

‘Ertheliche honeste thynges’: Langland’s Earthward Theology

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Will’s vision of the ‘lond of longynge and love’ in Passus XI of the B-Text of *Piers Plowman*¹ begins following a rebuke at the hands of Scripture. Will interrupts Scripture’s discourse on the perils of riches, which culminates in the warning that ‘It shal bisitten us ful soure, the silver that we kepen / [...] and seen beggeris go naked’ (B.X.359-60) to speak against the clergy. After his interruption, as Will tells us, ‘Scripture scorned me and a skile tolde, / And lakked me in Latyn and light by me she sette, / And seide, “Multi multa sciunt et seipsos nesciunt”’ (Many know many things and do not know themselves) (B.XI.1-3). Then Will weeps, and then comes the dream of the ‘lond of longynge’ and its apparently autobiographical concern with ‘Concupiscencia Carnis’ and ‘Coveitise of Eightes’, which Will says ‘folwed me fourty wynter and a fifte moore’ (B.XI.47).

The Latin used to ‘lakke’ Will, and to force him to give up his role as social critic in favor of the B-Text’s most confessional, self-interrogating vision, is a text that was mistakenly attributed to St. Bernard of Clairvaux, *Cogitationes Piissimae de cognitione humanae conditionis*.² Just following the lines cited by Langland, it reads, ‘Deum quaerunt per ista exteriora [...] quibus interior est Deus’ (They seek God in these outer things [...] when God is more inside themselves than they are) (PL 184, col. 485); in general, the text emphasizes the experience of God as a turn inward, away from the world, in the manner of Augustine’s *Confessions*.³ The concerns of this essay are with the recursively self-interrogating tendencies of *Piers Plowman* exemplified by this inward turn at the start of B.XI, but they are not with those tendencies as represented by Langland’s source text, which goes on to say, ‘Mens imago Dei est’ (The mind is the image of God) (PL 184, col. 487), comparing memory, reason, and the

¹ *The Vision of Piers Plowman: A Critical Edition of the B-Text Based on Trinity College Cambridge MS B.15.17*, ed. by A. V. C. Schmidt (London: Dent, 2011), B.XI.8.

² See *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, explanatory note to line XI.3; see also *Patrologia Latina* 184, cols. 485-508. Hereafter, references to the *Patrologia Latina* online database are given in parentheses, beginning PL and followed by volume and then column number, separated by a comma.

³ I have consulted the Loeb edition: *St. Augustine’s Confessions*, trans. by William Watts (London: Heinemann, 1919). See, for example, ‘tu autum eras interior intimo meo’, *Confessions*, III, vi, addressed to God, or the discussion of memory in Book X. I do not mean that Langland and Augustine, or even Langland and the *Confessions*, are fundamentally at odds; see, for instance, *Confessions* X, xvi: ‘laboro in me ipso: factus sum mihi terra difficultatis et sudoris nimii’ (I work over myself: I have become to myself an earth of difficulty and excessive sweat).

will with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit of the Trinity. It is my sense that *Piers Plowman* has fewer affiliations with this theme of a movement at once inward and upward, a movement toward knowledge of ourselves as images of God and so knowledge of God, than with a different turn: a movement inward and downward, toward an intractably sinful self and an irreducibly particular, immanent world, the humble apprehension of which nonetheless brings us in a kind of rebounding movement—since Langland’s Christ is the Christ of the Harrowing of Hell, the Highest who descends to make himself known in, and to bear up, the lowest—closer to God. As I will show, apophatic or negative theology is a helpful tool for thinking about what Langland is doing as opposed to what Pseudo-Bernard and Augustine are doing; but negative theology proper needs also to be distinguished from the uniquely earthward turn of Langland’s humbled unknowing.

