasure and pain, in so far as they draw upon themselves the soul's intention, hinder the reason from the act of consideration.' Aquinas, *Summa*, 1.2ae 37.1.

[249] Aquinas, *Summa*, 1.2ae 36.2.

beloved object… Consequently, since love is pleasant, both pain and whatever else results from love, forasmuch as they remind us of our love, is pleasant.'[250] That Thomas will discuss this reaction so generically, without an *a priori* discussion of disordered or immoderate loves, is another significant indication of the fundamental place of desire in his anthropology.

The 'pleasure' of love here referred to by the Dominican friar, is explicated in Article Six of the 32nd question of the *Summae* as 'doing good to another.'[251] Thomas notes, without judgement, if a little laconically, that some self-interest can take part in this pleasure, both by one 'hop[ing] to get some good for himself, either from God or from man, for hope is a cause of pleasure.'[252] Moreover, 'doing good to another becomes pleasant, in so far as it arouses in man an *imagination* of abundant good works existing in him, whereof he is able to give others a share [italics mine].'[253] The benefit of the imaginative faculty is notable in Aquinas, a counter-weight to the phantasms of *acedia* and the emptiness Augustine perceived in fictions.

Nevertheless, the real crux of this greatest pleasure is to be found in our 'being united to others by love.'[254] In a union of Platonic (though he would have

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[250] Aquinas, *Summa*, 1.2ae 36.2 See also Aquinas, *Summa,* 1.2ae 32.4. Thomas unites this apparent disunity under the rubric of the shared object of that love. One would imagine that it would take a lengthy disputation, or, indeed, therapy session, to allow Augustine to accept this definition in the face of his own experience of grief.

[251] Aquinas, *Summa*, 1.2ae 32.6.

[252] Aquinas, *Summa*, 1.2ae 32.6.

[253] Aquinas, *Summa*, 1.2ae 32.6.

[254] Aquinas, *Summa*, 1.2ae 36.3.

known them imperfectly) and Peripatetic principles, Thomas explicates this unity thus: '…the good of each thing consists in a certain unity, in as much as each thing has, united in itself, the elements of which its perfections consists: wherefore the Platonists held that 'one' is a principle just as good is. Hence everything naturally desires unity, just as it desires goodness.' The obverse of this pervasive desire, inevitably, therefore, is sorrow: '…a craving for unity, and love, [must] be accounted as causing sorrow.'[255] Consequently, by both the philosophical lights referred to above, Aquinas understanding of this concept of 'unity', and the human desire for it, takes on a character both teleological, with respect to the individual, and eschatological, with regard to both society and creation itself. Just as no human, other than Christ, can achieve the perfection of their nature in this life, so we will always be subject to our lack of self-integration. Moreover, the bonds of love and unity, both interpersonally within humanity, and the wider ecological (and, more broadly, spiritual) unity of the cosmos, are not liable to perfection in the present state of creation. Thus *homo viator* and *homo desideratus* are the most appropriate designations of our current creaturely state. As we continue to desire the unity that is the destiny coded into our very selves as children of God, so we continue to sorrow that we are divided from others, and from ourselves: 'that unity in which the perfection of nature consists.'[256]

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[255] Aquinas, *Summa*, 1.2ae 36.3.

[256] Aquinas, *Summa*, 1.2ae 36.3.

Thus, in Aquinas conception, the activities proper to this human perfection tend towards this co-implicit last end,[257] the perfect good. Citing Augustine that "all desire happiness with one will", he writes that 'the will must of necessity adhere to the last end, which is happiness.'[258] He understands this to be a fundamental motor of human nature. Just as 'pleasure is the repose of the appetite,'[259] the perfect good would 'lull the appetite altogether'[260] – however, no complete or perfect satisfaction is possible in humanity's present state as 'it is impossible for any created good to constitute man's happiness'[261]. As he writes,

> man is not perfectly happy so long as there remains something for him to desire and seek: secondly, that the perfection of any power is determined by the nature of its object. Now the object of the intellect is the essence of a thing…wherefore the intellect attains perfection… Consequently for perfect happiness the intellect needs to reach the very Essence of the First Cause. And thus it will have its perfection through union with God…[262]

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[257] Aquinas, *Summa,* 2.2ae 1.6.

[258] Aquinas, *Summa,* 1.2ae 82.1.

[259] Aquinas, *Summa*, 2.2ae 38.1.

[260] Aquinas, *Summa,* 2.1ae 2.8.

[261] Aquinas, *Summa,* 2.1ae 2.8.

[262] Aquinas, *Summa,* 2.1ae 3.8.

Therefore, it may be seen that, with regard to earthly human life, the very structure of Aquinas' account of humanity may plausibly be described as *anxious* in itself, and always at least potentially sorrowful, as the appetite strives endlessly towards a satisfaction it cannot mortally attain but for which it was nevertheless created. Thus, '…by the mere fact that a man mourns… for the delay of glory, he merits the consolation of eternity.'[263] Humans are *viators*, not *comprehensors*,[264] and we remain pilgrims, not at rest, and thus anxiety and sorrow are necessarily part of the road on which we travel.

Sorrow in the *Summa*: Compassion and Cultivation

Sorrow, however, is not only the obverse of the desires to which human nature is keyed; it can also be a positive force. In fact, Thomas writes, 'in so far as sorrow is good, it can be a virtuous good.'[265] For, 'it is a condition of goodness, that, supposing an evil to be present, sorrow or pain should ensue.'[266] Moreover, 'all shun sorrow, inasmuch as they shun evil: but they do not shun the perception and rejection of evil.'[267] Thus sorrow does not just function as the shadow of appetite, but in its character as judgement acting upon apprehension, as described above, it is an integral part (and evidence) of an individual's perception of evil. As Aquinas writes, it is a far greater evil to be

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[263] Aquinas, *Summa,* 2.1ae 35.3

[264] Aquinas, *Summa,* 2.2ae 15.10.

[265]Aquinas, *Summa,* 1.2ae 39.2.

[266]Aquinas, *Summa,* 1.2ae 39.1.

[267]Aquinas, *Summa,* 1.2ae 39.1.

insensible to the presence of sin and disorder than to suffer ill consequences from them. In contrast, if sorrow both perceives evil as such, and rejects it, then 'sorrow may be virtuous good' because, 'every virtuous good results from these two things, the rectitude of the reason and the will.'[268] Thus, 'Accordingly we must allow that sorrow for things pertaining to virtue is incompatible with virtue: since virtue rejoices in its own. On the other hand, virtue sorrows moderately for all that thwarts virtue, no matter how.'[269]

Indeed, this discerning aspect of sorrow may be the true kernel of its value to human moral development. We have seen that sorrow is occasioned in the context of thwarted (positive) desire, particularly in the case of love and the desire for unity, and in this case follows upon the imperfections of our drive towards the *summum bonum*. Moreover, as Thomas writes, 'evil is the privation of a good,'[270] and, so, 'to sorrow for the loss of a good, would be the same as to sorrow for the presence of an evil.'[271] However, within the Angelic Doctor's system, sorrow, as a 'movement of the appetite in consequence of an apprehension… is a kind of flight or withdrawal, while pleasure is a kind of pursuit or approach… as its proper object, sorrow regards the evil that is present.'[272]

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[268] Aquinas, *Summa,* 1.2ae 39.2.

[269] Aquinas, *Summa,* 1.2ae 59.3.

[270] Aquinas, *Summa,* 1.2ae 36.1.

[271] Aquinas, *Summa,* 1.2ae 36.1.

[272] Aquinas, *Summa,* 1.2ae 36.1.

Thus sorrow, as a 'withdrawal' is 'directed to something contrary in nature,'[273] in mourning the lack of a natural desire, those which ultimately tend towards unity, sorrow detects and is repelled by, those evils that thwart perfection. Not only is it natural to feel pain, it is both salutary and a sign of moral health. By understanding human nature was fundamentally appetitive, and by constructing that appetite as part of a universal drive towards integration, Thomas is able to elucidate sorrow as a state that does not simply regard one's interior disposition, but is also a sensitive aspect of one's moral orientation towards the cosmos as a (still-fractured) whole.

For Thomas, this sensitivity can engage with that world in two principal ways: in the practice of compassion interpersonally and, with respect to the individual in the first instance, didactically.

In speaking of the nature of friendship, the Angelic Doctor defines it as 'when a man rejoices with the joyful, and when he sorrows with the sorrowful.'[274] Charity and compassion require an imaginative identification with the emotional state of another, especially as, 'inasmuch as through being united to others by love, we look upon their good as being our own.'[275] Though this state, too, participates in that peculiar admixture of pleasure and pain that is the

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[273] Aquinas, *Summa,* 1.2ae 36.1.

[274] Aquinas, *Summa,* 1.2ae 38.3.

[275] Aquinas, *Summa,* 1.2ae 38.3.

hallmark of love in this imperfect mortal state,[276] one is nevertheless compelled by love to experience the unhappiness of someone to whom one is bound by the bonds of love as sorrow oneself - even if this is only, properly, to grieve the causes of the other's sorrow, while still rejoicing in one's love for them.

The necessity of tracing the movements of another's appetites in order to apprehend the causes of their sorrow as a crucial part of the practice of compassion is strikingly demonstrated by Thomas himself in an unexpected fashion. In considering the ambiguous case of whether it is possible for someone to hate himself. While,

> Properly speaking, it is impossible for a man to hate himself. For everything naturally desires good, nor can anyone desire anything for himself, save under the aspect of good.[277]

Yet it is possible to 'hate oneself' in the sense that one may desire something improperly, perceiving it, mistakenly, as a good. He notes that

> No man wills and works evil to himself, except under the aspect of good. For even they who kill themselves,

[276] 'Consequently [sorrow and joy] become an object of pleasure by reason of its cause [that is, friendship].' Aquinas, *Summa,* 2.1ae 38.3.

[277] Aquinas *Summa,* 1.2ae 29.4.

> apprehend death itself as a good, considered as putting an end to some unhappiness or pain.

In tracing the thought-processes of such extreme apprehensions, Thomas demonstrates why compassion and friendship are such effective consolations for sorrow. In attempting to understand the causes of sorrow as perceived by another, the Angelic Doctor is able to approach a taboo topic with clarity as well as charity. By delineating the motion towards suicide in terms of his overarching paradigm, moreover, he enables a kind of therapeutic 'common language' that allows the topic to be discussed in a nuanced fashion with that empathy that is the hallmark of compassion. By showing how even the most extreme of states can be given 'voice', Thomas makes it possible for what might be thought of as the apotheosis of alienation to be considered and comforted within a model that strives towards unity.

That such a 'common language' is crucial is due to the value that the Angelic Doctor gives to friendship in the consolation of sorrow. As an aspect of the drive towards unity, friendship, as we have seen, is one of humanity's highest pleasures. However, its efficacy against sorrow is not simply because pleasure, of itself, is capable of neutralising sorrow.[278] Rather, this is because, 'when a man's friends condole with him, he sees that he is loved by them, and this affords him pleasure.'[279] This reminder of the bonds of love and unity is not

[278] Aquinas *Summa,* 1.2ae 38.1.

[279] Aquinas *Summa,* 1.2ae 38.3.

only a bulwark against sorrow, but one might infer that the experience would also serve to strengthen those same bonds. The apprehension of this pleasure, too, directed as it is towards the ultimate good, might cause one to re-evaluate the causes of one's sorrow and the hierarchy of pleasures to which one's judgement is presently aligned. Moreover, 'since sorrow has a depressing effect, it is like a weight whereof we strive to unburden ourselves, so that when a man sees others saddened by his own sorrow, it seems as though others were bearing the burden with him.'[280] Writing of the efficacy of tears, Thomas notes that,

> a hurtful thing hurts yet more if we keep it shut up, because the soul is more intent on it: whereas if it be allowed to escape, the soul's intention is dispersed as it were on outward things, so that the inward sorrow is lessened. This is why men, burdened with sorrow, make outward show of their sorrow, by tears or groans or even by words, their sorrow is assuaged.[281]

Thus to 'unburden' oneself to friends, who might 'share' that burden with one is even more effective than to grieve in solitude. However, to do this most effectively requires that one can communicate one's grief to the benefit of an interlocutor's understanding. The more empathetically we attempt to enter into the interior movements of another's grief, the more fluent the language of

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[280] Aquinas *Summa,* 1.2ae 38.3.

[281] Aquinas *Summa,* 1.2ae 38.2.

compassion becomes, and the Babel of lonely sorrow begins to be built towards unity instead.

It is characteristic of Thomas, however, to most thoroughly consider the ways in which sorrow may be of benefit in a didactic manner. After considering whether sorrow can be a virtuous good, as discussed above, the Angelic Doctor then moves to consider whether it can be a useful good. He affirms that it can. In exploring the mechanisms by which this happens, he writes that one movement of the appetite in respect of a 'present evil', which, as we have seen, is the proper object of sorrow, 'arises… to the effect of avoiding or expelling the saddening evil; in this respect, sorrow is of use, if it be for something which ought to be avoided.'[282] Thus, the usefulness of sorrow is predicated upon Thomas' trademark twofold apprehension: the perception of an evil contrary to one's desire, and the judgement of reason regarding whether that evil (and that desire) is to be resisted. In this context, that same sorrow, which can be, in itself, virtuous, can also further develop virtue in the sufferer.

The most simple way in which this can be achieved is by sorrow's ability to reinforce one's perception of, and revulsion for, evil and, thus, the zeal with which one avoids it. In common with Evagrius, Thomas reflects that unhappiness can signal too great, or disordered, attachment. Thus even 'sorrow for temporal goods may be useful' as it can act as a warning of 'an occasion of

[282] Aquinas *Summae* 1.2ae 39.3.

evil; either through one's… loving it too much, or through one's being thrown headlong thereby into an evil.'[283]

Moreover, the emotional disruption of sorrow 'adds another motive for avoiding [evil].'[284] In employing his appetitive framework to the psychology of sin and virtue, Thomas makes sure to underline the affective aspect of the didactics of unhappiness. Desire is drawn towards pleasure, and pleasure finds its apotheosis in unity and the *summum bonum*; thus, fundamentally, 'pleasure in the good makes one seek the good more earnestly.'[285] Human nature, rightly understood and habituated, reinforces virtue. Equally, therefore, the appetite is repelled by evil, which thwarts its movement towards the desired good, and 'sorrow for evil makes one avoid evil more eagerly.'[286]

Given this essential structure of human nature, sorrow has the potential to invigorate the sufferer in order to more effectively avoid the evil from which the appetite is in flight: '…the more one sorrows on account of a certain thing, the more one strives to shake off sorrow.'[287] Aquinas adds the significant caveat, '…provided there is a hope of shaking it off.'[288] We have seen, above,

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[283] Aquinas *Summae* 1.2ae 39.3.

[284] Aquinas *Summae* 1.2ae 39.3.

[285] Aquinas *Summae* 1.2ae 39.3.

[286] Aquinas *Summae* 1.2ae 39.3.

[287] Aquinas *Summae* 1.2ae 37.3.

[288] Aquinas *Summae* 1.2ae 37.3.

how flexible in its monomania the human definition of 'hope' can be in the case of suicidal impulses. The converse cases are those of despair, which is defined as sorrow without hope, and the special species of sorrow that is sloth – Thomas' designation for the 'thought' of Evagrius, transmitted by Cassian, of *acedia*.[289]

These two vices are intimately linked, both to each other, and to sorrow in itself. Just as, by this latter, 'a man is said to be depressed, through being hindered in his own movement by some weight.' If the evil is considered inescapable 'even the interior movement of the afflicted soul is absolutely hindered… Sometimes, even the external movement of the body is paralyzed, so that a man becomes completely stupefied.'[290] The sorrowful individual, his external and internal movements arrested by sorrow, is thus even alienated from the passage of time.[291] It is easy to see the link with sloth, defined as, 'an *oppressive* sorrow which so *weighs* upon a man's mind, that he wants to do nothing. [italics mine]'[292] Despair can arise from this aspect of sloth, too, inasmuch as it is opposed to hope.

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[289] Aquinas, *Summa*, 1.2ae 35.4.

[290] Aquinas, *Summa*, 1.2ae 37.2.

[291] For Jeffrey A Vogel, *Acedia* is itself an impatient hastening, refusing to wait 'in the rest of God. While his account is useful, I do not believe his account sufficiently acknowledges the affective reality of the alienation described above. Moreover, and more importantly, it does not take account of the *phantasmal* nature of *acediac* time. *A*. Voegl "The Speed of Sloth: Reconsidering the Sin of *Acedia*" *Pro Ecclesia* 28 (2009), 50-69.

[292] Aquinas, *Summa*, 1.2ae 35.1.

> The object of hope is a good, difficult but possible to obtain by oneself or another… On the other hand the fact that a man deems an arduous good impossible to obtain… is due to his being *over* downcast, because when this state of mind dominates his affections, it seems to him that he will never be able to rise to any good. [italics mine][293]

Sloth and despair, thus, are species of unmoderated, extreme sorrow that oppose, and even neutralize the natural desiring movement of an individual, trapping one within a kind of self-enclosed stasis. In the case of despair, one ceases to 'hope for a share in God's goodness,' while sloth 'is sorrow about spiritual good in as much as it is a Divine good.'[294] Just as joy tends towards the ultimate satisfaction of the appetite, so can sorrow, if unchecked by reason, encouragement, or compassion, cause the appetite to collapse upon itself.

Nevertheless, even sloth, despite pertaining as it does to a revulsion from spiritual goods, remains only a venial sin 'if the sin be a mere beginning of sin in the sensuality alone, without attaining to the consent of reason.'[295] To experience even the most dangerous of sorrowful states in the appetite alone is not, of itself, deadly. Just like all sensations and impulses, they must undergo

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[293] Aquinas, *Summa*, 1.2ae 20.4.

[294] Aquinas, *Summa*, 1.2ae 35.3.

[295] Aquinas, *Summa*, 1.2ae 35.4-3.

the two-fold process of apprehension and rational judgment. Thus, at the same time as sorrow can be educative, so, too, must this passion, just like all other, be educated by the moderation of reason. It is in the context of this complex, mutually-reinforcing interaction of reason and will that Thomas grounds his understanding of the didactic potential of sorrow.

So it is that

> Moderate sorrow, that does not cause the mind to wander, can conduce to the acquisition of learning especially in regard to those things by which a man hopes to be freed from sorrow. And thus "in the tribulation of murmuring," men are more apt to be taught by God.[296]

The emotional impact of sorrow upon the appetite, as we have seen above, can act as a spur to both the appetite and the will to take action. In discussing the effect of this action-inducing unhappiness on learning, specifically, and, thus, effectively, of this affect upon the rational faculty more generally, Thomas is keen to emphasise that it can inspire the individual to the *investigation* of his or her state. In tracing the reasons thereof, and applying the structures of philosophy and theology to the results, one applies both reason and learning to

[296] Aquinas, *Summa*, 1.2ae 37.1.

apprehended experience. Moreover, given that one is undergoing a 'tribulation', it may be inferred that one's current rational structures may well be inadequate to contend with the present evils or absent goods to which one's will is reacting. Thus, one is spurred, not only to the application of that reason which one presently possesses, but also to develop this reason further.

In this respect, therefore, the Angelic Doctor's explication of sorrow's benefits with regard to learning is grounded in a two-fold didacticism: an objective acquisition of understanding regarding philosophical and theological truth, and a more subjective clarity of self-knowledge to which one can personally apply the former. Thus, he writes, '…the proper object of sorrow is one's own evil.'[297] Sorrow for the sorrow of another is 'pity'; conversely sorrow over another's joy is 'envy.'[298] Yet, even for the former, as we have seen, this sorrow is mixed with our love for the other for whom we feel pity. Sorrow, in its purest form, concerns the sin within oneself that sabotages one's own will in its striving towards the good. The necessity of learning in undergoing this tribulation is evident from the dangers inherent in the possibilities of sloth or despair, explored above: hope must be both understood and apprehended in order to make use of sorrow. However, learning can contribute to the stimulation and consolidation of this hope, as one explores, for example, the mechanisms of salvation or the proofs of God's existence.

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[297] Aquinas, *Summa*, 1.2ae 35.8.

[298] Aquinas, *Summa*, 1.2ae 35.8

The action of the intellectual aspect of the individual, for Thomas, is, more broadly, the most effective consolation, as he writes, 'there cannot be a sorrow contrary to the pleasure of contemplation.'[299] This is because, 'it is nothing else than the consideration of truth, which is the good of the intellect.'[300] Thus, 'even in the midst of tribulations men rejoice in the contemplation of Divine things and future happiness.'[301] The only accidental evil attendant upon sorrow is 'in so far as the contemplation [is] of a less noble object [that] hinders the contemplation of a more noble object.'[302] Indeed, frustration that is caused by a hindrance or impediment to the contemplation of truth is, in fact, 'in affinity and in harmony with it,' and a signal of the appetite's pull towards learning. However, in considering Paul's reference in 2nd Corinthians to 'the sorrow according to God,' Thomas acknowledges that the *subject* of that contemplation – that is, 'sin, which the mind considers as contrary to the love of God,'[303] – can indeed cause pain, even as one engages in contemplation.

This is, moreover, not the only way in which 'negative' appetites can affect the minds of thinkers while their minds are occupied in their vocation. As the Angelic Doctor observes while considering the passion of fear under the aspect

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[299] Aquinas, *Summa*, 1.2ae 35.5

[300] Aquinas, *Summa*, 1.2ae 35.5

[301] Aquinas, *Summa*, 1.2ae 38.4

[302] Aquinas, *Summa*, 1.2ae 35.5

[303] Aquinas, *Summa*, 1.2ae 35.5

of 'amazement' states that, as long as it does not stupefy one into torpor, 'amazement is a beginning of philosophical research' as 'he who is amazed shrinks [only] at present from forming a judgment… fearing to fall short of the truth.'[304] As above, the apprehension of an object that causes a desire to flee within the appetite acts as a spur to an intellectual investigation. This amazement, it is easily imagined, can be felt both in the face of natural phenomena, and also in the contemplation of the incomprehensible majesty of the divine, with the nobler apprehension stimulating the higher investigation. Even in the jarring state of the will that is fear, reason is not only called upon to moderate the movements of the soul: it is also potentially enriched by them.

Thus, for Thomas, sorrow, as the flight of the appetite, is both an inevitable effect of his passionate anthropology and an affect within the individual that shadows desire. As it is so intimately integrated into this psychological framework, it is not to be immediately condemned; indeed, it can be of benefit to the individual that suffers it. Indeed, to experience sorrow upon the apprehension of evil is, itself, a condition of good. As with all apprehensions, the object of sadness must be engaged with by the rational intellect, and the judgment of that intellect be enacted by the will. Wrong judgment, for example, regarding the goodness of God and the possibility of salvation, or a weakness of the will, for example, regarding spiritual practices, can lead

[304] Aquinas, *Summa*, 1.2ae 41.4 See also Thomas' statement, made without reference to, but doubtless in full knowledge of the *Confessions*, that 'Pain itself can be pleasurable accidentally in so far as it is accompanied by wonder, as in stage-plays.' Aquinas, *Summa*, 1.2ae 35.3.

sorrow to disintegrate into despair or sloth. Conversely, however, sorrow can *increase* our self-understanding by revealing disordered attachments. Moreover, the experience of unhappiness can act as a spur to investigation of the causes of, and possible solutions to, the predicament. Similarly, sorrow can also act as a spur to the will, increasing one's revulsion with respect to an evil. Even the initial flight of the appetite that accompanies amazement can encourage the pursuit of knowledge.

Thomas Aquinas on the Book of Job

Knowledge, indeed, is, for Thomas, not an intellectual game, but a concrete understanding within whose framework reason can make the judgments that guide the will. The Angelic Doctor's model of humanity can be applied, not only to personal experience, but also to narratives. Indeed, in his assertion that we 'conceive a kind of love' for characters whose stories are narrated to us, he implies that our identification with them can even be virtuous and beneficial. Nowhere would this be truer than in the case of Scripture, and nowhere would this emotional investment be riper for the investigation of reason. Thus, in a penetrating commentary on the Book of Job, Thomas ultilises his anthropological and theological paradigm to read the narrative on perceptive

psychological, philosophical and systematic levels.[305] In doing so, he illustrates the complex interaction of emotion, reason and will by which he understands the movements of the soul in a manner that clarifies the narrative of the book and scrutinises the character and behaviour of Job himself. By doing so, he demonstrates how his model might work in practice and, at the same time, elucidates the particular journey of this melancholy hero. In the context of the biblical narrative, the Angelic Doctor's understanding of the potential and, moreover, positive virtues of sorrow take on flesh while in the drama of Job's engagement with his predicament, his 'friends', and his God demonstrates just how much tension this understanding can bear and exemplifies the extremes to which sorrow and faith can run in parallel.

Job and the Moderation of Reason

From the beginning of his commentary, Thomas is keen to emphasise that Job underwent his tribulations virtuously. Job 'maintains an almost steadfast devotion in divine worship,' which the Angelic Doctor describes in terms of his not being subject to the sin of sloth - that is, *acedia* - which, he reminds us, in this context, specifically refers to 'when someone is saddened over a spiritual

[305] In terms of his own particular vocation, too, Thomas is keen, in his exposition, to 'meet the exigencies of the theological schools founded to equip friars to preach,' rather than reflecting his own personal *Lectio Divina.* J. Yocum, "Aquinas' Literal Exposition on Job" in Weinandy, Keating and Yocum, eds. *Aquinas on Scripture: An Introduction to his Biblical Scholarship*, (London, New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 27.

task.'[306] In contrast, Job, by continuing to pursue this spiritual work, demonstrates that he retains hope, even in the midst of his trials, and that his will remains invigorated.

Given this, Thomas acknowledges that it was natural for Job to suffer sorrow given the loss of his possessions, and then of his family. He reminds the reader that the Peripatetics affirm, in contrast to the Stoics, as we saw above, that 'the wise man is moderately saddened.'[307] Job's actions in rending his clothes and shaving his head are normal expressions of grief, and 'not to be pained over dead loved ones seems to be the marks of a hard and insensitive heart.'[308] Nevertheless, Thomas repeatedly emphasises that Job responded to this inevitable sorrow with the moderation of reason. He deduces from both Job's words and his actions that 'he rationally demonstrated that although he was suffering sadness, he did not have to succumb to sadness.'[309] When he speaks of 'succumbing' to sadness, Thomas is doubtless thinking of the disintegration of grief into hopeless despair or *acedia*, and his concern, as we have seen, is to demonstrate that Job does neither.

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[306] T. Aquinas, *The Literal Exposition on Job: A Scriptural Commentary Concerning Providence*, A. Damico, trans., (Scholars Press, Atlanta, 1989), 1.1.

[307] Aquinas, *Job*, 3.1, 6.1 'What is natural cannot be totally suppressed… The heart of man cannot freely tolerate things which are not pleasant, much less things which are bitter and harmful.'

[308] Aquinas, *Job*, 1.4.

[309] Aquinas, *Job*, 1.4.

One of the most effective pieces of evidence proffered in the commentary for this reading is an analysis of Job's physical posture as reflecting his spiritual posture with regard to the Lord. He stands upright, Thomas notes, and the text speaks that Job 'rose up.' This he considers a reflection of the persistence of rationality within the Old Testament hero: '…although men in pain are more accustomed to prostrate themselves… he was in fact suffering sadness, but not a sadness penetrating to the point of disturbing the inmost parts of his reason.'[310] The crucial role of reason within the individual is, furthermore, a spiritual virtue. Thomas writes, 'the mind stands erect when it submits humbly to God.' This observation sets the tone for Job's characterisation in the Angelic Doctor's understanding. It is by his persistence in *engaging* with his situation, in interrogating the causes and implications of the circumstances in which he finds himself, and his expectation that it can be, and more significantly, *should* be understandable, that he demonstrates his faith in the divine. This faith, moreover, is grounded and exemplified in the rational faculty: to employ one's intellectual abilities is to demonstrate the humility to be taught by God, and thus fulfil, not only the Peripatetic *telos* of the human person, but also the reason's created purpose.

Job's rhetorical gestures, too, are read as reflecting the fully-conscious and deliberate character of his behaviour. Thomas reads the passage of time referred to in Chapter Three of the text to show that Job deliberated over his

[310] Aquinas, *Job*, 1.4.

situation before he began to speak. 'If [he had] spoken from a disturbance of the mind he would have uttered them before… Hence on this account he seems to have kept silent for so long a time, in order not to be judged to be speaking from a disturbed mind.' It is noted, too, that the text 'he opened his mouth' reinforces this interpretation, as 'when someone speaks under the impulse of passion, he does not himself open his mouth but is driven by passion to speak…'[311] Job's self-possession reflects that he submits his apprehensions to his rational faculty and thus his words express both sorrow *and* patience. Even when, in Chapter 10, he begins a discourse with the words, 'I will release my eloquence,' Thomas reads this as unleashing 'eloquence' to 'brings forth the hidden disturbances into words.' More relevantly, Job, once again, demonstrates a desire to avoid blasphemy by prefacing his speech with the prayer, 'I will say to God: Do not condemn me.'[312]

This is further evinced by Job's 'not express[ing] a movement of impatience in word… i.e., blasphemy.'[313] We have seen how crucial correct understanding is to Thomas' idea of the virtuous engagement with the passions; his aim throughout his commentary is to demonstrate that Job, above all, does not contradict doctrine, even in his most harrowing reflections. This may, at first sight, seem to be a reading at odds with the high near-poetic tone for which this book of the Bible is most familiar, especially in English-speaking countries

[311] Aquinas, *Job*, 3.1.

[312] Aquinas, *Job*, 6.1.

[313] Aquinas, *Job*, 1.4.

whose linguistic heritage is derived from the King James translation. Moreover, at times, Thomas does press his point to the extent of insufficiently acknowledging the crucial rhetorical aspects of the text. Nevertheless, his emphasis on Job's persistence in rationality, self-possession and deliberation may also be seen as *heightening* the emotional impact of the text. In making plain how conscious and self-aware Job is in his thinking, this commentary embodies a startlingly clear-sighted reflection on the extremes of human misery and, in some sense, *affirms* even Job's most vehement pronouncements. By excusing the Old Testament hero from the charge of blasphemy, and by insisting on the rational control and evaluation of the language he employs, the Angelic Doctor, to a significant extent, accepts Job's protest. He furthermore demonstrates just how broad a range of passions reason is capable of 'moderating' into something virtuous. Job, therefore, exemplifies the attitude that the wise man ought to take towards sorrow. Indeed, Thomas reads his wish for death as an example of his piety: 'in him there was the greatest worry and fear that he would not guard himself against sadness, that he would in fact be led by sadness into some vice. To avoid this vice he was hoping for death.'[314] Instead of taking this step, however, the Book of Job becomes its eponymous hero's effort 'to defend and prove the truth about both divine and human matters.'[315]

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[314] Aquinas, *Job*, 6.1.

[315] Aquinas, *Job*, 6.1.

Thus, when Job begins his first oration by cursing the day on which he was born, Aquinas applies the same kind of compassionate reasoning to the statement that he applied in the *Summa* to the impulse towards suicide. Noting that 'though being and living, considered in itself, is desirable,' nevertheless, 'being and living in misery of this kind is to be renounced.'[316] Aquinas attributes this assessment of Job's situation only to the 'inferior part of his soul,' but only because he concedes that 'sometimes being in misery may be sustained willingly for the sake of some end…that miserable life which is not ordered towards some good end should in no way be preferred.'[317] That Job does *not* choose to end his life, but, instead, in the self-possession he has already demonstrated, chooses not only to live, but also to actively question his sorrow, rather than sinking into despair or *acedia*, implies, for Thomas, that Job retained a belief that 'the misery which [he] was sustaining could indeed seem to reason to be useful with respect to some purpose.'[318] Job's piety consists in his so insistently demanding to learn what that end was.

Investigation and Disputation: Job as Theologian

That Job's 'investigation' of 'divine and human matters' is indeed grounded in piety, Thomas reinforces even while Job exhorts God to leave him alone.

[316] Aquinas, *Job*, 3.1.

[317] Aquinas, *Job*, 3.1.

[318] Aquinas, *Job*, 3.1.

Writing that 'it would seem strange that God would have such great concern for man unless something lay hidden in him which would be capable of perpetuity.'[319] Job's sense of the vertiginous difference between humanity and the Divine[320] leads him to express, not despair, but a sense of his own powerlessness to do anything worthy of God except to plead with him for understanding - as well as the notion that, if God cares for each individual, then even the worst miseries must be ordered to some end. This arresting conception of the divine is, in its starkness, more pious than the more paternalistic God of his interlocutors, and Thomas attributes its formation to Job's pursuit of 'inquiry and wonder.'[321] The principles on which he bases his rational investigation are grounded in awe before the majesty of the Lord.

Thus, while Job, on Thomas' reading, is concerned to guard against any instance of blasphemy, neither does he 'out of a certain reverence… for God, omit to search into the things which are God's.'[322] The Angelic Doctor no doubt has the position of the growing universities and the blossoming discipline of academic theology in mind here when considering the relationship between piety and curiosity - and presumption. He thus affirms that he does not advocate that one attempt to 'comprehend the incomprehensible'[323] but that,

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[319] Aquinas, *Job*, 7.4.

[320] Indeed, Thomas understands him as being particularly stung by his interlocutors' apparent assumption that he has less understanding of the majesty of God than they: Aquinas, *Job*, 12.1.

[321] Aquinas, *Job*, 7.4.

[322] Aquinas, *Job*, 9.35.

[323] Aquinas, *Job*, 9.35.

rather, theological inquiry consists in 'searching[ing] into divine matters and… subject [one's] understanding to divine truth.'[324] Neither Job nor Thomas' contemporaries (nor Thomas himself) disdain to fear God; rather, that reverence informs the seriousness with which they pursue their lines of enquiry and, indeed, sets the parameters and premises that make those enquiries possible at all. It is also, however, an affirmation that, though the Divine remains indeed incomprehensible, even in its simplicity, humanity's relationship to it is not necessarily equally unfathomable. Indeed, it is the rational investigation of the latter, placed in the context of piety with respect of the former, the Angelic Doctor wishes to prove in the figure of Job, that constitutes the most virtuous, and the most fully human, in the Peripatetic sense, approach to life. Thus, he paraphrases the ancient hero's address to the Lord as '"Make me know the reason because of which I am being punished by you." For he knew that reason's investigation cannot reach the goal of truth unless it be divinely instructed.'[325]

Indeed, by both reason, and the teachings of 'divine truth' of which he is already aware, Job refutes his interlocutors' causal explanations for his trials and 'hence, the reason for his trial still remains in doubt.'[326] Moreover, frustrated by the inadequacy of their arguments in the face of this divine truth, Job addresses himself to God directly. Thomas paraphrases this strikingly, as

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[324] Aquinas, *Job*, 9.35.

