

The Good, the Bad, and the Penitent Thief: Langlandian Extremes,
the Edge of Salvation, and the Problem of Trajan and Dismas in
Piers Plowman

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And yet the synfulle sherewe seide to hymselfe:
'Crist, that on Calvarie upon the cros deidest,
Tho Dysmas my brother bisoughte thee of grace,
And haddest mercy on that man for *Memento* sake,
(B-text, *Passus* 5. 464-7)¹

In the above passage, Robert the Robber recalls Dismas on the cross, who, in his final moments, defends Christ against the vicious attacks of Gestas, the Bad Thief. At the centre of Robert's dual address to 'hymselfe' and 'Crist' is Dismas: a 'man for *Memento* sake'. Although Robert finds comfort in the established tradition of penitential rhetoric, his situation spirals into uncertainty: 'What bifel of this feloun I kan noight faire shewe' (B.5.472). Christian theologians were simultaneously amazed and perplexed with the inherent contradiction that a thief, who receives a kind of *clara visio* at the crossroads of death, becomes the sole heir to the heavenly kingdom, elevated to a status of glory as the first to enter Paradise.² It is no coincidence that as a symbol of God's mercy, Dismas is sometimes depicted alongside Christ in the Harrowing of Hell, appealing to the ideal of *imitatio Christi*.³ In fact, 'some writers carry the paradox so far as to suggest that the greatest sinners make the greatest saints',⁴ which it could be argued contributes to a pattern of colliding Langlandian extremes.

In the B-text, Will begins to question the logic behind God's decision to admit Dismas into heaven. To my knowledge, David Allen's article is the only instance of scholarship isolating Dismas, a figure who deserves more critical

I am indebted to Dr Nicolette Zeeman for her valuable advice and assistance in the project.

¹ All quotations are from William Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman: A Complete Edition of the B-text*, ed. A.V.C. Schmidt, 2nd edn (London: Everyman, 1995).

² For the influence of the Benedictine monk Uthred of Boldon (c. 1360) on deathbed salvation for Christians and non-Christians, see Cindy Vitto, 'The Virtuous Pagan in Middle English Literature', *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, 79:5 (1989), 1-100 (p. 33). I would argue that Dismas, having known Christ directly, does not fall strictly under the category of 'virtuous pagans'.

³ Alyssa Lyra Pitstick, *Light in Darkness: Hans Urs Von Balthasar and the Catholic Doctrine of Christ's Descent into Hell* (Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 2007), p. 83.

⁴ Susan Snyder, 'The Left Hand of God: Despair in Medieval and Renaissance Tradition', *Studies in the Renaissance* 12, (1965), 18-59 (p. 26).

attention for our understanding of Langland's salvation theology.⁵ Allen is correct in that Will introduces a Dismas *distinctio* of saved sinners, where Imaginatif's 'denigration of Dismas's station in heaven ... is remarkable for its lack of respect and its exegetical eccentricity', especially in comparison to traditional scriptural exegesis on Luke 23. 39-43.⁶ Allen believes this is 'authorial transgression that requires authorial restitution', and this restitution depends on Patience's contentment at the side table in Conscience's court (as opposed to the high table), which tacitly 'corrects' Imaginatif's 'pedagogically defensible overstatement'. Langland, he argues, manages 'the seemingly contradictory task of restoring Dismas's dignity without taking any away from Imaginatif' (p. 42). I do not deny, *pace* Allen, the 'exegetical eccentricity', but I would argue that Imaginatif's statement is in fact unapologetically excessive, as this is part of a broader scheme of Langlandian extremes and binary oppositions that directly address the problem of salvation. In the following pages, I will argue for a dialectic that develops very early in Passus 10 with the *topos* of starving beggars situated in front of the 'gate', the boundary where 'povere menne' hunger for salvation. Beggars are pushed to the extremes of criminality and poverty, which paradoxically intensifies their desire for God.⁷ In this dialectic, Trajan is an anti-type to Dismas. He dangles precariously with the Good Thief at the boundary/gate, and Langland's salvation theology suggests that, like Dismas, he is a soul very narrowly at the cusp of being saved or damned: '*Salvabitur vix iustus in die iudicii; / Ergo - salvabitur!*' ('The just man shall scarcely be saved; Therefore - he shall be saved!') (B.12.278-80). Nicolette Zeeman's ground-breaking scholarship on the nature of desire investigates Langland's development of the Stoic and medieval notion that 'the cosmos is structured in terms of contraries or contrasts, that understanding of one phenomenon involves understanding of its opposite'.⁸ In light of the medieval knowledge of antithesis,⁹ I propose that Dismas and Trajan function as the radically contrasting parts of Langland's rhetori-

⁵ 'The Dismas *distinctio* and the Forms of *Piers Plowman*,' *The Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 3 (1989), 31-48.

