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Piers Plowman, the Sublime

Ponam pedem in aquilone, et similis ero Altissimo

I shall set my foot in the north, and I shall be like the most high

(l. 119)

Langland after St. Augustine after Isaiah

The person who utters the proud and sublime words quoted at the head of this page is the Satan himself, and this fact alone tells us a lot about Langland's sublime. It is indeed, to a large extent, on such upward flights of fancy that Longinus based his notion of the sublime, hoping to arrive at the heart of the mystery of artistic fame and immortality. The effects of hearing a sublime piece of music or poetry he describes in the following terms: "For by some innate power the true sublime uplifts our souls; we are filled with a proud exaltation and a sense of a vaunting joy, just as though we had ourselves produced what we had heard"¹. In eulogizing "the true sublime", he was aware that there are many pitfalls in such ambitious striving, and it is easy to take pinchbeck for genuine gold, or to mistake the merely vulgar or pompous for "the true sublime"². But he never questioned the desirability and the supreme value of the sublime as the sublime. And yet for Langland and perhaps for the Middle Ages in general the sublime as such is already highly suspect, and it is suspect on moral, rather than on aesthetic, grounds. In the Bible the voice that is constantly harping on and exploiting man's yearning for the sublime, the infinite, and the immortal is usually that of the devil. It is the evil one who promises immortality and omniscience to Eve in the Garden of Eden (Gen, 3: 4—5), and it is he again who tempts Christ with

¹ Longinus, "On the Sublime", in *Aristotle, Horace, Longinus: Classical Literary Criticism*, ed. T. S. Dorsch (London: Penguin Books, 1984), p. 107.

² Cf. Chapter 3 (Defects that Militate against Sublimity), in Longinus, "On the Sublime", pp. 102—103.

a vision of infinite power, having taken him onto the top of a high mountain (cf. St. Luke, 4: 5—8). The Satan then appears to be the master of the biblical and medieval sublime.

At the same time, it is clear that all those devilish tricks are performed in imitation of God, the true master of the sublime, and the master of promises, of which perhaps the most sublime is the one given by Christ from the top of the mountain of the Cross to one of the malefactors: "To day shalt thou be with me in paradise" (St. Luke, 23: 43). Longinus himself takes recourse to the "Jewish God", who provides him with a classical example of the sublime, the instantly fulfilled sweeping promise of dispersing the darkness of the world: "And God said, Let there be light: and there was light" (Gen, 1: 3)³. The sublime then, thought of, in keeping with Longinus, as something that "transports us with wonder"⁴, or as joyful exaltation at the prospect of great promise being fulfilled, was no stranger to the medieval mind, on the contrary, it was, quite inevitably, at the very centre of the medieval, God-centred mentality.

If, however, the Middle Ages produced a 'sublime-centred' mentality, they also, by the same token, had to bring forth a heightened sense of suspiciousness towards the specific manifestations of the sublime, each of which could be of the devil's making, meant to tempt and lead astray the faithful with a high promise that shall be most dismally frustrated. One of the medieval common-places was, after all, the saying, *diabolus simia Dei* (the devil is an ape of God), but this raises immediately the question of how to distinguish, on the basis of Christianity, between the true and the false sublime. It is, however, essential to realize that this problem is of a different nature than Longinus's dilemma of telling the genuine from the spurious sublime. In the latter case the failure to make the proper distinction leads at worst to bad, pretentious and shallow poetry and to a waste of time, in the former case such a failure may easily amount to eternal damnation. Given the infinite cunning which the evil spirit is reputed to have at his disposal, the Christian task of separating the wheat from the chaff, the clever imitation from the original, the sacred from the profane, appears to be rather daunting. The difference in question may, at least at first sight, hardly be much of a difference, as opposed to the consequences of overlooking it, which may be very grave indeed. It is not surprising therefore that we find in medieval literature, and in *Piers Plowman* in particular, constant efforts to grasp this elusive, and yet absolutely vital, difference that decides about man's salvation or damnation.

Those two notions: the sacred and the profane I propose to treat as two aspects of the sublime, one holy, i.e. official, recommendable, with clear outlines, and the other unholy, i.e. shadowy, dubious, liable to being marginalized, stamped out, erased, or forgotten about. It seems that the very notion of the sublime

³ Cf. Longinus, "On the Sublime", p. 111.