[325] Aquinas, *Job*, 10.2.

[326] Aquinas, *Job*, 10.22.

saying, 'Although I understand from his diverse effects the excellence of divine wisdom and power not less than you, I am still not reasonably changed by this understanding from my purpose of wishing to address God.'[327] Job's sense of both the moral and ontological difference between God and humanity renders him too reverent to be servile or easily satisfied with an explanation that, implicitly or otherwise, assumes God to be less just or less loving than Job, in his piety, believes him to be. In contrast, according to the arguments of his interlocutors, 'it would follow that there would be injustice in God.'[328] This, not the blunt speech of the sorrowful man, is blasphemy. Thus, in confronting the divine, Thomas understands Job as doing two things. Firstly, he wishes to be taught by 'the teacher of all truth,' and this includes the truth of his own inmost self, 'from the searcher and judge of hearts.'[329] As noted above, the pedagogy of sorrow (and, ultimately, the practice of theology itself) redounds to self-knowledge even as it pursues universal truth, by explicating the nature of one's inner trials in the context of broader philosophy and doctrine. Secondly, however, Job wishes to 'destroy [the] errors' of his interlocutors, and, not only justify himself, but demonstrate a more accurate understanding of God.

In order to do this, Job adopts a breathtaking tactic in which Thomas sees reflected his own practices as an academic theologian: he calls God to a

[327] Aquinas, *Job*, 13.2-3.

[328] Aquinas, *Job*, 13.2.

[329] Aquinas, *Job*, 13.8.

disputation. The *disputatio* was the highest and most demanding of academic activities in the medieval universities, the creditable discharge of which was not only the prerequisite for earning a doctoral degree, but, in its free-form *quodlibet* form, was the showpiece of the young institutions, performed before an eager audience.[330] However, in reading the Book of Job in these terms, Thomas is making a claim for the spiritual necessity of the disputation. More than an exercise in logic, showmanship or skill, it was the sharpest tool in the schools' armoury for the discernment and construction of truth. By placing these ancient debates in this particular contemporary context, the Angelic Doctor makes a direct link between the doctrinal investigations of his colleagues, and the exemplary moral heroism of one of the Bible's most memorable characters.

Thus when Thomas is compelled to acknowledge that, while, 'a debate of man against God seemed inappropriate because of the excellence by which God excels man,' nevertheless, 'the truth does not vary depending on the diversity of persons.'[331] Indeed, as we have seen, Job's sense of 'the excellence by which God excels man' is more appropriate than that of those other figures in the text who scold him for impiety. Moreover, with regard to this accusation, Thomas again emphasises that Job prefaces his dialogues with pleas for God's mercy. Not only was 'Job… sure that he was speaking the truth inspired in him by

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[330] See W. Ruegg, ed. *A History of the University in Europe: Volume I, The Universities in the Middle Ages*, *Revised Ed.* (Cambridge University Press, 2008); A. B. Cobban, *The Medieval Universities: Their Development and Organisation,* (Methuen, 1975).

[331] Aquinas, *Job*, 13.19.

God through the gift of faith and wisdom,'[332] it also seems that he enjoined himself to that parallel self-awareness that, as we have seen, should accompany doctrinal investigation, saying to God, 'I will not hide myself from your face.'[333]

This clarified, Job begins his disputation by 'giving [God] the option of choosing which role he want stop take: the one making objections or the one answering.'[334] In doing so, he acts in contradistinction to his 'comforters', whose argument that the Lord is punishing Job for some sin is something they 'falsely charge in trying to speak of [God].'[335] Their inaccurate understanding is itself impious, and thus the insistence with which they speak of it is, on this reading, blasphemy. Conversely, Job's insistence on reason, rather than rationalisation, even when spoken into the face of God Himself, not only pursues that understanding on which virtue is built, but also, acknowledges a higher concept of the consistency of divine love and justice than that which has been offered to him in answer to his trials: 'Since he is the strongest and the greatest, so, too, he is the most just and a lover of equity.'[336]

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[332] Aquinas, *Job*, 13.19.

[333] Aquinas, *Job*, 13.19.

[334] Aquinas, *Job*, 13.20.

[335] Aquinas, *Job*, 13.10.

[336] Aquinas, *Job*, 23.1.

Thus, Thomas reads the dispute, too, in terms of an approach to a judge, writing, 'Those who have been burdened by a judge usually approach the judge first.'[337] Nevertheless, Thomas is once again careful to read Job's words as not accusing divine judgement of injustice, but that his 'loud complaints' are intended 'in the spirit of 'one questioning.'[338] Rather, this is a debating technique designed to clarify the argument of one's opponent in order 'to understand the truth more fully.'[339] Truth, it again emphasised, is something that must be pursued, clarified and *understood*, and not just accepted. Moreover, as one might expect a teacher to advocate, Thomas conceives of this understanding as something public and to be shared. Ultimately, Job's debating partners are his interlocutors, whose conception of God Job is enlisting the aid of the divine to refute. The Angelic Doctor paraphrases him, 'I will contend against *you* claiming I have not been punished for my sins [italics mine].'[340]

'Comfort' and Compassion

Indeed, the role of the 'comforters' in the narrative, often subsumed in the drama of the vertical axis of the book between Job and the Lord, is more than that of just straw men. Rather, the horizontal axis of interpersonal ties and

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[337] Aquinas, *Job*, 23.3.

[338] Aquinas, *Job*, 23.4.

[339] Aquinas, *Job*, 23.5 One can also imagine Thomas being familiar with this technique as a teacher.

[340] Aquinas, *Job*, 23.1.

human society is just as important to Job's predicament, and equally crucial to its eventual resolution. As we have seen, Job's disputation with God is enacted as much for the benefit of his 'friends' as it is for his own. Indeed, it may be argued that the greatest of the evils Job suffers is the rupturing of social bonds – not just the loss of his family and his possessions, but the lack of consolation and compassion that isolates him from his community and his erstwhile friends.

In fact, the interlocutors' lack of compassion, it is implied, unbalances the debate between them and the suffering Job. Thomas paraphrases the latter thus: 'You speak at such a great length to calumniate me since you care feel no trouble from this situation.'[341] He argues with them, at least in part, because, He wants for them the opportunity to feel the same thing he does.[342] Indeed, Job fears that for him, too, it would 'be easy for [him] to speak' like his 'comforters,' were he not suffering himself and, in the same way, 'pretend to be speaking out of mercy' while utterly lacking empathetic compassion.[343] Compassion, then, is an important factor in that understanding that Job pursues, and that, in his interlocutors, he maintains is inadequate. Moreover, as Thomas notes, 'There are two roots of hope: one, of course, on the side of divine help, the other on the side of human help.'[344] For Job, however, 'the root of his hope

[341] Aquinas, *Job*, 16.3.

[342] Aquinas, *Job*, 16.4.

[343] Aquinas, *Job*, 16.6.

[344] Aquinas, *Job*, 19.11.

which consists in human help has been torn up.'[345] Rather, it is the 'duty of friends' to 'bring consolation'[346], especially, one imagines, if they believe that one's persecution is from God, as 'it does not seem decent that a man should add affliction to one afflicted.'[347] Indeed, even though he affirms that he could not possibly have understood the depth of his afflictions before he experienced them, he still understood himself as enjoined, even in prosperity, to 'weep with those who [wept.]'[348]

Yet despite this virtuous behaviour, Job received only adversity and bitterness. When he speaks of how observably widespread this kind of injustice is in Chapter 21, he begins his disquisition by saying to his interlocutors, 'Pay attention to me, be awed and put your finger over your mouth,' which Thomas reads as urging dignity and silence in listening, rather than scorn.[349] Not only does this encourage a more compassionate engagement from his listeners than Job has enjoyed thus far, it also implies that the extent of moral discord in society should silence his interlocutors with that pity. Their lack of compassion, we may infer, blinds them to the reality of injustice – which, in turn, compounds their hard-heartedness. Social bonds without compassion, it seems, are already broken.

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[345] Aquinas, *Job*, 19.13.

[346] Aquinas, *Job*, 19.21.

[347] Aquinas, *Job*, 19.22.

[348] Aquinas, *Job*, 30.25.

[349] Aquinas, *Job*, 21.5.

Thus, when the Lord replies to Job from the whirlwind, returning his debating tactics against him, it is nevertheless not Job with whom God is angry, but his interlocutors. Their lack of compassion led them to '[sin] gravely in asserting perverse doctrines.'[350] While Job's doctrines had a more appropriate 'high' understanding of the divine, even he is humbled by the very majesty of Lord's enumeration of His acts. 'God certainly does not question to learn but to convince man of his ignorance.'[351] It seems, therefore, that even the sharpest reason cannot approximate the scale or nature of divine truth. Nevertheless, as we have seen, without compassion, reason is diminished to something wholly inadequate, and it is the interlocutors against whom the wrath of the Lord is turned, instead of Job, who maintained 'the truth of faith.'[352]

Indeed, as, 'Chief among Job's adversities as it were, was that he had been deserted by his friends, therefore the remedy for this adversity is put first' in the narrative.[353] Job is not only embedded in society once again, but also receives 'consoling words and… the remedy for affliction.'[354] He is not only given comfort, but also the material assistance that enables him to take part in social life once more. Compassion has its part to play in justice, too. Moreover,

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[350] Aquinas, *Job*, 42.7.

[351] Aquinas, *Job*, 38.3.

[352] Aquinas, *Job*, 42.7.

[353] Aquinas, *Job*, 42.11.

[354] Aquinas, *Job*, 42.11.

in instructive contrast to the heard-heartedness Job experienced at the hands of his 'comforters,' the Lord commands *them* to ask Job to intercede for them so that they 'may be reconciled to me by his mediation.' Thomas notes that, 'those who lack faith ought to be reconciled to God through the faithful.'[355] The work of compassion, thus, affects social bonds, not only between human and human, but between humanity and God Himself.

Thomas' commentary on Job, therefore, refracts and, in some senses, expands upon, his systematic consideration of sorrow in the *Summa*. Proceeding from his insistence that Job's doctrine is correct, and that he does not blaspheme, the Angelic Doctor goes on to portray Job's dialogues as a philosophical investigation of the causes of his sorrow, and, on this basis, more broadly, the justice of the relationship between humanity and the divine. Indeed, the quasi-academic disputation to which Job calls the Lord is as much an exercise in defending Him against the incorrect assertions of the 'comforters.'

However, while the speech from the whirlwind ultimately both affirms the faith of Job and confounds its systematic expression, its outcome underscores a second, but just as crucial, theme of the commentary: that of compassion. Thomas clearly considers Job's social isolation as the worst of his trials. Moreover, he seems to suggest that the cruellest aspect of this experience was the lack of sympathy and empathy displayed by those around him.

[355] Aquinas, *Job*, 42.10.

Compassion, then, is enjoined as an absolute duty to the suffering, and, indeed, a crucial basis for social bonds. Job's final mediation between God and his friends suggests that this is true, even on a cosmic level, and a more appropriate basis for justice than any of the understandings examined henceforth in the book.

Conclusion

Thomas Aquinas, drawing on the monastic ethical structures he received from Evagrius of Pontus through John Cassian, understood sorrow as both potentially salutary, and potentially dangerous. Expanding the desert account within the structure of his own philosophy and theology that understands sorrow as a repulsion of the appetite, he demonstrates particularly the ways in which sorrow may be linked to learning, while emphasising the crucial role of the reason and the will in regulating and directing this passion. Nevertheless, the consistent and detailed method of his approach allows him to perceive with sensitivity the logic by which one might fail to do so. Doing so allows Thomas to emphasise the importance of right knowledge and faith in the management and use of sorrow.

The significance of right knowledge, faith and the pursuit of learning are pivotal in Thomas' reading of the Book of Job. The Angelic Doctor

understands the Old Testament hero as pursuing an investigation regarding divine truth, and parses his discourses as a disputation reminiscent of those held in the medieval universities. However, perhaps even more prominent in the commentary is the effect of broken social bonds on Job's situation. Thomas repeatedly foregrounds the lack of compassion displayed by the 'comforters' and describes this misfortune as the worst of Job's trials. The knowledge pursued by the Angelic Doctor throughout his *Summa* and modelled in Job is not to be acquired for indifferent intellectual purposes, but morally in order to develop our understanding of God, His world, and each other.

Chapter Four: Melancholy as a Moment for Grace in Dante's *Commedia*

Dante Alighieri was born in Florence in 1265. Though he wrote a number of prose works on the subjects of both poetry and politics in Latin, he is most famous for the perfection to which he elevated the *dolce stile novo*,[356] that is, poetry in the vernacular Italian, constructed in rhyming forms. His first work, *La Vita Nuova*, is a sonnet series that chronicles his meeting, falling in love with, the lady Beatrice, only to lose her to death. Despite the influence of this work on western literature and, indeed, European conceptions of romantic love, his most important work is the monumental *Commedia,* renamed the *Divina Commedia* by his biographer, Boccaccio. This epic poem narrates the journey of a pilgrim figure of Dante journeying through Hell, Purgatory and Heaven, guided first by his hero, Virgil, and then, latterly, his beloved Beatrice, in order to traverse the moral landscape of human history and the individual human soul.

It is this sense of an universe ordered consistently, both intimately and cosmically, that is expressed most powerfully in Dante's *Commedia*. The concentric spheres of the Ptolemaic universe revolve harmoniously and contain each other as they are, themselves, contained, within the sphere of the Empyrean. Just as the structure of the universe articulates this harmony, so too are the consequences of the actions and decisions of its inhabitants contained

[356] As the poet Bonagiunta will describe Dante's verse in *Purgatorio*, 24. For a Beatrice-centric summary of its development, see R. W. B. Lewis, "Dante's Beatrice and the New Life of Poetry" in ed. H Bloom, *Dante Alighieri (2nd Edition),* (New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2011), 83-96.

within this same harmonious scheme. This is the root of Dante's famous motif of the *contrapasso,* by which the inhabitants of hell are punished by ironic reflections of their own sins. Evagrius' sense that sin follows an internal, self-satirising logic and bears within itself its own repercussions is here extended from psychological observation into a metaphysical mechanic. This logic, in some sense, lends Dante's cosmos a certain self-contained inevitability, but, equally, the *Commedia* dramatises an idea of individual morality whose character is derived as much from its objective context as its subjective locus.

Every human choice and action, therefore, reverberates through the spheres, and, though it is, ultimately, reflected back to its origin, its principal nature is metaphysical and *social*. Therefore, Dante is profoundly sensitive to the interpersonal, societal and political consequences of human decisions and behaviour.[357] His own experience of exile from his both beloved and loathed Florence during the feud between the Guelphs and Ghibbilines informed this awareness, as well as his conviction that the realms above and below the workaday earth are, nevertheless, concerned with temporal matters as well as the spiritual journeys of individuals. Social breakdown, the pilgrim learns, has cosmic moral consequences. The entire *Commedia*, therefore, can be seen as an engagement with those fears that Dante, no doubt, shared with Job and Bellerophon regarding God's care for justice on earth.

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[357] See Scott, 'The indissoluble link between Dante the Christian and Dante the citizen explains why the author of the *Comedy* chose to disagree with the redoubtable theologian Thomas Aquinas, by placing winds of violence in the seventh and sins of fraud in the eighth circle of his *Inferno* [as] for the author of the *Comedy*... it is the community that is the chief victim: the overriding criterion is a political one that measures the harm inflicted on society and its members.' J. A. Scott "Dante's Other World: Moral Order" in *Dante Alighieri,* 150.

This social aspect informs Dante's understanding of what constitutes sin. It is well known that the lowest depths of his hell is reserved for those guilty of treachery, but, from the first approach to the Inferno, those who have, through *acedia,* sloth or misery, elided their duties, not only to God, but to their communities, are identified amongst the damned. To have opted out of activity brings about a *contrapasso* that illustrates precisely that aspect of one's humanity that one has abrogated through sin.

Nevertheless, while sin exists within a social context, the purgation of sin is centred on the development of the individual. This development is enacted in the Pilgrim's ascent of the Mountain of Purgatory, structured around the eradication of the seven deadly sins. The central cornice of the mountain, bridging the irascible and concupiscible vices, is the place where sloth, understood in the Thomistic sense, is dealt with. As in Evagrius' schema, in both Dante's *Inferno* and his *Purgatory*, misery occupies an axial position in the Pilgrim's moral geography. Indeed, it is in being purged of the sin that Dante learns, not only the importance, and fundamental character, of action, but also that the experience of sorrow is something more than simply salutary: it teaches the pilgrim to trust, not in philosophy or, ultimately, in his own powers, but in the help of God. Indeed, Dante, learns in Purgatory, sorrow may itself be an occasion of blessing. Moreover, blessing, for the Pilgrim, becomes something of an occasion of sorrow towards the end of his journey, too: he can only experience a limited vision of Paradise, as the full glory and joy of the

blessed would overwhelm his still-mortal senses. Thus, even as he is granted an insight into highest Empyrean, the pilgrim, and Dante himself, must return from the heights to earthly life and remain tinged with longing, through the very hope that guides him upwards.

Inferno: the Wilderness of Sin

Midway through a journey that every man and woman must take, the very particular pilgrim, Dante, found himself lost, alone and terrified. We have seen how Bellerophon wandered in the wilderness and that the desert, especially in the Christian narrative, has been a space of trial and revelation since the Old Testament, crystallised in the Hebrew Exodus, and the site of Job's disputation with the Lord. It tests the traveller with the stress of uncertainty and strips from him every resource but faith. Yet rarely has any wilderness been so nightmarish and the 'dark wood' in which Dante wakes, a place both claustrophobic and endless. It is 'nearly as bitter as death.'[358] The Pilgrim has 'wandered from the straight path'[359] and now finds himself lost in his own ignorance and without a (moral) compass. In his helpless state, the wood is his enemy, 'savage and stubborn.' Worse enemies block the only route of escape that he can see: a sunlit hilltop is guarded by a ravenous leopard, lion and she-wolf. At the 'relentlessness' of this last, Dante writes, 'I lost all hope of going up the

[358] Dante, *The Divine Comedy: Volume 1: Inferno,* trans M. Musa,(London: Penguin, 1984), I. 7.

[359] Dante, *Inferno* I.3.

hill.'[360] The three beasts are traditionally read as representing the three classifications of sin found in the *Inferno*: thus Dante's despair at the foot of the hill may be characterised as the state of being trapped by sin, ignorance and fear. The Pilgrim is truly lost.

The *Commedia*'s necessary journey is thus contextualised in the overwhelming, devastating and terrifying state in which the pilgrim finds himself, a state delineated as moral as well as existential and emotional. It is by this rationale that Virgil must lead Dante downwards through Hell before he can ascend 'the blissful mountain' of Purgatory on the farther slope, not stalked by sin. As the Poet writes, 'if I would show the good that came out of it/ I must talk about things other than the good.'[361] The Pilgrim's disorientation and desolation is an alienation from the divine order expressed in creation itself. Moreover, his alienation is expressed in the particular landscape in which he wakes. His personal sin has alienated him from human society, stranding him in an unintelligible, lonely landscape that is thus read as a locus of madness, rupture and estrangement from community. The antitype of civilisation as much as it is the inversion of Eden, the wilderness is the non-native homeland of the outcast and the inadmissible. Moreover, the pilgrim's alienation from the broader divine order is expressed in the menacing hostility of the wild landscape. Sin not only fatally disrupts interpersonal bonds and human civic conventions; it also renders one opposed to the methods and ends of a moral, created cosmos.

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[360] Dante, *Inferno* I.54.

[361] Dante, *Inferno* I.8-9.

The 'incarnations' of sin encountered on what is, we will discover, the far side of Mount Purgatory, are as graphically horrifying as those battled by St Anthony. Nevertheless, while the Fathers of the Desert deliberately engaged the hostile forces that are both permitted, and by their very nature are compelled, to prey on sin, the Pilgrim's involuntary exile to their territory has come about because he has, rather, displayed a lack of zeal in combating sin. Its only cure, therefore, is in the complete understanding of the all-encompassing and perfect nature of that order only available to the Christian.[362] It is only by doing so that one can locate oneself in the universe, and only by so finding one's place that one can achieve the perfect contentment and self-realisation expressed by the souls that populate even the lower spheres of heaven.

The Pilgrim's education begins at the threshold of Hell as he quails before the infamous inscription, ending, '…abandon every hope, all you who enter.'[363] This truly is despair: to be cut off from the mercy of God, and, doubtless, instructive to the recently-despairing pilgrim, casting his panic into relief. Indeed, these horrifying words are the first, and highly suggestive, indication of Dante's understanding of sin: that it contains, within itself, its own consequence. The damned of Hell are cut off from grace, not necessarily

[362] It is perhaps noteworthy that the structure and narrative of the *Commedia* implies that this revelation is to be found in the totality of human history, philosophy and art, as well as the example and support of the 'cloud of witnesses' that makes up the church, militant and triumphant.

[363] Dante, *Inferno* III..9.

because of God's rejection, but because they have alienated themselves from His order so thoroughly that, in the Inferno, they have found their only logical place.

Yet, equally, one might wonder whether the warning applies to Dante, too, as he abandons himself to Virgil's care and instruction, and, ultimately, to Beatrice's, shedding self-reliance completely. The dialectic of paralysing sorrow, and abandonment to divine instruction, and grace, will be repeated later, and at an equally crucial point in the *Commedia.* This is one of Dante's most significant contributions to the theology of misery, and striking in a work that so emphasises the intelligibility of the cosmos, and, indeed, the necessity of comprehending, participating in and enacting this order within human capacity. However, as demonstrated from the first purposeful step of the poet's pilgrimage, this re-eduction is also fundamentally moral. Especially for one so alienated from the divine order, and thus comprehension of it, as the Pilgrim, the breakdown in understanding expressed in confounding sorrow necessitates - and becomes the occasion for - a complete restructuring and refinement of the self, the radical nature of which is expressed in the universal scope of the journey the Pilgrim must undertake in order to achieve.

That this will not be an easy task for him is demonstrated as he passes beneath the inscription: he exclaims at the 'cruelty' of the words above the vestibule. Virgil's 'experience', having seen the depths of Hell before and understanding the nature and purpose of its horrors, hears the sound of the living man's alarm

as 'cowardice.'[364] The pilgrim's lack of knowledge and understanding is reflected, the Roman implies, in his character and emotions (though Virgil perhaps also betrays here his own stern classical heritage). Moreover, the starkness of the contrast between the terrifying injunction and the very human reaction of the Pilgrim, that doubtless many would share, might cause readers to reflect on their now comprehension of the divine order, and spur them to identify their own journeys with the poet's, and compare the two along the way. Nevertheless, this response signals clearly that Dante has not yet lost, and found, himself in God's design.

It is certainly cowardice, however, that is demonstrated by the first wave of sinners he and Virgil encounter, who are, because of this, rejected by both Heaven and Hell. Running eternally behind a blank banner, these despised ones earned the contempt of both the divine and the damned[365] by abstaining from choice. They invested their loyalty nowhere, and in turn are disowned by all. Having, effectively, practiced fealty only unto themselves, they are harried by this harshest, and most pointless, of allegiances. Theirs is a kind of fundamental moral indolence that Dante, whose understanding of sin in its gravest form is structured around a system of faithfulness and devotion, finds vile. It is an attempt to circumvent the very structure of existence within a moral order; that is, impiety by default through a-piety.

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[364] Dante, *Inferno* III.15.

[365] Were they in Hell proper, even the damned might glory over them. (Dante, *Inferno* III.42).

The Roman Virgil, who, without revelation, can rely only on reason, describes them as 'those who lost the good of intellect.'[366] Mark Musa interprets this as having ignored the demands of the *summum bonum*,[367] but this, surely, can be said of every sinner in the *Inferno*. However, within an *intelligible* ordered cosmos, the neutrality specifically demonstrated by the runners amounts to a cognitive dissonance. The substance of the self in the world is only established in a triangulation with action and (some kind of) loyalty to (some perceived) good. Transforming the classical honorific of postmortem fame into the hope of heavenly glory, and thus reinforcing the divine origin of the cosmic honour, Virgil says in contempt that 'the world will not record their having been there.'[368] Dante leaves them nameless: their lack of choice has eroded their identity almost completely, and to posterity they are as faceless as their standard.

The Poet writes that these souls, 'had never truly lived.'[369] The characters we meet in the *Commedia* are post-mortem: their lives are merely 'back-story' establishing their personal ontological state. The narrative of their past actions creates their present being. Thus, those who rejected action have left themselves without much of a self at all. If, then, the self is, in fact, the ontologically real 'reflection' of lifetime's deeds, this is a direct connection made in Dante work between choice, action and identity that is, as noted above,

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[366] Dante, *Inferno* III.18.

[367] Musa, note to *Inferno* III.18.

[368] Dante, *Inferno* III.49.

[369] Dante, *Inferno* III.64.

grounded in his ordered metaphysic. Strikingly reminiscent of this alignment in an existentialist, modern vein, is the thought of Søren Kierkegaard, for whom continuous history is only established in the action that, as earnestness, is the very matter of the self.[370] Indeed, in the *Inferno*, the souls of the damned are alienated from such a continuous history, having access only to a past and future adrift without a present.

The connection is not made by Dante himself, who deals with sloth in a lower circle of Hell proper, but the nature of the runners' sinfulness bears a striking resemblance to the ancient description of *acedia* made by Evagrius of Pontus. Rather than simple indolence or laziness, classical *acedia* is, as we have seen, a kind of restless dissatisfaction that militates against any kind of sustained or deliberate action, preferring rather to dwell on memories of the past or fantasies of the future, and whose baroque rationalisations of the present moment's inadequacy distract from and defer any meaningful endeavour.[371] This 'noonday demon' arrests time, too, stretching the hours to breaking point, even as the individual watches them minutely. The runners, who lived entirely in a deformed present, are now denied the present, and are left with a future as empty as their past in hell.[372] Thus, it may be said of the *acediac*, like the runners, that he 'never truly lived' on earth, and, thus, shall never enjoy blessedness in the hereafter.

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[370] see S. Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death,* trans. A Hannay, (London: Penguin, 2004), and discussion below, Chapter Seven.

[371] see discussion above, Chapter One.

[372] In Kierkegaardian terms the runner has privileged time over history and divorced himself from the ground of selfhood: see below, Chapter Seven.

By thus prefacing the Inferno proper with the example of the runners, Dante establishes an instructive contrast that will cast both the damned and the saved into sharp relief. In a morally-structured universe, being itself necessitates alignment and action, and, equally, one's action-in-alignment inevitably characterises one's being. The counter-example is itself counterpoised in the following Canto by another liminal realm on the edge of Hell: Limbo, the home of the virtuous pagans. This is Virgil's eternal home, of soft shades in quiet discourse with the finest minds of men. Their 'great worth' and 'sinlessness'[373] has not saved them, for they neither knew Baptism nor right worship. Dante dwells most on the poets and philosophers populating this realm, recalling to the reader Virgil's condemnation of the running sinners as 'having lost the good of intellect.' The lesson of Limbo is, it seems, that the capacities of the human mind, and the heroic achievements of which humanity is capable, are insufficient for salvation. Indeed, it is perhaps significant that Virgil's understanding of Christianity is restricted to external observances and his own observations of the Harrowing of Hell, implying that the interiorly vivifying, and sacramental, aspects of revelation and praxis are unavailable even to this most refined of individuals.

Thus Limbo, suspended in isolation from the cosmic order, set in motion by a First Cause known only to Christians as Love, is a melancholy place, characterised by the 'sighs of untormented grief burdening these groups [of

[373] Dante, *Inferno* IV.34.

souls].'[374] Virgil describes the state of his fellow shades, saying, 'cut off from all hope, we live on in desire.'[375] Theologians from Evagrius to Aquinas understood sadness as the frustration of desire.[376] The frustration of the virtuous pagans does not curdle into anger but instead settles like silt. Indeed, they constitute a unique phenomenon in Christian moral literature: though they are ethically upright, despair, that is, to have no hope in God, is not a sin to them, as it would be for a Christian. Limbo's density of population renders it as 'woods, for the souls were as thick as trees,'[377] a characterisation that calls to mind the forest that the pilgrim has so recently escaped. This, then, is the second wilderness that we encounter in the *Commedia*. Although it has a dramatically different spirit to the terrible wasteland in which the poet awoke, it shares its essential nature as a landscape of despair and alienation from the blessed order of God. These good ancients, it might be said, experience the purest sadness possible in a Christian universe, one with which Dante cannot help but empathise.

The words I heard weighed heavy on my heart
To think that souls as virtuous as these
Were suspended in that limbo, and forever![378]

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[374] Dante, *Inferno* IV.26-7.

[375] Dante, *Inferno* IV.42.

[376] See Chapters One and Three

[377] Dante, *Inferno* IV.66.

[378]Dante, *Inferno* IV.43-45.

Their understanding however, having gone as far as it can, at least allows them to perceive the justice of their position; grace, however, is the precondition of hope, and is one to which they cannot abandon themselves.

The poisonous frustration of desire, however, is viscerally depicted in the gelatinous waters of the River Styx, the fifth circle of Hell. Here flail the wrathful and the *Tristi*, the latter being conventionally translated as the slothful, or sluggish.[379] The link between the two becomes intelligible under the medieval psychological rubric described above and, pointedly, the frustrating slime of Styx both exacerbates and eventually subsumes the sinners' shades. Indeed, it will be recalled that, for Evagrius, anger, sadness, and indolence exist on a continuum of ossification of the being. As irrational responses to desire disordered in measure or object, such sinners exemplify both Virgil's warning about 'the good of the intellect' and the necessity of Christian hope, that he and his brethren in Limbo lack.

Dante's slothful claim to have been 'sullen' in the 'sun [and the] sweet air'[380] – or, rather, they do so by Virgil's report. The sinners' presence is only signalled by the bubbles that their gurgling makes on the surface of the river, and the Pilgrim's guide relays the words that are denied them by the infernal water.[381]

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[379] In addition to Thomas Aquinas, see citations from Bonaventure and Latini in T. Boli, "Sloth" in R. Lansing ed., *The Dante Encyclopedia,*(Routledge, 2010), 784-785.

[380] Dante, *Inferno* VII.122.

[381] Dante, *Inferno,* VII.126. J. Thorp, "Fuming Accidie: The Sin of Dante's Gurglers", in J Miller, ed., *Dante and the Unorthodox: The Aesthetics of Transgression*, (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2005), 151-169, on the identification of the slothful with *acedia* and the link between *acedia* and anger.

Yet the idyllic memory of easeful days is counterpointed by the description of 'the dark smoke of sloth smouldering in our hearts.'[382] Like the runners, their refusal of action and choice has denied them the identity of 'words that sound.'[383] Virgil's ironic designation of their verse as a 'hymn' underscores the repetition of the theme: if even non-action has a moral weight in the created cosmos, so any language has a liturgical character.[384] Just as any action has a character either of piety and impiety, words, too, are necessarily spoken in relation to the creator, and thus to be unable to form such words is itself the expression of the hopeless Infernal condition, in which the person has collapsed, subsumed beneath the slime of sin.

If the slothful, in life, desired too little to either rejoice or despair, then perhaps a more pointed treatment of a destructive sadness is found in the thirteenth Canto of the *Inferno*, in the forest of suicides. This is the third wood Dante has encountered, and, like all of them, expresses hopelessness. The impression of all these settings is one of simultaneous vagrancy and captivity – indeed, of each being implicit in the other, in a kind of terrifying and depressing dehumanisation at the heart of the human condition. As noted, it is one only escapable through a thorough education in wisdom and revelation classical and

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[382] Dante, *Inferno* VII.123.

[383] Dante, *Inferno* VII.126. Indeed, Fyler describes the Augustinian 'logocentrism' of the *Commedia*, whose 'journey to redemption pulls language along in its wake.' J. Fyler *Language and the Declining World in Chaucer, Dante and Jean de Meun* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 52.

[384] On this theme throughout the *Commedia*, see M. Treherne, "Liturgical Personhood: Creation, Penitence and Praise in the *Commedia*" in V. Montemaggi & M. Treherne, eds. *Dante's Commedia: Theology as Poetry*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 131-160.

Christian, found through an abandonment of the self to grace. Without this demanding gift, the forests connote anguish and despair.

The wood of suicides brings this identification to its nightmarish conclusion. A trackless wilderness like the one in which the Pilgrim lost himself, it is nevertheless more unwholesome than even the most inhospitable and barbaric landscapes on earth, and the home of worse beasts, specifically, harpies, that are found in the mortal world, too. The poet's construction of its nature places it in opposition to beauty, health and fruitfulness. This is the ultimate end of despair, for the trees are, themselves, the souls of those who died by their own hand, a revelation that stuns the pilgrim into silence, and that Virgil admits must be seen to be believed.[385] The souls are tossed down to the seventh circle and there left to germinate as carelessly as they treated their own lives. Like the shades of Limbo, the hopeless suicides *create* the melancholy landscape of their eternal home.[386] Yet, unlike the virtuous pagans, their carelessness has inescapably rooted them to the spot: their misused freedom has become their entrapment. Their capacity for speech, or, rather, their divorce from their own words, that flow with their sap when a branch is broken, is, moreover, the inversion of that of the slothful above them, for not only are they capable of coherent speech, their laments are literally forced from them, as if their attempt to cast off their very selves is now punished by what we have seen is an important marker of identity and individuality: language.

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[385] Dante, *Inferno* XIII.21.

[386] On the trees' Virgilian and Ovidian roots, see L. Press "Modes of Metamorphosis in the *Commedia*: the Case of *Inferno* XIII" in H. Bloom, ed., *Dante Alighieri,* 197-215.