⁶ Allen calls this 'a division into its relevant parts of a concept'. In medieval commentaries, the *distinctio* 'gathered together the various uses of a term in Scripture' (p. 35).

⁷ Nicolette Zeeman postulates: 'It might be that, the better the goods are, the greater the merit in doing well without them, and the greater the desire that comes of lacking them', "*Piers Plowman*" and the Medieval Discourse of Desire (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 224).

⁸ Zeeman, p. 187.

⁹ On the medieval development of *opposita*, *adversa*, or *contraria*, see also Constance Brittain Bouchard's "*Every Valley Shall Be Exalted*": *The Discourse of Opposites in Twelfth-Century Thought* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003).

cal attempt to use *merism* to describe salvation.¹⁰ Throughout the poem, oscillating extremes clash to the point '[t]hat wise wordes wolde shewe and werche the contrarie' (B.12.50). To this end, Langland presents us with co-existing theological oppositions (e.g. grace vs. good works) and polarized characters (e.g. Dismas vs. Trajan or Gestas), which drive the salvific debate towards a tenuous equilibrium. This presentation of doctrinal extremes, albeit hasty and uncompromising, is perhaps Langland's most effective pedagogical tool in resolving the problem of salvation.

Mary Davlin points out, 'the word 'likeness' and its cognates and synonyms are frequently used in the poem to stress similarity between God and His creatures'.¹¹ It is common in medieval artwork and literature to stress the visual and emotional likeness of the crucified Dismas to Christ and to 'look upon the suffering convict as a pseudo-martyr, thus Christ-like'.¹² For example, in the *Story of Joseph of Arimathaea*, Dismas is Christ-like in that his body is not found in his tomb, but later appears to John 'like a king in great might, clad with the cross'.¹³ Dismas's 'likeness' to Christ is also apparent in the crucifixion, where he shares in his agony. More directly, Bonaventure boldly declares that Christ 'in a mystery ... is the good thief'.¹⁴ In much the same vein are Franciscan writings which associate holiness with the Good Thief; for example, Merback points out interesting echoes of the story of the Good Thief in the writings of Thomas of Celano (d. 1260) who claims that St. Francis was 'led like a robber' and that his dying wish was to be buried among the remains of thieves.¹⁵ Such writings may have influenced Langland's representation of the Good Thief. Lawrence M. Clopper, in his critical study on Langland and the Franciscans, suggests we might 'read *Piers Plowman* as part of a broad reformist culture, one admittedly informed by Franciscan thinking and preaching'.¹⁶ As we shall see, Imaginatif's ironic description of Dismas as a poor 'beggere bordless' (B.12.199) verges on neo-Franciscanism.

¹⁰ The *Oxford English Dictionary* (2nd ed.) defines *merismus* as 'a form of synecdoche in which two (or in early use sometimes more) contrasting or complementary parts are made to represent the whole.'

¹¹ *The Place of God in Piers Plowman and Medieval Art* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002) p. 146.

¹² Mitchell Merback, *The Thief, the Cross and the Wheel: Pain and Spectacle of Punishment in Medieval and Renaissance Europe* (London: Reaktion Books, 1999), p. 19.

¹³ *The Apocryphal New Testament: Being the Apocryphal Gospels, Acts, Epistles, and Apocalypses*, trans. by M.R. James (Oxford: Clarendon, 1924), p. 165.

¹⁴ *St Bonaventure's Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, trans. by Robert Karris, Works of St Bonaventure, 8, 3 vols (St. Bonaventure, NY: The Franciscan Institute Publications, 2001-2004), III (2004), p. 2147.

¹⁵ Merback, p. 229.

¹⁶ "Songes of Rechelesnesse": *Langland and the Franciscans* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997), p. 327.