What I mean is put better in an authentic, well-known work of St. Bernard, *De Gradibus Humilitatis et Superbiae* (PL 182, cols. 939-72). There Bernard goes to great lengths to caution against curiosity, the first and by far greatest of the steps of pride: ‘Terram intueri, ut cognoscas teipsum. Ipsa te tibi repraesentabit, quia terra es, et in terram ibis’ (Look at the earth, that you may know yourself. It will show yourself to you, because you are earth, and into earth you will return) (PL 182, col. 957). This version of the injunction to ‘know thyself’ proceeds by means not of an identification with the Trinity but by an identification with the earth itself, with the lowest and most changeable elements of the created world. This identification is well exemplified by the turn at the center of Langland’s poem from a critique of the clergy to specific self-criticism, criticism of the ‘Concupiscencia Carnis’ and ‘Coveitise of Eighes’ that make the self so earthly—here, after all, Will sees himself in the ‘mirour that highte Middelerte’ (B.XI.9)—and voluble. For Bernard and for Langland humility is a kind of knowing; for fallen man it is in fact a necessary condition of knowing, for without humility it is impossible to know oneself and, as Scripture is quick to remind Will, presumptuous to claim to know anything else.

In *Piers Plowman* criticism this earthward-turning tendency is best described in the scholarship of Jill Mann. Mann describes it in terms of Langland’s restless movement between the abstractly allegorical and the material particular, arguing that Langland’s language tends to position the two as equally and importantly real. In ‘Langland and Allegory’,⁴ she cites the Tree of Charity of B.XVI as an example of what she means: the Tree is ‘all of a piece with the agricultural realities that pervade the poem’, and so becomes ‘more than a literary trope’; ‘Charity and the growth of an everyday tree become parallel mysteries, neither of which takes precedence over the other’. In consequence, ‘Langland makes us constantly aware of the way in which life is lived at the intersection of the material and the non-material, the concrete and the abstract’.⁵

⁴ Jill Mann, ‘Langland and Allegory’, in *The Morton W. Bloomfield Lectures, 1989-2005*, ed. by Daniel Donoghue, James Simpson, and Nicholas Watson (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2010), 20-41.

⁵ Mann, ‘Langland and Allegory’, 30.

Though here and in her earlier essay ‘Eating and Drinking in *Piers Plowman*’ Mann offers up an array of moments in which Langland grounds even his most difficult allegories in the world of material particulars, her emphasis is not so much on the primacy of the earthly in Langland as on the other side of the equation—the literalizing realization of allegory Langland effects, and the consequent elevation of language as the vehicle of that realization.⁶ In ‘Langland and Allegory’ *Piers Plowman* is said to show that language has ‘generative capacities’, capacities to structure our experience and suggest ‘an extra dimension of meaning’ beyond either the concrete or the abstract alone and so, for Langland, a sense of the divine somewhere in the shimmer between. She concludes: ‘Grammar is, says Langland, the “grounde of al” (C.XVII.108); it is [...] an expression he also uses of God. In exploring the powers of language, [Langland] must have felt he was getting close to God’.⁷

Mann’s tendency to emphasize the positive sense of God’s presence in language tends to overlook a sense endemic in *Piers Plowman* that the ‘powers of language’ often leave us further from God than when we started. Vincent Gillespie and Maggie Ross describe the traditional distinction between negative and positive theologies, the ‘play of absence and presence’ that ‘characterizes the human experience of engagement with the ineffable’.⁸ There is a rich sense of the ‘play of absence’ in the poem, of language’s limits as well as of its possibilities. There is a worry that language’s ‘generative capacities’ require a generator, a speaker and a need to speak, without which language itself threatens to become a jumble of empty signs, signposts to nowhere.⁹ Nede’s speech in B.XX is the poem’s best example of what I mean:

Homo proponit et Deus disponit (Man proposes, God disposes)—
 [God] governeth alle goode vertues;
 And Nede is next hym, for anoon he meketh,
 And as lowe as a lomb, for lakkyng that hym nedeth;
 For nede maketh nedé fele nedes lowe-herted...
 And God al his grete joye goostliche he lefte,
 And cam and took mankynde and bicam nedy...
 Forthi be noght abashed to bide and to be nedy,
 Sith he that wroghte al the world was wilfulliche nedy... (B.XX.33-49)

Nede’s speech represents the poem’s most systematic exhaustion of the powers of

⁶ Jill Mann, ‘Eating and Drinking in *Piers Plowman*’, *Essays and Studies*, 32 (1979), 26-43.