Despite the gravity of their sin, there is a peculiar intimacy between the Pilgrim, his guide and the first arboreal shade they speak with: Piero della Vigne, personal secretary to Frederick II. Virgil more or less apologises for encouraging Dante to break off a branch in order to hear the soul speak; indeed, he confesses that the action 'grieved' him.[387] Nowhere else does he show pity or, indeed, courtesy towards the damned; in fact, he sternly attempts to root out such reaction in his charge. Yet, perhaps moved by their common vocation as poets, Virgil encourages della Vigne to speak, saying that Dante 'can make amends [for injuring the shade]/ and will, by making bloom again your fame/ in the world above.'[388] There is a double disjunction here, between both Virgil's conception of earthly fame and Dante's Christian transformation of it, discussed above, and also between the imagery 'blooming' and the unwholesome, undead growth of the infernal forest, that not only expresses the hopelessness of della Vigne's plight but further implies the kind of ironic pity the poet and the pilgrim feel for this lost soul.

Disgraced before his lord and his court by conspiracy and untrue rumours, he sought escape and, indeed, and in a further irony, justification in death. Della Vigne's anguish at his predicament developed its own kind of relish and internal momentum: he says he was 'moved by scornful satisfaction.'[389] By

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[387] Dante, *Inferno* XIII.51.

[388] Dante, *Inferno* XIII.53-54.

[389] Dante, *Inferno* XIII.70.

making his ironic revenge on others upon his own body, the secretary succumbed to the attempt to find self-sufficiency in despair. His sinful death, however, has not neutralised the wrong done to him in life, though Dante is keen to emphasise the untruth of the rumours that drove him to his unhappy end. The history of the damned in the world that they have left behind remains lively and vital, it is implied: one of their punishments is an alienation from the continuation of that story of which they were a part, but which they also, by their sin, rejected. Indeed, it is perhaps implied that the laments of the suicides, 'what [their] words cry out for'[390] is this justification of their now-amputated memories – in trying to escape their trials, and declining any interest in or responsibility for the society in which they occurred - they have been trapped with them as their living sap for eternity.

Della Vigne's pathetic tale, and his eloquence, moves Dante to speechlessness. He asks Virgil to continue the conversation as he cannot speak, 'such pity chokes my heart.'[391] For this reaction, he is not chastised, as we have seen that even the stern Roman has some gentleness for these particular shades. Dante not only feels pity for della Vigne's earthly predicament,[392] but the expressions of courtesy, concern and empathy displayed by both poets; not only to della Vigne, indeed, but also to the nameless Florentine whose sad story closes the Canto, whose fallen leaves Dante gathers back to his ravaged trunk

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[390] Dante, *Inferno* XIII.86.

[391] Dante, *Inferno* XIII.84.

[392] Musa, note to Dante, *Inferno* XIII.84.

demonstrates some sympathy for the plight of these souls.[393] It is worth remembering that Piero displayed what we have seen is, for Dante, a cardinal virtue: loyalty to one's lord. Indeed, this is perhaps the greatest irony in the doubling counterpoint of della Vigne's life and death, expressed in the mirrored forms of his shade's verses recounting each. It is with these ironies that Dante pierces to the quick (indeed, the sap) of the suicidal state. That he should encounter a fellow Florentine only underlines the point: both have been exiled from their home city thanks to its disorder and injustice; it is simply that, in Dante's case, this was involuntary. However, as is made clear from the very first line of the *Commedia*, he knows the terror of the trackless forest all too well.

None of this, however, exonerates the suicides' crime. Della Vigne tells Dante and Virgil that, at the Last Judgement, the souls' bodies will be tossed down to them and will hang forever on their respective trees: their shades will literally become thorns in their sides. No earthly glory is promised by Dante's memorialisation to the anonymous Florentine suicide. Rent of its leaves by a collision with a profligate soul, it laments over present injuries to the self it once cast away. The shade has no history or identity but this civic origin. The story of its self-destruction is told as that of his city; and like della Vigne's, it takes place within a matrix of patronage and loyalty, only this time, elevated to a cosmic key. Mars, the god of war, was pagan Florence's patron, renounced in favour of the Baptist and, says the shade, his characteristic wrath (warfare)

[393] Dante, *Inferno* XIV.1-3.

against the city is only mitigated by the remains of his image on a bridge. Impiety and a-historicism combine to render Florence as self-destructive as the sinner rooted in the wood: the shade implies that the city has forgotten its martial roots and has thus become decadent and unable to defend itself. The consequences of such dishonour for both the state and the individual is much the same: one's home, that is, one's self and the host of one's being, that which is given specifically to oneself by God, so misused, becomes one's 'hanging place,'[394] and the crime thus becomes doubly monstrous in its blasphemy. This final line of Canto XIII, so succinctly conjuring the metaphysical consequences of one's moral choices, could stand as every sinner's motto, and the misery and despair of suicide, every sinner's icon.

Purgatory: the Siren and the Angel

If the Inferno taught Dante the depths of sin's grievousness, his ascent of Mount Purgatory, its cornices dedicated in turn to each of the seven deadly sins, teach him to weed out sin at its roots. However, just as misery acts as the type of sin in the *Inferno*, and which, in its own particular nature, Dante seems to understand all too well, the Pilgrim will learn in Purgatory that it can also be the icon of that abandonment to God that leads to grace.

The structured, rational classification of vice is elucidated by Virgil in the seventeenth Canto of the *Purgatorio*, the exact mid-point of the *Commedia*,

[394] Dante, *Inferno* XIII.151.

explicating the sins in terms of perversions of love: as wrongly-directed love (pride, anger and envy), excessive love (lust, avarice and gluttony).[395] Nestled in the Cornice between each classification sits sloth, that is, insufficient love of the good.[396] Occupying the boundary between distorted earthly loves, it is the only sin that is directly related to the *Summum Bonum*. Thus it might be said to occupy the most intimate pivot between the individual and the Kingdom of God both within and above him. Sloth, indeed, is the Cornice on which this discourse on love takes place. It thus sits not only at the centre of Purgatory but also of the poem – just as, moreover, the Wood of Suicides occupies an equally central, yet liminal, place in the Inferno.

Yet, despite the clarity of Virgil's analysis, it does not appear to be sufficient to fire Dante's zeal. Indeed, not even his obvious interest in the topic, 'thirsting for more drink,'[397] and his awareness of its crucial importance, is enough to fire his more sympathetic responses. Having received 'such clear, plain answers,'[398] the Pilgrim, perhaps responding to the midnight hour, finds himself sleepy and his thoughts wandering. He has swooned before, upon entry to the Inferno, and after his encounter with Francesca, the first damned sinner

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[395] Gardner noted, many years ago, the Augustinian roots of Dante's understanding here: Gardner, E.C., *Dante and the Mystics* (New York: Octagon Books, 1968) 55-57. However, it is most poignant to note, in the context of this study, the link he makes between Dante's understanding of mystical ascent and Augustine and Monica's own experience described in the *Confessions* 47-8). However, Barolini agues that "*Purgatorio* is the most Augustinian of Dante's three canticles," with the saint's 'spokeswoman' being Beatrice. T. Barolini, "Purgatory as Paradigm: Traveling the New and Never-Before-Traveled Path of This Life/ Poem" in H. Bloom, ed., *Dante Alighieri*,

[396] Dante, *The Divine Comedy: Volume 2: Purgatorio,* trans M. Musa, (London: Penguin, 1985), XVII.115-138.

[397] Dante, *Purgatorio* XVIII.4.

[398] Dante, *Purgatorio* XVIII.86.

with whom he speaks. However he has never before, on his astounding journey, felt drowsy. Here, on the Cornice of sloth, he is set to purge his own tendency to sin, which by this somnolence, he enacts. However, it is notable that Dante's 'wandering thoughts' that preceded his sleepiness are attributed by the poet himself to his satisfaction with Virgil's moral-philosophical system. If sloth is insufficient love of the good, it seems that philosophy is insufficient to inspire that love and, without love, is itself little more than a compendium of *acediac* thoughts. Indeed, the possibility of (self-) satisfaction with the structures of reason alone might militate against zeal; it might even be part of the slothfulness that the Pilgrim has come to purge.

Indeed, in his lethargic state, the vigour of the penitent slothful seems, at first, to Dante like a crowd of 'frenzied' bacchants![399] Nevertheless, he recognises that they are spurred by that 'good and just love' just described, if not necessarily inspired, by Virgil. They spur each other on with the dictum that 'time is love,'[400] in a reminder, not only that the mechanisms of the temporal universe are part of the cosmic order that works towards the good, but also Purgatory's focus on the atoning present is the graced reflection of the present's complete absence in Hell. Indeed, the recurrence of the image of a band of unflagging runners recalls the empty-bannered sinners at the threshold of hell, further emphasising that their abstention from allegiance is, itself, a form of sloth. In their single-minded, energetic rush, the penitents' working 'to do

[399] Dante, *Purgatorio* XVIII.91-94.

[400] Dante, *Purgatorio* XVIII.104.

good, that grace may bloom again,'[401] acts as the compensation for and antithesis of the slothful state, diffuse and indolent, that lets the fields of grace grow fallow.

Yet, all too soon, the speeding penitents are out of sight, and the Pilgrim starts to sink, once again, into his thoughts. Indeed, a 'new thought' comes to him, that generates further, diverse speculations and imaginings, and he 'wander[s] sleepily'[402] without any of the direction, concentration or energy demonstrated by the racing souls. He has not guarded his mind, or examined the worth of these thoughts, and, as they 'melt into dreams', he thus becomes their prisoner. It is not difficult to recall, here, the undisciplined daydreams of the dissatisfied, *acediac* monk that are aroused by a laxity of discipline in his vocation. As the Pilgrim shows, as lay folk structure their own understanding of vice and virtue through monastic models universalised in the schools, so this understanding comes to structure the life of any Christian as being, also, a vocation, to be pursued with zeal. If everyman and everywoman is to conceive of their identity as Christians thus vocationally, so the definition of sloth is complicated by the noonday demon of *acedia*. Even thoughts, and simple daydreams, are actions and dispositions that take place in relation to one's vocation to the Christian life, which is itself, one's allegiance to the kingdom and the cosmos of God.

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[401] Dante, *Purgatorio* XVIII.105.

[402] Dante, *Purgatorio* XVIII.144.

The terrible, hallucinatory nightmare that the Pilgrim suffers just before dawn on the Mount Purgatory's Cornice of Sloth acts as the fulcrum at the heart of his penitent journey. Moreover, just as his wandering thoughts recall the moral psychology and strictures of the desert, so his encounter with a horrific vision in a nightmare is classically reminiscent of that desert literature iconically expressed in Athanasius' account of *The Life of St Anthony.* The liminal hour in which he dreams is 'within Saturn's cold,'[403] that of the planet that stands for melancholy. Shambling into the dream created out of Dante's melted thoughts comes a grotesque woman, whose every feature is an inversion of its proper attributes: her feet and hands are deformed, her eyes are crossed and she cannot speak, only stutter.

Yet, the Pilgrim's attention, dwelling on this creature, has a transformative power and, in a false dawn ('as the sun revives a body numbed by the night's cold,'[404] just like Dante's own), changes her ugliness into a desirability. Moreover, it is his attention that imputes to her the power of speech, whose significance was discussed above, and, perhaps because of this, he cannot free his mind from captivation by her song: his interest both precedes and creates the temptation.

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[403] Dante, *Purgatorio* XIX.2.

[404] Dante, *Purgatorio* XIX.10-11.

Indeed, it is soon revealed to be the archetypal temptation: the Siren.[405] She boasts of her history, declaring, 'My singing made Ulysses turn away from his desired course.'[406] One remembers, of course, that Ulysses himself did not finally succumb to the fatal call of the Sirens, but this reference has a broader significance. We have seen that the Siren is not so much an external force, but a parasitic obsession whose birth and perpetuation is internal to the sinner, just as the demons of the desert designed their seductions with regard to close observation of their victim's behaviour.

We therefore recall that Dante's meeting with Ulysses himself in the Inferno involved the ancient hero's account of his final voyage into the unknown. Despite the claims of piety towards the love of his father, son and wife, from whom he was separated for so long (and thereby the claims of society and the natural order), he is compelled by an obsession, almost like an *acedia* writ large, described as 'a burning wish… to know the world and have experiences/ of all man's vices, of all human worth.'[407] The aged king's ship sinks when he comes in sight of the Mountain of Purgatory, not only because he was a pagan, but also, perhaps, because, like Dante at the start of the *Commedia*, he wished to gain the heights without first understanding the infernal nature of the depths. Ulysses demonstrates no discrimination, thus, between good and evil, subsuming both under an illusory category of 'knowledge'. This is the mark of

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[405] Sara Sturm-Maddox suggestively describes this figure as 'a false Beatrice'. See S. Sturm-Maddox, "Siren" in R. Lansing, ed., *The Dante Encyclopaedia,* (Routledge, 2010), 783-784.

[406] Dante, *Purgatorio* XIX.22-3.

[407] Dante, *Inferno* XXVI.97-99.

his compulsive thinking and desiring, unregulated and unexamined: the siren within himself.[408]

The Pilgrim's siren is, likewise, born from unregulated and unexamined thought, loosed, not only by sloth, but, it seems, from satisfaction with reason alone. This does not mean that reason is inefficacious, but that it is insufficient. This is made clear by the method Dante is rescued from his ensnaring fantasy. A 'saintly lady'[409] appears and calls upon Virgil to save his charge, which the Roman does, by disrobing the Siren and exposing the rot beneath – the stench of which wakes the sleeping Pilgrim – but which he is only able to do by keeping his own eyes steadily fixed on the lady that called him into action. Indeed, he had a hard time of it, even so: he tells Dante that he called to him 'at least three times.'[410] It seems that Virgil, standing for the height that human capacity can rise to under its own power is responsible for the regulation and testing of thought, but that its potency to do so (and the sureness of its judgements) can only be empowered and guaranteed by the inspiration and guardianship of grace. Thus shaken, Virgil urges the Pilgrim on to the passage that will take them out of the Cornice of Sloth.

Dante, too, is shaken, and worse. Though day has broken, he follows Virgil 'brow bent low/ so heavy with my thoughts (I must have looked/ like half a

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[408] Boyde thus contextualises this dream within medieval psychology as a *sonia animalia* that reflects the preoccupations of the waking mind in sleep. P. Boyde, *Perception and Passion in Dante's* Comedy, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 127-130.

[409] Dante, *Purgatorio* XIX.26.

[410] Dante, *Purgatorio* XIX.35.

bridge's arch).'[411] He is preoccupied, perhaps ashamed, by his dream. Virgil interprets the Siren as the 'sorceress' behind the concupiscible desires to be purged on the cornices above. The dream, thus, occurring between inadequate and inordinate desire, and partaking in both, and revealing the mind's vulnerabilities and inadequacies, plunges the Pilgrim into melancholy. The entrapment of sin seems too total, and his vulnerability to it, too great.

Yet this grim moment becomes an occasion for comfort. An angel appears to the travellers as they pass from one cornice to another, reciting a beatitude to mark the purgation of sin. The angel of the cornice of Sloth, however, speaks 'in soft tones of graciousness/ tones never heard within mortal bounds,' the beatitude *qui legent* – 'blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.'[412] The connection to sloth is not immediately apparent – as we have seen, the slothful in hell gurgle of their *sullenness*, not necessarily sorrow, and they are defined in Purgatory as being guilty, not of sorrow specifically, but of an inadequate love whose nature and origin is undefined. Nevertheless, the angel's words are completely apposite to Dante's own situation, that of melancholy grief. It may be that this reaction to progression up the mountain is a common one: the desire to do good being frustrated by the pull of concupiscible desires, the soul then descends into anxiety and hopelessness at the spectre of its own helplessness. This helplessness, too, suggests that the angel's words are not simply a comfort, but an invigorating truth: the penitents'

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[411] Dante, *Purgatorio* XIX.40-42.

[412] Dante, *Purgatorio* XIX.50.

blessedness is found precisely *in* the mourning that teaches them to depend, not on themselves, but on help from heaven. And, indeed, Dante, looking up to 'the lure of mighty spheres/ that the Eternal King forever spins… [finally] strains,'[413] like one of the penitent slothful, to make the ascent to the next cornice. Melancholy, thus, becomes a moment for grace.

The Melancholy of Paradise: so near and yet so far

It would come as a surprise to many, but an occasion for suspicion to others, that the place of melancholy in Paradise should be a matter for discussion. Dante may ascend through the sphere of Saturn, celestial patron of melancholy, but it seems odd to remark upon the lack of disconsolateness amongst the contemplatives as it would be to make a meal out of the lack of sex amongst the (mostly repentant) lovers in the sphere of Venus, or the lack of war amongst the martial souls in the sphere of Mars. The melancholic power of Saturn was felt In Purgatory, but in heaven, the extremes of behaviour inspired by planetary influence have been soothed, and each soul perfected according to its degree.[414]

Indeed, this paradoxical hierarchy of equal perfection finds its perfect expression in Dante's portrayal of Saturn as the archetypal king of a primal

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[413] Dante, *Purgatorio* XIX.62-67.

[414] On celestial influences in Dante generally, see R. Kay, *Dante's Christian Astrology*, (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994).

order, 'that dear king/ under whose rule all evil was extinct,'[415] – a concept that, as we have seen, is key for him. Moreover, it is the *primal* nature of this order that is its crucial characterisation: while for more classical thinkers, the reign of Saturn was a nostalgic Golden Age, for Dante it speaks of the structure inherent in the universe itself. To give oneself over to trust in, and obedience to, that order is itself liberty and is both the start and end of human flourishing. It is based upon a faith in nature that is, ultimately, a faith in the providence of its Creator.

Thus, the highest of the hierarchical spheres, reserved for the most refined souls, who dedicated themselves to prayer, and might be imagined to have renounced the world, is nevertheless placed under the *aegis* of an order that pertains throughout the cosmos. Thus even the most contemplative life is shown to have maintained an intimate connection with the social structure of creation itself. The sphere of Saturn, which is the heavenly home of the life of prayer, is also the location of the heavenly ladder by which its souls ascend to the Empyrean:[416] 'a ladder gleaming in the sky/ stretching beyond the reaches of my sight.'[417] That this should be so only underlines that, while prayer *is* the ladder to heaven, it climbs there *on the basis of* a primal, cosmic order that ought to be reflected in human life and society. The ladder, too, is itself a

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[415] Dante, *The Divine Comedy: Volume 3: Paradiso,* trans M. Musa, (London: Penguin, 1986), XXII, 26-7.

[416] St Benedict will tell the Pilgrim 'our ladder reaches to that height,' *Paradiso* XXIII, 68. McMahon sees the *Commedia* as narratively enacting a paradigm of ascent common to medieval mystical theology: R. McMahon, *Understanding the Medieval Meditative Ascent: Augustine, Anselm, Boethius and Dante*, (Washington, D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2006).

[417] Dante, *Paradiso* XXII. 29-30.

symbol of order, a means of measured ascent. Its associations in Christianity are not only with the heavenly ladder of Jacob's vision,[418] but also the ladder of St John Climacus, the classic monastic text that structured the life of virtue and contemplation by such an ascending scheme. Indeed, the Pilgrim's journey may be seen as a dramatisation of the arduous ascent needed to reach the very lowest rung of this refined climb. The ladder, thus, marks the gap between the hierarchical spheres and the Empyrean, the ascent to which can only be made by unmerited grace.

The Pilgrim's interlocutors in this sphere are St Benedict, the founder of western monasticism, under whose influence the alternative society of the desert travelled north, and St Peter Damian, one of the earliest and most famous masters of the high medieval schools, one of the principal means through which the moral thought of that alternative society was transmitted to the church, and society more broadly. However, he nevertheless returned to the symbolic heart of that same monastic society later in his life, retiring to the Monastery of Santa Croce di Fonte Avalinna in 1235, and it is this capacity, 'content in only thoughts contemplative,'[419] that he descends to greet the pilgrim. Indeed, when the Pilgrim asks why he, particularly has been singled out to be given this vision, Damian admonishes him, 'The truth you seek to fathom lies too deep/ in the abyss of the eternal law/ it is cut off from every

[418] Genesis 28:12.

[419] Dante, *Paradiso* XXII. 117

creature's sight.'[420] However, Damian intriguingly suggests that a ray of God's light, striking that light in which his soul is 'enwombed,'[421] 'join[s] to [the force of] my own sight' such that he can perceive 'the Primal Source.'[422] The 'clarity of his spiritual vision'[423] is, thus, based on his own knowledge of God as a creature, as cultivated in his earthly life, which is then redoubled by grace in heaven. Indeed, Gardner suggests that each rung of the golden ladder may represent the grasping of a *truth*.[424] That it is certainly knowledge to which Damian is referring, rather than, for example, mystical experience, is indicated by his common use of ocular terms, ('sight' and 'vision') while explaining that even the Seraphs, 'who see God with keenest eye'[425] do not understand the mysteries of providence. Thus, even the sphere of the most contemplative of souls, nevertheless, finds that contemplative bliss to be grounded in a *knowledge*, that is shared, and consistent, between heaven and earth.

That truth is shared between the higher realms and the lower, and the degree to which it *ought* to implemented consistently is demonstrated by the reaction of the entire sphere to the thought of present clerical laxity and abuses. Damian laments that, 'The closer once produced *for all these heavens/* harvests of souls [italics mine],' indicating that this is not only a matter that touches only his

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[420] Dante, *Paradiso* XXII.94-96.

[421] Musa's striking translation of 'm'inventro', Dante, *Paradiso* XXII.84.

[422] Dante, *Paradiso* XXII.85-87.

[423] Dante, *Paradiso* XXII.90.

[424] Gardner, *Mystics,* 153-4.

[425] Dante, *Paradiso* XXII.92.

own rarefied sphere, 'but now it is so barren/ and soon its decadence must be exposed.'[426] The self-indulgence of the contemporary church is described in almost comic terms, with 'modern pastors' requiring servants to 'hold/up their behinds'[427] and wearing such enormous cloaks that, when they are on horseback, 'two beasts beneath one hide appear to move!'[428] The saint ends by crying, 'O Heaven's Patience, what you must endure!'[429]

This terrifying 'thunder' that shakes the sphere at this lament is described as 'a cry/the sounds of which no one on earth has heard'[430] and so alarming to the Pilgrim he turns to Beatrice for comfort, 'shocked, in amazement, like a little boy.'[431] The souls of the sphere of Saturn identify themselves, as individuals, with the perfect divine order. Their righteous anger here is a grief that is *shared* with, and expressed by a cosmos of which they - and human society - are an intrinsic part. Disorder below resounds in discord above. Indeed, as Damian spoke, the Pilgrim, 'saw more flames/ descending, whirling rung to rung, and they/ grew lovelier with every whirl they made,' as they gathered around their spokesman.[432] Beatrice afterwards reveals that the words of their cry that her charge could not distinguish in the thunder was, in fact, a prayer, the expression

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[426] Dante, *Paradiso* XXII.118-120.

[427] Dante, *Paradiso* XXII.131-132.

[428] Dante, *Paradiso* XXII.134.

[429] Dante, *Paradiso* XXII.135.

[430] Dante, *Paradiso* XXII.140-141.

[431] Dante, *Paradiso* XXIII.1.

[432] Dante, *Paradiso*, XXII.136-138.

of that active love, whence 'every act… springs from righteous zeal,'[433] that causes the light of their souls to brighten.

Moreover, the Pilgrim is informed that this righteous zeal is, in fact, *less* intense than that joy that no soul, in this particular heaven, expresses for fear of destroying his mortal frame.[434] The Pilgrim's first question to Peter Damian is why 'Heaven's sweet symphony/ is silent here in this sphere while below/ in all the rest its pious strains resound.'[435] He is answered that this is so for the same reason that Beatrice informed him, on their ascension, why she no longer smiles: that it 'would strike you [senses] the way a bolt of lightning/ shatters the leafy branches of a tree.'[436] These beauties, however, are usually expressed in the common state of affairs: indeed, it is the inevitable nature of the sphere.[437] Beatrice, therefore, does not smile, and the souls of the sphere do not sing because it will harm the mortal in their midst.

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[433] Dante, *Paradiso,* XXIII.8-9.

[434] In addition to this, 'direct sight can only be accomplished in the highest location of heaven', when Dante will be able to see the faces of those shining saints enveloped in flame: see M. Cogan "Part I: The Order of the *Paradiso*" in H. Bloom, ed., *Dante Alighieri,* 55. On Dante's metaphysic of truth and perception, see C. Moevs, *The Metaphysics of Dante's Comedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[435] Dante, *Paradiso,* XXII.58-60.

[436] Dante, *Paradiso*, XXII.11-12.

[437] The medieval system of morality based upon the concept of the cosmos, most systematically developed in the psychological and spiritual laboratory of the monasteries and eremitic *lauras* of the early middle ages, is thus, in its purest form, quite the opposite of repression and control, but rather an attempt to free oneself from the dictates of selfish passions, obsessions and desires. Therefore, Jeremy Tambling's equation of *acedia* with *apatheia* may be seen to be utterly ridiculous, as is his frankly paranoid insistence that the lack of smiling and singing in the sphere of Saturn is due to repression – rather than temperance for the sake of Dante's not-yet-perfected senses – by which Dante implies a melancholy grounded in an 'original Christian' 'refusal or loss.' see J. Tambling, "Getting Above the Thunder: Dante in the Sphere of Saturn", *Modern Language Review* 90, (1995), 632-645. Indeed, Tambling's argument is inconsistent even on his own terms, loosely drawn from Freud, since the Paradisical state would presumably entail an organic *integration* of the *id*, *ego*, and *superego*, rather than the dictatorial dominance of the latter; even if it did, Paradise would not be perfect if an underlying melancholy remained regarding this.

Thus it is that, in the sphere of Saturn, the Pilgrim experiences a kind of secondary melancholy. The joy of the blessed souls of this part of heaven is a joy far greater than can be imagined, or known, by mortals. It is in *this* that the possibility of melancholy occurs in the realm of the golden age king: not yet 'transhumanised', the truest heights of happiness are cut off from the still-mortal Pilgrim. Here, in the highest sphere of the structured heavens, just before our narrator is granted a vision of the true form of Paradise as the mystical rose, melancholy, once again, is the moment when mortality reaches its limits and leaves room for grace. Even after his journey from the nadir to the zenith of the universe, he still has a long way to go before he can see the joy that shines in Beatrice's eyes.

This is perhaps, however, only appropriate. The Pilgrim's journey begins in an expression of the fruitfulness of sorrow, but it is not his own: it is Beatrice's - and not only her own, but that of St Lucy, and of the Virgin Mary herself. All three 'grieved' the Pilgrim's 'stray[ing]/ on a desert slope,'[438] and their compassion, 'moved by the pity of his weeping,'[439] sends Beatrice, tearfully, [440]to Virgil, to implore his help. Indeed, she fears that she, 'might have started to his aid too late.'[441] Thus Beatrice makes her appeal at the same kind of dire moment of apparent hopelessness that the Pilgrim will later make his own

[438] Dante, *Inferno* II.61-2.

[439] Dante, *Inferno* II.106.

[440] Dante, *Inferno* II.116 'and there were tears…'.

[441] Dante, *Inferno* II.66.

abandonment to grace on the slopes of Mount Purgatory. This sorrow not only sorrows *along* with Dante, but *for* him, in the way Augustine described Christian compassion.[442] We have seen that the dislocation of the earth is felt in heaven, as a disorder of the divinely created structure of which both are a part. Therefore, even in heaven, this disorder is grieved, and is an occasion for tears, for thunder, but, most of all, for prayer, and, in the fortunate Pilgrim's case, compassion and reintegration. That this dislocation, however, is a condition of earthly life, and not the destiny of the human soul is demonstrated by a final melancholy that Beatrice expresses to Virgil, as she says that, though 'love moves [her],'[443] she 'come[s] from the place I am longing to return to.'[444] To be apart from heaven, even for a moment, is, for one of the blessed, a moment of melancholy that reveals the fullness to which they are filled by grace. To journey there alongside the Pilgrim Dante, however, is for the reader to 'trace the path toward, and to trigger, understanding/revelation, the awakening of the subject of all experience to itself in us… This is the foundation of ethics, and of all political and social reform: such experience alone is capable of changing, rather than just temporarily suppressing, human behaviour.'[445]

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[442] See above, Chapter Three.

[443] Dante, *Inferno* II.72.

[444] Dante, *Inferno* II.71.

[445] Moevs, *Metaphysics*, 171.

Conclusion

The Pilgrim Dante's journey is marked, throughout, by melancholy and sorrow. Beginning in a wilderness of despair, it passes through several such landscapes in its descent through Hell. Perhaps the most memorable of these is found at the centre of the first canticle: the Wood of Suicides, whose inhabitants are arguably the most poignant in the *Inferno*. Meanwhile, the Cornice of Sloth in Purgatory occupies an axial position between the categories of disordered love, and it is there that is enacted the Pilgrim's own experiences of *acedia,* sloth, and despair: those vices that, we have seen, improperly regulated sorrow can disintegrate. However, this is also the moment where the Pilgrim's despair becomes a moment of grace, and abandonment to God's comfort.

Yet, even in Paradise, the Pilgrim still experiences a degree of melancholy. This does not only occur because, in his mortal state, he cannot fully experience the glories of the higher spheres, but also because heaven itself is shaken by rage and grief at disorder and injustice on earth. Indeed, the *Commedia* itself is grounded in this sorrowful responsiveness of heaven to circumstances below: just as the Pilgrim's journey begins as he is lost in the wilderness, so his guide, Virgil, is entreated to shepherd him by the tears of the Virgin Mary, St Lucy, and Beatrice herself.

Chapter Five: Petrarch's Leisure

Francesco Petrarca, known in English as Petrarch, was born in 1304 in Arezzo, Tuscany, and his family moved to the papal seat of Avignon in 1313. He became the leading scholar of his age: a formidable textual critic, an excavator of lost texts, an antiquarian and historian and was crowned poet laureate in Rome in 1341. He was in minor orders: vowed to the status of a cleric, though he never practiced this vocation. Petrarch was also a moral philosopher who engaged with theological questions and, also, on Good Friday, 1327, at church, he first caught sight of the lady whom he immortalised as "Laura."

Petrarch stands at the threshold of the Renaissance and foreshadows many of its preoccupations, for example, with the study of the classical world, the collection and analysis of ancient manuscripts and the attempt to write more accurate versions of history. His most abiding interests, however, were in the creation and application of rhetoric and poetry, the "existential" questions of moral philosophy and a theology that was affective as well as effective. He scrutinised, monitored and catalogued his experience and his responses to it; his thought springs from this life-long attempt to come to terms with himself and his reactions to the world in which he found himself. It found expression artful constructions: poetry, invectives, dialogues and harangues. Such forms allowed Petrarch to respond to new circumstances and internal variations and

permit his ideas an open-ended quality that reflects the vicissitudes of his conscientiousness as well as his irresoluteness.[446]

He felt the miseries of human existence acutely, vexed by the external pressures of public life and the internal temptations of the passions, but believed that such unhappiness could be addressed, contained and even remedied. However, just as the forms of his *oeuvre* remained open-ended and unresolved, so did this life-long battle with deep-rooted and tormenting sorrow. Despite several works dealing directly with the subject, Petrarch never comes to a satisfactory accommodation with his melancholy and its implications for his character. Rather, he remains caught uncomfortably between a medieval, monastic ethic that remains more an instinct than a consistent set of ideas, and more worldly concerns grounded in the burgeoning civic life of the early Italian renaissance. Indeed, in Petrarch, we see the beginnings of a more modern *acedia* that begins to come unmoored from its desert roots.

Petrarch's Golden Chains

Indeed, Petrarch's conception of the miseries of the world bears the imprint of a medieval spirit exemplified in Lotario dei Segni's treatise *On the Misery of the Human Condition*. This work, whose promised twin on the dignity of man

[446] The best discussion of Petrarch's religious and philosophical thought remains C. Trinkaus, *In Our Image and Likeness*, (University of Chicago Press, 1970). See also G Mazzotta, *The World of Petrarch (Duke Monographs in Medieval and Renaissance Studies)*, (Duke University Press, 1993). More broadly on Renaissance Humanism, see P. O. Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought and its Sources*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979). On Sorrow in the Italian Renaissance, see G. McClure, *Sorrow and Consolation in Italian Humanism,* (Princeton University Press, 1990).

was overtaken by his election as Pope Innocent III, is the classical exposition of the ideal known as 'contempt for the world.' Its drastic lack of esteem for the human condition is such that every aspect or possibility of earthly life becomes an instance of pain, of temptation, or of both. Indeed, it was in response to this very work that Petrarch composed the encyclopaedic *Remedies for Both Kinds of Fortune.*

The Prior of his brother's Charterhouse requested that the man of letters write the sequel to the *De miseria* that Lohario promised but did not deliver.[447] Petrarch replies self-effacingly regarding his worthiness to follow in the great pope's footsteps, but nevertheless goes on to reveal that he is already engaged on such a work: the *De remediis*. "I try to uproot the passions of my heart and my readers' hearts or, if possible, to uproot them."[448] He thus identifies misery with the passions and opposes them with reason, a method also followed by his interlocutor, 'Augustinus' in his dialogue, the *Secretum*.[449] His catalogue of the occasions of unhappiness is as comprehensive as Lotario's but he proceeds to attempt to neutralise the consequences: he does not see man's misery as intractable or, indeed, as necessarily proper to the human state. Indeed, he most often seems to approach misery as impropriety, as mistakenness, to be corrected by the regulation of "right thinking" mastering impulse. However, rather than reflect upon the dignity of man, the work attempts to diagnose and

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[447] F. Petrarch, *Letters of Old Age: Books: X-XVIII,* S. Levin, eds., (Italica, 2008), XVI.9.

[448] Petrarch, *Letters,* XVI.9.