⁴ Idem, p. 100.

implies such a duality, as is visible in the old saying attributed to Napoleon: "From the sublime to the ridiculous there is only one step"⁵. The discourse of the sublime is by definition extreme, it resembles tightrope walking and thus may swing violently between maximal understanding and gratification to complete alienation — something that Longinus was already well aware of⁶. Quite significant in this respect is also the semantic slippage that took place in the English language on the way from the noun, *pathos* with the sense, "a quality that excites pity or sadness", to the adjective, *pathetic*, which usually means, "arousing contempt"⁷. Langland's grappling with this problem consists in a long series of repeated attempts, none of which is satisfactory in the eyes of the author. Hence, perhaps, the air of fitfulness, the lack of the so-called logical development, and numerous paradoxes that typify this strange poem.

The problem of the sublime may also be approached from the point of view of the aesthetics, there is, namely, a certain fundamental similarity between the sublime and the category of the aesthetic impression as such. Both seem to yield the effect of easiness, and immediacy in the relationship between man and the Absolute, or the Other. Both also seem to bring about the opposite, but concomitant, effect of frustration caused by the disappointment of the great promises that inhere in them. As Terry Eagleton has remarked:

The aesthetics offers the middle class a superbly versatile mode of their political aspirations, exemplifying new forms of autonomy and self-determination, transforming the relations between law and desire, morality and knowledge, recasting the links between individual and totality, and revising social relations on the basis of custom, affection and sympathy. On the other hand, the aesthetic signifiers what Max Horkheimer has called a kind of 'internalised repression', inserting social power more deeply into the very bodies of those it subjugates, and so operating as a supremely effective mode of political hegemony⁸.

Thus, an ideology that accentuates the importance of the aesthetic side of life would, by the same token, be committed to a celebration of 'brotherly love' and, generally, of warm relations between people. It would also be committed to the individual's 'self-determination', and would regard with a lot of suspicion any attempts to 'determine' an individual 'from above', i.e. by all sorts of traditional or institutional authorities, such as the state, or the church, and by

⁵ Cf. J.M. & M.J. Cohen, *Dictionary of Quotations* (London: Penguin Books, 1960), p. 268.

⁶ Cf. Longinus, "On the Sublime", p. 103, where he berates the "false sublime" in the following terms:

This is misplaced, hollow emotionalism where emotion is not called for, or immoderate passion where restraint is what is needed. For writers are often carried away, as though by drunkenness, into outbursts of emotion which are not relevant to the matter in hand, but are wholly personal, and hence tedious. To hearers unaffected by this emotionalism their work therefore seems atrocious, and naturally enough, for while they are themselves in an ecstasy, their hearers are not.

⁷ Cf. H.W. Fowler, F.G. Fowler, R.E. Allen, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*. Eighth Edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 872.

⁸ T. Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), p. 28.

a waste of time. Why should Langland take such a severe stand towards his own favourite pastime? A lot is known of course about medieval asceticism, and about the Christian fundamentalist distrust towards any activity in which the element of pure enjoyment seems to prevail over that of duty. But Langland provides us also with quite a 'practical' explanation of this problem. Poetry is not serious enough because it hampers the process of communication between the self and the supernatural Other by attracting too much attention to itself. This is particularly obvious when we compare poetry with prayer, the latter being much more clearly than the former 'a means to an end'. The relationship between God and man is likened here, in a very traditional manner, to the one between father and child, which means that the expected 'direct' way of address must be, for the child, an act of submission, which, in this case, is also submission to the Dreamer's earthly patrons who give him bread, fulfilling one of the chief wishes included in the Lord's Prayer: "and give us this day our daily bread". A simple and emotional prayer, conceived of as a concentrated expression of love, or, more precisely, of loving submission, is considered here a much more natural response to the challenge presented by God, than the elaborate composition of poetry that is likely to divert the poet's attention from 'heavenly matters' and lead to his getting 'bogged down' in the intricacies of the poetic craft, or in the largely irrelevant, from a 'spiritualist' point of view, details of a realistic presentation.

In taking such an attitude Langland resembles Horkheimer and Eagleton in their mistrust towards the cult of beauty. All of them 'smell a rat' in the aesthetic outlook, suspecting that it could be a bait which they are invited to swallow, as a result of which they would be held in bondage by various 'powers of darkness', whether they be 'the military-industrial complex', or the devil — 'the prince of this world'. Of course, Langland's motivation is very different from that of the above mentioned Marxist critics. He does not suspect art simply because it may breed an ideological submissiveness — having nothing against the very principle of submission, he fears that his indulgence in poetry may cause him to serve other masters than the ones he feels he should be loyal to.