⁷ Mann, ‘Langland and Allegory’, 39.

⁸ Vincent Gillespie and Maggie Ross, ‘The Apophatic Image’, in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England: Exeter Symposium V*, ed. by Marion Glasscoe (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1992), 53-78 (53).

⁹ For another reading in this vein, see Kathleen M. Hewett-Smith, ‘“Nede ne hath no lawe”: Poverty and the De-stabilization of Allegory in the Final Visions of *Piers Plowman*’, in *Piers Plowman: A Book of Essays*, ed. by Hewett-Smith (New York: Routledge, 2001), 233-53. She writes, ‘the de-stabilization of allegory [...] is, finally, a means of redeeming the mode, of providing significance within the epistemological void constitutive of allegorical discourse’ (233).

language. Within a burst of three lines, at B.XX.35-7, Nede uses ‘nede’ and its variants as, in order: an allegorical subject, a verb, a possibly non-allegorical subject, an object, and, by way of the archaic genitive ‘nedes’, an adverb. The effect is to see the way any single unit of language depends for its meaning on the necessity, the ‘nede’, imposed by its grammatical usage and ultimately by its user. This lesson is being taught as early as B.I.44-53, when Holy Church tells the ‘Reddite Caesari’ story from the book of Matthew¹⁰: ‘of whom spak the lettre’ is the operative question (B.I.49). With Nede’s speech especially it is almost impossible to forget who is speaking, because Nede is always talking about himself. We see through the language, to its speaker and his intention; and so it is Nede – and not, as Mann would make it out, language itself – that is the generative power next to God. ‘Homo proponit et Deus disponit’: When language means anything, it always points toward – but never contains – the ‘willful need’, the Incarnational force, of the Word. That same proverb was invoked to chasten a covetous Will at B.XI.37-8, in the dream of the ‘lond of longynge’, but was dismissed by Faunteltee. Here, in mature reflection on the limits of language and of man, it stands.

This negative strain of Langland’s attitude toward certain uses of language runs deep in the poem, typically showing up alongside turns from abstract dispute or explanation to direct personal rebuke – humblings, in other words. As Scripture ‘lakked’ Will in B.XI, and as Nede will rebuke him for not coming to terms with his own neediness in B.XX, Anima attacks him in B.XV when he senses that Will wishes to ‘knowe and konne the cause of alle hire names’ (B.XV.45-6). ‘I se thi wille!’ (B.XV.44), he exclaims, and adds, ‘For swich a lust and likyng Lucifer fel from hevene’ (B.XV.51). As Anima has explained at length, many names can designate the same thing. This much is in line with Mann’s emphasis on Langland’s complication of language beyond simple one-to-one correspondences. But what gets Will in trouble is, I think, what occasionally sends Mann off the mark: he begins to bother himself with purely linguistic questions, questions that have no bearing on the state of his soul, the original subject of his quest. Anima explains, citing St. Bernard twice:

‘Beatus est’, seith Seint Bernard, ‘qui scripturas legit
 Et verba vertit in opera (Blessed is he who reads the scriptures and
 turns words into works) fulliche to his power’.
 Coveitise to konne and to knowe science
 Pulte out of Paradis Adam and Eve:
 Sciencie appetitus hominem immortalitatis gloriam
 spoliavit (Desire for knowledge robbed man of the glory of
 immortality).
 And right as hony is yvel to defie and englymeth the mawe,
 Right so that thorough reson wolde the roote knowe
 Of God and of hise grete myghtes – hise graces it letteth. (B.XV.60-6)

¹⁰ *Matthew* 22.16-21, where Jesus tells the Pharisees to return to Caesar what is his – the coins that have Caesar’s name on them. All references to the Bible are to the Vulgate.