[449] F. Petrarch, *Petrarch Secretum with Introduction, Notes and Critical Anthology,* D. Carozza, H. J. Shey, eds., (P. Lang, 1989).

deconstruct 'every ill the flesh is heir to' from *acedia* to toothache, by reflection on the instability, and danger to be found, in bad fortune or good. While it ranges from the profound, dealing with death[450] and despair[451], the commonplace, considering the difficulties of marriage[452] to bodily complaints such as toothache,[453] most striking is his assumption that *both* kinds of Fortune contain the seeds of possible unhappiness.[454]

Thus, while he, in fact, shares Innocent's conviction that humanity remains susceptible to sin and unhappiness in every state an individual might inhabit, he tends of conceive of this as being more of an abstract vulnerability to the vicissitudes of time and of Fortune rather than moral weakness. This is a more classical anthropology, understanding the individual as buffeted by outside forces. Whether or not he regarded fortune as an objective force,[455] he believed that existence and interaction with the human situation presented problems both material and psychological. Joy is to be treated with a degree of suspicion as much as misery is to be neutralised.

Thus Petrarch demonstrates his ethic to be fundamentally Stoic in its aims, aiming to preserve a tranquil spirit, rather than being concerned with justice or

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[450] F. Petrarch, *Petrarch's Remedies for Fortune Fair and Foul*, C. H. Rawski, trans. and ed., (John Wiley & Sons, 1991), I.18, 46-52.

[451] Petrarch, *Remedies,* II 93.

[452] Petrarch, *Remedies,* I.69.

[453] Petrarch, *Remedies,* I.94.

[454] Petrarch, *Remedies,* I.108.

[455] Petrarch, *Secretum* II, 95 discusses the ancients' disagreements on the subject.

compassion. The contrast with Evagrius' *Antirrehtikos* is instructive: while the desert monk encourages his brethren to 'talk back' to the demons tempting them into sin, Petrarch aims to furnish 'remedies' that neutralise passion, or, at the very least, encourage self-control. Due to this suspicion of emotion as disorder, Petrarch therefore does not perceive any utility or virtue in sorrow.

The "claims of the world" so strained Petrarch personally that he frequently idealises a simpler, rustic life for himself, as described in *De vita solitaria*. Thus, he sketched withdrawal from the world as a remedy to the misery of the complexity of public life and the tempting passions arising from it. He characterised it as the best condition for study[456] and the linked pursuit of the cultivation of virtue. To cede from society could be seen as the correct, rational response to the human circumstance. In this work, Petrarch sought to combine classical models, with the example of his Carthusian brother Gherardo and the monastic tradition.[457] Nevertheless, though he appropriates certain monkish forms, his retreat has a different, lay character. His *contemptus* is for a world improperly regulated: in spite of the weight of tradition, he is unable to disavow (human and ultimately worldly) intellectual pursuits; indeed, he relishes them.[458] He also celebrates the aesthetic pleasure to be gained from the landscape around his country retreat at Vacleuse. His aim is not, strictly

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[456] Petrarch, *Secretum* II. 92.

[457] D. S. Yocum, "De otio religioso: Petrarch and the Laicization of Western Monastic Asceticism" *Religion and the Arts* 11 (2007) 454–479.

[458] In a late letter, he avers "that study must not be interrupted by age" Petrarch, *Letters* XVII.2

speaking, ascesis, renunciation or contemplation, but regulation in the service of mental tranquility.

It is perhaps because of this, rather than being in spite of it, that Petrarch was never able to adequately explain or exorcise his own life-long experience of malignant misery. The most potent description of this is to be found in *The Secret Conflict of My Cares*, a dialogue between 'Franciscus' and a near-unrecognisable Augustine, 'Augustinus', who seems to be little more than a mouthpiece for Petrarch's own guilt and self-recrimination. Franciscus speaks of his suffering "a bitter disdain for life" which is not a spiritual *contemptus mundi* but a repugnance for the fact of existence itself. In Part II of the *Secretum*, as the conversation examines Francescus' propensity toward each of the Seven Deadly Sins, the climactic discussion is over his propensity to sloth, introduced by Augustinus as the "disease of the mind, which we moderns call melancholy and the ancients called *aegritudo*."[459] The sufferer describes it as without consolation, in which "everything is harsh, unhappy and grim."[460] In the *De remediis,* he also describes the relish with which such a melancholy feeds on itself and the perverse pleasure that can come from despair. Having no specific root, this *accidia-aegritudo* is less vulnerable to remedy by human powers of reason and will. It is, rather, the result of man's liability to the totality of Fortune's repeated blows. Augustinus admits, "I do not know where

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[459] Petrarch, *Secretum* II. See also, Petrarch, *Letters,* 84; S. Wenzel, "Petrarch's Accidia", *Studies in the Renaissance 8* (1961), 36-48. On Petrarch's own experience of *acedia*, see E. H. Wilkins, "On Petrarch's Accidia and His Adamantine Chains", *Speculum 37* (1962), 589-594.

[460] Petrarch, *Letters.* 84.

to begin, so complex is the disease."[461] He exhorts his wayward charge with arguments depending on Stoic philosophy and the writings of the ancients. These appeals to his reason and will, nevertheless, have little impact on the encompassing, almost voluptuous melancholy of *aegritudo*.

The *Secretum* questions whether Francescus, and, more broadly, men in general, are unhappy through the lassitude of their own will. This is the position of Augustinus, who counters Francescus' objection that the majority are made unhappy by the blows of Fortune with an essentially Stoic exhortation to preserve an internal integrity against the fluctuations of the external world, bolstered by meditation upon the inevitability of death.[462] Thus man achieves the right to the schoolroom definition of him as "a creature both rational and mortal."[463] Francescus finds no fault with the saint's reasoning: indeed, he has come to the same conclusions himself but protests that, whatever his knowledge of the right path, he cannot bring himself to put it into practice. By the end of the dialogue, though Augustinus has demonstrated the irrationality of Francescus' sinful ways, the latter leaves his interlocutor to attend to the many things of the world.[464]

It seems, then, no regulation can oppose the totalising depression of *aegritudo*. The *De remediis* tells us it can only be opposed by the joy of humanity's

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[461] Petrarch, *Secretum* II.

[462] Petrarch, *Secretum* I.

[463] Petrarch, *Secretum* I.

[464] Petrarch, *Secretum.* III.

dignity. However, Petrarch seems to have regarded honour and glory *as* humanity's dignity, and therefore that very dignity is, in some sense, a dangerous and sinful ballast. Indeed, a large part of the *Secretum* is an attempt to talk him out of his attachment to them. Glory, fame and honour, equivalent terms describing the renown due to human achievement, were intrinsic to Petrarch's conception of humanity and a major feature of his mental topography;[465] he defends his impulse towards them vigorously against Augustinus' contempt: against Augustinus' argument that the world is dwarved by "time and space," Francescus replies, "I know that old and worn out story… if you have a more persuasive argument than this, use it.".[466] The arguments he puts in the saint's mouth are not as immediately satisfactory as others in the dialogue and, though he eventually admits the consistency of his interlocutor's viewpoint, he ends the conversation by rejecting the practice recommended.

The crux of the saint's argument against the desires of the poet is that his pupil should "despise earthly endeavours" and seek "the way to your homeland [heaven],"[467] advice in keeping with the Stoic flavour of his earlier discourses. As at the book's opening, he recommends meditation upon death as a means to *contemptus mundi.* Crucially, he urges Francescus, "get yourself to safety."[468]

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[465] Indeed, one of the two works that Augustinus urges him to abandon (the other being the *Africa*) is *De viris illustribus*, a historical catalogue of biographies of the illustrious. Though its conception evolved over Petrarch's lifetime, it was always dominated by the heroes of Rome. In an early preface, he wrote "I have decided, therefore, to collect or rather almost to compress into one place the praise of the illustrious men who flourished with outstanding glory…" see Kohl "Petrarch's Prefaces to *De viris illustribus*" *History and Theory* 13 (1974).

[466] Petrarch, *Secretum*, III, 135.

[467] Petrarch, *Secretum,* III, 143.

[468] Petrarch, *Secretum* III, 143.

Petrarch frequently describes the lifestyle of such a pious retreat in such terms as "a straight road,"[469] that suggest the fashion in which he conceives of heavenly destiny as an eternal and stable state, in contrast to the transient, dynamic nature of earthly life, here described in terms of a pilgrimage towards this goal. At the conclusion of the *Secretum*, however, the usually pliant Franciscus says that he "cannot restrain my desire for study" and therefore cannot pursue this "much safer course."[470] His ultimate aim is salvation and his spiritual inheritance is a medieval one structured by a spiritual hierarchy that constructs retreat from the world as a superior mode of life. Nevertheless, he finds himself resistant to such a commitment and, significantly, his resistance finds its expression in his desire for glory, a concept in which he conceives the dignity of humanity, but which he nevertheless regards, in ambiguous measure, as sinful. He is trapped between regarding virtue as transcending *virtus*, his term for the energy of human creativity, but is only, it seems, capable of writing panegyrics praising its exemplar rather than embodying it himself.

The Ideal of the Cloister

In his moral obsessions, therefore Petrarch remains wed to the ideals of an older world, but is too much part of a newer one to fully embrace, or even understand them. He cannot escape the conviction that his brother Gherardo's vocation as a Carthusian is the difficult, but ideal, and direct route to heaven, as

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[469] Petrarch, *Secretum* III, 144.

[470] Petrarch, *Secretum* III, 144.

evidenced in his account of their contrasting ascents of Mount Ventoux. In this work, Petrarch contrasts his fruitless search for an easy path up the mountain with his brother's swift climb via a strenuous, but straight, path.[471] His work *De otio religioso* was written for Gherardo's Carthusian brethren and explores the emotional and spiritual dangers that plague even the spiritual elite of society, including that of *acedia* and a despair even of the possibility of achieving salvation.[472] It instructs the brothers for whom it was composed that their seclusion is the perfect response to the vain and fleeting nature of worldly life. Indeed, to urge the brothers not to wish to return to life in the world, conceived as a city, he writes in *De otio* of the eventual destruction of the urban landscape and the anonymity and dissolution that death brings to even the most renowned.[473]

As this suggests, for Petrarch, the leisure of the religious is not about contemplation, but about the *safest retreat* from the dangers of the world – it seems negative, not positive. Despite his lionising of his brother's struggle to climb Mount Ventoux, he imagines the monastic life, not primarily as one of discipline and spiritual labour, but as the absence of struggle, beyond that of restraining the urges of the flesh. The problem, therefore is Petrarch's

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[471] see Greene on the problematisation of the allegorical mode in the *Ascent*: T Greene, *The Light in Troy: Imitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry,* (Yale University Press, 1982).

[472] F. Petrarch, *Prose,* G. Martellotti, ed. (Milan, Naples: Ricciardi, 1955)*,* 594-606.

[473] Petrarch, *Prose,* 597-599.

oversimplification and misunderstanding of the medieval monastic solution,[474] even as he rejected that path for himself.

Charles Trinkaus argues, in his monumental *In Our Image and Likeness*, through a close reading of the *De otio,* that Petrarch wrote to encourage his the brethren of the Charterhouse, that he successfully opposes the miseries and inadequacy of mankind that he had elsewhere sought to neutralise to the immense condescension of God that is the object of faith.[475] However, it is both characteristic, and suggestive, that the poet describes the Incarnation in terms of the 'depression' of God in taking on the miserable human state.[476] This is not faith *from* despair: it is simply faith *alongside* it. Petrarch is unable to find a way to 'talk back' to his unhappy thoughts, and move the conversation onwards. His misery is not something from which he learns; nor is it something with which he engages. He indeed recognises that injustice exists in the world, but his experience of sorrow is almost entirely personal: it is, of course, for this reason that he regards isolation as its ideal solution.

The crux, therefore, of Petrarch's concept of monastic life is one of *flight*: that is the most secure refuge possible from the vicissitudes of the world. However, while, undoubtedly, many monastic thinkers have emphasised the temptations

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[474] Moevs writes 'it becaomes almost a parody of Christian conversion' C. Moevs, "Subjectivity and Conversion in Dante and Petrarch", in Z. G. Baranski, T. J. Cachey, Jr., eds., *Petrarch and Dante, Anti-Dantism, Metaphysics, Tradition*, (University of Notre Dame, 2009), 246.

[475] Trinkaus, *Image*, I.i.3.

[476] Trinkaus, *Image*, I.i.3, 38.

inherent in secular life, both the great founders of the religious orders, and the hermits of the desert understood a life lived in subject to a rule as having the character of a *fight:* against the temptations that lurk within one's own soul. The Fathers and Mothers who were the contemporaries of Evagrius were engaged in a far profounder battle, and often warned acolytes that the desert was not a place of escape, but rather the nexus of existence in which one could look sin in the eye. In contrast, Petrarch's idealisation of religious retreat echoes Evagrius' account of the unsettled *acediac.* The leisure of the cloister may look like ease, but its practice is anything but.

Conclusion

Petrarch, therefore, remained unable to decisively address his *aegritudo* for a number of inter-connected reasons. He remained wedded to a Stoic ethic that stipulated self-control and a kind of philosophical 'deconstruction' of one's circumstances as the correct response to trials - and, indeed, to blessings. Necessitating this standard of behaviour is his understanding of humanity as being vulnerable to a classically-understood *Fortuna.*

Petrarch's life-long fascination with the monastic vocation acts as a Christian *counter-weight* to this world-view. It is conceived of as a flight from Fortune, and a safe escape from the temptations and vicissitudes of the world. However,

in understanding monasticism in terms of his own philosophy, Petrarch betrays the poverty of his theology. By regarding *aegritudo* as something to be neutralised, and human impulses as something to be controlled, he remains closed to the possibility of transformation, or of engagement with, and learning from, one's sorrow, one's society, and one's God.

Chapter Six: Melancholy Renaissance Men - Ficino, Milton and Burton

The 'laicisation' of monastic forms whose first impetus we have seen in Petrarch gained momentum with the rise of a lettered, educated middle class during what is conventionally designated 'the renaissance.' Though its boundaries with the medieval world are porous, unclear and, indeed, debatable, it is certainly observable that the priorities of thinkers outside the cloister began to make themselves felt in the broader stream of European discourse.

One of the iconic *loci* of thought peculiar to the renaissance was the revival of the ancient figure of Melancholia. Perhaps best exemplified in Dürer's eponymous engraving, *Melancholia II*, this secular figure came to stand for a complex interplay of intellectual acuity, disaffection, and a parallel worldliness and retreat. The posture was more than an aesthetic stance: the idea of melancholy was retrieved from the Ps-Aristotle and ancient humoural texts and interrogated for its implications for the new class of non-ecclesiastical scholars. As this happened, melancholy retained its association with extraordinary individuals, but the emphasis shifted from the 'heroic' aspect to that of 'genius.' The sign of Saturn came to be identified, overwhelmingly, with the intellectual, most influentially outlined by Marsilio Ficino.

This character is often given certain aesthetic trappings from monasticism: the old identification of church with letters retained an echo; this conception is given perhaps its best exemplification in the contrast of John Milton *L'Allegro*

and his *Il Penseroso*. Moreover, the ideal of scholarship preserved the impulse to retreat from the world and, often, the renunciation of material trappings in favour of rarefied speculation. This secular 'cloistering' however often proved to be an unhealthy tendency for its practitioners, and to affect 'melancholy,' it will be seen, often tended to effect it as well. Moreover, such a rejection of the world, rather than reflecting the monastic impulse to restructure human life in an ideal, alternative society, tended towards a disengagement from society and its problems. In eliding the 'heroic' aspect of melancholy, renaissance thinkers rather tended to idealise a pursuit of that same alienation that earlier narratives portrayed as the reprehensible result of injustice and disorder in society. By being identified with intellectualism, thus, melancholy, and its associated complex of sorrow and grief, comes unmoored from its social base. Rather than a protest against atomisation, it becomes that atomisation itself. Dürer's *Melancholia* sits on a barren shore beside a featureless sea, staring out of her frame at nothing, while even the dog at her feet plays unnoticed.

Equally, while the revival of a reinvigorated humoural theory returned melancholy to the consideration of medicine, this materialism also acted to divorce negative emotions from more rigorous moral consideration. Indeed, even as despair becomes an aesthetic and narrative *topos*[477], the sense that sorrow might be salutary - or, more, that a kind of hopelessness can, in a Dantean sense, be a turning point - rather than being either deathly or,

[477] S. Snyder, "The Left Hand of God: Despair in Medieval and Renaissance Tradition," *Studies in the Renaissance*, 12 (1965), 18-59.

alternatively, attractive for its own sake, falls by the wayside. The consequences of this are observable in Robert Burton's sprawling *The Anatomy of Melancholy,* which anatomises this prevalent disease. Medicalisation had, by Burton's time, clearly made the identification of melancholy more applicable in diverse states of life, and he tries to cover all eventualities under both their physical and psychological rubrics. Thanks to his universal view, he is able to identify some social roots beneath the malignant growth of sorrow, but his work makes few moral recommendations, apart from a closing exhortation to the depressed. Perhaps thanks to his determination to analyse the malady so minutely, Burton, too, fails to reintegrate melancholy, or the melancholic, back into the world from which he is estranged.

Marsilio Ficino

Marsilio Ficino stands as an, if not *the,* exemplar of the Renaissance Man as conceived by the humanist scholars – that is, a man versed fluently in humane studies such that it informed, not only his writings, but also his life. A prodigy taken under the wing of the Medici patriarch Cosimo, Ficino was devoted to the study of Plato while also practicing as a physician.[478] Nevertheless, he was also a serious and committed Christian, and his greatest work, the *Platonic*

[478] On the link between Ficino's vocations as priest and physician, see P. Serracino-Inglott, "Ficino the Priest" in M. J. B. Allen, V. Rees, eds., *Marsilio Ficino: His Theology, His Philosophy, His Leagcy*,(Brill: London, Boston, Koln, 2002), 2-13, esp. 'it is in the role of psychological counsellor, even more than as a prayer-leader, that Ficino appears to have discerned a more manifestly sacerdotal dimension to the physician's work.' 12.

Theology is an attempt to reconcile his creeds.[479] In this serious engagement with serious theology, if not the kind studied by his contemporaries in the universities, Ficino occupies a unique crux in this history. Though informed, indeed, saturated in the methods and values of what is today called the humanist movements in *quattrocento* and *cinquecento* Florence, he retains some sense, characteristic of his medieval predecessors, of a fundamentally theological cosmos.

It is the shape of this cosmos, however, that Ficino dramatically, and, especially in the case of the understanding of melancholy, decisively reinvents. He does this in a complex movement characteristic of renaissance thinkers, in which he engages and reinvents the preoccupations of his forebears by both returning to ancient sources with improved philological tools, while also reconstructing readings of the classical in an image decidedly contemporary.

Thus, while for ancient mythographers, such as the author of Job and for the Euripides that gave us Bellerophontes, and for the Ps-Aristotle who came after them, the archetype of the melancholic was the hero; and while for the medievals from Evagrius to Dante, the exemplary melancholic was a pilgrim whose process of purgation took place on markedly monastic lines; for Ficino,

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[479] On the authenticity of Ficino as a Christian thinker, see, J. Lauster, "Marsilio Ficino as a Christian Thinker: Theological Aspects of his Platonism" in M. J. B. Allen, V. Rees, eds., *Marsilio Ficino: His Theology, His Philosophy, His Leagcy*, (London, Boston, Koln: Brill, 2002), 45-69. On FIcino's place in the trajectory of religious humanism in the Florentine *quattrocento*, see A. Edelheit, *Ficino, Pico and Savonarola: The Evolution of Humanist Theology 1461/2 - 1498,* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2008,), especially on Ficino's concern regarding the separation of temporal powers from ecclesiastical blessing.

and for an overwhelming proportion of those who came after him, the stereotypical melancholic became the *intellectual*.

The shift, as we shall see, took hold rapidly. Ficino classically expounded his theories on the subject in the first book of *Vita libri tres*, the *Three Books on Life*, which appeared in 1489. The crystallisation of the aesthetic thus propagated can be seen in England less than 140 years later, in Milton's *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, whose rhetorical combat presumes its audience is already intimately familiar with the assumptions and tropes employed. Only a few years earlier, Burton published the first edition of what was to become his monumental *Anatomy of Melancholy*, in which he interrogated and elaborated the link between melancholy and scholastic endeavour in both profound and practical terms that both ground and question this now fashionable and, even today, hugely influential association.

Ficino's fascination with the figure of the scholar is indicative of his own preoccupations as much as with his own scholarship as a classicist. He variously understands the intellectual as one who engages in 'the pursuit of the sciences,'[480] 'hunters after the highest good and truth,'[481] and as 'the priests of the muses.'[482] His definition of outstanding intellect is the possession of 'judgement and wisdom.' His understanding of the mind of a genius is indeed

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[480] M Ficino *Three Books on* Life, trans., C Kaske & J. R. Clark, (MRTS, Arizona :1998), I.iv.

[481] Ficino, *Books*, I.ii.

[482] Ficino, *Books*, I.ii.

moral, but notably lacks an aspect hitherto remarkably present in previous understandings of melancholy. He indeed notes the link between frenzy and poetics, citing, not only Ps-Aristotle, but also Democritus, and also, inevitably, Plato's *Phaedrus*.[483] Nevertheless, while referring to these author's explicit link between genius and melancholy, he seems to prefer to understand this as encompassing, rather, those personalities that are drawn to sustained, serious intellectual engagement. Even in considering the frenzy described by his master, Plato, he seems to subsume the *divine aspect* of such disorder under his preferred understanding of 'melancholics' as a *type of person*.[484]

Klibanksy, Panofsky and Saxl, in their seminal *Saturn and Melancholy*,[485] helpfully delineate that, while the Greeks understood humoural theory as a bodily dynamic continually in flux, and thought no one humour was to be preferred over the others, but rather that all were to be kept balanced and moderated by the others, medieval theory tended to use the humours as psychological and moral descriptors, and considered the sanguine, and therefore the abundance of that humour, to be the only virtuous configuration. While Ficino goes some way to restoring the Greek understanding, only rejecting the phlegmatic humour as unsavoury,[486] and constructing an even more dynamic picture of how the movement of the humours attends upon and

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[483] Ficino, *Books*, I.v.

[484] Ficino *Books,* I.iv 'Even if he perhaps intends divine madness to be understood here, nevertheless, according to the physicians, madness of this kind is never incited in anyone else but melancholics.'

[485] R. Klibanksy, E. Panofsky and F. Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy: Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy Religion and Art*, (Nelson, 1964).

[486] Ficino, *Books*, I.iii.

creates physical and psychological states. Nevertheless, Ficino had inherited a strong strain of the existential concern of his medieval predecessors, and, as we have seen, was keen to 'type' scholars in particular as pre-destined by the influence and preponderance of black bile in their systems.

This central positioning of ideas of pre-destination (if not in the doctrinal sense) is perhaps key to understanding the basis on which the philosopher-physician built his understanding of the scholarly melancholic. Ficino was fascinated by astrology, in common with many of his contemporaries, and his concept of the cosmos, while as totalising, was, in some senses, even more integrated than that of, for example, Dante, thanks to its explicit foregrounding of the mechanism of the celestial and planetary influence on individual human lives. In the case of melancholia, this involved re-evaluating the character of Saturn, whose inherent ambiguity had been largely understood negatively in the middle ages (although, as we have seen, Dante's handling was at once sensitive and profound and, indeed, linked this darkest of planets with the deepest reaches of the contemplative life). In Ficino's hands, Saturn remained, it must be admitted, 'an essentially unlucky star, and melancholy as an essentially unhappy fate,'[487] but so powerful was the influence of the stars on human fate, that he advocated rather than attempting to evade that influence, however potentially baneful, one should turn *freely* towards one's own star. Thus, as Kilbanksy, Panofsky and Saxl put it, 'the melancholic should… apply

[487] Klibanksy, et al, *Saturn*, 256.

himself to that activity which is the particular domain of the sublime star of speculation.'[488]

That speculation and scholarship should be so entwined with Saturn reflects the other great influence on Ficino's cosmology: Neo-Platonism. As the highest of the planets, Saturn occupied a high link in the chain of being, becoming 'representative… of the purest and highest power of thought.'[489] This rarified position belies somewhat Ficino's characterisation of melancholy as unfortunate in itself, for despite its dangers, it nevertheless is essentially linked with the sublime ends of his philosophic system. Indeed, he notes that "…just as black bile…is to be sought and nourished as the best, just so that which is contrary to it, as we said is to be avoided as the worst."[490] It is, in fact, this very contradiction in the nature of melancholia that, for Ficino, seemingly both literally and by analogy, constitutes the very mechanism of rigorous inquiry and thought.

> The natural cause [of melancholy] seems to be that for the pursuit of the sciences, especially the difficult ones, the soul must draw in upon itself from external things to internal as from the circumference to the centre and while it speculates, it must stay immovably at the very centre (as I might say) of man.

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[488] Klibanksy, et al, *Saturn*, 270-1.

[489] Klibanksy, et al, *Saturn*, 153.

[490] Ficino, *Books*, I.vi.

> Therefore black bile continually incites the soul both to collect itself together into one and to dwell on itself and contemplate itself. And being analogous to the world's centre, [he earlier says black bile is the element analogous to the earth, that is, to the centre of the Ptolemaic universe], it forces the investigation to the centre of individual subjects, and carries one to the contemplation of whatever is highest, since, indeed, it is most congruent with Saturn, the highest of planets. Contemplation itself, in its turn, by a continual recollection and compression, as it were, brings on a nature similar to black bile.[491]

There is a great deal at work here. One notices the complete integration of the mind, the parts and humours of the body, and the cosmos itself that is expressed in the actions and thought-life of the individual. However, in Ficino, the melancholic seems cut off from that personal dialogue with the divine (whether positive or negative) central to previous conceptions of his or her state.

Intelligence, indeed, in its correspondence with Mercury and Saturn, and thus called away from the body to mental speculations,

> is made in the highest degree both a neighbour to the divine and an instrument of the divine. As a result it is filled from above

[491] Ficino *Books* I.iv.

> with divine influences and oracles and it always invents new and unaccustomed things and predicts the future.[492]

However, this oracular function seems to be purely passive, and markedly impersonal, in contrast to the powerfully emotional, deeply personal encounters experienced by Job, by Dante, and by the monks of the Egyptian desert and their successors. Ficino's melancholic, in contrast, exists in perpetual conversation with the universe itself. Given his understanding of the power of astrological fate as so determinative that the only way to mitigate its ill effects is to embrace it as one's very nature, this 'conversation' does seem rather one-way.

Nevertheless, this model is not static. Indeed, it recalls the dynamism of Greek humoural theory, if expanded to a cosmic scale. As a physician, moreover, Ficino is concerned with the movements of the humours, especially those of black bile, within the individual. 'Natural' melancholy, he writes, is 'a dense and dry part of the blood' and can lead one to that 'judgement and wisdom' mentioned earlier as his favoured characterisation of the intellect. However, if left alone, it becomes a substance 'black and dense' that 'terrifies the soul and dulls the intelligence'[493] or if mixed only with phlegm brings on sluggishness (if it gets cold, it gets cold in the extreme, being a 'dense material'). It is also dangerous if it putrefies, or is too abundant.

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[492] Ficino *Books* I.vi.

[493] Ficino, *Books*, I.iv.

> Therefore, it must be every bit as subtle as its nature allows… Therefore let black bile abound, but very rarified… But let it not be mixed only with phlegm…let it be so mixed with bile and blood, that one body is made of the three humours…Let the black bile be kindled a bit from these two others, and having been kindled let it shine, but not burn, lest… it should burn too intensely and become agitated, but when it cools of it similarly should become cold in the extreme. Nor should it seem surprising that black bile can be kindled easily, and when kindled burn with great intensity… Melancholy has a similarly great tendency towards either extreme, in the unity of its fixed and stable nature. This extremism does not occur in the other humours. Extremely hot, it produces the extremest boldness, even to ferocity; extremely cold, however, fear and extreme cowardice.[494]

Like the Ps-Aristotle, Ficino notes the potentially dangerous volatility of black bile, and the consequent tendency to extremes of those prone to it. Melancholy finds its stability only as a *unity* of these extremes, hence, perhaps, its potentially universal genius by which, as noted above, 'the soul must draw in upon itself from external things to internal as from the circumference to the

[494] Ficino, *Books*, I.v.

centre and while it speculates.'[495] Despite his tacit privileging of the scholarly destiny, whatever the dangers, and thanks to his Neo-Platonic priorities, Ficino is adamant that melancholy cannot, and must not, exist in isolation. Overindulged in either direction, it either solidifies or combusts. Indeed, 'on account of the repeated movements of inquiry [in intellectual life], the spirits continually move and get dispersed,'[496] which can leave the blood dry and black, and, thus, melancholic. It seems that even inquiring minds must discipline, lest, like the acediac monk, thoughts thin of content, turn on, and then consume themselves. Thus, black bile is not something that should, or even really *can*, be heightened or cultivated. All that can be achieved is its proper regulation.

It is in his program of regulation that Ficino the physician echoes most clearly his medieval monastic predecessors.[497] Just like Evagrius before him, he understood the importance of care of the body as a first step towards care of the soul. Indeed, Ficino recognises the importance of this particularly for his scholar-melancholics who, drawn, ultimately, to philosophy and, thus, the study of incorporeal things, tend to be 'compelled to disjoin it [their minds] from the body. Hence the body is often rendered as if it were half alive and

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[495] Ficino, *Books*, I.iv.

[496] Ficino, *Books*, I.iv.

[497] Indeed, Ficino was part of the Florentine Greek-scholarly circle that surrounded the Camoldelensian Ambrogio Traversari. Lacuna, D. F. "The Camaldolese Academy: Ambrogio Traversari, Marsilio Ficino and the Christian Platonic Tradition" in M. J. B. Allen, V. Rees, eds., *Marsilio Ficino*, 15-44. On Traversari, see C. L. Stinger, *Humanism and the Church Fathers: Ambrosia Traversari (1386-1439) and the Revival of Patristic Theology in the Early Italian Renaissance*, (SUNY Press: New York, 1977), esp. Chapter III "The Renaissance of Patristic Studies". Another member of this circle was Gianozzo Manetti, who, like Petrarch, wrote an answering volume to Innocent III's *Misery of Man*, entitled *The Dignity of Man.*

often melancholic.'[498] He goes on to cite the *Timaeus* that the mind overreaching too far does violence to the frame. The body, itself, can become 'melancholic,'[499] being as intimately linked to the chain of being as any other part of Ficino's interpenetrating cosmos. He therefore proscribes sex, satiety in food and daytime sloth caused by staying awake late into the night.[500] These are the 'deadly sins' of scholars, but we have seen this program of bodily regulation in the rules and recommendations of the monastery as a technique for mastering, but not destroying, the flesh through moderation. For Ficino, doubtless, it represents an attempt to circumvent the risky volatility of black bile in arenas where its vigour would be inappropriate; a reasoning reminiscent of Evagrius' concern to temper the force of the passions. It is instructive, indeed, that this part of Ficino's picture of the melancholy genius was the part to have the least influence. By the era of the romantics, and certainly in our own, it would be inverted completely.

For it is in the work of Marsilio Ficino that the concept of melancholy begins its decisive evolution into its modern form. Despite his location of melancholy within a divinely-understood cosmos, and despite his recommendation of a moderate regimen of bodily continence, it is with the *libri vitae* that melancholy is uncoupled from an explicitly moral-theological context as a profound existential crux in the life of the individual sufferer, and becomes a

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[498] Ficino, *Books*, I.iv.

[499] Ficino, *Books*, I.iv.

[500] Ficino, *Books*, I.vii.

more-or-less permanent affliction, embedded in a personality that expresses one's amoral place in the cosmic order. For Ficino, one simply *is* a melancholic, and the sense of predestination that freights his preoccupation with astrology inextricably entangles this sense of destiny with the possession of intellectual capacity and predilections and with the possession of a melancholy disposition. It is unsurprising, therefore, that, even when the thread of starry influence on human life unravelled, this knot of fate and philosophy remained untangled, and that each strand came to imply the others: to be melancholy was to be intellectual; to be profound was to be unhappy; and to be either meant to be set apart, to be destined, to genius.

In restricting the influence of black bile to those of an intellectual disposition, and connecting it so overwhelmingly with intellectual endeavour, the moral implications of the experience are lost totally. As a temperament, melancholy may be *inconvenient*, but it does not seem to be potentially transformative or indeed dangerous, let alone potentially sinful. Beyond being the mark of a scholar, there is no sense of what to be melancholy might mean for the human soul. Indeed, melancholy as an *experience* is something little discussed by the Florentine physician: a striking omission given the prominence of narrative (and, indeed, the insufficiency of analysis) in the works of the poets and the monks. Not much sense is given of what a melancholy temperament *entails*; what sufferings its bearer labours under, beyond being prone to either sloth or ill-temper – and even these are rendered as physical states within the humoural system, rather than moral-psychological passions enacted in the person. Its

movements in the cosmos are described, but not within the human heart. Yet it is the insistence, the intolerability, of these movements that, hitherto, were the most striking marker of the melancholy state. And it is this intolerability that, we have seen, can drive the sufferer to either salvation or damnation: by either confronting God, or by ceding to the demonic. For all Ficino's understanding of the volatility of black bile, and its potential as a conductor of heightened states, his vision seems curiously low-key. His intellectuals may be impelled by certain mournful stars, but they are not driven by a sorrow unto death within.

But it is this compulsion, driving the melancholic to push beyond the boundaries of hope and despair, that is the mark of the melancholy genius; it is this that makes heroes melancholic, and can make melancholics heroes. Whether as legendary individuals like Bellerophontes, as the demon-battling monks of the Egyptian desert, or as the Christian everyman, who must make his own heroic pilgrimage through the terrain of sin, the melancholic was conceived as confronting himself, his world and God at the limits of experience, where all illusion and security have been shed and the divine must be encountered without lies or posturing, even of the politest sort, or else one can only take refuge in blackness.

This is not a conundrum to be dissolved by reason, and there is no place for it in Ficino's model. Indeed, it is suggestive that he shows little inclination to include poetics in his conception of intellectual pursuits. For Ficino, 'only

contemplation, unfettered by imagination, deserved the title of melancholy.'[501] A comparison with the epistemologies of Evagrius and Aquinas is instructive here: both understood the centrality of the imagination to the human mind's ability to locate itself in reality at all. Moreover, while Ficino's contracting and expanding intellect may seem reminiscent of the desert monk's idea of *gnosis*, by which the intellect reaches out to understand the *logoi* undergirding the physical, as well as the spiritual, cosmos, this *gnosis* goes hand-in-hand with that *theologia* that is, fundamentally, prayer. This relationship, we have seen, is expressed much more in narrative and in address than in analysis, and these are the modes of poets and the habitats of heroes, and less so of intellectuals.