We may find that the act of writing a book is suspect for Langland also on another count if we remember Langland's interjection: 'aren't there enough books?' ['for ther are bokes yнове']. These words are a trifle surprising if we consider that books in the 14th century were rather uncommon and highly treasured possessions. Of course Langland does not want to say that there exist enough copies of books, but rather that enough books have been composed. The Middle Ages apparently knew little of the modern notion of the infinite progress of knowledge, in which every new generation has a chance radically to improve, widen, or revise the intellectual legacy of their forbears. J.A. Burrow, writing about the medieval concept of the author, connects it with the derived notion of 'authority' and with the etymology of the word 'author', meaning originally 'the one who increases, or augments':

Authority belongs to the auctor — an honorific title ... To be an auctor is to augment the knowledge and wisdom of humanity (both words derive from Latin *augere* 'increase'); and few latter-day writers can claim as much. The great auctores of the past, Christian and pagan, have already said almost everything there is to say¹¹.

It is quite clear that such a perception of the author comes close to that of God, as is also visible in the superficially unemotional definition of the author given by St. Bonaventure, in which he compares the author proper with other types of writers:

There are four ways of making a book. Sometimes a man writes other's words, adding nothing and changing nothing; and he is simply called a scribe (*scriptor*). Sometimes a man writes others' words, putting together passages which are not his own; and he is called a compiler (*compilator*). Sometimes a man writes both other's words and his own, but with the others' words in prime place and his own added only for purpose of clarification; and he is called not an author but a commentator (*commentator*). Sometimes a man writes both his own words and others', but with his own in prime place and others' added only for purpose of confirmation; and he should be called an author (*auctor*)¹².

The author is then somebody who differs from the 'scriptor' in almost the same way as the Creator differs from His creation, inasmuch as all creations, in the medieval eyes, were but reflections of the eternal verities, referring us back to the only 'real' Creation, which cannot be repeated or improved upon, and to the Creator Himself¹³. To exalt the position of the author to this extent was bound to mean in practice that the 'author' became a title bestowed only on the 'great writers of antiquity', whose authority (meaning here precisely the state of being an 'author' in the medieval sense) was universally taken for granted. This process rarely yielded positive results as it often led ultimately to a virtual 'mummification' of the authors, which could be compared to the process whereby the original creation gods in primitive cultures started to be felt as distant and inaccessible, reaching the state which Mircea Eliade refers to as *deus otiosus*, 'the idle god'¹⁴.

¹¹ J.A. Burrow, *Medieval Writers and Their Work (Middle English Literature and Their Work)* (Oxford, New York, Toronto, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 32.

¹² Quoted after J.A. Burrow, *Medieval Writers...*, pp. 29, 30.

¹³ At this point we may refer to the well-known 12th-century poem by A. de Lille:

Omnis mundi creatura
Quasi liber et pictura
Nobis est et speculum;
Nostrae vitae, nostrae mortis,
Nostri status, nostrae sortis
Fidele signaculum.

["Every creature in the world is, for us, like a book, a picture, and a mirror; it is a faithful sign of our life, our death, our condition, and our fate"]

¹⁴ Cf. M. Eliade, *Historia wierzeń i idei religijnych*, vol. 1, trans. S. Tokarski, the original title, *Histoire des croyances et des idées religieuses* (Warszawa: Instytut Wydawniczy PAX, 1988), p. 107.

Hence the complex nature of the danger facing Will, the narrator of *Piers Plowman*. On the one hand, his styling himself as an 'author', or 'maker' (the archaic English term meaning a poet which corresponds to both the etymology of the Greek word *poetes*, and the concept of the godlike poet as an 'original maker') is a presumptuous and arrogant gesture — 'bookish' knowledge, and even more, the act of writing books can easily be accused of unworthily and ineffectually imitating the act of Creation. For this reason, perhaps, Will talks self-deprecatingly of his 'meddling in makings', trying, as it were, to conceal the fact that he is actually in the business of writing an original work of art, which is something that few of his contemporaries in England attempted to do, and thus coming close to a blasphemous self-deification¹⁵. We seem to encounter an interesting paradox here — on the one hand, Langland reproaches himself for his artistic leanings because they make him take unnecessary detours and slow him down in his striving for the absolute, but, on the other, he is afraid of the easiness of the written word that may produce spurious effects behind which there will not be enough of a living or authentic authority.