Before considering Langland's treatment of Dismas, let us consider the long tradition of depicting the Good Thief as the moral opposite to the Bad Thief. This is notably evinced in the gospels, particularly in Luke 23. 39-43.¹⁷ Other precedents include the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, where the contrast is visibly represented with Dismas 'on atte riȝth half' of Christ, and Gestas is 'þat oþer atte left [i.e. *sinistra*] half'.¹⁸ For Augustine, the two thieves signify humanity: those on the left seek 'temporal glory,' whereas those on the right seek 'celestial glory'.¹⁹ The moral divide between the Good Thief and the Bad Thief occurs more explicitly in *The Story of Joseph of Arimathaea*: Gestas would 'hang up women by the feet and cut off their breasts, drink the blood of babes: he knew not God nor obeyed any law', whereas Demas 'despoiled the rich but did good to the poor, even burying them' (p. 161).

With this moral contrast in mind, I turn to Langland's deployment of the language of theft. Langland revives the 'likeness' of the Christ-thief image directly: 'If he reve me [Satan] of my right, he [Christ] robbeth me by maistrīe' (B.18.276-8). Bonaventure, along with Ambrose, calls Christ 'the good thief, who lay in ambush for the devil, so that he might carry off his possessions'.²⁰ Of interest is the suggestion that Christ uses deception against the devils, which Marx believes 'carries with it no doctrinal implications' and postulates that this deception motif is 'typical of late medieval writers'.²¹ I propose, however, that Langland develops this accusation further and portrays Satan as the Bad Thief (i.e. Gestas) when Christ declares: '*Thefliche* thow me *robbedest*. The Old Lawe graunteth / That *gilours be bigiled* – and that is *good reson*' (B.18.339-40, emphasis mine). In this particular case, Christ is the Bonaventurian Good Thief that rightfully 'robbeth' and who openly admits to having 'begiled' Satan, the Bad Thief,

¹⁷ 'And aftir that thei camen in to a place, that is clepid of Caluerie, there thei crucifieden hym, and the theues, oon on the riȝt half, and `the tother on the left half. But Jhesus seide, Fadir, foryue hem, for thei witen not what thei doon. ... And oon of these theues that hangiden, blasfemyde hym, and seide, If thou art Crist, make thi silf saaf and vs. But `the tothir answeyng, blamyde hym, and seide, Nether thou dredist God, that art in the same dampnacioun? And treuli we iustli, for we han resseiued worthi thingis to werkis; but this dide no thing of yuel. And he seide to Jhesu, Lord, haue mynde of me, whanne thou comest `in to thi kyngdom. And Jhesus seide to hym, Treuli Y seie to thee, this dai thou schalt be with me in paradise.'

(*The Holy Bible, Containing the old and new testaments, with the apocryphal books, in the earliest English versions made from the Latin Vulgate by John Wycliffe and his followers: Edited by the Rev. Josiah Forshall, F.R.S. etc. Late Fellow of Exeter College, and Sir Frederic Madden, K.H. F.R.S. etc. Keeper of the MSS. in the British Museum* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1850))

¹⁸ *The Middle English Prose Complaint of Our Lady and the Gospel of Nicodemus, ed. from Cambridge, Magdalene College, MS Pepys 2498, ed. by CW Marx and JF Drennan* (Heidelberg: C. Winter, Universitätsverlag, 1987), pp. 102-3.

¹⁹ *St Bonaventure's Commentary*, III, p. 2147 [i.e. Bonaventure writes on Augustine].

²⁰ *St Bonaventure's Commentary*, III, p. 2147.

²¹ *The Devil's Rights and the Redemption in the Literature of Medieval England* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1995), p. 112.

of his faulty claim. Christ has 'good reson' to beguile and rob, and He is therefore the Good Thief. In other words, Langland maintains a clear moral distinction between the Good Thief and the Bad Thief and oscillates between the two extremes. Likewise, Piers 'for pure tene' decides 'to go robbe that rageman and reve the fruyt fro hym' (B.16.86-9).

