

“INNOGHE”: A PREFACE ON INEXHAUSTIBILITY

Karl Steel

We know that *Pearl* offers a picture of the “more and more” of God’s grace. It gifts us with an extra stanza, 101 where we expected 100, as a formal sign that God is “never the lesse” (Fitt XV), always more than we could expect. *Pearl* tells us that God’s infinite grace can never be used up, emptied, or satisfied, while also reminding us that, at least for now, we had better learn to be satisfied with our side of the river.ⁱ *Pearl* sees merely commercial economies, represented so neatly by the grieving jeweler, break open to make way for an unending generosity. *Pearl* teaches us that life, at its best, is anything but fair, and thank goodness for that.ⁱⁱ

Pearl gives us two ways of not being satisfied, then, the one insufficient, the other beyond sufficiency. We have the *dissatisfaction* of the jeweler, greedy, malcontent, jealous, sad at the death of what might be his daughter, marked as his only by his *not* having her, more than a bit envious that she’s made such a good match; and then there’s God’s infinite *unsatisfiability*, always able to do more than what’s required, always exceeding what’s on order, whose eternal grace can keep on coming, because it’s its own cause, its own power, its own necessity.¹

¹ Anselm of Canterbury, *Cur Deus Homo*, Chapter V, in a dizzying attempt to save God from having something so compulsory as a *motive*: “God does nothing of necessity, since nothing whatever can coerce or restrain him in his actions. And when we say that God does something by necessity, as it were, of avoiding dishonor—which, in any case, he need not fear—it is better to interpret this as meaning that he does it from the necessity of preserving his honor. Now this necessity is nothing but his own changeless honor, which he has from himself and not from another, and on that account it is improper to call it necessity.” In Eugene Fairweather, ed. and trans., *A Scholastic Miscellany: Anselm to Ockham* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956), 150. Also see Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/2112.htm>, 1a 2ae 112 art 1, “Is God alone the efficient cause of

But for a fuller picture of God's unsatisfiability, we must take another trip to the otherworld, travelling in the other direction: this guide also hails from the late fourteenth century, the Middle English translation of the *Vision of Tundale*, a representative medieval best-seller if ever there was one, with some 150 Latin manuscripts and translations into at least 12 other vernaculars. Tundale's a wicked Irish merchant, keen on collecting debts, who, after falling into a coma, travels first to hell and then, more briefly, into heaven. God's mercy, the vision says, "passud all thyng" (39; 813), while the demons, watching Tundale elude their grasp, complain that God "schuldust reward sone / Ylke mon aftur that he hathe done" (275-6), that God, in other words, should just do the right thing, and only that. God being God of course does more. The deeper Tundale's infernal journey, the deeper the pain: "That peyn hym thoght well more semand / Then all the peynus that he byforyn fand / That peyn passyd all odor peynus" (403-5; see also 760-64), and the more he encounters "sowlys in peyn withowtyn ende" (1128), "in peyn endles" (1163), who can do nothing but cry "welaway" (462; 1130), who can suffer "yett myght thei not fully dye" (1080).²

As might be expected, the justice of this unending punishment needed justification. Hugh of St Victor's *De sacramentis* explains that since sinners wanted to sin without end, they should be punished according to their will; while Aquinas heaps up a jumble of reasons, including that sin "offends God Who is infinite," and since "punishment cannot be infinite in intensity, because the creature is incapable of an infinite quality, it must needs be infinite at least in duration [requiritur quod sit saltem duratione infinita]."³ Here, presumably, the antecedent, the unstated *it* of the Latin present

grace?" "Nothing can act beyond its species, since the cause must always be more powerful than its effect. Now the gift of grace surpasses every capability of created nature, since it is nothing short of a partaking of the Divine Nature, which exceeds every other nature. And thus it is impossible that any creature should cause grace."

² *Three Purgatory Poems: The Gast of Gy, Sir Owain, The Vision of Tundale*, ed. Edward E. Foster (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2004).