John Milton

John Milton's *L'Allegro* and *Il Pensoroso* are youthful works,[502] taking the form of a disputation between opposing loyalties – one to mirth, one to melancholy – in a poetic genre commonly employed to display one's gifts and dexterity in presenting both sides of an argument with the subtlety suitable to each.[503] That they are not mature works or the fruit of deep and lengthy

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[501] Klibanksy, Panofsky and Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy*, 346.

[502] Keats described them as having, 'an artful or rather artist's humour.' Keats, quoted in F. T. Prince, "Milton's Minor Poems" in *John Milton,* H. Bloom, ed., (Chelsea House: Philadelphia, 2004), 23.

[503] In her exposition of the formal influences on the works, Lewalski lists, 'the academic prolusion or debate, the Theocritan pastoral idyl of the ideal day and its festivals, the Theophrastian prose "character" with such titles as "The Happy Man" or "The Melancholy Man," the encomium, and the demonstrative or eulogistic oration with its traditional categories of praise: the goods of nature (ancestry and birth), the goods of fortune (friends and circumstances of life), and the goods of character (actions and virtues),' as well as the spirits of Jonson and Shakespeare. B. Lewalski, *The Life of John Milton: A Critical Biography, Revised Edition* (Blackwell, 2003), 49. See also E. Martina "The Sources and Traditions of Milton's *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso:* A New Approach" *English Studies 92* (2011), 138-173.

reflection does them no disservice as objects of study. Indeed, quite the opposite may be said to be the case. Milton's gleeful exposition of the fashionable concept of melancholia, counterposed by unmistakably renaissance georgic on the topic of mirth, mirrors the aestheticisation and secularisation of both amongst intellectuals and artists following Ficino's treatise. The glass, however, is backed by the perception and eloquence of the author's mind, whose already-growing profundity deepens the conventional ideas drawn up against each other in this artistic duel.

This may first be detected in Milton's subtle complication of this form itself. Even though each poem opens with a formal decrying of the opposing force, on closer examination, Milton does not seem to regard mirth as necessarily the simple opposite, or indeed, the equal of melancholy. Early in the poem, mirth is said to act 'in spite of sorrow,'[504] which implies that it does not neutralise or dissolve unhappiness, but, rather, acts in parallel to it. Moreover, when the merry spectacle of (non-tragic) theatre and informal poetry is portrayed, mirth once again acts as bulwark, but not a cure, 'against eating cares.'[505]

Thus, Milton's disputation is not, in fact, a duel to the death between two precisely paired forces. Rather, despite the strident rhetoric that opens each piece, it is an examination of the relationship between two necessary and neighbouring strains of the human experience. The complexity of the co-

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[504] J. Milton, *L'Allegro*, in J. Milton, *Poetical Works,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), 45.

[505] J. Milton, *L'Allegro*, 135.

implication of these strains is explored in *L'Allegro's* closing lines. Milton writes that the sweetness of mirth's 'notes'[506] that 'untwisting all the chains that tie/ the hidden soul of harmony'[507] would make Orpheus, the archetypal poet-musician (the two arts here most closely associated with mirth) wake somewhat from his sleep in Elysium. More than that, in these merry tones he hears 'such strains as would have won the ear/ of Pluto, to have quite set free/ His half regained Eurydice.'[508] This is a complex, striking, and quite daring ending. Milton claims for his ideal, fanciful and somewhat rustic mirth a power that exceeds that of Orpheus himself. When reflected back to his earlier claims, discussed above, that mirth acts to dissolve sorrow, he almost seems to be claiming that it can overcome the sorrow of death itself! Indeed, we might speculate that, in this reading, it is Orpheus' very grief for Eurydice that causes him to lose her, his gaze always being drawn back in the direction of the land of the dead, compulsively seeking out the shade of the one he loves. Milton's vision of the song of mirth, in contrast, is markedly non-individualistic, focusing on first rural, then urban communities, and the rhythms of their respective collective lives. The only individuals mentioned are the poets whose art contributes to these patterns; otherwise, only archetypal, stereotypical figures – the Milkmaid, the Shepherd, Knights and Ladies – are mentioned as making up the larger body of social life, 'the busy hum of men.'[509] This life, in

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[506] Milton, *L'Allegro*, 139.

[507] Milton, *L'Allegro*, 143-4.

[508] Milton, *L'Allegro*, 149-150.

[509] Milton, *L'Allegro*, 118.

both its countryside and city-wide forms, is greater than any individual death, and its relish and revelry, it is implied, a balm for individual cares.

Yet this ending to the poem remains a melancholy one. The cascading couplets of the piece have an irresistible rhythm,[510] rushing upon the preceding pair and building an ever-stronger momentum that rises like a wave, all energy and glee, only to reach its peak and have its movement abruptly arrested and its breath taken away from it with a gasp – Eurydice was only ever *half*-regained. From its height, it seems, Mirth can see all the way down to Hades. Orpheus only stirs and, though in happy Elysium, he does not sing himself: he only sleeps. Mirth can only turn, quietly, and a little tenderly, to take in the view in the other direction, that of life, with the anti-climactic, almost poignant, final couplet, 'These delights, if though canst give,/ Mirth with thee, I mean to live.'[511] The poet almost seems to imply that 'these delights' may well be the only ones on offer; indeed, through the journey of the poem, he may well, in some sense, have already, like Orpheus, left them behind.

Thus, it may be seen that, even in the poem that speaks in its favour as the superior state or force, melancholy haunts mirth like a ghost. It seems that sorrow is, ultimately, indissoluble, and that mirth, at the same time as it redirects one's focus from one's own cares towards an unproblematic and somewhat static, or at least cyclic, social life, also *reveals* the enduring, even

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[510] J. Creaser, "'Through Mazes Running": Rhythmic Verve in Milton's "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso"', *Review of English Studies 52*, (2001), 376-410.

[511] Milton, *L'Allegro*, 151-2.

undergirding, presence of sorrow itself at the heart of human life. In acting 'in spite of sorrow,' mirth is ultimately aware of sorrow's persistent ubiquity.

That the poet comes to this awareness as a kind of knowledge at the close of *L'Allegro* acts as the transition to the vision of *Il Penseroso*, whose narrator may be understood as the one who did not turn away from the vision of the drop into Hades at the close of the preceding poem.[512] Indeed, to describe this shift as one of *gnosis* captures a key and salient characteristic of melancholy in Milton's construction of it that is acknowledged by both its champion and its opponent. The melancholy state is rendered in terms reminiscent of the mystical. It is decried by the advocate of mirth as dwelling, unkempt, in the 'darkness'[513] of a 'desert.'[514] Though this is far from the classicism of the rest of *L'Allegro's* jolly imagery, to a Christian reader, it can also conjure the notion of a desert saint, dressed, like John the Baptist, in ragged skins and doing battle with 'horrid shapes, and shrieks, and sights unholy.'[515] This mystical

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[512] Phelan describes the author himself as 'off-screen' in the course of these poems, but his presence is nevertheless felt: see H. Phelan "What Is the Persona Doing in *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*?" in *Milton Studies* 22, ed. James D. Simmonds (Pittsburgh, 1986), 3–19. On the complication of a tentative and ambiguous authorial presence split into opposing tendencies, see J. M. Evans, "The Birth of the Author: Milton's Poetic Self-Construction" in *Milton Studies 38*, (2000), 141-68. I would suggest that the ambivalent ending of *L'Allegro*, however, suggests the presence of a continuum of awareness, if not, strictly speaking, a continuity, between the two poems. However, Fish makes the equally valid point that it is, most significantly, the reader who find themselves and their own tendencies towards mirth and melancholy in the responses produced by the poems, citing, for example, what is often considered the superficiality of *L'Allegro's* argument the fleeting nature of its subject. S. Fish, "What it's Like to Read *L'Allegro* and *I'l Penseroso" Is There a Text in This Class?* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1980), 132. On the development from 'fancy to reality' in *L'Allegro* to *Il Penseroso* see E. Tate, "Milton's 'L'Allegro' and 'Il Penseroso' - Balance, Progression or Dichotomy?", *Modern Language Notes 76*, (1961), 585-590.

[513] Milton, *L'Allegro*, 6.

[514] Milton, *L'Allegro*, 10.

[515] Milton, *L'Allegro*, 4.

characterisation is confirmed, in more positive terms, in *Il Penesroso*, that addresses,

> Divinest Melancholy,
>
> Whose Saintly visage *is too bright*
>
> *To hit the Sense of human sight;*
>
> *And therefore to our weaker view*
>
> *O'er laid with black staid Wisdom's hue.* [italics mine][516]

The wisdom of 'sober, steadfast, and demure'[517] melancholy is one not completely, perhaps not even partially, available to the immediate human senses, and therefore takes on the nature of *gnosis*. Indeed, *Il Penseroso*, is described as being more native to darkness than the night itself 'outwatch[ing]'[518] even the stars, and for whom light serves more to emphasis darkness, than to dispel it as 'glowing embers through the room/ Teach light to counterfeit a gloom.'[519] Even the 'civil-suited'[520] light of morning is softened by clouds, rain and shadows. The theme is continued in comparatively more mundane terms, with Melancholy described, if not as saint, then as a

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[516] Milton, *Il Penseroso*. Contrast with the souls in Dante's *Paradiso*, who, too bright to appear in the fullness of their glory to the Pilgrim's eyes, nevertheless still appear enclosed in light.

[517] Milton, *Il Penseroso*, 32.

[518] Milton, *Il Penseroso*, 87.

[519] Milton, *Il Penseroso*, 79-80.

[520] Milton, *Il Penseroso*, 122.

‘Compensive Nun, devout and pure… Thy rapt soul sitting in thine eyes/ There held in holy passion still…’[521]

It is a stark contrast with the secular, even worldly, imagery of Mirth.[522] As laymen, or, at least, men living lives in the world, took up the serious pursuit of scholarship, which had previously been an endeavour for the monastery, it became necessary to develop an ethic and even an aesthetic, of scholarship *qua* itself. Francesco Petrarch, throughout his *oeuvre*, attempted to construct a concept of the scholar as a kind of secular monk, enjoying a similar kind of virtuous seclusion to that of the brothers inside the community walls.[523] To be sure, Petrarch’s compulsion in this regard was partially driven by the powerful example of his brother Gherardo, a Carthusian, and he was himself a lively friend to several religious as well as being a man under regular orders himself. For Milton, an Englishman living after the Reformation and the dissolution of the monasteries, the presence of regular life as an integral part of society was nothing but a memory, and the continuing existence of monks and nuns in other parts of Europe and the wider world linked inextricably with Catholicism. Yet it is perhaps this very distance that allows the aestheticisation of the contemplative life (an image as distant to Milton as that of classical arcadia) as a Christianised, and specifically scholarly, Melancholy.

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[521] Milton, *Il Penseroso*, 31, 40-41.

[522] Wilding notes the positive portrayal of the rustic labourers of *L’Allegro*, however, with the laziness displayed by the landowners and aristocrats of the poem. M. Wilding, "Milton's Early Radicalism," *John Milton*, ed. Annabel Patterson (London: Longman, 1992), 39-45. This injustice, however, does not seem to concern *Il Penseroso*.

[523] See above, Chapter Five.

Yet Milton's vision of the melancholic contemplative, though it draws on Christian imagery, remains a renaissance scholar in its practices. *Il Penseroso*, in common with Ficino, is archetypally as astronomer of the 'midnight hour',[524] 'in some high, lonely tower… out-watch[ing] the Bear,'[525] from which he attains high philosophic knowledge,

> …unsphere[ing]
> The spirit of Plato to unfold
> What worlds, or what vast regions hold
> The immortal mind that hath forsook
> Her mansion in this fleshly nook.'[526]

Indeed, the poem is populated with the 'spirits' of many ancient figures, mythic and otherwise, in great contrast to the general lack of specificity in *L'Allegro*. One remembers Machiavelli's similarly nocturnal recreation of 'conversing' with his heroes and forbears through perusal of their works. Petrarch before him went so far as to compose letters to Cicero and Aristotle. The communion of saints depended upon by the religious of the middle ages is, for the scholars of the renaissance, replaced by 'Saint Socrates' and his republic of letters. Yet this melancholy communion, disjointed and distorted like light through water,

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[524] Milton, *Il Penseroso*, 85.

[525] Milton, *Il Penseroso*, 87.

[526] Milton, *Il Penseroso*, 88-92.

is reminiscent, too, of Dante's Limbo, populated by a forest of shadows whose whispered conversations are like the rustle of leaves.

It is, therefore, a particularly solitary and enclosed type of communion, an unchanging season that, despite its trappings, makes little progress in the penetration of either heaven or hell beyond what is available to the 'musing gait'[527] and 'looks commercing'[528] of the fixed philosopher. Though he characterises melancholy as a nun, Milton's *Il Penseroso* interacts with no saint or biblical hero, except for 'The Cherub Contemplation,'[529] the 'fiery-wheeled throne'[530] of which he has guardianship - a strangely jolting image in these shadowy groves. He indeed gains knowledge of 'Daemons' but these seem merely to be the animating spirits 'in fire, air, flood, or under ground.'[531] Only at the end of the poem does Milton return to religious imagery, longing for 'studious cloisters pale'[532] and the 'dim, religious light… the full-voiced choir… in service high and anthems clear/ As may with sweetness… dissolve me into ecstacies'[533] and, at last, for 'weary age/ Find out the peaceful hermitage/ The hairy gown and mossy cell…'[534] It is a swerve worthy of Petrarch's nagging paranoia and, coming after a long litany of classical

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[527] Milton, *Il Penseroso*, 38.

[528] Milton, *Il Penseroso*, 39.

[529] Milton, *Il Penseroso*, 54.

[530] Milton, *Il Penseroso*, 53.

[531] Milton, *Il Penseroso*, 93-95.

[532] Milton, *Il Penseroso*, 156.

[533] Milton, *Il Penseroso*, 160-165.

[534] Milton, *Il Penseroso*, 167-169.

citations, reflects the difficulty Christian scholars generally have had in reconciling their forebears from before Christ with those that came after him, as well as the post-medieval ambivalence concerning lay scholarship.

Yet what is most striking about Milton's characterisation of melancholy as a monastic scholar is his persistent emphasis on the *latter* aspect: he seems to have very little feel for the nature of the vowed life. His understanding of regular life, doubtlessly formed by his university experience in the shells of his college, is almost thoroughly conceived in academic terms: the cloister is 'studious,' and the purpose of the hermitage is to 'sit and rightly spell/ Of every star that Heav'n doth shew/ And every herb that sips the dew.'[535] This is not quite, one imagines, what Abba Moses intended when he told a brother, 'Sit in your cell and your cell will teach you everything.'[536] Though the melancholy nun is described as 'devout'[537] and 'rapt',[538] at no point in *Il Penseroso* does either narrator or personification *pray*. The *gnosis* to which each attain is not the wisdom that one might have thought implied by the close of *L'Allegro*, but a combination of scientific knowledge and a superior kind of art. The tragedy that is native to melancholy, unlike the georgics and comedies of mirth, can cause Orpheus to sing again: it is clearly a more profound, even fundamental aspect of the human experience, but its seeming fruit and wisdom is a compulsion towards secluded study, and, though mirth is polemically decried

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[535] Milton, *Il Penseroso*, 170-172.

[536] *Sayings*, Moses 6.

[537] Milton, *Il Penseroso*, 31.

[538] Milton, *Il Penseroso*, 40.

as 'dwell[ing] in some idle brain,'[539] there is certainly much more activity in the former poem than the latter.

In this, Milton archetypally illustrates the poverty of the aestheticsed idea of melancholy that sprung from Ficino's treatise. Though it partakes of both ancient and Christian ideas and models, it removes the moral aspect that gives those ideas and models, not only their content, but also their ability to galvanise sorrow and ennui and thereby to paradoxically invert a descent into an upward thrust. It will be recalled that, for Evagrius, *gnosis* is inextricable from *Praktikos*, and we have seen that Ficino, both as physician and as priest, recommends a rigorous medical-moral regime for scholars. It will also be remembered that the melancholy heroes of the classical era, such as Bellerophon, and of the biblical texts, such as Job, are grounded in, and address themselves to, their respective communities. Indeed, though it was certainly common practice to retire to a monastery in one's old age throughout the medieval era, for a novice to expect to retreat directly to a hermitage was (and is) against monastic practice since before the time of St Benedict. In contrast with mirth, which Milton shows permeating every station and mode of life, melancholy is here constructed as a form of life in itself, but one, seemingly, without the insight, wisdom and constraints that made previous like constructions fruitful. While Petrarch feared the heights of monasticism were too high and rarified for him to scale, Milton has here flattened the contemplative ideal into two dimensions. This flattening, crucially, removed

[539] Milton, *Il Penseroso*, 5.

that link with society, or reconstruction of the world, that we have seen is built into both the monastic ideal, while neutralising the protest inherent in melancholy. Finally, in making no reference to the peculiar strains and labours of the scholarly life against which Ficino warns, Milton comes dangerously close to associating the fruits of study with this languid kind of melancholy itself.

Robert Burton

Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* defies categorisation and even description. First published in 1621, several subsequent editions expanded it to a behemoth tome encompassing scholarly compendia, personal opinions, eloquent exhortations and exhaustive lists addressing the physical, psychological and spiritual causes, symptoms and consequences of melancholy, divided as systematically and elaborately as Aquinas' *Summa*. In the introductory essay, *Democritus Junior to the Reader*, Burton may lay claim to inaugurating the particular art form of English prose; in the following treatise, he displays a beguiling mix of wide-ranging classical scholarship and pithy observation drawn from life. The Christ Church librarian's work was an immediate and runaway success, in itself, a testament to the surge of interest in melancholy since the days of Ficino, an interest that demanded more material engagement than the archetypal treatment offered by Milton.

Burton's doorstop indeed provides a solid slice of contemporary thinking around melancholy, both in medical and more general terms. He also deals specifically with 'love melancholy' and 'religious melancholy.' As a life-long academic, too, he treats the particular dangers scholars face as potential and actual melancholics. Yet, despite the encyclopaedic nature of his edifice, Burton provides an instructive and sobering contrast with the imagery and theory of melancholy found in the work of figures such as Ficino and Milton.[540]

Perhaps most strikingly, in the face of Ficino's coupling of Saturnine black bile with the labour of the mind, and Milton's contemplative astronomer-nun, Burton makes no exclusive, nor even any markedly particular, claims for melancholy as the badge of a rarified mind. Indeed, his enumeration of the strains of scholarly life, being obviously drawn from experience and observation and the closest of quarters, are the polar opposite of the kind of idealisation and aestheticisation of the life of letters that begins with Petrarch and finds its mentor in Ficino. Though Burton indeed notes the Ps-Aristotle's proverbial link between wit and melancholy, and, of course, cites Ficino alongside it, he restricts himself to discussing this completely neutrally, over the course of two paragraphs, and in purely physical terms.[541]

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[540] Trevor notes the contrasting understandings of melancholy stemming, respectively, from Ficino and Galen in his *The Poetics of Melancholy in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[541] R. Burton *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (New York, NYRB, 2001), Pt. 1 Sec.3.

In fact, Burton's disquisition on the link between misery and the intellect (and the intellectual) comes a full section before what might, at first sight, be considered these most essential citations. In enumerating the causes of melancholy, he devotes an entire subsection, that in my edition stretches to thirty pages, on, 'Love of Learning, or overmuch Study. With a Digression on the Misery of Scholars, and why the Muses are Melancholy.'[542]

After citing a cascade of classical authorities (and, also, Machiavelli), Burton states that there are two reasons why scholars should be 'more subject to this malady than others' – their 'sedentary, solitary lives,' and 'overmuch study,' by which they neglect their bodies (here he cites Ficino).[543] Moreover, they neglect worldly as well as bodily affairs, for, as he notes, 'Mercury can help them to knowledge, but not to money.'[544] They are even driven to neglect acquiring basic social skills, such as riding a horse, carving at table or saluting a gentlewoman, and are thus 'laughed to scorn and accounted silly fools by our gallants.'[545] Their naïveté in worldly matters, too, leaves them prey to unscrupulous tradesmen, who do not hesitate to take advantage of their inability to 'bargain and contract.'[546] This is not the idealised contemplative of

[542] Burton, *Anatomy*, Pt.1 Sec. 2 Mem. 3 Subs. 15.

[543] Burton, *Anatomy*, Pt.1 Sec. 2 Mem. 3 Subs. 15.

[544] Burton, *Anatomy*, Pt.1 Sec. 2 Mem. 3 Subs. 15.

[545] Burton, *Anatomy*, Pt.1 Sec. 2 Mem. 3 Subs. 15.

[546] Burton, *Anatomy*, Pt.1 Sec. 2 Mem. 3 Subs. 15.

Milton's archetypal poem, nor even a holy fool, but, 'such is their misery, they deserve it: a mere scholar, a mere ass.'[547]

> Nor is it only the young and fashionable that despise the toilers of the mind, but our patrons of learning are so far nowadays from respecting the Muses, and giving that honour to scholars, or reward, which they deserve… that after all their pains taken in the universities… they shall in the end be rejected, contemned and, which is their greatest misery… exposed to want, poverty and beggary.[548]

For all the popularity of the melancholic image, it is the grinding reality of scholarship, so far removed from the stereotype of 'the studious cloisters pale,'[549] that, in fact, drives the academic to despair.

Burton's complaints, and the vehemence with which he voices them, are clearly drawn from life. His subsection on scholarly life, too, demonstrates that, despite his obvious erudition, and respect for classical and modern sources, he writes most fluently and vividly on the contemporary exemplifications and material causes and consequences of his subject. Indeed, given the clear personal vexation of which he writes, and the fluent vehemence

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[547] Burton, *Anatomy*, Pt.1 Sec. 2 Mem. 3 Subs. 15.

[548] Burton, *Anatomy*, Pt.1 Sec. 2 Mem. 3 Subs. 15.

[549] Milton, *Il Penseroso*, 156.

with which he expresses his complaints, this particular section of the *Anatomy* might be seen as a peculiarly Renaissance enactment of the melancholy heroism we have henceforth traced. Most particularly, his lament for the disadvantage and lack of respect granted to scholars socially, even in the complication of his reflexive self-loathing, is reminiscent of an ideal of melancholy marked by its relationship to society, even in its alienation and experience of rejection.

Despite its baroque structure, the text of *The Anatomy of Melancholy* is by no means systematic.[550] Burton is not an analyst, like Ficino, nor a regulator, like Evagrius. Nor does he attempt to place melancholy within a pre-existing philosophical or theological structure, like Dante. His ultimate concern, rather, is with the concrete, which he attempts to shepherd into the simplest possible categories: causes, cure, and the two particular cases of love and religious melancholy.[551] Within these partitions, cases, possibilities and aspects of the malady cascade onto the page, sometimes as lists, sometimes as narratives, sometimes as disquisitions. Every possible instance and angle is crammed into the text, because, 'despite the monstrous nature of melancholy symptomatics, there have never been two melancholics the same.'[552] Burton understands the

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[550] Indeed, Daniel argues that the very profusion of authorities undermines the text's purported structure in an ironic complication of the very possibility of remedy. D. Daniel *The Melancholy Assemblage: Affect and Epistemology in the English Renaissance* (Fordham University Press, 2013).

[551] Schmidt usefully contextualises Burton's treatise in terms of seventeenth-century European attitudes towards the passions: J. Schmidt, *Melancholy and the Care of the Soul: Religion, Moral Philosophy and Madness in Early Modern England,* (Ashgate, 2007), esp. 27-45.

[552] Burton, *Anatomy*, Pt. 1, Sec.3, Mem. 1, Subs. 2.

ultimately particular and personal nature of melancholy. Near the end of the first partition of the work, that on causes, he writes,

> Who can sufficiently speak of these symptoms, or prescribe rules to comprehend them? [...] The four-and-twenty letters make no more variety of words in divers languages than melancholy conceits produce diversity of symptoms in several persons. They are irregular, obscure, various, so infinite, Proteus himself is not so diverse; you may as well make the moon a new Concept as a true character of a melancholy man.'[553]

His towering enumeration of possible causes and symptoms is as much an admission that any one melancholy is native, in a sense, to the person afflicted, as it is an attempt to track every triangulation of stimuli that can lead to the malady.

> Another great occasion of the variety of these symptoms proceeds from custom, discipline, education and several inclinations. This humour will imprint in melancholy men the objects most answerable to their condition in life, and ordinary

[553] Burton, *Anatomy*, Pt. 1, Sec.3, Mem. 1, Subs. 4 Here we remember, too, Evagrius' dictum that the human heart is visible only to God, even, as it seems here, when it is flayed open by melancholy.

> actions, and dispose men according to their several studies and callings.[554]

In a sense, there is no melancholy – there are only the *melancholies* of every individual sufferer, in all their parts, predilections and histories. That this is so returns to the analysis the social reactions and protests inherent in a melancholy that can turn *both* outwards and inwards in order to effect substantive change.

Equally, just as an individual's own melancholy has its own particular configuration, so can melancholy effect any *part* of *any* individual, regardless of their estate. Life, Burton notes – as many had done before him – is full of cares, and for all levels of society.[555] Indeed, transitory, if not pathological melancholy, is a part of human existence on account of these diverse troubles, however Stoic, wise, happy or patient one tries to be: *contra* Petrarch, Burton recognises that these are neither universal preventatives or cures.[556] Perhaps even more importantly, Burton understands that the disharmony caused by this illness in one part of the body can affect the others, 'for our body is like a clock; if one wheel be amiss, all the rest are disordered, the whole fabric suffers.'[557] The influence between body and mind works both ways; indeed, one might question whether such a strict distinction can be drawn at all, for,

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[554] Burton, *Anatomy*, pt. 1, Sec.3, Mem. 1, Subs. 4.

[555] Burton, *Anatomy,* Pt. 1, Sec. 2, Mem. 3, Subs. 10.

[556] Burton, *Anatomy*, Pt. 1, Sec.1, Mem. 1, Subs. 4 . On Petrarch's attempt to provide 'remedies for both kinds of fortune' see below, Chapter Five.

[557] Burton, *Anatomy*, pt. 1, Sec.1, Mem. 3, Subs. 2; see also Subs. 1 'Passions and Perturbations of the Mind'.

> as the body works upon the mind by bad humours, troubling the spirits, sending gross fumes to the brain, and so *per consquens* disturbing the soul, and all the faculties of it… so, on the other side, the mind most effectually works upon the body, producing by his passions and perturbations miraculous alterations, as melancholy, despair, cruel diseases, and sometimes death itself.[558]

All parts of the person act so intimately upon the others, and thus the total system so implicated that, in melancholy, the unity of the person is exploited to cause what can become a total collapse.

Like Evagrius and Aquinas, Burton therefore recognises the signal importance of the passions to a healthy life, even when considered simply for the benefit of the individual him, or herself. 'A more frequent and ordinary cause of melancholy… this thunder and lightning of perturbation, which causeth such violent and speedy alterations in this our microcosm.'[559] Indeed, he cites these as the cause of the most grievous maladies, even above the influence of the humours themselves.[560] Conversely, 'Whosoever he is that shall hope to cure this malady in himself, or any other, must first rectify these passions and

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[558] Burton, *Anatomy*, pt. 1, Sec.1, Mem. 3, Subs. 2.

[559] Burton, *Anatomy*, pt. 1, Sec.1, Mem. 3, Subs. 1

[560] Burton, *Anatomy*, pt. 1, Sec.1, Mem. 3, Subs. 1

perturbations in the mind; the chiefest cure consists in this.'[561] Like his predecessors, too, Burton recognises that the passions – amongst which he, expansively, lists, sorrow ('an inseparable companion, "the mother and daughter of melancholy, her epitome, symptom and chief cause"; as Hippocrates hath it, they beget each other and tread in a ring…')[562], fear, shame, envy, malice, faction, anger, discontent, inordinate desire, ambition, over-indulgence and, of course, too much study – are what he calls, 'links of this chain' that binds one up in melancholy. The list is strikingly reminiscent of what we recognise as the monastic deadly sins, or evil thoughts, while being grounded, as is Burton's characteristic method, in worldly life. It demonstrates, most effectively, the remarkably wide applicability of a moral and psychological system forged in the psychic laboratory of the late Roman desert. He recognises, as they did, the self-defeating, and self-consuming, nature of the passions when indulged, writing, 'giving way to these violent passions of fear, grief, shame, revenge, hatred, malice, etc., they are torn in pieces, as Actaeon was with his dogs, and crucify their own souls.'[563] Like Evagrius, he sees that melancholy can sit squarely at the centre of sin.

It is no wonder, then, that Burton, piece by piece, dismantles the idealised image of melancholy found in works such as Milton's. Indeed, he recognises,

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[561] Burton, *Anatomy*, pt. 2, Sec.2, Mem. 6, Subs. 1.

[562] Burton, *Anatomy*, pt. 1, Sec.1, Mem. 3, Subs. 4

[563] Burton, *Anatomy*, pt. 1, Sec.1, Mem. 3, Subs. 3.

> we may conclude of melancholy: that it is most pleasant at first, I say, *mentis gratissimus error*, a most delightsome humour, to be alone, dwell alone, walk alone, meditate, lie in bed whole days, dreaming awake as it were, and frame a thousand phantastical imaginations unto themselves.[564]

One remembers Milton's Melancholy walking in her shadowy groves, and casting her countenance downwards, eyes rapt. For Burton, thus, the chief danger of melancholic solitude is in its licensing the imagination to generate, and eventually blind itself with 'phantasms.' 'A most incomparable delight it is so to melancholies, and build castles in the air, to go smiling to themselves, acting in a variety of parts, which they suppose and strongly imagine they represent, or that they see acted or done.'[565] So pleasant is this 'paradise' that 'if you trouble him: tell him what inconveniences will follow, what will be the event… *canis ad vomitum*, 'tis so pleasant he cannot refrain. Thus, soon the 'progress of melancholy' renders the sufferer so solitary until, 'at last they can endure no company' or else show a marked decline in their social skills, caring 'not what they say or do, all their actions, words, gestures, are furious or ridiculous.'[566] Moreover, so untethered will the imagination become that 'the scene alters upon a sudden, fear and sorrow supplant those pleasing thoughts,

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[564] Burton, *Anatomy*, pt. 1, Sec.1, Mem. 3, Subs. 3.

[565] Burton, *Anatomy*, pt. 1, Sec. 2, Mem. 2, Subs. 6.

[566] Burton, *Anatomy*, pt. 1, Sec.1, Mem. 3, Subs. 4.

suspicion, discontent, and perpetual anxiety succeed in their places,'[567] Every part of this progress reminds one, forcibly, of the Evagrian sinner, subject to 'wandering thoughts' and *acedia* in his dissatisfaction, and rendered unable to bear his social place, ending up sorrowful, and tied in knots by the contradictions and impossibility of their own sins and obsessions.[568]

The condition for this kind of melancholy Burton describes as 'that shoeing-horn of idleness, and *voluntary* solitariness, [italics mine]'[569] both of which he writes against particularly strongly. Though his thoughts on malignant solitude are outlined above, his most venomous animus he reserves for the former. Indeed, when reflecting that all estates in society are capable of melancholy, he cites the very 'badge of the gentry' – idleness – as,

> the bane of body and mind, the nurse of naughtiness, stepmother of discipline, the chief author of all mischief, one of the seven deadly sins, and a sole cause of this [melancholy] and many other maladies, the devil's cushion… his pillow and chief repose.[570]

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[567] Burton, *Anatomy*, pt. 1, Sec.1, Mem. 3, Subs. 4. This progress of symptoms strikingly recalls both Evagrius' and Aquinas' progress of perturbations following upon the indulgence of the passions.

[568] On Evgrius, see below, Chapter One.

[569] Burton, *Anatomy*, pt. 1, Sec.1, Mem. 3, Subs. 4.

[570] Burton, *Anatomy*, pt. 1, Sec.2, Mem. 2, Subs. 6.

He represents idleness as 'the rust of the soul, a plague, a hell itself,' that allows the faculties of the body and mind to wither and descend into self-cannibalisation. 'When we are left to ourselves,' he writes, 'idleness as a tempest drives all virtuous motions out of our minds, *et nihil sumus*; on a sudden, by sloth and such bad ways, we come to naught.'[571]

Though he does not use the term, we have noted that the kind of corrosive idleness Burton alludes to here is clearly kin to the *acedia* we have encountered before, and, more classically, aligned to the original formulations that the *aegritudo* of Petrarch. Burton's treatment, as curmudgeonly as it occasionally sounds ('when you shall hear and see so many discontented persons in all places where you come, so many several grievances, unnecessary complaints, fear, suspicions, the best means to redress it is to set them awork, so as to busy their minds; for the truth is, they are idle.'[572]) reminds the reader of the necessity placed by the desert fathers on the *acediac* monk remaining in his cell at his mundane tasks, rather than being blown about by the myriad thoughts by which the spirits attempt to tempt him from it. In Burton's phantasms, too, we see these, now technicolour, perhaps even more seductive, demons transplanted to the seventeenth century. Burton's treatment helpfully brings out the fact that *acedia* is, fundamentally, not so much about those thoughts, or one's distaste for one's surroundings, or even a loss of relish, even

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[571] Burton, *Anatomy*, pt. 1, Sec.2, Mem. 2, Subs. 6.

[572] Burton, *Anatomy*, pt. 1, Sec.2, Mem. 2, Subs. 6. Previous to this particular disquisition, Burton cites the practice of Pharaoh that 'when the children of Israel murmured against [him], he commanded his officers to double their task… for the sole cause why they mutiny and are evil at ease, is, "they are idle."'

in spiritual matters: it is really about a disengagement from one's allotted task or vocation, whatever that may be. It is an existential unmooring, a loss of commitment that renders one's thoughts and actions directionless and their outcomes chaotic and even phantasmal.