Pamela Gradon notes Langland's rather 'grudging tone' towards Dismas, suggesting that Langland 'feels the story [of Dismas] to be out of tune with his presentation of *Dowel* or reward for merit'.²² To demonstrate why this conclusion is problematic, we need to first look at Will's argument in passus 10:

A Good Friday, I fynde, a felon was ysaved
That hadde lyved al his lif with lesynges and with thefte;
And for he beknew on the cros and to Crist shrof hym,

He was sonner ysaved than Seint Johan the Baptist
And or Adam or Ysaye or any of the prophetes,
That hadde yleyen with Lucifer many longe yeres.
A robbere was yraunsoned rather than thei alle
Withouten any penaunce of purgatorie to perpetual blisse
[...]
And now ben these sovereyns with seintes in hevne -
Tho that wroughte wikkedlokest in world tho thei were;
(B.10.413-420, 425-6)

No passage better represents, to use Britton Harwood's phrasing, Will's 'problem of belief' in Christ.²³ Will argues that the most ardent sinners are saved, rather than 'any of the prophetes'. Will's 'problem' with this seemingly unfair and immoral outcome betrays his skepticism regarding Christian morality and Langland's concern to show Will's perversion of Christian teaching.²⁴ In fact, such is the unsettling force of Will's conclusion that it prompts the poet of the C-text to replace the dreamer with the voice of Rechelesnesse, in order to 'withdraw a further degree of authorial sanction'.²⁵ It is also worth noting that the A-text abruptly stops at this point as though reaching an irresolvable theological crisis. What is important is how the confession of Dismas provides the groundwork for this distortion of the tenets of faith and the nature of grace in

²² 'Trajanus Redivivus: Another Look at Trajan in *Piers Plowman*', in *Middle English Studies Presented to Norman Davis in Honour of His Seventieth Birthday*, ed. by Douglas Gray and E.G. Stanley, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), pp. 93-114 (p. 106).

²³ *Piers Plowman and the Problem of Belief* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992).

²⁴ For example, Marie Collins argues that 'this is neither the traditional nor the proper function of adducing the great penitents' in 'Will and the Penitents: PP B X. 420-35', *Leeds Studies in English*, 16 (1985), 290-308 (p. 303).

²⁵ Derek Pearsall, 'The Idea of Universal Salvation in *Piers Plowman* B and C', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 39.2 (2009), 257-281 (p. 264).

the face of Will's despair. For Langland's medieval audience, any mention of the Good Thief would certainly bring to mind his anti-type, Gestas, 'that oother theef' (B.12.214). Dismas functions as a mirror of inversion that exposes the characteristics of his moral opposite. Specifically, Will as the skeptical narrator shows negative traits of Dismas's anti-type (i.e. Gestas). From Luke's dialogue, the medieval audience would find an obvious echo of the Bad Thief in the voice of Will. Gestas and Will are both equally skeptical. Gestas demands proof before 'belief': 'if thou be the Christ, come down from the cross that I may believe thee.'²⁶ Similarly, in the passage above, Will the skeptic challenges the logic behind a great sinner receiving disproportionate mercy, becoming 'sovereyns with seintes in hevne - / Tho that wroughte wikkedlokest in world'. Also, the alliterative effect of pairing 'robberer' and 'yraunsoned' stresses the inherent fallacy Will detects in the restoring of payment to the thief, and not to the victim robbed. In light of this apparent inverse relationship of sin with mercy, Will is skeptical of his 'findings': 'A Good Friday, I fynde, a felon was ysaved'. However, the inner-dream prepares Will for what Robert Frank calls the 'answers of Imaginatif', and offers more insight on the Dismas story.²⁷

Before we consider Imaginatif's digression on degrees of bliss, there are a few surface departures to note from Will's rendering of Dismas in passus 10. For Imaginatif, the thief had 'ben in wille to amenden' (i.e. *facere quod in se est*, 'doing what is in him') (B.12.194). Imaginatif also points out how Trajan, an analogue to Dismas, 'wolde amende' if he had been given proper Christian teaching (B.12.286). Will's Dismas, however, inappropriately merits salvation absolutely, whereas Imaginatif's Dismas seems to merit salvation congruently (*meritum de congruo*) on earth and condignly (*meritum de condigno*) in heaven.²⁸ In all cases, the thief arrives at a knowledge of failure, and he 'knewliched hym gilty' (B.12.192). This is also consistent with Will's rendering of Dismas who 'beknew on the cros,' and Robert's Dismas who 'knoweliched his [coupe] to Crist' (B.5.474). Epistemology and penitential doctrine intersect when the sinner must come to 'know' the self before contrition, *culpa*, and confession are even possible. Imaginatif, in direct response to Will's polemic, 'as thow speke' (B.12.191) scolds him for his Gestasian skepticism and instead invites him

²⁶ *The Story of Joseph of Arimathea in The Apocryphal New Testament*, trans. James, p. 163.