The artistic writing then, as a means of mediation and signification, is found wanting as inefficient or as efficient only in a superficial way, but it does not mean that Langland rejects it. Having voiced his, rather conventional, objections, he proceeds to defend it and to defend himself as a 'maker':

I seigh wel he seide me sooth and, somewhat me to excuse,
 Seide, 'Caton conforted his sone that, clerk though he were,
 To solacen hym som tyme — a[ls]o I do whan I make: *amuse; just as; versify*
Interpone tuis interdum gaudia curis.
 'And of holy men I herde', quod I, 'how thei outhurwhile *sometimes*
 Pleyden, the parfiter to ben, [places manye].
 Ac if ther were any wight that wolde me telle
 What were Dowel and Dobet and Dobest at the laste,
 Wolde I nevere do werk, but wende to holi chirche
 And there bidde my bedes but whan ich ete or slepe'. *say my prayers except*
(XII, 20—28)

The Dreamer's argument, based first of all on the authority of the pagan writer, Cato, may be considered surprising as a reply to Imagination's criticism, appealing to Christian orthodoxy. But the Dreamer does not want to refute Imagination's claims, but only qualify them, hence he prepares an ontological niche for the aesthetic dimension of life, a sort of side-track, and he might have

¹⁵ At least one critic did actually compare Langland to God: 'Like God, Langland strives to approach Unity through multiplicity and plenitude in his poetic cosmos'. (P. Raabe, *Imitating God (The Allegory of Faith in Piers Plowman B)* (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1990) p. 168) which is not very surprising given the tradition of regarding *Piers Plowman* as an English counterpart to Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

felt that to establish such a niche no more was needed than second rate authorities. Thus we come again across a dualistic, and ambiguous manner of thinking in connection with the aesthetic. The words used with reference to writing: "solace, gaudia, pley", are referring to something short-lasting and not quite serious, something whose existence may be justified by its being merely a supplement of the "real thing", a seasoning of the main course. The saints mentioned by Langland use some unspecified amusements, probably poetry, "the parfiter to ben", which sounds like a nobilitation of art, but it seems more likely that in Langland's eyes a saint's saintliness was needed to counterbalance the potentially harmful effect of the artistic discourse, and turn it to a good use. In the final statement the Dreamer concedes that writing is his second best occupation he would not have to resort to if he knew with perfect certainty, i.e. from an external authority, the rules of good life. Writing and art in general appear here as a having their locus in a certain zone of uncertainty and serving to minimize the noxious effect of that uncertainty, again as a substitute for the 'real' certainty. After the state of certainty is achieved writing can be discarded in favour of prayer, functioning as a symbol of the "real", apparently because it is spoken and is supposed to come from "the depth of one's heart", though in itself it clearly is not the whole answer to Langland's problem of "Do-well, Do-bet, and Do-best".

There is naturally a rather intimate link between 'the aesthetic' and 'the sacred', even though to a man like Langland the common modernist postulate of a 'disinterested' enjoyment of beauty would sound like a thinly covered inducement to worship false gods. By the sacred, in the broadest possible sense of the word, I understand a disquieting or soothing presence that has a basically non-pragmatic, non-utilitarian character, and does not lend itself easily to the operations of reason. Eagleton himself talks of 'the aesthetic' in words that could be applied to the sacred, and could be regarded as a good definition of the sacred, if such a definition is at all possible:

Within the dense welter of our material life, with all its amorphous flux, certain objects stand out in a sort of perfection dimly akin to reason, and these are known as the beautiful. A kind of ideality seems to inform their sensuous existence from within, rather than floating above it in some Platonic space; so that a rigorous logic is here revealed to us in matter itself, felt instantly on the pulses¹⁶.

Let us compare it with E. Benveniste, who, writing about the pairs of terms referring to the sacred in Indo-European languages, such as the Avestan *spenta/yaozdata*, the Gothic *heils/weih*, the Latin *sacer/sanctus*, or the Greek *hieros/hagios*, says the following:

¹⁶ T. Eagleton, *The Ideology...*, p. 17.

The analysis of each of the testified pairs ... allows us to assume that there was in the prehistoric epoch a concept with two meanings — a positive one: something that is characterized by a divine presence, and a negative one: something which people are forbidden to touch¹⁷.

The two above passages seem to be informed by the same dialectic of fear and fascination which typifies every genuine metaphysical experience, and which we have already encountered while talking about the sublime and the aesthetic. Benveniste's "negative aspect of the sacred" has in fact much in common with our understanding of the profane, seen as an 'accursed thing', and it demonstrates the closeness of the relationship between the sacred and the profane.