³ Hugh of Saint Victor, *On the Sacraments of the Christian Faith (De Sacramentis)*, trans. Roy J. Deferrari (Cambridge, MA: Mediaeval Academy of America, 1951), 468. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, ss 99, Art. 1, "By Divine justice, is an eternal punishment inflicted on sinners?" <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/5099.htm>.

subjunctive verb “sit,” refers to the duration of both punishment *and* sinner, who endures without ever *fully* dying.ⁱⁱⁱ

The same door that opens to infinite mercy also opens to infinite suffering: God is the sovereign, whose unregulated, self-generated goodness at once establishes and suspends the order of justice, with everything that follows from that.⁴ But this operation, which, essentially, flips or reverse engineers Schmitt’s *Political Theology* away from the secular and back towards the theological, makes God human, just as awesome and frightening as any other king.

God’s inhuman infinity requires that we not be satisfied with that. To grasp God’s *inhuman horror* more fully, we have to get him off his throne and sense the impossible, how he’s invisibly and impalpably everywhere. God’s time is beyond ours; his order beyond ours; his realm one that none of us, at least not here, can penetrate fully: you remember what happens to the *Pearl*-dreamer when he tries, in his frenzy, to slip across the river, while Tundale just as badly fails in trying to get into the furthest reaches of heaven. God offers a chance to get totally inhuman. He’s so much more than a sovereign. He—or the divine it—operates at a scale that no human action, no human conceptualization, could ever satisfy. And yet this It still takes an interest, condemning us or saving us according to its own unlimited schedule, far beyond anything that we could think just.

Timothy Morton’s *Hyperobjects*, on the topic of Very Large Finitudes, says that there’s “a real sense in which it is far easier to conceive of ‘forever’ than very large finitude. Forever makes you feel important. One hundred thousand years makes you wonder whether you can imagine one hundred thousand anything.”⁵ A counterproposal: what the afterlife tells us is that our actions have consequences far beyond anything we could ever imagine. Something out there is taking an interest, disproportionate to our comprehension, but proportionate to Its own, rewarding or

⁴ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 36, famously, “The exception in jurisprudence is analogous to the miracle in theology.”

⁵ Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), Kindle location 1095.

condemning us according to calculations that we will enjoy, or suffer, undergoing without understanding, and—given that this is an eternity—without ever giving us an out. Without ever being satisfied that we will have done enough for It, in It.^{iv}

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End-notes (on commentary) by Nicola Masciandaro:

ⁱ This structural tension in the poem, between inexhaustibility and sufficiency, is analogous to the marginal situation of commentary, just as the dramatic encounter between dreamer-poet and Pearl Maiden takes place paradoxically by means of an impassible boundary, the river that flows—impossibly—between the incommensurable realms of time and eternity:



British Library MS Cotton Nero A.x., f. 38r (public domain image)

This commentarial correlation between the form and content of *Pearl*, between the drama of its dialectical narrative and the poetic production of the dream-vision as an expanding exegetical gloss on “that specyall spyce” (l. 938) of the *Pearl*, is captured in the deictic gestures of the Dreamer in the sequence of illustrations preceding the text. (On the phenomenological relation between commentary and spice/species, see Nicola Masciandaro, “Becoming Spice: Commentary as Geophilosophy,” *Collapse VI: Geo/Philosophy* [2010]: 20-56). These manicular gestures, as Robert J. Blanch and Julian N. Wasserman observe, “narrate pictorially the Dreamer’s psychological movement from receptiveness, to foolish error, to repentance” (*From Pearl to Gawain: Forme to Fynisment* [Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1995], 87). As such, they point the reader into participation with the difficult hermeneutic movement of the dream-vision towards divine grace, a movement passing by necessity through the twin sorrows, affective and intellectual, of grief and ignorance. As the real and symbolic organ of this movement, the indicating hand, in its figural capacity to enter the river which the Dreamer cannot, to perhaps be enough in the face of its own insufficiency, no less reflects the inexhaustible “grace of hermeneutics” defined by Michael Edward Moore “an experience of plenitude in the depths of reading” (“The Grace of Hermeneutics,” *Glossator 5: On the Love of Commentary* [2011]: 163). In these terms, the paradox of divine grace, at once a too-much that seems never enough and a never-enough that seems too much, manifests in the form and process of that which seeks to understand and interpret it. Specifically, grace appears in commentary’s plenitude or *copia* vis-à-vis its text and in the generativity of its error or wandering. Commentary strays, goes too far, says too much, but along a turning path that always finds a new way back into the unpossessable object of its attention and love, so that the voice of what possesses it may speak—before the end of time—a “A note ful new” (l. 879).