Yet, Burton's foregrounding of *idleness* as a social, as well as individual, stasis, rather than sloth as a purely moral fault, enlarges the reference generally attributed to this 'deadly thought' while profoundly illuminating its application. For to be idle may not only invoke the neglect of activity and exercise, or, indeed, the deleterious effects of the political order, but also imply (perhaps despite his intentions) a kind of entrapment: an *inability* to act. Burton cites the case of Achilles, whose 'eating out his own heart' he attributes to his refusal to fight. To formulate it so baldly seems crass, and our author commands enough respect that one does not suspect him to be merely accusing the great warrior of simple laziness. Rather, this particular case, its citation buried in the middle of a paragraph that, close-printed, still runs for nearly three pages in my edition, calls to mind those other ancient heroes, pinned in place by impossible situations, that also 'ate out their own hearts.' To be sure, Achilles' wrath is, in some greater or lesser degree responsible for his own immobilisation, but the allusion recalls the kind of dilemmas faced by the heroes of Greek epic and, later, tragedy, whose impossible paradoxes can catapult the holiest man into melancholy, and whose only dissolution is confrontation with the divine.

‘Cousin-german to idleness, and a concomitant cause which goes hand in hand with it, is *nimia solitudo*, too much solitariness,’[573] writes Burton, and he asserts that melancholics ‘above all things love solitariness.’[574] However, though, as we have seen, he lyrically acknowledges the pleasures of melancholy solitude, and sternly warns of its caustic character, and thus recognises the ambiguity of this craving, asking,

> Are they so solitary for pleasure… or for pain? For both; yet I rather think for fear and sorrow… for they have a conceit (I say) every man observes them, will deride, laugh to scorn, or misuse them… they will diet themselves, feed, and live alone.[575]

This is a surprisingly modern reading of melancholy, and one that is perhaps more at home in the public world than in the private cloister. Yet it recalls, not only our contemporary concerns with insecurity and self-esteem, but also Burton’s earlier concern with shame and suffering caused by social disgrace as passions from which melancholy can grow. Indeed, the two may not be so different, for how else do we understand and esteem ourselves but against the scale of other people and our own society and culture? What is doubly resonant here, however, is not only Burton’s foreshadowing of the future, but also how he draws on the past, citing Bellerophon, who, in the Latin translation he cites,

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[573]Burton, *Anatomy*, pt. 1, Sec.2, Mem. 2, Subs. 6.

[574] Burton, *Anatomy*, pt. 1, Sec.3, Mem. 1, Subs. 2.

[575] Burton, *Anatomy*, pt. 1, Sec.3, Mem. 1, Subs. 2.

'*Qui miser in silvis moerens errabat opacis, Ipse suum cor edens, hominum vestigia vitans;*'[576] and whose compulsive solitary wandering is not only the symptom of his melancholy, but also the mark of its deeper cause: his isolation from society. 'Conceit' the melancholic's fear may be, but such stories enact the very real sense of *isolation* from one's fellows that is the concomitant of such an overwhelming desire for solitude. Indeed, the instance of 'Job's comforters' only underlines the point: melancholy exists in the breaking of personal and sympathetic social bonds, and not only moral and formal ones. Conversely, in order to combat the unbalancing of one's sense of reality melancholic idleness and solitude can cause, 'the best way for ease is to impart our misery to some friend, not to smother it up in our own breast… whosoever then labours of this malady, let him get some trusty friend… to whom freely and securely he may open himself.'[577] Whether this be a close companion or a contemporary therapist, Burton clearly has in mind a meaningful, interpersonal connection to strengthen the tie between the sufferer and the friends, family and broader society around him, as did both Augustine[578] and Aquinas[579] before him.

Indeed, he seems to perceive that it is this *lack* of connection and purpose that constitutes the destructive character of melancholic solitude. For, as he writes,

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[576] Burton, *Anatomy*, pt. 1, Sec.3, Mem. 1, Subs. 2.

[577] Burton, *Anatomy*, pt. 2, Sec. 2, Mem. 6, Subs. 2.

[578] See above, Chapter Two.

[579] See above, Chapter Three.

> I may not deny but that there is some profitable meditation, contemplation, and kind of solitariness to be embraced, which the Fathers so highly commended… a paradise, a heaven on earth, if it be used aright, good for the body, and better for the soul: as many of those old monks used it, to divine contemplation… or to the bettering of their knowledge… that they might *vacare et Deo*.[580]

This seems, at first sight, a remarkable concession, as apparently anomalous and nonchalantly noted as Evagrius' allowance that there can be godly sorrow. Though idleness, solitude and contemplation can be so dangerous in Burton's eyes, he nevertheless recognises that they *also* constitute the essentials of an extremely venerable tradition. Indeed, in this context, the use of paradisiacal language is actually, almost literally, warranted. Moreover, he recognises that such a lifestyle is not for the benefit of the soul alone, but for the whole person. So much so, that Burton comments, a little astoundingly, 'Methinks, therefore, our too zealous innovators were not so well advised in that general subversion of abbeys and religious houses, promiscuously to fling down all'[581] when a few could have been spared to act as havens for those who would sincerely wish to live in seclusion to serve God and scholarship, for to live so is 'neither solitary or idle.'[582] The counter-example of the monastic life demonstrates that

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[580] Burton, *Anatomy*, pt. 1, Sec. 2, Mem. 2, Subs. 6.

[581] Burton, *Anatomy*, pt. 1, Sec. 2, Mem. 2, Subs. 6.

[582] Burton, *Anatomy*, pt. 1, Sec. 2, Mem. 2, Subs. 6.

melancholy can, in fact, cause the corruption of that which is potentially most refined in a human being; indeed, of those very faculties that are capable of leading us to intimate union with God. However, it also acknowledges that the monastic structure can shape and direct those same melancholic impulses, leeching them of their atomising tendencies and reintegrating them into a new relationship with society through its membership of the monastic community, as well as enabling one to explore the limits of one's humanity through contemplation, and the concomitant sorrowful realisations directed towards a deeper relationship with God. Burton quotes Bonaventure, describing contemplation as, 'a divine melancholy, a spiritual wing.'[583] The *otium* of the monk is not idleness but a single-minded *commitment* to his vocation; the seclusion of the nun is not solitude, but, in fact, *communion*. Thus, even while those who engage in religious discipline are as much, if not more, prone to what Burton terms 'religious melancholy'[584], if not abused, 'sobriety and contemplation join our souls to God.'[585]

Indeed, this very religious melancholy illustrates the precipice walked by the melancholic, for Burton, in this most original part of his treatise,[586] treats it, strikingly and suggestively, as a sub-species of love melancholy. Thus, in

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[583] Burton, *Anatomy*, pt. 3, Sec. 4, Mem. 1, Subs. 2.

[584] Whereby overmuch fasting, for example, can lead to 'visions, phantasms, apparitions, enthusiasms,' which is 'the best opportunity and sole occasion the devil takes to delude them.' Burton, *Anatomy*, pt. 3, Sec. 4, Mem. 1, Subs. 2.

[585] Burton, *Anatomy*, pt. 3, Sec. 4, Mem. 1, Subs. 2.

[586] 'I have no pattern to follow as in some of the rest, no man to imitate.' Burton, *Anatomy*, pt. 3, Sec. 4, Mem. 1, Subs. 1.

summary, religious melancholy occurs in the confrontation between the sublime beauty of God, and our own fallen state:

> in this infirmity of human nature… our love is corrupt"; and a man is like that monster in Plato, composed of a Scylla, a lion and a man we are carried headlong with the torrent of our affection: the world and that infinite variety of pleasing objects in it, do so allure and enamour us, that we cannot so much look towards God, seek Him, or think on Him as we should.[587]

Thus, 'for these defects, we swerve from this true love and worship of God: which is a cause unto us of unspeakable miseries… we become fools, madmen, without sense.'[588] Religious melancholy, therefore, is for Burton the more or less hidden quintessence of all melancholy, for in its disruption of the order of creation, 'for to that end we were born, to love this object [God]… and to enjoy it,'[589] it perverts those passions which, as we have seen, he holds to be the chiefest cure and cause of this multifarious, but here ultimately unified, malady. Melancholy exposes the crack in reality caused by the impact of the Fall.

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[587] Burton, *Anatomy*, pt. 3, Sec. 4, Mem. 1, Subs. 1.

[588] Burton, *Anatomy*, pt. 3, Sec. 4, Mem. 1, Subs. 1.

[589] Burton, *Anatomy*, pt. 3, Sec. 4, Mem. 1, Subs. 1.

Burton, despite his sympathy for the institution of monasticism, was a thoroughgoing protestant, and is keen to attribute much religious melancholy to the mischief of 'superstition,' by which he generally understands the doctrines of the Catholic church, and whose 'principal agent, who in a thousand several shapes, after divers fashions, with several engines, illusions, and by several names hath deceived the inhabitants of the earth,' is, of course, the devil,[590] whose delusions in service of this end are both cause and symptom of the disease.[591] Non-protestant practices, from veneration of the saints, to fasting, are equated with 'idolatry', 'superstition' and, to use an archaism that is nevertheless appropriate, neurotic. The contention is that such external practices become, in themselves, a cause of perturbation as well as, not simply being merely mistaken or heretical, but actually prevent one from enjoying a relationship with the divine – and with one's fellow-man.[592] They create a too-particular world, whose ends are too diverse to be addressed to the one God.

It is, inevitably, somewhat disappointing to find that one of Burton's subtlety and sensitivity should so easily descend into polemic,[593] but even more so that he should here fail to apply his psychological perceptiveness to the practices of religion, and the daily negotiation of the relationship between the individual

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[590] Burton, *Anatomy*, pt. 3, Sec. 4, Mem. 1, Subs. 2. He subsequently notes that a symptom of religious melancholy is love of one's own sect and hate of all others. Burton, *Anatomy*, pt. 3, Sec. 4, Mem. 1, Subs. 3.

[591] Burton, *Anatomy*, pt. 3, Sec. 4, Mem. 1, Subs. 2-3.

[592] 'What else can superstition, heresy produce, but wars, tumults, uproars, torture of souls and despair,' Burton, *Anatomy*, pt. 3, Sec. 4, Mem. 1, Subs. 4.

[593] Though Gowland reads Burton's treatise on religious melancholy as a subtle polemic on Jacobean and Carolingian religious politics: A. Gowland, *Worlds of Renaissance Melancholy: Robert Burton in Context,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

human and his or her creator. His devil seems curiously lazy, content to shepherd his victims through external rounds of exercises, rather than interrogating and subverting their inner lives, as he had been wont to do in the past.

Yet Burton, the scholar of melancholy, if not of comparative religion, unerringly homes in on the point at which religious melancholy is whetted to its essential nature: that of despair. As noted above, melancholy itself exists at the point of disjunction between the perfection of God and the imperfection of humanity. A conviction of the indissolubility of one's sinfulness, whether provoked by demonic insinuations, irresponsible ministers, or misreadings of scripture,[594] engenders, 'a fearful passion, wherein the party oppressed thinks he can get no ease but by death… The heart is grieved, the conscience wounded, the mind eclipsed with black fumes arising from those perpetual terrors.' This 'pernicious kind of desperation' is 'a grievous sin' and '*homicida animae*, the murderer of the soul, as Austin terms it.'[595]

Nevertheless, like Evagrius, Burton also recognises that this same apex of religious melancholy can act as the pivot for something quite different. 'In some cases, this desperate humour is not much to be discommended, as in wars it is a cause many times of extraordinary valour.'[596] There follows a list of

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[594] Burton, *Anatomy*, pt. 3, Sec. 4, Mem. 2, Subs. 3.

[595] Burton, *Anatomy*, pt. 3, Sec. 4, Mem. 2, Subs. 2.

[596] Burton, *Anatomy*, pt. 3, Sec. 4, Mem. 2, Subs. 2.

historical victories claimed when 'a forlorn impotent company [became] conquerors in a moment.'[597] When he speaks of those who 'attempt impossibilities, not to be performed by men,'[598] one recalls the link drawn by Ps-Aristotle between heroics and melancholy. The particular connection, brought out by Burton, between human *impossibility* specifically, and heroic melancholy, finds its most profound, religious expression in that 'kind of despair be not amiss, when, saith Zanchius, we despair of our own means, and rely wholly upon God.'[599]

This is a neat summary of that kind of 'godly sorrow' referred to by Evagrius and Aquinas, and experienced by Dante's Pilgrim. Burton's analysis, while deconstructing much of his contemporaries' aestheticisation of melancholy as a badge of intelligence, he also surveys this older understanding of the melancholy precipice in impressively concrete and up-to-date terms.[600] However, Burton is rather more concerned to delineate the dangers of melancholy and offering means of defence, than exploring the process by which despair in oneself becomes hope in God.

This kind of one-sidedness in his account, is exemplified in the inconsistent use made, in the *Anatomy*, of the complex Book of Job. He is used both as an

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[597] Burton, *Anatomy*, pt. 3, Sec. 4, Mem. 2, Subs. 2.

[598] Burton, *Anatomy*, pt. 3, Sec. 4, Mem. 2, Subs. 2.

[599] Burton, *Anatomy*, pt. 3, Sec. 4, Mem. 2, Subs. 2.

[600] A stimulating recent study on the use of melancholy by Burton's contemporaries, see E. Sullivan, *Beyond Melancholy: Sadness and Selfhood in Renaissance England*, (Oxford University Press, 2016).

exemplar of perseverance in the face of trials, in the 'Remedies Against Discontents, Burton exhorting,

> …tell me (saith Chrysostom) "was Job or the devil the greater conqueror? surely Job; the devil had his goods, he sat on the muck-hill and kept his good name; he lost his children, health, friends, but he kept his innocency; he lost his money, but kept his confidence in God, which was better than any treasure. Do thou then as Job did, triumph as Job did…[601]

But Job is *also* quoted as a graphic exemplar of the desire for one's own death, without any comment on the narrative continuity between the two states. In describing the suicidal impulse, Burton writes, '… it grinds their souls day and night, they are perpetually tormented, a burden to themselves, as Job was… they curse their stars with Job "and the day of their birth, and wish for death."'[602] Indeed, Burton admits, 'Pindea, and most interpreters hold, [that] Job was even melancholy to despair, and almost to madness itself.'[603]

The disjunction that exists, let alone the movement that occurs, between the two states is never remarked upon, let alone interrogated. In fact, Burton further referring to Chrysostom on the model of 'triumph' Job provides, 'How

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[601] Burton, *Anatomy*, pt. 2, Sec. 3, Mem. 3.

[602] Burton, *Anatomy*, pt. 1, Sec. 4, Mem. 1.

[603] Burton, *Anatomy*, pt. 1, Sec. 4, Mem. 1.

shall this be done? Chrysostom answers, *facile si caelum cogitaveris*, with great felicity, if thou shalt but meditate on heaven.'[604] Yet the comforting narrative of divine providence and martyr's crowns thereafter elaborated bear little resemblance to Job's own reflections on the incomprehensible relationship between heaven and the disordered earth, let alone his anguished demand for answers from the Lord. Indeed, Burton goes on to employ to that very justice that Job insisted he, and, thus, his case, possessed, not as Job did – that is, as an interrogation of God Himself – but as a quality that allowed him to suffer while 'not [being] moved'![605] This can only be achieved by utterly disregarding the anguished irony inherent in the very quote offered as a proof text, 'Though he kill me, I will trust in him.' When Chrysostom writes, 'Though heaven itself should fall on his head, he will not be offended,' he seems to miss the point: Job, as we have seen, is, rather, offended that heaven does *not* come down to earth. Certainly, even Burton admits that Job is sufficiently offended with earth itself that he wishes he had never been born.

Thus, on Burton's reading, it is quite inexplicable that the two exemplary Jobs could possibly be the same person. There is a piece missing between the experience of despair, and the decision to commit one's hopelessness to an inexplicable, humanly impossible hope in God.

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[604] Burton, *Anatomy*, pt. 2, Sec. 3, Mem. 3.

[605] Burton, *Anatomy*, pt. 2, Sec. 3, Mem. 3.

Indeed, Burton's exhortations regarding the case of Job is doubly striking given his distaste for 'obsolete sentences and familiar sayings' masquerading as comfort – quoting Job to his 'friends', in fact, '"You are but miserable comforters all."'[606] Conversely, as we have seen, he recommends that one should unburden one's fears and feelings to a trusty friend, as well as receiving, 'comfort, cheerful speeches, fair promises, and good words.'[607] In fact, in this line, he devotes an entire 'Consolatory Digression' to the, largely philosophical and theological, remedies for discontents.[608]

However, this, and the completed work's closing one on the cure of religious despair, though beautifully written, fall curiously flat. This is perhaps due to its dissonance with an 'unburdening' that occurs earlier in the *Anatomy*. As we have seen, Burton is acutely aware of the dangers of melancholy, particularly as it tends to sin. However, he is remarkably measured on the subject of suicide, even to the point of sympathy. Writing on the subject of religious melancholy, the most solemn part of the book, he states,

> If a man put desperate hand upon himself by occasion of madness or melancholy, if he has given testimony before of his regeneration, in regard he doth this not so much out of will as *ex*

[606] Burton, *Anatomy*, pt. 2, Sec. 3, Mem. 1, Subs. 1.

[607] Burton, *Anatomy*, pt. 2, Sec. 2, Mem. 6, Subs. 2.

[608] Burton, *Anatomy*, pt. 2, Sec. 3, Mem. 1, Subs. 1.

> *vi morbid*, we must make the best construction of it, as the Turks do, that think all fools and madmen go directly to heaven.[609]

Moreover, he does not justify his sympathy through a slight of hand that relegates melancholics to the status of utter incapacity. Rather, he understands the terrible extremity of experience that can be engendered by the malady. He writes, '…if there be a hell on earth, it is to be found in a melancholy man's heart.'[610] He continues, 'I say of our melancholy man, he is the cream of human adversity, the quintessence, and upshot; all other diseases whatsoever are but flea-bitings to melancholy in extent: 'tis the pith of them all.'[611] Akin to his understanding of religious melancholy, Burton recognises the profound existential essence contained within melancholy: its searing encounter with the limits of one's being. No wonder, then, that he refers to the melancholic as 'that true Prometheus… the true Tityus… and so ought it to be understood'[612] Like the Ps-Aristotle, once again, he recognises that the extremities with which melancholics wrestle can – perhaps, must – be conceived of in mythic terms, such is their scale. Indeed, Burton takes three pages to quote those ancient authors who considered suicide acceptable, and despite then dismissing them as 'false and pagan positions'[613] he, nevertheless, seems to consider it

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[609] Burton, *Anatomy*, pt. 3, Sec. 4, Mem. 2, Subs. 2.

[610] Burton, *Anatomy*, pt. 1, Sec. 4, Mem. 1. On the subject of Burton's own melancholy, and his role as 'healer and patient', see M. A. Lund *Melancholy, Medicine and Religion in Early Modern England: Reading the Anatomy of Melancholy,* (Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[611] Burton, *Anatomy*, pt. 1, Sec. 4, Mem. 1.

[612] Burton, *Anatomy*, pt. 1, Sec. 4, Mem. 1.

[613] Burton, *Anatomy*, pt. 1, Sec. 4, Mem. 1.

necessary to acknowledge them at length. For, at the beginning of this particular disquisition, he describes the melancholic as being 'in a manner *enforced* to offer violence unto himself, to be freed from his present *insufferable* pains [emphasis mine].'[614] He recognises that this stems, not from psychosis or complete derangement, but from a terrible paradox: while, for physical ailments, most patients are willing to make many sacrifices to preserve their lives, but '…to a melancholic man, [there is] nothing so tedious, nothing so odious; that which they so carefully seek to preserve, he abhors; so intolerable are his pains.'[615] Burton's lively sensitivity here is a development, in the Christian tradition, from even the sympathetic analysis we have seen was offered by Aquinas.[616] Not only understanding suicide as a matter of logic, passionate nonetheless, Burton imputes to this combat the heroism that the Ps-Aristotle considered potential in melancholy. Given his delicate understanding, moreover, Burton urges that judgement be held on those who commit suicide, '… for what shall become of their souls, God alone can tell; His mercy may come betwixt the bridge and the brook, the knife and the throat.'[617] Moreover, he writes, 'Who knows how he might be tempted? It is his case, it may be thine… God be merciful unto us all!'[618]

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[614] Burton, *Anatomy*, pt. 1, Sec. 4, Mem. 1.

[615] Burton, *Anatomy*, pt. 1, Sec. 4, Mem. 1.

[616] See above, Chapter Three.

[617] Burton, *Anatomy*, pt. 1, Sec. 4, Mem. 1.

[618] Burton, *Anatomy*, pt. 1, Sec. 4, Mem. 1.

Not only is there, in melancholy, a struggle with the very limits of human experience and, indeed, endurance, undergoing this ideal may be as much understood as an act of God, as one's own fault and within the limits of one's control or capacity to remedy. In this light, Burton may perhaps understand Job's own extremity better than he seems to in his specific discussion of the case. If that is so, then it is no accident that it is also in this particular section of the *Anatomy's* sprawl that Burton seems at his most perceptive and most moving. His concern to save bodies, minds, and souls imperilled by melancholy can elsewhere lead him dangerously close to the logic of one of Job's 'comforters', but here, he simply acknowledges the terrible power of the malady without offering any solutions: he recognises that, at this point, any such 'sentences' would certainly be 'obsolete.'

In this honesty regarding the nature of melancholy and its possible prognostics, and, especially, of the disease's own particular logic, he is, in fact, following Job's example. Rather than repeating pious platitudes, his 'justice' and integrity lies in his truthful expression of the extremity of his situation. Indeed, *this* is, itself, that 'despair of one's own means' that he will later understand as allowing one to 'rely wholly upon God.' However, what Burton demonstrates *here*, is that such despair, in some part, entails ceasing to rely on human wisdom and comfort, and, instead, to confront the nature of the depths in which one finds themselves, and the ultimately inexpressible, impossible implications about human and divine nature found therein.

Conclusion

While Marsilio Ficino returned a more medical, physically-based idea of melancholy to western discourse, his fateful reading of the Ps-Aristotelian 'heroism' implicit in the condition as primarily equivalent to intellectualism stripped the concept of its potential as a revelatory locus of moral evolution, and, indeed, a broader consideration of sorrow and grief as either moral or social issues. The aestheticisation consequent upon this reading is archetypal portrayed in the figure of *Il Penseroso,* who, despite invoking monastic tropes, pursues an amoral, highly individualistic retreat that is portrayed in direct opposition to the engagement with society characteristic of *L'allegro*.

In contrast, Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* has a more nuanced and concrete understanding of the eponymous condition that, nevertheless, engages with its theological potential. Indeed, Burton's contribution to the idea of the melancholy hero is twofold: first in his unwitting self-presentation as such in his extended complaint against the injustices faced by his peers, and in his description of the moral-mortal struggle faced by the suicidal. Indeed, the liveliness of his account redounds to his conviction, shared with Aquinas and Augustine, that a sure poultice for malignant sorrow is honest and compassionate conversation with friends.

Nevertheless, Burton's multifarious account, though acknowledging the social roots of much melancholy, offers no unified engagement with a broader sense

of injustice. Moreover, in its concern to anatomise melancholy in order to *remedy* it, the treatise fails seriously examine the potential benefits of this kind of confounding grief. In common with his contemporaries, Burton was keen to elide the possibility of despair, at the cost of exploring the confrontations with oneself and with the divine that can be occasioned - and even necessitated - by a sorrow unto death.

Chapter Seven: Søren Kierkegaard

Søren Kierkegaard endured the suffocation of melancholia, first his father's and then his own, throughout his life.[619] He draws on his experiences in his literature and his philosophy; he committed his struggles to his voluminous journals.

> Since my earliest childhood, a barb of sorrow has lodged in my heart. As long as it stays, I am ironic – if it is pulled out I shall die.[620]

> … I have one close confident – my melancholy… she is the most faithful mistress I have known; what wonder then that I, on my part, must be ready to follow her on the instant.[621]

With Kierkegaard, there is no need to infer the presence of malignant sorrow, as there might be with Burton or Ficino. Rather, his philosophy and theology deal directly, subtly, and profoundly with the kind of experiences and psychological states with which he was so familiar.

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[619] '… the father thought the son's melancholy was his fault, and the son thought the father's was his fault, and so they never spoke of it to each other.' Kierkegaard, *Diary,* 33.

[620] Kierkegaard, *Diary,* 26.

[621] Kierkegaard, *Diary,* 21.

This is not to say, however, that his work is subjective or self-referential. Indeed, the polyphony of voices through which he writes under various pseudonyms constructs a uniquely polyvalent oeuvre. Indeed, he may be said, by his pseudonyms, to create for himself a tradition, and populate a community, almost an *ekklesia*, within which to locate his philosophy and himself. Nevertheless, Kierkegaard narrates an understanding of human anthropology and Christian life that places the states of despair, sorrow and anxiety at the centre of both the development of the individual and the composition of humanity more broadly.

Though he makes explicit this fulcrum-like position of the melancholic states that we have seen was implicit in medieval and early modern moral psychology, Kierkegaard nevertheless emphasises and deepens the themes and concerns that run through the understanding of human nature and ethics that is derived from the monastic tradition. By reading Evagrius' anxiety regarding attachment to material goods, Thomas' conviction of the pedagogic potential of sorrow, and Dante's Pilgrim's experience of melancholy and despair as the locations at which one comes to depend entirely on the comfort and strength of God, alongside Kierkegaard's discussion of *The Concept of Anxiety* and *The Sorrow Unto Death*, one encounters the same *foci*, cast into a modern form.

It is under the heading of 'despair' that the Danish Philosopher discusses both a psychological state and the teleology of his human anthropology. Understanding the individual as suspended between a series of opposing poles,

such as finitude and infinity, 'despair' for Kierkegaard, is the dawning apprehension of this state of tension and awareness of the difficulty of navigating between them and participating in both. To tend too much towards one or the other leads to a metaphysical, emotional, and psychological degradation of the human person, whose unique construction is based upon participation in both extremes.

The way in which Kierkegaard characterises each particular type of degradation reveals, however, that his understanding of the moral necessities attendant upon human nature is not far from those of his predecessors across the centuries. The man who is too finitised, for example, displays the kind of corrosive concern with materiality that the discipline of the desert aimed to erode. The woman immersed in infinity, meanwhile, is alienated from the present moment, and dissolved in empty, phantasmal daydreams: that is, an *acediac* state.

To pursue either pole to the exclusion, or even imbalance, of the other not only affects oneself, but also unbalances society. Indeed, one of the extremes between which each person must find his or her being are those of the individual and the [human] race. In contrast, the route out of despair is the kind of concrete action as a member of a broader history that participates in both aspects of Kierkegaard's anthropology. This kind of prescription is not only, itself, the opposite of *acedia*, but is also reminiscent of Burton's polemic against idleness. However, most significantly, this anthropology not only

identifies similar triggers for sorrow, and its associated possible revelations and ossifications, but also concludes that the fundamental place of health for the individual is in a society that is oriented towards heaven.

Under the aspect of anxiety, meanwhile, Kierkegaard explores the issues of moral freedom and sin. For the Danish philosopher, anxiety is the state that precedes sin: it is the awareness of its possibility. The apprehension of plurality is, in turn, what impels language. Communication, then, dovetails with concrete action in being the cure for a melancholic state that is, nevertheless, born from it. Indeed, for Kierkegaard, to undergo despair and anxiety, and to learn from them the metaphysical morals implicit therein, is absolutely necessary. In his narration of human teleology, every Christian is called to be a melancholy hero.

This progress – and this temper – he reads into the narratives of two Biblical heroes: Abraham and Job. On the tale of the former's call to sacrifice his son, Isaac, Kierkegaard bases his book, *Fear and Trembling*, exploring the radical role of faith with regard to society. In the epistolary work, *Repetition*, meanwhile, he lauds Job's heroism in not eliding his sorrow, but rather challenging God over it. Both Old Testament heroes, in Kierkegaard's reading, are governed by their radical faith, but, in their breaking community boundaries, become icons of both and individuality and a society appropriately keyed to the divine.

Adam and Anxiety

For Kierkegaard, the states of anxiety and despair are transitional states that reflect the perpetual liminality of human nature as it pursues the synthesis of spirit. Fundamentally developmental, they are, also, the *narrative* keys of his anthropology, whose dynamism militates against simple static description. His account of the various states and admixtures of distorted synthesis often take the form of characterisation, rather than straightforward description, and his unfolding philosophy traces possible paths through the landscape between the poles. Indeed, his conviction that the individual is co-implicated in the broader human race renders it totally appropriate that the growth of a single person can serve as a universally-reflective structure.

This is most clearly exemplified in Kierkegaard's 'simple psychologically orienting deliberation on the dogmatic issue of hereditary' that narrates the Fall of Adam. In approaching the biblical narrative psychologically (but appropriating the philosophical tools of German Idealism), he establishes anxiety as the 'intermediate term' that nearest approaches the moment of the first sin itself. Before the fall, Adam was *innocent* and possessed no sinfulness or free will – because he had no concept of freedom, or, indeed, of anything. His mind and body were not in a synthetic relationship to each other. Sin and sinfulness entered the world by a qualitative 'leap' on Adam's part that cannot be explained.

Anxiety, for Kierkegaard, is not sin itself, but, rather, its necessary, and ambiguous, prelude. In 'innocence', spirit is present, but is 'dreaming of possibility.' It precedes, and suggests, the very notion that sin could exist; more than that, it is the first instinct of the possibilities human existence affords. Anxiety isn't just the first sight of the apple out of the corner of the eye: it is the first rumour of the apple's very existence. 'The prohibition induces in [Adam] anxiety, for the prohibition awakens in him freedom's possibility.'[622]

Anxiety is, fundamentally, the apprehension of difference - the idea of oneself as an individual capable of freely taking action and making choices. It is not even specifically restricted to the possibility of sin but rather 'the anxious possibility of *being able*.'[623] Alongside this comes the possibility of acting thus within the history of the human race. It is therefore, also, the reflection, and result, of the tension of human nature as existing within these two poles.

It is the awakening of spirit whose awakening anxiety marks as it begins to navigate the poles of existence. 'How does it relate to itself and to its conditionality? It relates itself as anxiety.'[624] As it 'constantly disturbs the ration between soul and body' it is as much of an 'ambiguous' development as the dawning awareness of difference that is its consequence.

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[622] S. Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety,* R. Thomte, A. B. Anderson, trans. and eds., (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 44.

[623] Kierkegaard, *Concept,* 44.

[624] Kierkegaard, *Concept,* 43.

'That anxiety makes its appearance is the pivot upon which everything turns.' This initial anxiety is 'precisely… ignorance about nothing.'[625] Kierkegaard is not here treating fear as familiarly defined, for example, by Thomas Aquinas as the flight of the appetite from a threat, but rather of something more fundamental and existential. This 'possibility of possibility' Kierkegaard likens to a child's 'seeking for the adventurous, the monstrous, and the enigmatic.'[626] In this sense, it has more in common with the species of anxiety Thomas describes as 'amazement.'[627] Adam 'has no conception of what he is able to do' and this is 'a higher form of ignorance, as a higher confession of anxiety… in a higher sense he both loves it and flees from it.'[628] Just as in 'amazement', one is both drawn to, and repelled by, the immeasurable and inexplicable, whose primary apprehension is nascent in anxiety, and one has, as yet, no suitable means of conceptualising or expressing the awesome novelty before one.

Anxiety, therefore, acts as the ignition of maturity, the siren that sings from the far side of the threshold. Indeed, it 'captivates' the child, such is its 'pleasing' aspect, as much as it apprehends the terrible.[629] In this sense, Kierkegaard relates it to the developmental potential of despair at a later point, when

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[625] Kierkegaard, *Concept,* 42.

[626] Kierkegaard, *Concept,* 42.

[627] See above, Chapter Three.

[628] Kierkegaard, *Concept,* 44.

[629] Kierkegaard, *Concept,* 42.

freedom, 'having passed through the imperfect forms of its history… will come to itself.'[630]

That the innocence that precedes anxiety cannot yet conceptualise the multitude of forms and possibilities whose existence it has begun to sense is not only implied by the structure of Kierkegaard's philosophy, but also in his insistence that the prelapsarian Adam had no real sense of linguistic meaning. That 'Adam was able to talk, it does not [therefore] follow that he was able to understand what was said.'[631] Indeed, this verbal innocence is not only a precondition of anxiety, but also a supplementary cause 'The prohibition [of the apple] produces in him anxiety for… [it] awakens in him freedom's possibility' by its very meaninglessness.[632] As Steven Shakespeare writes, '…it is *language itself* which does not merely evoke freedom and consciousness, but is their presupposition.'[633] Language regards difference, and, even if 'innocence can express this difference' in the sense of mouthing words, 'the difference is not for innocence.'[634] Adam may have named the animals, but, in the innocence of Eden, the meaning of these names is indifferent. In terms of Thomas' 'amazement', therefore, Adam lacks any language, and therefore the

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[630] Kierkegaard, *Concept,* 43. On melancholy in Kierkegaard, see below.

[631] Kierkegaard, *Concept,* 60.

[632] Kierkegaard, *Concept,* 60.

[633] S. Shakespeare *Kierkegaard, Language and the Reality of God,* (Ashgate, 2001), 72.

[634] S. Kierkegaard, *Concept,* 41. On this knot in Kierkegaard's thought, see G.D. Marino "Anxiety in *The Concept of Anxiety*' in Hannay, Alistair and Marino, Gordon Daniel, eds., *Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard,* 311-312.

concepts thus formed, by which he can form any kind of explanation for the phenomena that surround him.

Indeed, that anxiety persists throughout the human race subsequent to Adam is not simply because each individual necessarily makes morally-weighted choices, but, perhaps, because the very 'infinity of possibility' that 'ensnarlingly disquiets with its sweet anxiousness'[635] is, ultimately, inexpressible. However, in later humans, anxiety has a added, and finite, if expansive, freighting: that of history. While each individual makes the same 'unquantifiable leap' into sin as Adam, quantitatively, the pervasiveness of sin throughout humanity acts as an amplification with regard to anxiety. This is because, for Kierkegaard, just as humanity is composed of finite and infinite aspects, so does a person's identity exist in a dialectic between their individuality and their membership of the human race.

The perfection of the self is

> that man, as *individuum* and as such simultaneously himself and the whole race, and in such a way that the race participates in the individual and the individual and the whole race.[636]

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[635] Kierkegaard, *Concept,* 61.

[636] Kierkegaard, *Concept,* 28.