Let us have now a look at a fragment which exemplifies Langland's understanding of the dialectic of the sacred — it is taken from the sermon of Lady Church directed to the Dreamer:

And also the plante of pees, moost precious of vertues:	<i>peace; powers, virtues</i>
For hevne myght nat holden it, so was it hevvy of hymself,	
Til it hade of the erthe eten his fille,	<i>eaten (C)</i>
And whan it hadde of this fold flesh and blood taken,	<i>earth</i>
Was nevere leef upon lynde lighter thereafter,	<i>leaf; linden tree</i>
And portatif and persaunt as the point of a nedle,	<i>portable; piercing; needle</i>
That myghte noon armure it lette ne none heighe walles	<i>(So) that; armour; stop</i>

(I, 152—58)

The whole imagery of the above vision of the 'plant of Peace' leans rather heavily on very obvious paradoxes, the 'plant of Peace' behaves in a bizarre fashion, it becomes the lightest when it seems to be at its heaviest, it 'eats its fill of earth', like a Gargantuan monster, only to become similar in subtlety to 'the point of a needle'. Langland's vision of the plant of Peace could be regarded as a bold attempt at reconciling the fundamentally hostile elements of 'love' and 'law', i.e. of the aesthetic and the ethical¹⁸. The heaviness of the plant seems to symbolize the material content of peace, the fundament of lawfulness on which it is based, while its subsequent lightness seems to stand for the freedom and indeterminacy of love, without which law becomes oppressive and insipid, for: *The letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life*. (2 Cor. 3: 6). At the same time, the earthiness of the plant may be treated as corresponding to that element of the sacred which is expected to satisfy the longing for "the real presence", while its later, slightly unearthly, spikiness and elusiveness would be associated with the

¹⁷ E. Benveniste, *Le vocabulaire des institutions indoeuropéennes*, vol. II, p. 179. Quoted by M. Eliade, *Historia wierzeń...*, p. 135 [The translation from the Polish is mine].

¹⁸ Those notions figure prominently in the immediate context of the discussed fragment, cf. *Piers Plowman*, B, I, 147—171.

forbidding, untouchable element of the sacred, the element that we could term, the sublime, without forgetting that it properly belongs to the zone of the sacred, and is never far away from the obsession with "the real presence".

There is a strange similarity between the vision of the plant of Peace and the description of the fall of Lucifer and the rebel angels in the same Passus I, who also appear to be too heavy for the heaven to hold them:

And mo thousandes myd hym than man kouthe nombre	<i>more; with; count</i>
Lopen out with Lucifer in lothliche forme	<i>Leapt; loathsome</i>
For thei leveden upon hym that lyed in this manere	<i>because; believed; lied</i>
<i>Ponam pedem in aquilone et aquilone, et similis ero Altissimo</i>	
And alle that hoped in myghte be so, noon hevene myghte hem holde,	
But fellen out in fendes liknesse [ful] nyn dayes togideres,	
Til God of his goodnesse [garte the hevene to stekie	<i>made; stick fast</i>
And gan stable it and stynte] and stonden in quiete.	<i>cause it to rest</i>

(I, 116—23)

The juxtaposition of those two fragments makes one realize how short is the conceptual and aesthetic distance between Langland's sublime and his 'anti-sublime' or false sublime, the consequence of which is a headlong fall instead of elevation. The passage also introduces the all-important topic of the "illicit mimesis", an imitation that betrays, threatens, and (literally) bedevils the original.

A similar dialectic of a 'positive' and a 'negative' interpretation of the aesthetic, and, by implication, also of the sacred is one of the main themes of Langland's thinking. Many fragments in *Piers Plowman* show that Langland was acutely aware of the dangers of an overly aesthetic attitude. Perhaps the most telling is the following one:

'The doughtieste doctour and devinour of the Trinitee,	<i>theologian</i>
Was Austyn the olde, and heighest of the foure,	<i>(Who) was; greatest</i>
Seide thus in a sermon — I seigh it writen ones —	<i>discourse</i>
<i>"Ecce ipsi idiote rapiunt celum ubi nos sapientes in inferno mergimur" —</i>	
And is to mene to Englissh, moore ne lesse,	
Arn none rather yraavysshed fro the right bileve	<i>orthodox faith</i>
Than are these konnynges clerkes that konne manye bokes,	<i>clever; know</i>
Ne none sonner saved, ne sadder of bileve	<i>more constant in</i>
Than plowmen and pastours and povere commune laborers,	<i>herdsmen</i>
Souteres and shepherdes — swiche lewed juttis	<i>unimportant, ignorant people</i>
Percen with a Paternoster the paleys of hevene	<i>penetrate</i>
And passen purgatorie penauncelees at hir hennes partyng	
That inparfitly here knewe and ek lyvede	<i>?incompletely</i>
'Ye, men knowe clerkes that han corsed the tyme cursed	<i>learned men;</i>
That evere thei kouthe or knowe moore than <i>Credo in Deum patrem</i>	<i>learnt</i>
And principally hir paternoster — many a person hath wisshed.	

(X, 450—65)

The above passage is of course deeply paradoxical, it is a very learned invective against learning, it also an aesthetic answer to the problem of the limitations of the aesthetic. Paradoxical is also Langland's ostentatious scorn for the 'cunning clerks that know many books', since he certainly could be considered one of them, just as St. Augustine, in the quotation adduced by Langland, when condemning 'the wise men', unmistakably talks of himself as one of them.

To travesty the famous dictum of Alexander Pope, we might conclude that what our author seems to be saying here is that 'a lot of learning is a dangerous thing', dangerous because it can make you become satisfied with 'the second best', with the superficial, purely aesthetic — because useless, or not immediately useful, perfection of language, and of abstract concepts. Langland's criterion of usefulness has naturally little or nothing to do with what we might call practical or material profit, he talks all the time *sub specie aeternitatis* (under the aspect of eternity), truly useful for him are only those things of which it may be said that they are essential for an individual's eternal salvation, i.e. exactly aesthetic phenomena whose meaning is not exhausted by everyday considerations. In such circumstances it is small wonder that Langland should point to prayer as a positive aesthetic counterpart to the negative aesthetic phenomenon, i.e. the bookish knowledge. A prayer is also an aesthetic artefact, just like a book, it is made of words and has the status of something 'higher' and more 'spiritual' than the everyday existence. At the same time, the ideal prayer envisaged by Langland has the degree of warmth, directness and intimacy inaccessible to books and 'makings', and above all, it is far more efficient than they. Its efficiency, moreover, does not depend on the personal accomplishments of the person who resorts to it, a common sinner, and an uneducated yokel 'can pierce with a single Paternoster to the palace of Heaven'.

Let us have a look now at a typically medieval, i.e. clearly hierarchical, view on prayer.

You must know that there are three degrees of prayer.

There is first vocal prayer, either given us directly by God Himself, as the Paternoster, or by the Church, as matins, vespers, and the other canonical hours, or else composed by holy men and addressed to our Lord, our Lady, or the saints ... Generally speaking this kind of prayer is most suitable in the early stage of conversion ...

The second degree of prayer is vocal, but without any set formula. This is when a man by the grace of God feels devotion, and out of his devotion speaks to Him as though when he were bodily in His presence, using such words as come to mind and seem to be in accord with his feelings ... This kind of prayer is very pleasing to God for it comes straight from the heart, and for that reason it is never made in vain. It belongs to what I have called the second degree of contemplation.

The third degree of prayer is in the heart and without words. It is characterised by great peace and rest in soul and body. The man who would pray in this manner must have great purity of heart, for it is only possible to those who, either by long spiritual or bodily exercise, or else by sudden movements of love ..., have come to great inward peace ... This peace our Lord gives to some of his servants as a reward for their labour and a foreshadowing of the love which they shall have in the happiness of heaven¹⁹.

¹⁹ W. Hilton, *The Scale of Perfection*, trans. D.G. Sitwell (London: Burns Oates, 1953) I, 29—30, pp. 41—42.

Hilton's 'scale of perfection' in reaching heaven through prayer is not really so inexorably hierarchical as it might seem at the first glance, it allows for a sudden movement of love' through which we probably can attain to a *unio mystica* (mystical union) with a single leap. It may generally be said that in the above passage, just as in Langland, we can observe a powerful yearning for an immediacy of experience, which seems to favour a movement 'by leaps and bounds', rather than a patient and painstaking clambering upwards. This 'yearning for immediacy' might well be suspected of lying behind the notorious lack of a coherent, linear development in *Piers Plowman*, about which so many critics have complained²⁰.