When Mann takes up this passage, she emphasizes the connection between knowing and eating contained in the honey metaphor, and concludes with reference to the Tree of Charity: 'The only way you can know apples, for Langland, is to eat them'.¹¹ The reading is broadly affirmative of both knowing and eating, and of the connection between the two effected in Langland's language. What Mann does not emphasize, and what she skips over entirely in the celebration of language's generative powers at the end of 'Langland and Allegory', is that it is precisely the inquiry into language for language's sake – what name comes from what cause, *ad infinitum* – that is here cited as an instantiation of 'coveytise', and is deemed worthy of the full vituperative weight of Langland's earthly imagination.

It is not that all knowing is bad. Anima gladly explained his practical roles as Anima, Mens, and so on (B.XV.24-36). It is the case, however, that in *Piers Plowman* there is a deep scepticism, nearly impossible to overemphasize yet almost entirely elided in Mann's readings, of any 'verba' that cannot be connected with earthly 'opera' by more than metaphor. This is the lesson taught by Holy Church at the beginning of the poem, where she assures Will that nothing is 'nedfulle' (B.I.21) but the bare necessities of clothes, food, and drink (B.I.23-5). It is also the lesson the much needier Will of the poem's end, 'hevy chered' and 'elenge in herte' (B.XX.2), is finally fit to learn from Nede himself.¹²

The recent work of D. Vance Smith introduces negative or 'apophatic' theology into his discussion of *Piers Plowman*, but cautions that, 'In one sense, apophatic theology simply restates the ultimate inadequacy of theology as a science [...] in respect of the contingency and limitation of physical and mental signs'.¹³ The poem's sense of the contingency and limitation of all science, and of man—a sense of neediness—is all I mean to restate. Smith's later suggestions about Langland's affinities with Dionysian negative theology in particular seem to me misguided; Pseudo-Dionysius's heavily Neoplatonic mystical aporia, opening upward into a divine silence,¹⁴ has its equivalent in Langland only in a kind of downward silence, a stressing of the bare needs of hunger and thirst. The stress is not on the unknowability of God, but on the unfitness of a wandering human Will to know Him on anything but the humblest terms.

In the B.XV passage above, the bitter end of the honeyed 'coveytise to konne' without humility is that 'hise graces it letteth'. To avoid a misleadingly negative sense of Langland's emphasis on being humbled, it is important to stress this emphasis on

¹¹ Mann, 'Eating and Drinking', 41.

¹² Jill Mann's 'The Nature of Need Revisited', *Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 18 (2004), 3-29, rightly emphasizes Langland's 'brilliant stroke' of connecting human, bodily need with the 'ius necessitatis' (right of necessity) that justifies the Redemption of man (27), but glances over the role of spiritual neediness by way of humility in that Redemption.

¹³ D. Vance Smith, 'Negative Langland', *Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 23 (2009), 33-59 (52).

¹⁴ Pseudo-Dionysius's *Mystical Theology* ends, speaking of God as known apophatically: 'We make assertions and denials of what is next to it, but never of it, for it is both beyond every assertion [...] and [...] beyond every denial'. See *Pseudo Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. by Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 141.

grace, understood as the upshot of humility: ‘Deus superbis resistit humilibus autem dat gratiam’ (God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble).¹⁵ The poem’s demanding final refrain, ‘Redde quod debes (Return what you owe)’,¹⁶ in fact comes, in Matthew 18, from the mouth of a servant who, having been forgiven by his master, demands his dues from a servant of his own. ‘Omne debitum dimisi tibi quoniam rogasti me’ (I dismissed every debt of yours because you begged me), the first master reminds and rebukes his servant, before delivering him to torture.¹⁷ What looks like the refrain of legalism is also a reminder that what we owe one another is what we have been given ourselves: forgiveness, grace. Paul says, ‘nemini quicquam debeatis nisi ut invicem diligatis’ (You should owe nothing to anyone, except that you love one another).¹⁸ Aquinas wrote, ‘Gratia, secundum quod gratis datur, excludit rationem debiti’ (Grace, inasmuch as it is freely given, excludes the reckoning of debt).¹⁹