²⁷ 'Piers Plowman' and the Scheme of Salvation: *An Interpretation of Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), p. 58.

²⁸ These two terms deserve clarification, *congruent merit* 'is relative and conditional, whereby man receives reward from God out of God's generosity' and *condign merit* 'is absolute, strict merit, whereby man can be said to merit the reward of salvation absolutely and justly', see James Simpson, *Piers Plowman: An Introduction to the B-text* (London: Longman, 1990), p. 79.

to identify with Dismas, who too was 'unholy of werkes' (B.1.3). Paradoxically, the greater the sin, the greater is the sinner's desire for Christ. The scene in heaven that follows implies that salvation is possible even for the sinful narrator, where moral effort is duly rewarded:

Ac though that thief hadde hevene, he hadde noon heigh blisse,
 As Seint Johan and othere seintes that asserved hadde bettere.
 Right as som man yeve me mete and sette me amydde the floore:
 I have mete moore than ynough, ac noght so mucche worshipe
 As tho that sitten at the syde table or with the sovereynes of the
 halle,
 But sete as a beggere bordlees by myself on the grounde.

So it fareth by that felon that a Good Friday was saved:
 He sit neither with Seint Johan, ne Symond ne Jude,
 Ne with maydenes ne with martires ne [med] confessours ne wy-
 dewes,
 But by himself as a soleyne, and served on the erthe.
 (B.12.195-204)

Derek Pearsall notes how the notion of degrees in heaven has scriptural basis in Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*, as well as in John 14:2.²⁹ Later, Imaginatif suggests that the thief occupies a place in heaven at the expense of someone else, 'that oother thief' (i.e. Gestas). There are not many places available to 'sitten at the syde table'. In Cambridge, Magdalene College, MS Pepys 2498, a scribe translates portions of the *Gospel of Nicodemus* and comments on the consequences of Dismas's position: 'Seint Austyn seiþ þat þere ne may noman noumbre þe folk þat ben gon to helle for þe þef þat henge on Goddes riȝth side.' Langland reasserts this Augustinian concept and adds a limitless number in hell: 'Hevene hath evene noumbre, and helle is withoute noumbre' (B.20.270). This view of salvation as a desperate race to snatch a seat in heaven contributes to the Dreamer's anxiety: 'Al for tene of hir text trembled myn herte' (B.11.115). It is no surprise that the notion of degrees in heaven clashes with mainstream fourteenth-century thought on the equality of heavenly reward.³⁰

Langland introduces 'degrees of bliss' in passus 12 as part of a sequence of co-existing extremes, where Dismas simultaneously conveys both criminality and the virtue of poverty. Imaginatif's description of heaven is indeed problem-

²⁹ 'The Idea of Universal Salvation', p. 267.

³⁰ See Carleton Brown, 'The Author of *The Pearl*, Considered in the Light of his Theological Opinions', *PMLA*, 19, (2004), 127-45 and Pearsall, 'The Idea of Universal Salvation', p. 267; note also line 607 in *Pearl*.

atic and perhaps develops ironic fissures that destabilize the text beyond what Allen cautiously calls an 'overstatement' (p. 41). First, Langland brings to our attention several lines earlier that pride caused 'Lucifer to lese the heighe hevene' (B.12.40). This almost serves as a warning against 'so muche worshipe' for those positioned above Dismas. They sit in Lucifer's old chair on 'heigh' and 'at the syde table or with the sovereynes of the halle'. On the other hand, Dismas sits 'by himself as a soleyn' and again 'by myself'. It is no coincidence that Imaginatif himself pre-figures Dismas in this respect when he declares, 'I sitte by myself' (B.12.2). In both instances, seclusion evokes an ironic tone of humility, especially when Imaginatif openly removes the possibility of sloth (B.12.3). Similarly, Patience and the narrator in Conscience's court 'seten bi oure-selfe' (B.13.36). Dismas's enforced segregation is also problematic in light of Clergie's complaint that 'Now hath ech riche a rule - to eten by hymselfe / In a pryvee parlour for povere mennes sake' (B.10.99). Instead, the other heavenly guests should be eating alongside beggars like Dismas. Dismas's likeness to a 'beggere' is in fact oddly reminiscent of Trajan's depiction of Christ 'in a povere mannes apparaille' (B.11.185). If we imagine the scene as a caution against desiring 'so muche worshipe', the association of the dubious 'confessours' and 'wydewes' sitting at the high table destabilizes the argument for a meritocracy in heaven. I would not agree with Allen that the resolution must wait until *passus* 13, where Patience refines Imaginatif's overstatement. Rather, Imaginatif *himself* sets up this hierarchical vision of heaven in order to make his own subsequent retraction more effective.