It may be profitable to compare Hilton's degrees of prayer with St. Bonaventure's distinction between the scribe, the compiler, the commentator, and the author (cf. p. 5). Both classifications begin with the level of strict imitation, the level of 'speaking with others' words'. From this Hilton proceeds immediately to the level of speaking with one's 'own words', or with words inspired by God as a token of a special grace. This level seems to correspond to the highest category distinguished by St. Bonaventure, that of the author. But Hilton goes further, in the third degree of prayer the question of authorship disappears together with the question of composition and all the pain that it entails. The disappearance of material and conventional constraints does not lead, however, to a wild anarchy of any sort, but rather to an ultimate confirmation of the divine law, on the basis of spontaneous feeling alone.

It should not escape our notice that Langland greatly simplifies Hilton's scheme, proposing, as it were, an immediate passage from 'level one' to 'level three', coupling a simple recitation of set prayer by an ostensibly uninitiated person with the truly sublime and astonishing effect of 'piercing the heaven'. Langland's 'short-circuit' is hard or impossible to reconcile with a hierarchical way of thinking, and in this respect it is far more revolutionary and 'anti-medieval' than Hilton's views. As D.M. Murtaugh has remarked:

Langland considered learning to be one species of good works, and he has his dreamer interpret Ecclesiastes 9: 1 — "Sunt iusti atque sapientes; et opera eorum in manu dei sunt" — to show the tenuous relationship of both to salvation (B.X. 436—47). And so the damnation of Aristotle and the salvation of the good thief are adduced to show the doubtful relevance of good works in a scheme of salvation that seems to have been determined "in the legende of lif longe er I were" (B.X. 381). All human endeavor is invalidated by the economy of grace, and the least learned of men gain salvation with a prayer.

(B.X. 465—71).²¹

²⁰ A case in point is the statement by Pamela Raabe: 'And yet Langland is said to distrust allegory, to distrust it so intensely that he cannot stop himself from continually calling attention to it, breaking down its similitudes, and abandoning one after another in despair of finding any that is adequate to express the Truth'. Cf. P. Raabe, *Imitating God...*, p. 10.

²¹ D.M. Murtaugh, *Piers Plowman and the Image of God* (Gainesville: A University of Florida Book/The University of Florida, 1978), p. 73.

Seen from this point of view Langland is a true precursor of the most radical currents of the 16th-century Reformation, with its doctrine of 'justification by faith', and indeed we can see how in his mind a single act of personal faith outweighs all possible human merits and deserts, together with the established social distinctions of a class society. The 'instant salvation' proposed by Langland has, unfortunately, as its concomitant, the perspective of an 'instant and unaccountable damnation' by a God who has been liberated from the rules of human logic and causality. It has been already been noticed that this line of Langland's thinking might have been inspired by the philosophy of the great English nominalist thinker, William of Ockham. Such is the opinion of D.M. Murtaugh, who, in connection with, *Piers Plowman*, says the following:

Ockham and his followers denied the ontological status of grace as an essential constituent of merit, saying that it was simply a name for the fact of God's acceptance of man. This, combined with the Ockhamists' insistence on the absolute power of God, had a dual consequence. On earth, man's free will was given a fuller scope in that it could merit God's favour on its own. But in heaven, on the other hand, God's absolute freedom meant that He could choose at random those acts and those men who would be pleasing to Him. The resulting indeterminism was at once exhilarating and terrifying²².

A combination of those two feelings: exhilaration and terror, may also serve as a good description of the medieval sublime, or even the sublime in general, and it may be useful to adduce here the definition of the sublime provided by Edmund Burke, where we can clearly observe a mixture of the elements of horror and irresistible fascination:

The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully, is astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it. Hence arises the great power of the sublime, that, far from being produced by them, it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force. Astonishment, as I have said, is the effect of the sublime in its highest degree; the inferior effects are admiration, reverence, and respect²³.

The intoxicating visions of Burke and the nominalists seem be a fruit of a peculiar experience of minds, used to deference for hierarchic thinking, which suddenly envisage the possibility of taking a short cut allowing them to avoid, or at least shorten, albeit at a very high risk, the tortuous path upwards along which the weary traveller's hope of finally reaching the summit is constantly

²² Ibid., p. 73.