Thus, by virtue of his very individuality, the self must participate in the history of the whole humanity of which he or she is a part. This, as Kierkegaard observes, is a contradiction (indeed, a paradox), but

> a contradiction is always the expression of a task, and a task a movement, but a movement that as a task is the same as to which the task is directed is a historical movement. Hence the individual has a history… [and thus] the race also has a history.[637]

Parallel with the synthesis of time and eternity is this synthesis of history and the perpetual novelty of individuality. This latter dialectic is negotiated through concrete temporal action. Such action must have the character of 'earnestness,' being the certainty and inwardness born of the eternal in man that makes for freedom, in order to attain succession and repetition – that is, historicity – rather than the emptiness of mere habit.[638] Equally, however, certitude and inwardness can only be attained by and in action, and even understanding must be born of a concrete consciousness. As an individual is a synthesis, he must guard against abstraction as much as particularity, and 'the most concrete content that a consciousness can have is consciousness of itself.'[639]

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[637] Kierkegaard, *Concept,* 28-29.

[638] Kierkegaard, *Concept,* 147-149.

[639] Kierkegaard, *Concept,* 139-143.

By language and action, the individual participates in difference: that is, in his or her membership of the human race, and, therefore, in history. This is the character and teleology of spirit. Although Kierkegaard may be accused of excessive individualism,[640] his philosophy demands social action, and, indeed, conceives of the individual as a social self, whose activity is necessarily directed towards a broader identity and narrative. Anxiety, that, as we have seen, marks the developing exercise of spirit in negotiating this multi-dimensional identity, regards this very plurality that, nevertheless, has the most intimate implications for oneself.

Indeed, Kierkegaard rejects in the strongest terms any description of anxiety as a 'sentimental… cowardly sympathy' that is grateful for not undergoing the trials of another. He describes this as 'treason against both God and oneself' and notes that 'life always holds in store analogous phenomena that one probably will not escape.'[641] One recalls both Job's exhorting his comforters to compassion, while noting that, had he not experienced such suffering himself, he would likely be as self-righteous as they. Within the structures of Kierkegaard philosophy, however, 'what has happened to one human being can happen to all' and only when this realisation occurs 'can one benefit both oneself and others.'[642] It is characteristic of Kierkegaard to understand self-

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[640] Although on the relational aspect of Kierkegaard's thought - and its metaphysical aspect - see C. S. Evans "Who Is the Other in *Sickness Unto Death*? God and Human Relations in the Constitution of the Self" in C. S. Evans, ed., *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self: Collected Essays*, (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006), 263-275.

[641] *Kierkegaard, Concept,* 54.

[642] *Kierkegaard, Concept,* 54.

relation as entwined with one's relationship to others, but also, grounds compassion in a profoundly ingrained understanding of a common humanity that demands identification with the other as much as its narrative proceeds in terms of the individual's self's development.

Anxiety, however, is not only the apprehension of the horizontal density of difference between the individual and the race: it is also an apprehension of the ontological difference between humanity and God. Indeed, the 'vertical' difference of the divine is what gives the 'horizontal' difference its value. For example, that 'history' within which spirit, through earnest action, navigates the temporal and the eternal, begins with 'the moment' which is 'not properly an atom of time, but an atom of eternity.'[643] Sin, in contrast, is an action that takes place, 'only in the moment as abstracted from the eternal.' Therefore, '[mere] temporality is sinfulness.'[644] The neglect of 'the moment' is a neglect of both one's membership of the human race and one's responsibility, by developing 'spirit', to participate in its history, and a neglect of the divine creator who is responsible for one's very being.

One who lives such an abstracted life, Kierkegaard designates as 'spiritless… qualified *away from* spirit… the stagnation of spirit.' Even in adults so designated, there is the kind of alienation from meaning familiar from his account of Adam, as it is 'not dumb [only] when it comes to repetition by

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[643] *Kierkegaard, Concept,* 88.

[644] *Kierkegaard, Concept,* 91.

rote.'[645] The spiritless man is a 'talking machine' who spouts 'mere twaddle.'[646] Nevertheless, even in this case, anxiety is present, but profoundly disguised, and, indeed, its disguise can make it even more horrifying than even its nature would warrant.[647]

In contrast, one who has developed enough spirit to be aware of sin, specifically, as a possibility, anxiety then traces the individual's relation to sin. Indeed, as Kierkegaard notes, the 'longing' for heaven described by Dante is not necessarily the sweet ache so often described. If one is still in a state of sin, one will relate to this 'expectation' ambiguously, even in a hostile mode. The *object* of one's anxiety, therefore, is a barometer of the development of spirit with one.

Negatively, one can experience anxiety with regard to the good. We have seen how, for Thomas Aquinas, sloth can be understood as a revulsion by spiritual goods. Similarly, Kierkegaard traces the form and consequences of unease and aversion regarding what should be one's proper end. This he describes in striking terms as 'the daemonic.' This is defined as when 'the individual is in evil and is in anxiety about the good… the demonic is an unfree relation to the good.'[648]

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[645] *Kierkegaard, Concept,* 94.

[646] *Kierkegaard, Concept,* 94.

[647] *Kierkegaard, Concept,* 96.

[648] Kierkegaard*, Concept,* 119.

As Evagrius conceived of a metaphysically dynamic self within a morally-structured universe, so does Kierkegaard's plastic anthropology understand the very personhood of humanity in moral terms. To mis-develop spirit is to suffer a degradation in one's very nature. Indeed, the 'unfreedom' to which Kierkegaard refers is a complete inversion of the innocence that regarded possibility with 'pleasing' anxiety: in the demonic, one is so unfree that possibility becomes something from which one wishes to hide.

This is demonstrated by the demonic's principal characteristic: 'inclosing reserve.' It is 'precisely the mute'[649] that attempts to 'close itself off.' In doing so, it rejects that 'continuity' of action-in-community that constitutes history, existing only in atomised time abstracted from eternity[650] that Kierkegaard refers to as 'the sudden', and 'communicat[ing] only with itself.' Thus, 'the demonic is the contentless, the boring… The continuity that corresponds to the sudden might be called extinction. Boredom, extinction, is precisely a continuity in nothingness.'[651] To be self-enclosed is to attempt to cut oneself off from communication, and thus from relation: it is the ultimate disruption of social bonds, indeed, it is an attempt to rupture them completely.

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[649] Kierkegaard, *Concept,* 123.

[650] Pattison, indeed, characterises the melancholy of Kierkegaard's contemporaries with this kind of totalisation of the present, and the concomitant dislocation when it is removed. G. Pattison, *Kierkegaard, Religion and the Nineteenth Century Crisis of Culture*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 20-1.

[651] Kierkegaard*, Concept,* 132-33.

This emptiness recalls the sloth of Thomas, and Dante, and the *acedia* of Evagrius,[652] while providing an anthropological framework within which this moral-metaphysical phenomenon can be observed and explained. Moreover, Kierkegaard's framework also provides an account of the inherent instability of the demonic model in that, while it consists in the attempt to become completely self-enclosed,[653] it nevertheless, 'always retains a relation,' as a creature and as a human, 'and anxiety at once manifests itself in the moment of contact [with the good.]'[654] Thus 'it is noteworthy that the demonic in the New Testament first appears when it is approached by Christ.'[655]

The result of this contact is, as will be inferred from the Gospel narratives, 'the unfreely disclosed.' Encounter with the good forces the demonic to 'blurt' out expression against its will. It compels communication and relation, even if that communication is only to express distress. It is for this reason that the demonic regards the good with anxiety: the disruption of its goal of self-enclosure. Indeed, the unfreely disclosed, thrown into relief by comparison with the good, reveals that 'the content of inclosing reserve… may in turn be almost comic,' in its trifling, foolish nature.[656] This is a common theme in Kierkegaard, whose

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[652] In a most Evagrian echo, Kierkegaard also describes inclosing reserve as 'the vapid, enervating dissolution of oneself continually absorbed in the impression.' Kierkegaard, *Concept,* 130.

[653] That is, to rule in hell.

[654] Kierkegaard, *Concept*, 123.

[655] Kierkegaard, *Concept,* 119.

[656] Kierkegaard, *Concept*, 129.

doctoral dissertation considered irony: the diminishment of the human self into the demonic results, not in a kind of awesome evil, but in a laughable pettiness.

Nevertheless, anxiety-inducing as the revelation of one's small-mindedness may be, 'disclosure *is* the good, for disclosure is the first expression of salvation. [italics mine].'[657] Communication is the use of language that is meaningful and in 'disclosure' the demonic is compelled to break out of its self-enclosure in order to honestly express the truth: to name the beast from the point of view of spirit. Acting thus as the means of relation by spirit, 'communication is in turn the expression for continuity.'[658] Equally, the demonic can also occur as an 'abstraction from truth' familiar from the case of Job's comforters., for whom 'truth is… the aggregate of ceremonies,'[659] whose 'rigid orthodoxies' conceal a truth that has no certitude - that is, no fruit in historical, earnest action.

The demonic is therefore propelled back into the history of the human race by the expression-in-relation of his or her individuality. It is for this reason that 'the word is precisely what saves the individual from the empty abstraction of inclosing reserve.'[660] Just as the radical disclosure of the desert father's disciple rooted him in the community of his brothers, even in the face of the Noonday Demon of *acedia*, and the self-enclosure that is the devilish *telos* of sin, so does

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[657] Kierkegaard, *Concept*, 127.

[658] Kierkegaard, *Concept*, 129.

[659] Kierkegaard, *Concept*, 139.

[660] Kierkegaard, *Concept*, 113.

self-communication - that is, confession - reveal, and begin to exorcise, the demonic in the individual member of the human race. It is significant, moreover, that this revelation takes place in a relational setting grounded within a morally-structured universe. In Kierkegaard's diagnosis, the demonic cannot 'know itself' but rather is precisely an abstraction from the vital dimensions of existence. Equally, the interlinkage between communication, relationship, community and history demonstrates the metaphysical and anthropological connection between social dislocation and compassion. For the demonic to encounter, and be drawn into conversation with, the good *itself* begins the process of re-establishing those bonds whose rupturing is the *telos* of the devil.

In contrast, the adventure of spirit and the trials of anxiety are not something from which one should shut oneself away. Dangers, too, lurk in 'anxiety over evil,' but they are to be elided and navigated in the journey towards the development of spirit. For the Lutheran Kierkegaard, the danger upon the progress of anxieties regarding individual sins is one in which 'anxiety is ahead; it discovers the consequence before it comes' means that 'sin advances… repentance follows it step by step, but always a moment too late.'[661] Equally, there is always 'the danger of a fall, namely suicide.'[662] In both of these cases, the tutelage of anxiety has been misconstrued and its form

[661] Kierkegaard, *Concept*, 115.

[662] Kierkegaard, *Concept*, 159.

perverted. If 'anxiety does not lead [one] to faith but away from faith, then [one] is lost.'[663]

Faith is not merely 'the only thing that is truly able to disarm the sophistry of sin'[664] but the solution to the paradox that anxiety would have presented to 'the pagan', had it been available to them: 'that one became guilty by fate' and is yet redeemed.[665] Indeed, for Kierkegaard, it is this contradiction that is the locus for anxiety in 'the non-religious genius'[666] for whom the moment of anxiety occurs 'in the moment before and after the danger, *that trembling moment when he must converse with the great unknown*.'[667] Just as Bellerophon faced the gods, not during his humiliating wanderings, or in his disastrous fall, but in a suspended moment of transformation, so theophany, on Kierkegaard's account, occurs *in the midst* of heroic activity, but not as the activity itself. It is this irruption of the divine that gives the melancholy hero's narrative its transcendent quality.

The genius who *is* religious and turns towards God discovers, immediately, his own guilt. This, once more, Lutheran-infused interpretation is, in fact, grounded in the ontological difference, as 'when the finite spirit sees God, it must begin as guilty,' and, indeed, 'the greater the genius, the more profoundly

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[663] Kierkegaard, *Concept*, 159.

[664] Kierkegaard, *Concept,* 115.

[665] Kierkegaard, *Concept,* 96.

[666] Kierkegaard, *Concept*, 101.

[667] Kierkegaard, *Concept*, 101, [italics mine].

he discovers guilt'[668] and this 'greatness' is scaled solely to the 'energy of the God-relation in him.'[669] For the non-Christian, who understands the relation of 'possibility and necessity' as fate, this is the moment of transcendence; even if the individual therefore collapses 'himself for himself' in the 'depths of sin-consciousness.'[670]

For the Christian, whose anxiety may lead him towards, not fate, but faith, however, 'this is an adventure that *every human being must go through* - to learn to be anxious in order that he may not perish… Whoever has learned to be *anxious in the right way* has learned the ultimate.'[671] Kierkegaard, the inverted romantic, understands the relationship of individual and [human] race in the genius as one who 'traverses and experiences all that is fast until he catches up with himself.'[672] However, the 'education' of anxiety, which is 'education' by possibility (and, thus 'educate[s one] according to his infinitude'[673]) means its pupil may be placed

> in the middle of a Jutland heath, where… the greatest event is a grouse flying up noisily, and he will experience everything more perfectly, more accurately, more thoroughly than the man who

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[668] Kierkegaard, *Concept*, 107.

[669] Kierkegaard, *Concept*, 110.

[670] Kierkegaard, *Concept,* 110.

[671] Kierkegaard, *Concept*, 155, [italics mine].

[672] Kierkegaard, *Concept*, 104-5.

[673] Kierkegaard, *Concept*, 156.

> received the applause on the stage of world history if that man were not educated by possibility.[674]

By anxiety, the individual is broken open to possibility, and by possibility she is broken open to both the Infinite and the many finitudes of His creation. Moreover, the relationship between self and [human] race is here grounded in compassion. If guilt is not understood 'by analogy to the judgements of the police court,'[675] but rather as something intimately intwined with one's finitude and the dizzying possibilities of life, the 'educated' individual 'is absolutely identified with the unfortunate man; he knows no finite evasion by which he may escape.'[676] 'Whoever took possibility's course in misfortune lost all, all, as no one in actuality ever lost it [and] received everything back as no one in actuality ever did… for the disciple of possibility received infinity.'[677] One cannot help thinking, here, of Job, and the place of compassion in his exhortation to his comforters: both its necessity and the ambiguous place of like experience in its authenticity and efficacy.

For Kierkegaard, however, compassion is enjoined and enabled by the structure of his anthropology. The experience that renders it empathetic as well as sympathetic, however, is not necessarily one in actuality, but, rather, a psychological, spiritual, and emotional journey: that of anxiety. It is a struggle

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[674] Kierkegaard, *Concept*, 159.

[675] Kierkegaard, *Concept*, 161.

[676] Kierkegaard, *Concept,* 158.

[677] Kierkegaard, *Concept*, 158.

whose traumatic and dramatic trials, described in terms such as 'terrifying', may recall the heroic battles of the desert fathers with the demons of the wastes, as they 'search out everything and anxiously torment out of him everything finite and petty.'[678] Nevertheless, as we have seen, it is a struggle that each individual must pass through in order to develop spirit. For one who 'remains with anxiety,' that same anxiety 'becomes a serving spirit that leads him where he wishes to go.'[679] For Kierkegaard, all are called to be melancholy heroes.

Despair and the Dialectic

As anxiety develops the self that is spirit, meanwhile, so the struggle with the composition of that self is understood by Kierkegaard under the rubric of 'despair.' If succumbed to, despair is indeed the biblical 'sickness unto death.' Despair is an 'imbalance in a relation of synthesis' that makes up a man as 'a relation that relates to itself.'[680] Yet, though the possibility of despair lies in the synthesis, despair is *not* the synthesis itself.[681] Rather, it is through the experience of despair that, rightly navigated, one develops the proper balance and integration of the poles of self that make up spirit. Like anxiety, however, this development takes place in a moral universe, and its resolution (and

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[678] Kierkegaard, *Concept*, 159.

[679] Kierkegaard, ,*Concept* 159.

[680] S. Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death,* trans. Hannay, Alistair, (London: Penguin, 2004), 45.

[681] Kierkegaard, *Sickness,* 45-6.

solution) is inextricable from the moral-metaphysical context in which each individual exists. Thus the 'task' of the development of the synthesis 'can be performed only by means of a relationship to God.'[682]

Like anxiety, too, despair is something proper to every human being. Indeed, Kierkegaard insists that 'there lives not one single man who after all is not to some extent in despair, in whose inmost parts there does not dwell a disquietude.'[683] This unease is, as we have seen, a consequence of the unstable and dynamic nature of the developing self. Moreover, 'man, regarded as spirit, is always in a critical condition.'[684] With regard to the challenge of despair, too, everyone is called to be a melancholy hero. However, 'It is not depressing: on the contrary it is uplifting, since it views every man in the aspect of the highest demand made on him, that he be spirit.'[685] While anxiety regards the multitude of possibilities, scaled against infinity, that the finite being may face, despair regards the flux of finitude and infinity within one's very self. Nevertheless, the fearsome possibilities of life discussed above can educate one in despair as well as anxiety, as 'the hard vicissitudes of life and its dreadful decision have helped [individuals] to become conscious of themselves as spirit.'[686]

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[682] Kierkegaard, *Sickness,* 29.

[683] Kierkegaard, *Sickness,* 20.

[684] Kierkegaard, *Sickness,* 23.

[685] Kierkegaard, *Sickness,* 20.

[686] Kierkegaard, *Sickness,* 25.

The 'task' of the development of spirit that follows upon this awareness consists of an integration within the self of the poles between which the individual exists. Kierkegaard describes this as 'becoming concrete', which he describes as, 'moving away from oneself infinitely by the process of inifinitising oneself, and in returning to oneself infinitely by the process of finitising.'[687] Where this process is unbalanced or incomplete, the self remains in despair. As in the case of anxiety, Kierkegaard explores this process by narrating the causes and consequences of the defective states in order to more accurately chart 'the despair which is the passageway to faith.'[688]

Two complementary imbalances in the relation of the synthesis are imbalances between infinity and finitude and between necessity and possibility. Examining the despair of infinitude, defined as, 'the fantastical, the limitless'[689] we remember how, in a 'demonic' stance with regard to anxiety, one experiences an anomie akin to that of *acedia*. In the inifinitisation of despair, the individual is given over to the 'phantasms' of this malady, familiar from the narratives of the desert.[690] Indeed, it is in Evagrian terms that Kierkegaard describes the imagination as 'the faculty *instar omnium*' that ultimately reflects feeling, knowledge and will.[691] In infinitisation, however, the imagination's 'counterfeit of the self' becomes absorbed in 'the possibility of the self' and 'carries a man

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[687] Kierkegaard, *Sickness,* 29.

[688] Kierkegaard, *Sickness,* 76.

[689] Kierkegaard, *Sickness,* 29.

[690] See above, Chapter One.

[691] Kierkegaard, *Sickness,* 30.

away from himself and therewith prevents him returning to himself.'[692] A self without finitisation is dissolved in the phantoms of fantasy and loses itself to the boundlessness of the imagination, like the acediac monk.[693] The phantoms of unchecked possibility, too, like those of unbound infinity, "succeed one another with such speed that it seems as though everything were possible, and that is the very moment the individual himself has finally become nothing but an atmospheric illusion.'[694]

The consequences of these imbalances are familiar. An infinitised imagination renders the compassion that ought to be developed by the education of possibility into an 'abstract sentimentality which is so inhuman that it does not apply to any person.'[695] Indeed, it is this unmoored sensibility that Augustine found so corrosive in the theatre, as it 'inhumanly participates feelingly…in the fate of one or another abstraction.'[696] If one has become untethered from the fact of one's particular self, compassion for another particular being becomes impossible. To be grounded in one's individuality is, therefore, necessary to the development of relationship and, thus, community. To 'love' an imaginary being when one is little more than an imaginary being oneself is, as Augustine feared, a double negative.

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[692] Kierkegaard, *Sickness,* 30.

[693] Kierkegaard, *Sickness,* 60-3.

[694] Kierkegaard, *Sickness,* 66.

[695] Kierkegaard, *Sickness,* 30.

[696] Kierkegaard, *Sickness,* 30.

Meanwhile, as infinitisation abstracts one from relationship, so an immersion in unchecked possibility abstracts one from history. In this state, the individual 'does not budge from the spot, or move to any spot' because 'nothing becomes actual.'[697] Indeed, just as 'the moment' is an 'atom of eternity' and mere time is the enervated temporal locale of sin, so 'to become oneself is a movement *at* the spot [italics mine].'[698] The smallest horizontal aspects of existence are nevertheless to be synthesised with the potential of the infinite. However, if this vertical axis is not properly balanced within the self, one perishes in either 'wistful yearning' or 'agonising dread.'[699] One remembers, here, the damned of Dante's Inferno, alienated from the present, alive to only the vanished past and the dreadful future.

In contrast, a self who lacks an awareness of infinity, addicted to prudence, 'pawns himself to the world.'[700] This is a kind of worldliness that is concerned only with fluency with the matters of earthly life and to avoid 'embarrassment.' Equally, for one concerned only with necessity, 'everything becomes trivial.'[701] Kierkegaard's contempt for this kind of thoroughgoing compromise is clear in his description of proverbial wisdom as 'merely rules for shrewd behaviour.'[702] On the contrary, the heroism that the Danish philosopher has in mind in

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.[697] Kierkegaard, *Sickness,* 36.

[698] Kierkegaard, *Sickness,* 36.

[699] Kierkegaard, *Sickness,* 38.

[700] Kierkegaard, *Sickness,* 63-65.

[701] Kierkegaard, *Sickness,* 39. 'Necessity is like a sequence of consonants only, but in order to utter them [in history and continuity], there must in addition be possibility.'

[702] Kierkegaard, *Sickness,* 34.

dramatic and disruptive, one that relishes contradiction and whose eyes are trained on the horizon where history and eternity meet.

Indeed, the most challenging possibility of all is that, while 'salvation is humanly speaking the most impossible thing of all, but for God all things are possible!'[703] This is the core of faith. In contrast to the comforter-like bondage to necessity, faith is Job-like in that 'the believer perceives and understands, humanly speaking, his destruction… but he believes… his own destruction is impossible,' with God's help.[704]

This is *faith*, not fatalism. The former is a lively belief that God will render his help; the latter is 'dumb submission' which, almost like a spiritual 'inclosing reserve' is 'unable to pray.'[705] Drowning in necessity, the fatalist resembles Dante's slothful, sunk in viscosity, unable to voice anything but a bursting bubble above its own head.[706] Prayer, properly, can only be performed by a synthesised self.[707] Indeed, faith, and sound health itself, 'consists essentially in being able to resolve contradiction'[708] that is the development of this self. The journey of despair is not only to become aware of oneself as spirit, that is, as

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[703] Kierkegaard, *Sickness,* 40.

[704] Kierkegaard, *Sickness,* 40-1.

[705] Kierkegaard, *Sickness,* 41. In its likeness to the gurgling hymns of Dante's slothful, this suggests that *acedia* may infect any faith that does not retain its lively vitality.

[706] See above, Chapter Four.

[707] '…for possibility alone or for necessity alone to supply the conditions for the breathing of prayer is no more possible than it is for a man to breathe oxygen or nitrogen alone.' Kierkegaard, *Sickness,* 42.

[708] Kierkegaard, *Sickness,* 41.

synthesis, but to integrate the contradiction that this involves. We have seen that this cannot be done by attempting to elide the distress and confusion involved by giving preference to one pole of existence over the other. Neither can it be resolved through a kind of compromise that Kierkegaard terms 'Philistinism', that is, a gambling on 'probability' too diminutive to take account of the 'possibility' of the Divine.[709] This is due to the complete lack of imagination in this state: it does not suffer the distress of despair, but, even worse than one who despairs in necessity, it does not only restrict itself to the petty and unimportant, but outright '*tranquillises* itself in the trivial.'[710]

The controlling formula of despair itself is 'to despair over oneself.'[711] If this sickness really does tend unto death, that is to suicide ('in despair to will to be rid of oneself'[712]), not only does this express the desire to be rid of the self that one that is at the root of the condition, it also redoubles its own torment. This is because, in Kierkegaardian terms, 'despair… has to do with the eternal in a person,'[713] and eternity is something humanity cannot be rid of.[714] The self can never be entirely consumed because it is a derived self, and that from which it is derived is the Divine. Therefore, 'what [the despairer] really wills is to tear his self away from the Power that constituted it.'[715] To commit suicide while

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[709] Kierkegaard, *Sickness,* 43.

[710] Kierkegaard, *Sickness,* 43.

[711] Kierkegaard, *Sickness,* 70.

[712] Kierkegaard, *Sickness,* 50.

[713] Kierkegaard, *Sickness,* 47.

[714] Kierkegaard, *Sickness,* 47.

[715] Kierkegaard, *Sickness,* 18.

understanding what despair really means, therefore, is a more intense type of despair than to do so without such a clear understanding.[716] Nevertheless, with or without a teleology of the act of suicide, all despair 'is entirely without defiance,' as its nature is 'not to will to be.'[717] The impulse to shake off the self, with its burden of eternity, has various intermediate levels, that Kierkegaard relates as an ironic 'ladder of descent' of the contortions of the self, in an acute and sensitive reading that deepens those of Aquinas and Burton, even as it explicitly elucidates the gravity of the desire itself.

Even the man who has little conception of the eternal aspect of his own being, and who lives entirely angled towards earthly things in a state Kierkegaard refers to as 'the immediate,' exists in a 'prodigously fragile' state.[718] If a 'stroke of fate' deprives him of his security, or a loss causes the slightest need for reflection, he is devastated. Thus, 'despair is going on behind him without his knowing it.'[719] So great is the shock - and, as Kierkegaard rather harshly puts it, the weakness of the sufferer - that he wishes to be somebody else entirely. Unable to bear his own being, he does not wish to become a changed man in the future, or imagine how he might have become a better man in the past. Rather, his only wish is for a completely new self, and 'loves to think' that 'this most crazy of transformations… might be accomplished as easily as changing a

[716] Kierkegaard, *Sickness,* 52.

[717] Kierkegaard, *Sickness,* 53.

[718] Kierkegaard, *Sickness,* 57.

[719] Kierkegaard, *Sickness,* 57.

Concept.'[720] So unwilling is he to be himself, that he will not develop the self that he has, or, indeed, suffer any awareness of it. 'He comes to himself only once in a while, as it were on a visit, to see whether the change has not occurred,'[721] but will otherwise engage in self-forgetfulness. Here, the salutary potential of sorrow, as understood by Evagrius and Aquinas, curdles into sin, alienated from the tradition that might have contextualised the experience as educative.

Further down the ladder, awareness of despair, and its intensity increases. This both holds out the possibility of salvation, but also the toxic danger of the self's perversion as it struggles to achieve synthesis. For as the despairer realises that it is a weakness to reject the self over earthly trials, he or she can reject the humility associated with this weakness and, instead, invert the condition into 'introversion', 'the direct opposite to immediacy.'[722] The introverted impulse is to withdraw from the things of the world that have caused despair in others. However, if this is pursued despairingly, the self thus attempts to be self-sufficient and completely self-enclosed, suppressing the impulse to relate to others fully.

Kierkegaard here makes the comparison with the desert and the cloister. Like Burton, he draws a comparison with the 'respect' shown in the Middle Ages to

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[720] Kierkegaard, *Sickness,* 59.

[721] Kierkegaard, *Sickness,* 62.

[722] Kierkegaard, *Sickness,* 71.

the need for solitude and withdrawal and what these signify, noting that 'in the constant sociability of our age people shudder at solitude.'[723] However, the despairer 'gets no further than' occasional spells of solitude, after which 'he goes outside, as it were' back into that sociable world.[724] Without such a paradigm or structure the impulse towards withdrawal cannot be tempered and developed, and rapidly disintegrates into isolation and alienation. Nevertheless, the motivation behind this impulse is not a healthy one, anyway. The introverted despairer clings to *pride* that he has managed to avoid any weakness associated with things of the world as a sop to his disquiet, and is therefore unwilling to recognise any need for God's help - or, indeed, the humility to accept the possibility of improvement on his own part. Refusing to be oneself, introversion 'disowns' the possibility of weakness 'as a father disinherits a son'[725] and therefore 'will not humble itself in faith… in order to gain itself again.'[726]

Finally, one comes to defiance, in which one is 'despairingly determined to be oneself.'[727] This may seem to be a contradiction in Kierkegaard's terms. Nevertheless, it is the final Gordian knot of unused despair. This is 'despair by

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[723] Kierkegaard, *Sickness,* 73.

[724] Kierkegaard, *Sickness,* 73.

[725] Kierkegaard, *Sickness,* 70.

[726] Kierkegaard, *Sickness,* 71

[727] Kierkegaard, *Sickness,* 76. On this culmination, see D. Roberts, *Kierkegaard's Analysis of Radical Evil* (London: Continuum, 2006), 'What is tragic is that we have come to use our resourcefulness against ourselves: we have so enchanted and seduced ourselves by our own resources that we are unable to see that we are barefoot and homeless.' 105.

the aid of the eternal,'[728] that pursues despair to the end point noted above, 'to detach the self from every relation to the Power which posited it.'[729] Defiance is determined to have full control over itself and its destiny and rejects all divine interference or aid in favour of retaining this twisted parody of volition. 'The self wants to enjoy the entire satisfaction of making itself into itself… it wants to have the honour of this poetical, this masterly plan.'[730] Nevertheless, this 'performance' is entirely arbitrary, abstracted from the Eternal and the Divine as it is, and can therefore be, equally arbitrarily, resolved into nothing.

This active, experimenting contingency of the self-contained self Kierkegaard calls 'Stoicism - yet without thinking only of this philosophic sect.' While the introvert deals in suppression, the defiant despairer is unfailingly busy and a producer of dazzling novelties in her more or less conscious attempt to compensate for her rejected foundation in eternity. Such contortions in the pursuit of self-control call to mind the encyclopaedic and multifarious efforts of Petrarch to out-discipline, out-think and out-talk his *aegritudo*. In Kierkegaardian terms, the poet indeed experienced despair intensely, but, in his suffering, clung too closely to his own self, and his belief in the efficacy of his own genius, to effectively admit of the divine help he really needed.

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[728] Kierkegaard, *Sickness,* 76.

[729] Kierkegaard, *Sickness,* 77.

[730] Kierkegaard, *Sickness,* 78.

It is not only the more positive aspects of one's nature that one might refuse to abrogate in the name of despair. One might refuse to hope for the relief of an earthly burden in order to preserve the self-righteous rage into which one can twist one's suffering.[731] This is the deepest, and most demonic level of despair, one which rejects hope and is outright afraid of eternity[732] because through them one might lose that ''(demonically understood)… advantage over other[s].'[733]

Nevertheless, as Kierkegaard says, the more intense the despair, the more the possibility of salvation presents itself. Next door to this despairing rage that insists on preserving the offence that it identifies as its own self is the offence of the Christian doctrine of sin. In both *The Concept of Anxiety* and *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard describes the contradictions of guilt and salvation as 'incomprehensible', and almost insulting to human nature. Indeed, he understands them as 'the dialectical factor in everything Christian,' and the guarantor of faith: 'things so fantastic that paganism might well declare them bosh.'[734] He writes that they are 'pure *impertinence* against man, accusation upon accusation [italics mine].'[735] It is more than appropriate that he describes this 'impertinence' in Jobean terms, as 'the charge which the Deity as

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[731] Kierkegaard, *Sickness,* 82.

[732] For the characteristic of the demonic is to fear the good; see above.

[733] Kierkegaard, *Sickness,* 80.

[734] Kierkegaard, *Sickness,* 146.

[735] Kierkegaard, *Sickness,* 108.

prosecutor takes the liberty of lodging against man.'[736] It seems wilful on the part of the accuser, for there is nothing that humanity can do about the guilt imputed to it simply for being less than divine, but is equally inevitable, a necessary consequence of the comparison. Moreover, that this can be demonstrated philosophically means that, *contra* Socrates, to fail to accept this eminently intelligible concept renders sin, not the result of ignorance, but a wilful rejection of knowledge. To follow this train of thought with the aid of reason alone is to be caught between the horns of this contradiction; to remain there is to despair. For Kierkegaard, the only means of escape is the abandonment of oneself to faith.

Indeed, it can be as dangerous to simply accept this contradiction, but neglect to fully accept the implications of faith, as it is to simply reject it outright. To despair over one's sin is to fall just before the finish line. In this case, sin 'would become consistent in itself.'[737] It 'will have nothing to do with the good,' but is rather a self-reverential state, that almost fetishises its own sinfulness. Just as Aquinas recognised the danger of despairing of forgiveness,[738] so Kierkegaard describes the self-enclosed echo-chamber of this 'second detachment' from the good. He also rejects entirely the romantic martyrdom of 'never forgiving' *oneself* for a sin, describing it as 'a more

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[736] Kierkegaard, *Sickness,* 108.

[737] Kierkegaard, *Sickness,* 125.

[738] See above, Chapter Three.

intensive characterisation of sin,' in its breach with the forgiveness held out by God.[739]

Nevertheless, in contrast with all of this, the pedagogical experience of despair, like that of anxiety, is both 'an advantage [and] a drawback.' Indeed, abstracted from from 'any concrete despairer,' it might be called 'an immense advantage.'[740] Despite the concrete possibilities of disadvantage for particular subjects, 'the possibility of this sickness is man's advantage over the beast; to be sharply observant of this sickness constitutes the Christian's advantage over the natural man; to be healed of this sickness is the Christian's bliss.'[741]

In this passage, Kierkegaard sums up the dialectical content of his work on despair, and also on anxiety. This dialectical ricochet not only reflects the equally dialectical formation of human nature itself as 'spirit', but the *aporia* of faith and salvation. It is little wonder that the apprehension of this traversing and integration of extremes is freighted with unease. It is both 'an infinite advantage' to be able to despair and 'the greatest misfortune and misery' to actually suffer it.[742] While despair signals the composite self of the individual that is derived from its relationship to the divine creator, that self remains

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[739] Kierkegaard, *Sickness,* 128.

[740] Kierkegaard, *Sickness,* 11.

[741] Kierkegaard, *Sickness,* 11.