Let us first consider a sequence of narratives on the hungry 'beggere' and 'povere menne' who stand in front of the gate, which serves as the boundary at the cusp of salvation.³¹ This menagerie of beggars leads up to Imaginatif's digression and lends support to the thief's claim as the first heir to enter heaven, in spite of Will's faulty argument, and elevates him to the plane of 'maydenes,' 'martires,' 'confessours,' and 'wydewes.'

Dame Studie introduces the theme of hungry beggars crawling before the gate/boundary:

³¹ Admittedly, there is a large body of scholarship on the topic of poverty in *Piers Plowman*, and Derek Pearsall aptly notes 'the persistence of Langland's concern for the sufferings of poor people is remarkable, as many of his readers have recognized, and seems unusual for a medieval writer', see 'Poverty and Poor People in *Piers Plowman*,' in *Medieval English Studies Presented to George Kane*, ed. by Edward Donald Kennedy, Ronald Waldron, and Joseph S. Wittig (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer), pp. 167-85, at p. 167.

Ac the carefulle may crie and carpen at the yate,
 Bothe afyngred and afurst, and for chele quake;
 Is non to nyme hym in, nor his noy amende,
 (B.10.64-67)

These beggars plead 'at the yate' before apathetic, rich 'maistres' for 'mete' and 'mercy.' Langland's wordplay on 'mete' and 'mede' evokes the sinner's hunger for salvation. Here, we find only 'amonges meene men his mercy and hise werkes'. Scripture then develops this idea and puts it in a more explicit salvific context. In her sermon from Matthew 22. 1-14, she describes the parable of the lord's feast: '*Multi* to a mangerie and to the mete were sompned' (B.11.112).³² Upon approaching the gate, however, 'the porter unpynned the yate / And plucked in *Pauci* pryveliche and leet the remenaunt go rome' (B.11.113-4). Will then wonders if he is among the *predestinati*: 'wheither I were chose or noght chose' (B.11.117). Will compares the baptized Christians who also 'rome' to the wandering 'renyed caytif': a thief who steals from his Lord, and does 'renne in arerage and rome fro home' (B.11.129). The run-away serf/thief becomes a penitent sinner who is invited to dine at the heavenly feast only 'if contricion wol come and crye by his lyve / Mercy for hise mysdedes' (B.11.135-6). The run-away serf anticipates Dismas, who is also invited to the feast because Christ 'haddest mercy on that man' (B.5.468). Analogous to the serf, Dismas is similarly described 'as a beggere'. Trajan later clarifies that the 'feast' is strictly for the poor and *not* the rich citing Luke 14. 12-14: 'by the Evaungelie that whan we maken festes, / We sholde noght clepe oure kyn therto, *ne none kynnes riche* [...] Ac calleth the carefulle therto, the croked and the *povere*' (B.11.188, emphasis mine). Imaginatif's portrayal of Dismas as a beggar compliments Trajan's glorification of poverty. The implication is that there is one God and that all Christians, despite their earthly possessions, are on an equal plane as His serfs, who must beg at the gates for their 'mete'/salvation. Critics emphasize Will's reliance on baptism, but often ignore his caveat that salvation is possible '*But if* contricion wol come'. Imaginatif exploits Will's unintended metaphor and continues the dialogue to further illustrate the possibility of salvation for the penitent sinner. We see a progression in Will's understanding of certain 'pre-requisites' for salvation in his analogy of the wandering serf-thief to Scripture's sermon. In the end, all five speakers (Studie, Scripture, Will, Imaginatif, and Trajan) admit only 'meene men' of poverty through the gate. In this dialectic surrounding

³² I agree with Gordon Whatley's assertion that the voice of Scripture is Will's 'own interpretation of the scriptures' ('The Uses of Hagiography: the Legend of Pope Gregory and the Emperor Trajan in the Middle Ages,' *Viator*, 15 (1989), 25-63 (p. 51)).

grace versus good works, the shared glorification of poverty perhaps points to the possibility for a principle that unifies the seemingly contradictory paths to salvation.