Beginning ‘Negative Langland’, D. Vance Smith writes, ‘I want to argue here that our collective failure to come to terms with the poem—that is, terms that all readers of Langland can agree are essential to understanding such basic features of the poem as its form—is not a critical failure but a profound reading of the poem’.²⁰ If Smith means that the ‘failure’ of contemporary criticism to come to terms with the poem is ‘a profound reading’ because it shows that the poem is profoundly difficult, I would agree. But I want to argue that the poem’s essential difficulty—and the reason for the jerky self-reflexivity that makes it so difficult to understand the poem’s ‘basic features’—is due to the difficulty the poem knowingly represents again and again: the difficulty of being humbled. I do not believe it is reductive to say that *Piers Plowman* can be read as a painstaking and even painful acting out of something like Bernard’s ‘Terram intueri, ut cognoscas teipsum. Ipsa te tibi repraesentabit, quia terra es, et in terram ibis’ (Look at the earth, that you may know yourself. It will show yourself to you, because you are earth, and into earth you will return) (PL 182, col. 957). If this reading is reductive, it at least reduces the poem to the terms of Will’s initial request: ‘Teche me to no tresor, but tel me this ilke— / How I may save my soule’ (B.I.83-4). On the other hand, to champion the poem’s difficulty as if the difficulty itself were the poem’s point, and as if failing to read it were to read it well, is a critical movement that threatens to reduce the poem to a ‘nede’-less, unnecessary thing, with no operable ethical weight. It is better in my view to risk seeing the poem as a bit naive—as Mann does, when she identifies in *Piers Plowman* ‘the idealization of poverty’, which is ‘one of the ways the poor are kept in existence’²¹—than to risk reading into it a ‘negative theology’ that, de-theologized, amounts to little more than negativity.

The last piece of advice Will receives in the poem comes from Kynde, just after

¹⁵ James 4:6.

¹⁶ B.XIX.188, B.XIX.194, B.XIX.261, B.XIX.394, B.XX.309.

¹⁷ Matthew 18:23-35.

¹⁸ Romans 13:8.

¹⁹ *Summa Theologiae*, Ia 2ae 111, 1 ad. 2. I have consulted the Blackfriars edition: *Summa Theologiae*, ed. and trans. by Thomas Gilby, O.P., 61 vols (London: Blackfriars, 1964-80).

²⁰ Smith, ‘Negative Langland,’ 34.

²¹ Mann, ‘The Nature of Need Revisited’, 29.

Kynde has advised him to ‘wend into Unitee [...] And loke thow konne som craft’ (B.XX.204-6). Will asks, in a very slight advance on a question he asked Holy Church at the beginning of the poem (B.I.138-9), ‘Counseilleth me, Kynde [...] what craft be best to lerne?’ (B.XX.207). ‘Lerne to love’, Kynde replies, ‘and leef alle othere’ (B.XX.208). ‘And there by counsel of Kynde’, Will tells us, ‘I comsed to rome / Thorough Contricion and Confession til I cam to Unitee’ (B.XX.212-3). This shriving is an action left incomplete earlier on in the poem’s characteristically stop-and-start conclusion; shortly following his dream of the Harrowing of Hell, Will goes to church, intending ‘to be housled after’ (B.XIX.3), but ends up falling asleep in the middle of mass. It is one of several features of the poem’s final sections that give a sense of real trajectory to a work that threatens always to collapse into formlessness: a trajectory toward a confession. Confession offers Will a humble language of words that have to do with works, words that have a nede and an apprehension of one’s own neediness behind them, words that can stand up to the charge, ‘seipsos nesciunt’ (they do not know themselves). The ‘Unitee’ Will comes to ‘thorough Contricion and Confession’ may be not only the unity of the Church, but also a unity and integrity of the self through humble self-knowledge and acknowledgment.