ⁱⁱ Life is not fair. But is it (not) beautiful, *fair*? This is a good question to pose to commentary as a form whose meaning and appeal are conspicuously in excess of its own content. As Nietzsche said, “All our so-called consciousness is a more or less fantastic commentary on an unknown, perhaps unknowable, but felt text” (Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, ed. Maudemarie Clark and Brian Leiter [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997], 78).

ⁱⁱⁱ The principle of commentarial *copia* (on which see Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *The Powers of Philology* [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003], 41-53) is thus also instanced by the doctrine of eternal hell, just as the impossible perfection of commentarial plenitude would be an infinite commentary on an infinitesimal text. Unable to satisfy divine justice in an immediate way, the damned soul suffers its sin *ad infinitum*, becoming a kind of endless commentary paradoxically deprived forever of the real presence of the eternal truth which its suffering glosses, as per the Dantean *contrapasso*, in which the nature of eternal justice is disclosed to the observer: “Cosi

s’osserva in me lo contrapasso” (*Inferno* 28.142). Correlatively, Augustine, commenting on John 5:25 (“he who hears my word and believes him who sent me, has eternal life”), envisions perfected being as final, face-to-face understanding of the original Word without gloss: “The fruit of faith [is] understanding, so that we may arrive at eternal life, where the Gospel would not be read to us, but he who has given us the Gospel now would appear with all the pages of reading and the voice of the reader and commentator removed” (*Tractates on the Gospel of John*, 22.2, quoted in Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*, trans. E. M. Macierowski, 4 vols. [Grand Rapids, MI: Eedmans, 2000], 2.188-89).

^{iv} Likewise, the commentator experiences (suffers and enjoys) insufficiency as the mysterious medium of satisfaction. This is more in keeping with the order of mystical theology than soteriology, according to which the essential hiddenness of God, in proportion to the infinity of spiritual desire, is the very condition of intimacy or union with the divine. Thus Mechthild of Magdeburg exclaims, “O blissful Estrangement from God, how lovingly am I connected with you!” (*The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, trans. Frank Tobin [New York: Paulist Press, 1998], 4.12). Augustine clarifies this paradox by pointing out that the presence of one’s beloved does not diminish longing: “When we love another, even when we can see that person, we never tire of the presence of the beloved, but want him or her to be present always. This is what the psalm conveys by the words, *Seek his face always* [Psalm 104.4]: let not the finding of the beloved put an end to the love-inspired search; but as love grows, so let the search for the one already found become more intense” (Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms*, trans. Maria Boulding, 6 vols. [Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2003], 5.186). And Eriugena elaborates upon this endless end in a manner that accentuates its sense of inevitable impossibility: “since that which human nature seeks and toward which it tends, whether it moves in the right or the wrong direction, is infinite and not to be comprehended by any creature, it necessarily follows that its quest is unending and that therefore it moves forever. And yet although its search is unending, by some miraculous means it finds what it is seeking for: and again it does not find it, for it cannot be found” (Johannes Scottus Eriugena, *Periphyseon*, PL 122:919, quoted in Bernard McGinn, *The Growth of Mysticism: Gregory the Great through the 12th Century* [New York: Crossroad, 1994], 118). Similarly, it is only through the Pearl’s absence that the poet and his readers in turn become capable of being present to what she truly and really is—whatever she is—even and precisely if this capacity persists in a sufficiency that is never enough, across the time and space of a dreamy truth or visionary *if* as difficult as it is consoling:

If hit be veray and soth sermoun
 That thou so stykes in garlande gay,
 So wel is me in thys doel-doungoun
 That thou art to that Pryses paye.
 (1185-8)