Langlandian extremes typically co-exist; on the surface this co-existence appears problematic, but digging deeper unearths an essential equilibrium. As mentioned earlier, the Bad Thief represents the moral opposite to the Good Thief. Similarly, the poet sets up Trajan in hell as the anti-type to Dismas in heaven:

And right as Troianus the trewe knyght tilde noght depe in helle
That Oure Lord ne hadde hym lightly out, so leve I [by] the thef in
hevene:
For he is in the loweste of hevene, if oure bileve be trewe,
And wel losely he lolleth there, by the lawe of Holy Chirche,
Qui reddit unicuique iuxta opera sua.
(B.12.209-13)

The Trajan episode is often discussed in isolation, but Langland strikes an equal balance between the two extremes of Trajan and Dismas. Let us consider a few key contrasting elements, which will reveal some insights into the poet's theological aim. Trajan is 'noght depe in helle' whereas Dismas has 'noon heigh blisse' in heaven. Trajan shouts from the depths of hell ('Ye, baw for bokes!') and is opinionated, if not boasting, despite his reputation for humility in the Middle Ages. On the other hand, Dismas is completely silent throughout the poem and shows outward signs of meekness. Zeeman notes how Trajan is 'the most extreme form of the natural in the text'.³³ It follows that Dismas, as a corollary, signifies the most extreme form of revelation. Gregory intercedes on Trajan's behalf as an intermediary, whereas Christ speaks directly to Dismas. Before his death, Dismas *knows* Jesus to be the Son of God (i.e. has faith), whereas Trajan dies an ignorant Pagan without faith in Christ. In other words, Langland polarizes the text with side-by-side accounts of a believer and non-believer. On the surface, Trajan establishes a kind of Pelagian doctrine of good works,³⁴ whereas Dismas's *clara visio* suggests typical Bradwardinian grace. Dismas is saved by God's grace alone (e.g. he 'grace asked of God'). Such a comparison provides a lavish backdrop for competing beliefs on salvation throughout the

³³ Zeeman, p. 229.

³⁴ A closer examination reveals the episode as semi-Pelagian, as propounded by Robert Adams in 'Piers's Pardon and Langland's Semi-Pelagianism' *Traditio* 39 (1983), 367-418. David Aers also examines this debate and its Augustinian roots in *Salvation and Sin: Augustine, Langland, and fourteenth-century theology* (Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009).

poem. By providing us with two radically different avenues to salvation with this use of *merism*, Langland makes a strong case for the possibility of universal salvation for both believers and non-believers, and these oscillating extremes suggest a more likely equilibrium somewhere between grace and good works.

More importantly, we discover a common ground with Dismas in Trajan's glorification of 'the povere; / For in hir liknesse Oure Lord ofte hath ben yknowe' (B.11. 230). Trajan's diatribe on 'parfit poverte' (B.11.271) prepares the reader for Imaginatif's analogy of Dismas to a beggar in the next passus, as well as the glorification of Patience in passus 12.³⁵ It is no coincidence that poverty is also subject to the medieval discourse of opposition. Constance Bouchard's study elaborates on medieval images of poverty as a model for conversion, and she cites a letter from Bernard of Clairvaux to the count of Troyes, where the conversion of 'a poor man to a rich man' is described as 'a radical and indeed abrupt change from one status to its diametric opposite' (p. 77). The greater our poverty and our lacking, and quite possibly the greater our sin, the more fervently we desire and therefore merit God. Despite the binary oppositions between Dismas and Trajan, there exists a unitary resolution in their shared poverty. In addition, the end of the Trajan episode mentions how Dismas and Trajan are rewarded equally and rest 'wel losely' on the 'loweste of heaven,' in danger of falling off the edge. On the surface, this is 'slightly ridiculous-sounding.'³⁶ Pearsall's reading here would imply a mistake in God's Judgment, contradicting His omnipotence, but this is obviously not what Langland intended. Instead, I propose the equality of reward in heaven between the two theologically polarized characters of Trajan and Dismas suggests an equality between all of God's chosen: it suggests that *all* sinners precariously dangle on the brink of salvation, which is barely within our reach.