[742] Kierkegaard, *Sickness,* 11.

unstable as long as that relationship to the divine is not regularised, and its contradictions dissolved, in faith.[743]

Misery, then, is as potentially educative for Kierkegaard as it was for Evagrius, for Thomas Aquinas, and for Dante, and by the elucidation of its dangers, he demonstrates, not only the great benefits that he ascribes to this experience, but also, its absolute existential necessity. Indeed, he not only elucidates, but also radicalises that place of misery and melancholy in Christian life. Just as Job remained faithful to his understanding of God, so the Kierkegaardian must face up to, and remain faithful to the 'offensive' lesson of despair and anxiety. The question of human existence is not *whether* one shall suffer misery, but *how*. For Kierkegaard, not only are all called to misery, to melancholy and to despair, but, more than that, all are called to face it with *heroism*. Indeed, for Kierkegaard, to be a melancholy hero *is* to fulfil the teleology of one's humanity.[744]

The Knights of Faith: Kierkegaard and the Bible

To traverse the paradox of that teleology, however, is not to immediately be cured of misery. Rather, the paradox of faith itself can make demands on the

[743] Meanwhile, 'The social dimension of despair is rooted in the nature of the relations between individuals who do not exist in faith… [there is] ubiquity of despair in human relationships that have not become Spirit by virtue of each willing the other as neighbour.' J. W. Elrod, "The Social Dimension of Despair" in R. L. Perkins, ed., *International Kierkegaard Commentary,* 107-119.

[744] This movement is termed by Podmore, 'The Melancholy Theophany,' by which 'melancholy *alterity* forces the self to come to terms with the heterogeneity of the divine.' S. D. Podmore, *Kierkegaard and the Self Before God: Anatomy of the Abyss,* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2011), 68.

heroic believer so astonishing and appalling that his or her heroism is barely recognisable as such. Kierkegaard illustrates these particularly distressing requirements of faith by reference to the narratives of iconic religious figures, not only to philosophically triangulate their journeys systematically, but also to follow their emotional and psychological process as human individuals in relationship with the Divine.

Just as he attempted to approach the moment of the Fall in *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard follows the steps of Abraham as he climbed Mount Moriah in *Fear and Trembling*. In attempting to account for the Patriarch's agreement to the sacrifice of his only son, Isaac, the Danish philosopher rejects any understanding of Abraham's faith as 'immense resignation.'[745] He does not draw from the narrative the lesson that Abraham must be purged of too-great an attachment to mortal things. Rather, he affirms the Patriarch's love for his son. His faith, then, consists in on 'a mighty trampoline leap' that is made upon the material of 'the absurd.'[746] Rather than renunciation, 'by faith I receive everything… By faith Abraham did not renounce Isaac, but by faith Abraham received Isaac.'[747]

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[745] S. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling, Repetition*, H. V. Hong, E. H. Hong, trans. and eds., (Princeton University Press, 1983), 37. Though 'infinite resignation' is the last stage before faith (46) it is not faith itself, and, indeed, 'does not require faith' (48.) It is what Petrarch attempted in his flirtation with Stoicism, a 'peace and rest… which, in its pain, reconciles itself to existence.' (45.)

[746] Kierkegaard, *Trembling* 36-7.

[747] Kierkegaard, *Trembling* 49. That Kierkegaard's narrator, Johannes de Silentio, did not himself fully understand this dialectic of renunciation and reception, see Hall, *Kierkegaard and the Treachery of Love*, (Cambridge University Press: 2004) esp. Chapter Two, "Provoking the question: deceiving ourselves in *Fear and Trembling*", 51-83.

It is this 'prodigious paradox that is the content of Abraham's life' that Kierkegaard finds 'shatter[ing]' to consider.[748] Due to its inhabitation of contradiction, he writes, 'I can think myself *into* hero; I cannot think myself into Abraham'[749] because 'faith begins precisely where thought stops.'[750] Nevertheless, Kierkegaard's aim in *Fear and Trembling* is to locate the liftoff-point of faith, and to trace the horror of the Patriarch's journey, a journey that 'lasted three days and the good part of a fourth' and 'like a leech, [to] suck out all the anxiety and distress and torment out of a father's suffering.'[751]

The thesis of the work is that Abraham's actions, born from faith, take precedence over ethical norms. For Kierkegaard, the individual standing in 'an absolute relation to the absolute' is superior to universal, horizontal, inter-human 'social morality,' something that he describes as part of the incomprehensible paradox of faith.[752] Therefore, Abraham is decidedly *not* comparable with a tragic hero, whose drama takes place, and is intelligible, *within* the universal ethical paradigm, and 'gives up the certain for the even more certain.'[753] The tragic hero 'expresses the universal and sacrifices himself

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[748] Kierkegaard, *Trembling* 33.

[749] Kierkegaard, *Trembling* 33.

[750] Kierkegaard, *Trembling* 53.

[751] Kierkegaard, *Trembling* 53.

[752] Kierkegaard, *Trembling* 54-56.

[753] Kierkegaard, *Trembling* 60. However, for a Catholic understanding of Abraham's narrative within Thomistic natural law that argues that what Kierkegaard would describe as extra-ethical heroism in fact, while retaining its paradox, becomes intelligible within the universal context, not of the state, but of the church, using the hagiography of St Perpetua as a test case: J. Mulder, Jr., *Kierkegaard and the Catholic Tradition: Conflict and Dialogue* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis: 2010), 37-66.

for it.'[754] Even if the church were to demand an immense sacrifice from one of its members, that faithful individual would remain a mere tragic hero, fulfilling a demand of the universal.[755] Rather, he has 'transgressed' the ethical and is, according to Kierkegaard, 'either a murderer or a man of faith'[756] as his logic is utterly incomprehensible. While we can share in the tears of the tragic hero, and find catharsis in imaginative empathy,[757] Abraham only occasions astonishment, and perhaps even outrage. Kierkegaard laments that his anxiety and torment have never been adequately rendered in poetry, but one wonders if this is even possible, such is the alienation of this 'single individual' from 'the universal'.[758] Indeed, the 'paradox' of his faith 'cannot be explain[ed] to

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[754] Kierkegaard, *Trembling* 79. For a subtle and nuanced reading of Kierkegaard's understanding and development of, and beyond, the genre and tradition of tragedy, see D. Greenspan, *The Passion of Infinity: Kierkegaard, Aristotle and the Rebirth of Tragedy*, (Walter de Gruyter: Berlin, New York, 2008), 'It exposes this reason to the groundlessness of its grounds, the darkness and unpredictable depths of the sea it foolishly tries to chart, not by humiliating reason formally (the paradox is no logical contradiction), but by insisting on its finite human nature and, through a paradoxical offence, forcing the eyes of this fragile body toward a religious reality the heart and stomach cannot contain.' 206.

[755] Kierkegaard, *Trembling* 74.

[756] Kierkegaard, *Trembling* 57.

[757] Kierkegaard, *Trembling* 61.

[758] Kierkegaard, *Trembling* 61. Indeed, Mooney subtly complicates this by observing that 'It can be no part of moral-religious concern to "long to see" another's suffering. Watching others suffer or grieve is the opposite of faithfully keeping watch with them in their hour of need.' Our morbid curiosity, and, indeed, Anti-Climacus', to see the terrible moment on Mount Moriah, is, in fact, a diversion from real faith - and from that *compassion* that, we have seen, is enjoined upon those who witness suffering, even, or perhaps especially when, this suffering is incomprehensible. E. F. Mooney, *On Soren Kierkegaard: Dialogue, Polemics, Lost Intimacy, and Time*, (Ashgate, 2007), 148.

anyone else.'[759] This inexpressibility is what isolates the knight of faith.[760] Not only does it alienate him from the universal, but this vocation also cuts him off from relationship with others of his own kind. 'The one knight of faith cannot help the other at all… This is an absolute isolation.'[761] Indeed, the distress and anxiety of one immersed in the paradox *is*, in fact, the very incommunicability of his or her situation.[762]

However, Kierkegaard's aim is to emphasise, if not to adequately render, 'the distress, the anxiety, the paradox' in order not 'to speak inhumanly about greatness.'[763] By way of illustration, he compares Abraham's case to that of Mary, mother of God. Not only had she the 'anxiety, distress and paradox' that is the natural concomitant of pregnancy and childbirth[764] but God cursed her even as he blessed her, Kierkegaard writes, for 'the angel went only to Mary,

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[759] Kierkegaard, *Trembling* 62.

[760] Law understands this aspect of the 'paradox' as a (non-traditional, to be sure) apophatic aspect in Kierkegaard's thought: 'In this limitation of reason by the paradox the apophatic strand in Kierkegaard's thought once again becomes apparent. Indeed, Kierkegaard argues that any attempt to explain the paradox, any procedure which entails the application of reason to the paradox in order to make it acceptable for human thought, is fundamentally mistaken. Such activity is akin to the nonsense of attempting to express an inexpressible joy. It robs the paradox of its force and reduces it to a mere 'rhetorical expression'. A true understanding of the paradox does not mean, then, attempting to make the paradox intelligible. Such an understanding of the paradox is a misunderstanding. A true explanation will rather attempt to explain what the paradox is, and this means explaining that the paradox is unintelligible.' D. Law, *Kierkegaard As Negative Theologian*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 182. On the concept of the knight of faith, thus, 'What the knight of faith has that the Aristotelian self does not is another domain altogether in which action takes place, a domain that is neither the public domain of social intercourse nor the private domain which belongs essentially to it. This is why the ethical and religious stages are so sharply distinguished by Kierkegaard.' M. Westphal, 'Kierkegaard's Psychology and Unconscious Despair" in R. L. Perkins, ed., *International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Sickness Unto Death* (Macon, Georgia: Marcer University Press, 1987), 42.

[761] Kierkegaard, *Trembling* 71, 79.

[762] Kierkegaard, *Trembling* 113.

[763] Kierkegaard, *Trembling* 63-4.

[764] Kierkegaard, *Trembling* 65.

and no one could understand her…. Has any woman ben as infringed upon as was Mary…[?]'[765]

Yet both Mary and Abraham need neither admiration or tears, for they are not tragic heroes. Indeed, this is the very mark of their greatness, and perhaps the key, not only to Augustine's revulsion for the theatre, but also to the peculiar character of Bellerophontes' heroism. Kierkegaard writes that 'one can become a tragic hero through one's own strength,' and, indeed, a tragic hero often becomes so specifically *in spite of* his strength; the tragedy lying thus in the spectacle of its destruction, tied in the knots of its own inevitability - one thinks of Agamemnon slain by Clytemnestra.

However, one can only become 'a knight of faith' by a lonely road that absurdly pursues the Divine, even beyond the broad and manicured paths of social ethics, and into the wilds of incomprehensibility. Bellerophontes flew beyond the desert and the *polis*, but what he saw as he approached Olympus remained inexpressible beyond ceremonial pieties. This inexpressibility places him outside the strict structure of the tragic hero. Although his fall reinstates the universal ethical order, the drama of the play is in his questioning of this order. He does not sacrifice himself to its demands - rather he is redeemed by his daring. In this peculiar *lacuna* in the logic of the narrative, Bellerophontes hints at the inexpressibility of the absurd.

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[765] Kierkegaard, *Trembling* 65.

The iconic figure of Job, meanwhile, is dealt with in *Repetition*, a work which contains the letters of a 'young man' as he attempts to rationalise his decision to break off an engagement - a decision Kierkegaard himself had recently made. It was published simultaneously with *Fear and Trembling,* but, rather than attempting to elucidate the journey of Patriarchal figure from the point of view of the narrative, the epistles of *Repetition* reflect on the Book of Job as a personal companion in present troubles.

However, in an empathetic identification, the letters, too, reflect on the 'empty period' that goes unrecorded in the narrative; in this case, the seven days when Job was silent and attempts to imagine 'what went on in [Job's] soul…'[766] Nevertheless, the significance of Job for the 'young man' is, decisively, in his expression of his grief, and the legitimisation that this affords to the similarly troubled, as both a 'witness' and a 'spokesman', an *imprimatur* that the writer likens to the good deeds for the needy that Job performed in his fortunate days.[767] Most of all, in making available this language of broken-heartedness to all, and not just to poets, Job breaks sorrow out of the ghetto of romanticism and sentimentality.[768] The young man asks ironically if, 'there is so much fear of God today that the sorrowing do not need what was customary in those days of old… Has the fear of God then increased - or fear and cowardliness?'[769] He

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[766] S. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling, Repetition*, trans. and eds., H. V. Hong, E. H. Hong, (Princeton University Press, 1983), 197.

[767] Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, 197.

[768] Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, 198.

[769] Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, 197-8.

affirms, firstly, the, albeit temporary, relief that the expression of sorrow affords, likening it to the kind of ungenerosity that would deprive widows and orphans.[770] However, he also affirms the efficacy of Job's complaints with regard to relationship with the divine. As in Thomas Aquinas' account, Job's piety is indeed the prerequisite and foundation of his appeal, and it is through this piety that Job speaks 'before the tribunal of the Most High.'[771] Again, with irony, it is noted that 'the Lord… can certainly defend himself. But how is he to defend himself when no one dares to complain as befits a man.'[772] Moreover, this defence, 'the thunder,' is 'a reply from God,' that is, a relationship with him, which, 'even if it crushes a man' is nevertheless a true experience of the Divine.[773]

Indeed, by 'attaching [himself] to [Job's] following,' the young man not only makes use of the empathetic figure Job cuts in human history - a metaphysical aspect of the self that belongs to both the individual and the whole [human] race, as we have seen - but also, in re-reading - indeed, re-reading so earnestly that one feels he is almost *imbibing* - the narrative with such attention and passion, in some sense enacts that 'repetition' that is Constantin Constaninus' (*Repetition's* editor) philosophical contribution: suspending temporal sequence through an earnestness of active memory that, rather than

[770] Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, 197.

[771] Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, 198.

[772] Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, 198.

[773] Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, 198.

simply returning to a previous event, rather, by recapitulation, makes a new one.

Indeed, this repetition crosses into the 'young man's' own self-narrative. In the very next epistle, the 'young man' relates his own 'Jobean moment,' expressing both his profound depression and his defiance of common norms. Even though, he says, 'I am at the end of my rope. I am nauseated by life; it is insipid - without salt and meaning,' he nevertheless insists that 'Even if the whole world rose up against me even if all the scholastics argued with me, even if it were a matter of life and death - I am still in the right.'[774] It is this latter that, he maintains, is crucial. Even once his depression has passed, he remains fascinated by Job's stubbornness in rectitude, designating it 'freedom's passion'. In imputing error to neither himself or to God,[775] Job displays the kind of absurd faith he shares with the Abraham of *Fear and Trembling:* 'To him every human interpretation is only a misconception, and to him in relation to God all his troubles are but a sophism that he, to be sure, cannot solve, but he trusts that God can do it.'[776] However, Job is not, upon this reading, like Abraham, a hero or a knight of faith. He remains in the category of 'ordeal', that is, 'a purely personal relationship of opposition to God.'[777] It is in him that 'the disputes at the boundaries of faith are fought out…'[778] but he does not

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[774] Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, 200-1.

[775] and being 'sufficiently noble to go on loving him', a formulation described as 'demonic' - Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, 207.

[776] Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, 207.

[777] Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, 210.

[778] Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, 210.

pass, strictly speaking, beyond the boundaries of the ethical. That Job is in the right is expressible and demonstrable in a way that Abraham's being in the right is not. Nevertheless, in his reconciliation with God, and his receiving back the goods of life, Job enjoys a repetition by which earthly history is earnestly infused by the eternal.[779] Moreover, the repetition involved in the re-reading of his narrative is, for the 'young man', 'an ineffable comfort.'[780] This is underscored in Kierkegaard's *Upbuilding Discourse* on Job, published in the same year as *Repetition*, when he refers to Job as 'a teacher and guide of humankind.'[781]

Nevertheless, it may seem puzzling that Kierkegaard, a writer who so emphasises the transformative power of anxiety and despair, should rank Job below Abraham. However, it is this very evaluation that underscores the true radicalism of Kierkegaard's understanding of the potential of sorrow. In a later work, he notes that, for all of Job's virtues, the only truly innocent human who has ever existed is Christ himself. Therefore, his insistence that he was 'in the right' can only, for the Christian, go so far, as 'the Christian knows that only one suffered before God as innocent… between him and every human being there is an eternal difference. That is why it now applies with renewed clarity that in relation to God a human being always suffers as guilty.'[782]

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[779] Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, 212.

[780] Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, 213.

[781] S. Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, trans. and eds., H. V. Hong, E. H. Hong, (Princeton University Press, 1990), 109.

[782] Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits,* trans and ed., H. Hong, E. Hong (Princeton University Press, 2009), 183-188.

To be a melancholy hero, in Kierkegaardian terms, involves pressing beyond even the iconic example of Job himself. The 'trampoline leap' of faith has to cross a deeper chasm, and its absurdity has to contain a greater 'impertinence' and 'offence'[783] and the work of despair and anxiety is so much more profound. This is because it was for the 'first time in Christ that God is man's goal and measure'[784] and this intensification of potentiation also intensifies the possibilities of both self and sin.[785] Indeed, the particular vocation of the Christian to the passage of sorrow is reinforced by Kierkegaard in *The Concept of Anxiety*, where he writes that 'the only one who sorrowed innocently over sinfulness was Christ.'[786] He was not obliged to do this, having no part in either the qualitative or quantitative generation of sin within humanity. Nor was sorrow developmentally necessary to his understanding of his own self, 'for Christ was more than an individual.'[787] Rather, 'He sorrowed as one who freely chose to carry all the sin of the world and to suffer its punishment.'[788] Sorrow, for Christ, was a necessary part of his human existence, but in a completely

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[783] In an echo of Dante's depiction of the potentially stupefying effects of philosophy in the *Purgatorio,* Evans reads Kierkegaard's understanding of paradox as not so much a contradiction, as '… a tension rooted in the prideful pretensions of reason to autonomy and completeness.' C. S. Evans, "Faith as the *Telos* of Morality: A Reading of *Fear and Trembling"* in C. S. Evans, ed., *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self: Collected Essays*, (Baylor University Press: Waco, 2006), 209.

[784] Kierkegaard, *Sickness*, 131.

[785] Kierkegaard, *Sickness*, 130-131.

[786] Kierkegaard, *Concept*, 38.

[787] Kierkegaard, *Concept,* 38.

[788] Kierkegaard, *Concept*, 38. On Christ's suffering, see D. Gouwens, *Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 167-172, at the heart of which suffering is 'that his divine love is hated. This unique suffering indicates again that the suffering of Christ is the suffering of God…' 172.

different way that it is necessary for the existence of every other human being, and, because of the nature of this difference, his sorrow is as perfect as the rest of his being. The sorrow that theologians from Evagrius onwards advised as being salutary to ethical development, in Christ is not reflexive, but, rather, a pure compassion. In his sorrow, Christ relates to a disordered world in empathy and sympathy, and it is through this compassionate sorrow that he incarnates the recreation of justice and the order of God. Christ, then, rather than Job, in Kierkegaard's philosophy, becomes the archetypal melancholy hero.

Conclusion

Joshua Furnel suggests that Kierkegaard shared the spirit of the Catholic *Ressourcement* theologians.[789] Certainly, in the cases of despair and anxiety, it may be seen that he revived the ethic of a pre-modern understanding of sorrow that conceives of it as a function of dislocation both within oneself and within one's relationship to the society - and the cosmos - to which one belongs, and that, therefore, if faced, in courage and in faith, it can have a crucial developmental, even revelatory, potential. It is Kierkegaard's particular achievement to unite these personal and interpersonal aspects within an existential Christian philosophy that enables this prophetic attitude towards malignant misery to speak to a society vastly different to those in which it was originally conceived.

[789] J. Furnel, *Catholic Theology After Kierkegaard,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

While anxiety marks the initial apprehension of difference that signals the beginning of psychological and spiritual maturity, and despair reflects the struggle for balance within the polarised individual who develops spirit, both augur, for Kierkegaard, a developing understanding of the metaphysical human nature, its place within a created cosmos, and its relationship to its creator. Both can result in a diffuse *acedia* or a defiant spiritual despair if the individual attempts to evade them and the demands of its own dialectical self, pursuing infinity over finitude, the individual over the human race, or vice-versa. However, if faithfully attended to, these states demonstrate the contradictory metaphysical paradox whose solution is in the 'offence' of Christianity, and whose melancholy hero is the 'knight of faith.'

Conclusion: Jesus Christ, Melancholy Hero

Christianity is, above all, a religion of hope. For hope to have meaning, however, it must regard the present situation as unsatisfactory. We have seen that St Augustine considered the positive potential of sorrow a 'nice question' but, in a specifically confessional context, understands the Pauline description of creation's 'groaning' and the believer's own 'longing' as authentically Christian expressions of sorrow: a sorrow that is coterminous with hope.

This peculiarly Christian intimate fusion of hope to the experience of sorrow is, however, in the spirit of certain pre-Christian understandings of the character and potential, for both the individual and for his or her society, of misery and grief. Both ancient near-eastern narratives, biblical and otherwise, and Greek expressions of legend and analysis of behaviour, portray the melancholic griever as occupying a prophetic position with respect to a disintegrated society and ruptured relationships. This position is enacted in an exile to an 'othered' landscape such as a wilderness, and a devastating internal emotional 'exile.' That these two are linked is made clear by the often-dialogic forms in which the sorrowful, even suicidal state is expressed, an expression that often includes a plea for a notably-absent compassion from peers.

The significance of this social aspect in the depression of the individual is deepened by the theological dimension also found in these ancient texts. That figures such as Bellerophon and Job ground their protest in interrogations of

divine equity reveals a mindset that regards a continuity that ought to exist between heavenly and earthly justice. Indeed, it is this desperate 'faithful protest' that merits the theophany granted to those who, through the extremity of sorrow, confront the very limits of their humanity, and confirms, by its divine sanction, the substance of their social dissent.

However, when contextualised within the broader narrative of Christian social heterodoxy, compassionate fellowship, and eschatological hope, this understanding of sorrow deepens further, and becomes fruitful, both for the moral development of the individual, and the stabilisation of the cosmic moral order. However, the neglect of this hopeful dimension can lead to sorrow's disintegration into *acedia* or despair, and strips it of this positive potential. Thus, it is absolutely necessary that misery, grief, and melancholy be theologically grounded; and, if they are, they can lead the sufferer to a moral evolution, and even, perhaps, to God.

The vice of *acedia*, mentioned above, is first formulated by the early monastic fathers, most influentially by Evagrius of Pontus. When embroiled in this sin, the individual is diffused in daydreams and dissatisfaction, their commitment to the actuality of their vocation, or even their daily lives, rendered distasteful - something that most significantly includes an alienation from spiritual goods. This is sorrow collapsed in upon itself, estranged from its social, and metaphysical, context. Although subsumed, since the time of Thomas Aquinas, under the sin of sloth, this particular conjunction of tendencies resurfaces

repeatedly in the literature of Christian engagement with sorrow. Indeed, the dangers of distraction by phantasmal thoughts, and even emotions, finds a striking expression in St Augustine's youthful love of the theatre, and, later, centuries later, will find its twin in Kierkegaard's 'inclosing reserve.'

For Evagrius, Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas, however, sorrow is acknowledged to have a salutary potential. Most basically, the experience of the frustration and the limits of human capacities, if reflected upon, can be a source of self-awareness, especially regarding one's own attachment to material goods, and the concerns of earthly life, above spiritual matters and the demands of Christian living. Sorrow is, moreover, for Augustine and for Thomas especially, a natural part of human life, and its social dimension is strongly implied in their emphasis on the healing power of friendship, and the crucial importance of compassion.

This emphasis on fellowship is prominent in Thomas Aquinas' commentary on the Book of Job. However, Thomas is also keen to describe Job in almost scholarly terms. In order to establish and clarify this characterisation, he repeatedly reiterates Job's anxiety to avoid blasphemy, and his remaining within the boundaries of faith. However, in describing Job's discourses in terms of a medieval university disputation, Thomas highlights the way in which the experience of sorrow has driven the Old Testament hero to pursue a new and more profound understanding of the relationship of humanity and the divine.

It is significant, however, that the theophany that marks the climax of the book is elucidated by Aquinas, not so much in doctrinal, systematic terms, but, rather, as an enumeration of the observable majesty of divine power. The more quantifiable moral of the narrative is in the crucial part that compassion is shown to play in a just society, as Job becomes a mediator for his former interlocutors.

This intersection of personal theophany and social reconstruction finds parallel expression in Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*. This epic poem, indeed, is contextualised in the conjunction of two experiences of sorrow: the Pilgrim's wilderness alienation, and Beatrice's heavenly grief for his state. In his journey through both hell and Purgatory, the Pilgrim finds that sorrow, in its medieval characterisation as sloth, exists at the crux of the geography of sin. Indeed, on the mountain of Purgatory, this axial position occasions the enactment of sloth and near-despair to act as a turning-point for the Pilgrim, whose experience of crushing, terrifying sorrow demonstrates both the inadequacy of philosophical models to redeem human nature, and the necessity of a complete abandonment of the self to God - and the blessedness and comfort attendant on this abandonment. In the beatitude of heaven, meanwhile, the souls who there find their eternal home are nevertheless, like all those the Pilgrim has encountered, intimately interested in earthly society, even to the extent of expressing terrifying rage at church abuses. Dante's narrative of the individual soul's exploration of the divine order unites personal progress with a profound

concern for the justice of human society that is embedded within that order expressed in creation.

As is demonstrated in the ambivalent positions of Francesco Petrarch, however, the flowering of the renaissance inaugurated a laicisation of certain monastic ideals, such as solitude and 'leisured' contemplation, without embracing either the moral rigour, or social aspects in which those ideals were originally contextualised. When combined with Marsilio Ficino's equation of the heroic melancholic of Ps-Aristotle with the intellectual, this led to an impoverished conception of the potential of sorrow that was stripped of its social-prophetic aspect and largely excused from moral concerns. However, Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy's* encyclopaedic sprawl cataloguing the causes and consequences of that condition did reflect upon particular concrete social contexts in which it could occur - including a markedly non-idealised narrative of scholarly life. However, although he strikingly acknowledges the benefits of the monastic form of life for those prone to melancholic symptoms, Burton fails to seriously consider the possibility that, and the means by which, sorrow can be of benefit to the sufferer, or the broader manner in which it can act as a barometer of social, as well as psychic disorder.

In the work of Søren Kierkegaard, however, these two aspects are united and reinvigorated for an atomised age. Kierkegaard understands the miserable states of dread and anxiety as liminal and revelatory, and, above all, crucial to the development of the Christian specifically. Though freighted with the

dangers of both stubborn, terminal despair and the 'inclosing reserve' mentioned above, they are also the means by which the limits of human nature are tested and experienced. Indeed, it is reflection upon these states that elucidates the relationship of humanity to the divine, as well as the character of that humanity as a synthetic nature participating in both the infinite and the finite, the moment and history, and the individual and the [human] race. Sorrowful states reflect imbalances in this synthesis, but it is their suffering that becomes the occasion upon which that synthesis can be developed in the aspect of the self Kierkegaard terms 'spirit.'

The 'offence' of Christianity, whose contradictory content, accepted in faith, provides the locus of the synthesis, dissolves the impasse created by the simultaneous claims of the poles of human nature. The nature of that faith - though not its specific content - is examined by Kierkegaard through the narratives of the biblical icons, Job and Abraham, and, thus, linked intimately with their own harrowing experiences of sorrow and anxiety. Indeed, in Abraham's case, and in Mary, the Mother of Jesus', this involves a 'transcending' of social ethical norms in order, by faith, to establish, heroically, a new intimate relationship between humanity and the divine that, in turn, reveals the character of the covenant both more clearly and deeply.

However, for Kierkegaard, one individual suffered such states, not in order to develop spirit, or because he shared the guilt of a limited humanity before God:

Jesus. Rather, he *chose* to suffer for our sins - on account of humanity's disorder within and amongst itself.

Christ's sorrow is, therefore, perhaps the purest example of that melancholy discussed in this thesis: suffering the disjointedness of a fallen world within one's own person. In him, is the very type of the Christian model of the melancholy genius and hero. In the Gospel narrative, we find themes that epitomise, inform and complete the narratives of Job and Bellerophon, and the ideas of Aquinas and Kierkegaard. Indeed, the figure of Christ is one to whom both Kierkegaard and the Angelic Doctor, return time and time again. For the Danish philosopher, Christ felt anxiety more deeply than any man, according to, not despite, his perfection.

> As a synthesis he can be in anxiety… Only in this sense can the words be understood when it is said of Christ that he was anxious unto death, as well as the words spoken to Judas by Christ, what you are going to do, do quickly.[790]

Thus is implied that, while despair's possibility is one that must be annihilated by the Christian, anxiety (or *angst* or dread) is something endemic to human nature that accompanies us at moments of drama and tension, situating us metaphysically and thus ethically. The contrast between the poles of the human it's composite identity is even more marked in the case of Christ, and the

[790] Kierkegaard, *Concept,* 155.

anxiety acting as midwife to their transcendence must be correspondingly heightened.

Even more than anxiety, however, Christ experienced, more than once, that terrible isolation that Aquinas considered the worst of Job's trials. Solitude accompanied Jesus at the most crucial, and what he describes graphically as the most traumatic, moments of his life, even during the press of bodies that surrounded His Passion. His disciples could not stay awake to pray with Him in Gethsemane, drowsing like the *acediac* Dante on the Cornice of Sloth, while their Lord was 'deeply grieved, even to death,'[791] and asked them to watch with him; rather, they slept, isolated in their own 'grief.'[792] Most emblematically, on the Cross, he cries out, in the words of Psalm 22, the greatest expression of social, metaphysical and spiritual isolation in Scripture, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'[793] In doing so, he embodies the loneliness, and the craving for fellowship and compassion expressed by Job, not only in a human way, but in an unimaginable self-alienation only possible for the Son of God: the rupturing of the most intimate social bonds. It is little wonder that the earth shook at such a fundamental fracture in the cosmos.

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[791] Mark 14:34.

[792] Luke 22:45.

[793] Ps 22:1a.

Equally, at the very inception of His ministry, Jesus went alone into the desert and was there tempted. Indeed, as Aquinas notes, "the devil prefers to assault a man who is alone… and so it was the Christ went out into the desert, as to a field of battle,'[794] as he would later be imitated by the Desert Fathers. Indeed, it might be considered that this experience of temptation was only the first battle in a life-long war, for, having defeated the devil's temptations towards sensual, worldly and individualistic goods, Christ went on, throughout his life, to be 'tempted in every way we are'[795] by the experience of isolation, pain and death. For 'it is plain that in His will of sensuality and in His rational will considered as nature, Christ could will what God did not…'[796]

Along with Augustine, Aquinas affirms that 'inasmuch as the sensitive appetite naturally shrinks from bodily hurt, by sorrow if it is present, and by fear if it is future; and thus fear was present in Christ, even as sorrow.'[797] As Gondreau notes, 'Aquinas does not make Jesus' express will [in Gethsemene] to forgo his impending death a moment of purely spiritual anguish, but an affective one as well.'[798] Furthermore,

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[794] Aquinas, *Summa,* 2.2ae 41.2.

[795] Hebrews 4:15.

[796] Aquinas, *Summa,* 2.2ae 18.5.

[797] Aquinas *Summa* 2.2 15.7.

[798] P. Gondreau, "St. Thomas Aquinas, The Communication of Idioms and the Suffering of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane" in J. Keating and T.J. White, eds., *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering* (Eerdmans, 2009), 233.

> Christ's soul could apprehend things as hurtful either to Himself, as His passion and death – or to others, as the sin of his disciples… And hence, as there could be true pain in Christ, so too could there be true sorrow.[799]

It is of this latter cause for sorrow that Kierkegaard writes, 'The only one who sorrowed innocently was Christ… He sorrowed as one who freely chose to carry the sins of the world.'[800] The 'education' of despair and anxiety, though as little proper to the Saviour as sin, becomes part of the human burden that he vicariously bears on our behalf - and, in a sense, at our behest. Indeed, though, during His Passion, Christ's higher reason still enjoyed a perfect orientation towards its divine object, 'if the soul be considered with respect to its essence, it is evident that Christ's whole soul suffered' on the Cross.[801]

It may even be this persistence of the Beatific Vision that inflicted a unique experience of melancholy upon Christ. For Thomas Joseph White, it creates an 'existential dissatisfaction' in the Saviour, suffering an earthly separation from his father.[802] This, indeed, is a thoroughly Thomistic idea. The Angelic Doctor notes that the pain can be caused, not contrary to the pleasure of contemplation, but in the hindrance of it.[803] As Pope John Paul II writes,

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[799] Aquinas, *Summa,* 2.2ae 15.6.

[800] Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety,* 38.

[801] Aquinas, *Summa,* 2.2ae 46.7.

[802] T.J White, "The Voluntary Action of the Earthly Christ and the Necessity of the Beatific Vision" *Thomist,* 69, (2005), 497-534.

[803] Aquinas, *Summa,* 2.1ae 35.5,

> Precisely because of the knowledge and experience of the Father which he alone has, even at this moment of darkness he sees clearly the gravity of sin and suffers because of it.[804]

On this model, it was his very union with the Father that sharpened the Son's experience of the pain of distance. Thus, Jesus may be seen to *epitomise* that experience of disorder and dislocation between humanity and the divine order that lies at the centre of numerous theologico-philosophical accounts of melancholy.

In His saving work, then, Christ becomes the encapsulating and transforming narrative of that sorrow that is caught in the chasm of humanity's disruption of and alienation from the divine order, and whose faithfulness to that sorrow is the sign of His faith in God. He thus bestows a teleology – indeed, a soteriology – to that struggle with grief enacted throughout human history. As the saviour is, according to Aquinas, both *viator* and *comprehensor*,[805] every step on the human journey, however dark the valley, lights the road home for each sorrowful individual, towards the heavenly city that is the Kingdom of God. As Kierkegaard reminded himself in his journals:

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[804] John Paul II, *Novo Millenio Ineunte,* accessed 26/09/2016 https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/2001/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_20010106_novo-millennio-ineunte.html.

[805] Aquinas, *Summa,* 2.2ae 15.10.

> Not until a man has become so utterly unhappy, or has grasped the woefulness of life so deeply that he is moved to say, and mean it: life for me has no value – not till then is he able to make a bid for Christianity.
>
> And then his life may acquire the very highest value.[806]

[806] Kierkegaard, *Diary,* 184.

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