If, then, the critical difficulty is ‘how to explain *Piers Plowman*’, Smith is right: the poem communicates a sense that what is really necessary, really needful, is something that can be explained over and over and in endless ways, but something that cannot be taught any more easily than one person can teach another to be hungry. If the difficulty is ‘what to do about *Piers Plowman*’, the difficulty is an ethical and personal one—forcefully real, in the Mann sense of making claims both immaterial and material—more than a critical one, and so all the more important. ‘Reddere quod debes (to return what you owe)’ where *Piers Plowman* is concerned might be to cease trying to explain the poem and do something about it—to attend to what is needful, like Conscience who at last leaves off defending the Church and sets out to find *Piers the Plowman*.

In the end, it is in something like this sense of distance between seeker and sought-after at the poem’s close—in something like the sense of an impossible gulf between the divine need and earthly human hunger, and the more occult sense that this distance has already been overleapt from the other side—that Langland locates the experience of God. Mary Clemente Davlin draws attention to the emphatic earthliness of the poem’s close in contrast with the great ‘Mens imago Dei est’ (The mind is the image of God) epiphany at the end of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*²²: ‘Where God is in *Piers Plowman* does not provide a comfortable ending to the narrative; it cannot, since the poem is about faith in this world, not sight in the next’.²³ The last, rapid-fire sequence of awakenings toward the poem’s close enacts a movement not toward a comfortable ending but toward a less comfortable, more active beginning, a

²² The three circles that make up the Trinitarian ‘circulazion’, says Dante, ‘mi parve pinta de la nostra effige’. See Canto XXXIII, lines 127-31. I have used *The Divine Comedy: Paradiso*, trans. by Charles S. Singleton (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975), 378.

²³ Mary Clemente Davlin, *The Place of God in Medieval Art* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2001), 170.

different kind of awakening: 'right with that I wakede' (B.XVIII.427) pairs with 'Thus I awaked and wroot' (B.XIX.1) to describe, for the first time, the same awakening twice; likewise, 'I awakned therwith, and wrote as me mette' (B.XIX.485) pairs with 'as I wente by the way, whan I was thus awaked' (B.XX.1). This mounting sense of coming awake as not merely something you do, but something you do again and again, culminates in the final and unique 'I gan awake' (B.XX.387), which ends the poem in a moment of endless awakening. It becomes a process – like the process of humbling enacted in confession – that must be accomplished again and again because it is never complete, and because we ourselves cannot accomplish it; we rely on something else to wake us up.

This brings us back to grace, the gift given only to the reliant, the humbled. 'Whan I was thus awaked' (B.XX.1) makes the waking moment into a past participle, an adjective and so a quality of whoever has been woken up. In scholastic thought grace too becomes, strictly speaking, a quality of the person to whom it is given. This is the subject of an inquiry into grace in the *Summa Theologiae*: 'Utrum gratia sit qualitas animae' (Whether grace is a quality of the soul). Aquinas responds, 'super Ps. 103,15, ut exhilaret faciem in oleo, dicit Glossa quod gratia est nitor animae, sanctum concilians amorem. Sed nitor animae est quaedam qualitas, sicut et pulchritudo corporis. Ergo gratia est quaedam qualitas' (On Psalm 103, 15, that he may refresh the face with oil, the Gloss says that grace is a splendor of the soul, winning over holy love. But splendor of the soul is a certain quality, like the beauty of the body. Therefore grace is a certain quality).²⁴ Aquinas's description of grace by way of oil poured over the face, and by the 'pulchritudo corporis' (beauty of the body), recalls the earthly bent of Langland's poetics. It recalls also the logic of B.XX, where the humbling of contrition and confession, and Conscience's final cry for grace, follow Nede's re-assertion of the importance of earthly needs, and of the willful neediness of the Incarnation. Conscience, who will walk 'as wide as the world lasteth' (B.XX.382), who in his professed neediness 'gradde after Grace' (B.XX.387), is Langland's final enduring image of awakening to, and being awakened by, the divine.

²⁴ *Summa Theologiae*, Ia 2ae 110, 2, sed contra.