In response to Will's polemic, Imaginatif is careful not to give too much glory to the thief, and his caution certainly 'wreaks havoc in a tradition that Langland almost certainly knew':³⁷

³⁵ Allen, pp. 43-44, is correct in that the seating of Patience at the side table in Conscience's court 'correct[s] Imaginatif's overstatement ... if Patience can be happy at Conscience's feast here on earth, then Dismas must be overjoyed in Paradise.'

³⁶ Pearsall, 'The Idea of Universal Salvation', p. 267.

³⁷ Allen, p. 38.

For he that is ones a thef is everemoore in daunger,
 And as lawe liketh to lyve or to deye:
De peccato propiciato noli esse sine metu
 And for to serven a seint and swich a thef togideres –
 It were neither reson ne right to rewarde both yliche.
 (B.12.205-9)

The suggestion that the thief commits crimes in heaven seems ludicrous. In the end, Imaginatif essentially retracts his digression on the degrees of bliss, albeit in stages (B.12.213-224). Initially, the mention of ‘reward’ and ‘reson’ might seem to justify a ‘Pelagian’ argument. However, the motives behind the *personification* of reason (or to be precise, *ratio divina*) are mysterious and hidden from view:³⁸ a few lines later, clerks now ‘aresonedest Reson, a rebukynge as it were’ and ‘ne kouthe the skile assoille’, attempting to explain ‘why that oon theef upon the cros creaunt hym yelde / Rather than that oother theef’. These are the same clerks described earlier by Clergie, who attempt an understanding of Trinitarian theory, and yet ‘Alle the clerkes under Crist ne koude this assoille’ (B.10.247-250a). If we are to follow strict Pelagian doctrine, both thieves sinned equally and should merit an equal degree of reward/punishment but the mysteries of the faith inevitably means putting aside rational faculties. The stubborn clerks express the same puzzlement as Will regarding Dismas’s ‘undeserved’ reward and are reminiscent of the unsympathetic clerks who ‘breketh noght to the beggere as the Book techeth’ (B.10.84).

Imaginatif’s resolution, however, is as direct as it is enigmatic: ‘*Quare placuit? Quia voluit*’ (B.12.215a). This tag line, albeit unsatisfactory, flatly dismisses the limits of human understanding in regards to the classic paradox that great sinners make great saints: ‘It were neither reson ne right to rewarde both yliche’. In a poem concerned with the perversion of Christian teaching, the question of Dismas’s exact position in heaven is certainly *not* practical knowledge and dangerously risks falling under the accusation of *curiositas*. Dismas’s reward is God’s decision, which is unquestionably just. After all, God has the power to save even Judas if he so chooses.³⁹ Davlin argues for the co-existence of God’s absolute freedom and ‘truth’ in the poem.⁴⁰ Imaginatif comes to the final conclusion that gratuitous intellectual acquisitiveness in minute theological matters

³⁸ John Alford has re-examined the variety of meanings behind the word *resoun* in his chapter, ‘The Idea of Reason in *Piers Plowman*’ in *Medieval English Studies Presented to George Kane*, ed. by Edward Donald Kennedy, Ronald Waldron, and Joseph S. Wittig (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 1988), pp. 199-215.

³⁹ See Whatley on Bonaventure, p. 37, and Vitto on Thomas Buckingham, p. 31.

⁴⁰ Davlin, p. 161.

(such as the degree of reward in heaven) is insignificant when weighed against the more pressing issue of salvation or damnation. Instead, he brings to our attention the notion that Dismas and Trajan dangle from heaven. In other words, Langland suggests that everyone lies 'everemoore in daunger' at some equilibrium point within these extremes, precariously on salvation's brink.⁴¹ In the end, venturing salvation is both thorny and uncompromising, where complacency must give way to action.

⁴¹ I agree with Zeeman and David Aers in describing Langland as a dialectical poet, and therefore this essay does not intend to position Langland in any particular theological camp. The discussion on Dismas nonetheless supports Derek Pearsall's analysis of the idea of universal salvation ('The Idea of Universal Salvation', pp. 257-81), whereby God's justice is mitigated by mercy on the Day of Judgment. Pearsall develops this idea from Nicholas Watson's 'Visions of Inclusion: Universal Salvation and Vernacular Theology in Pre-Reformation England', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 27 (1997), 145-88.