²³ E. Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (London: Longman and Co., 1812), pp. 95, 96.

frustrated by ever new vistas of a still more elevated terrain. At the end of the road there looms an irenic vision of an unshakeable certainty and the feeling of being at one with God or Nature. I feel tempted to claim that the rise of nominalism intensified, on the one hand, the need for the sublime, and, in the other, made the achievement of the sublime, in its positive sense, a much more hazardous and potentially traumatic affair. Such an effect was a direct consequence of dramatizing the ontological gap between the Creator and the creation, talking in semiotic terms, also between the signifier and the signified.

At the same time, there is apparently little in common between the medieval and romantic sublime with respect to the way such lofty feelings are experienced. Immanuel Kant, developing his concept of the 'dynamic sublime', states the following:

To experience the dynamically sublime we must be in a position of safety: the boundless ocean rising with rebellious force, the high waterfall of some mighty river, and the like, make our power of resistance a trifling moment in comparison with their might. But, provided our own position is secure, their aspect is all the more attractive for its fearfulness²⁴.

It is quite obvious that such feelings were also familiar to medieval authors and audiences, (otherwise, romances and fantastic stories of all sorts would not have been so popular in those times) but they certainly would be considered too trifling and too idle for most serious writers to dwell upon. The medieval sublime is not so much a retrospective celebration of danger at the time of safety, but rather a celebration of a successfully accomplished labour at the time of a brief respite, it is, in a sense, a 'poor man's sublime', based on less fastidious tastes and on more elementary needs. The motif of labour in connection with the sublime and the absolute did not die with Langland. Eagleton draws attention to this problem in his discussion of Burke:

The aesthetic experience of the sublime is confined to the cultivated few; and there would thus seem the need for a kind of poor person's version of it. Religion is of course one obvious such candidate; but Burke also proposes another, which is, surprisingly enough, the lowly activity of labour. Like the sublime, labour is a masochistic affair, since we find work at once painful in its exertion yet pleasurable in its arousal of energy... The sublime, with its 'delightful horror', is the rich man's labour, invigorating an otherwise dangerously complacent ruling class. If that class cannot know the uncertain pleasures of loading a ship, it can gaze instead at one tossed on the turbulent ocean. Providence has so arranged matters that a state of rest becomes soon obnoxious, breeding melancholy and despair, we are thus naturally driven to work, reaping enjoyment from its surmounting of difficulties²⁵.

²⁴ I. Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. J. C. Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), § 28, pp. 109—110.

²⁵ T. Eagleton, *The Ideology...*, pp. 56, 57.

Eagleton seems to treat here 'religion' and 'labour' as alternative forms of the sublime, and is willing to call them both 'a poor man's sublime', but in Langland the sublime is apparently capable of forming one inextricable knot with labour and religion, a knot where the 'lowliness' of labour preconditions and completes the 'loftiness' of the sublime effect, and where religion, providing the mediating form of prayer, serves as the necessary glue holding the two elements together, in keeping with the probable etymological sense of the word 'religion' as derived from the Latin verb *religare* meaning 'to tie', or 'to bind together'²⁶. If we accept Langland's point of view, the 'poor man's sublime' will appear to our eyes as the only genuine form of the sublime, not just a supplement to the 'rich man's sublime'. Burke wrote quite a lot about the link between labour and the sublime:

Melancholy, dejection, despair, and often self-murder, is the consequence of the gloomy view we take of things in this relaxed state of body. The best remedy for all these evils is exercise or labour; and labour is a surmounting of difficulties, an exertion of the contracting power of the muscles; and as such resembles pain, which consists in tension or contraction, in every thing but degree. Labour is not only requisite to preserve the coarser organs in a state fit for their functions; but it is equally necessary to these finer and more delicate organs, on which, and by which, the imagination and perhaps the other mental powers act. ... In all these cases, if the pain and terror are so modified as not to be actually noxious; if the pain is not carried to violence, and the terror is not conversant about the present destruction of the person; as these emotions clear the parts, whether fine or gross, of a dangerous and troublesome encumbrance, they are capable of producing delight; not pleasure but a sort of delightful horror, a sort of tranquillity tinged with terror; which, as it belongs to self-preservation, is one of the strongest passions. Its object is the sublime²⁷.

It is clear that for Burke labour is a source of masochistic exhilaration as a one of the aspects of the Other, an exercise one occasionally takes to keep fit. For Langland labour is connected with the sublime and the absolute in a much more paradoxical way. The two coexist on the basis of the principle of 'extremes meet', the *unio mystica* being the rarest and the most sought after condition, while labour the commonest and the least attractive.

The relationship between the two may in fact break completely, as in the famous scene of Piers Plowman's tearing of the papal pardon:

'Piers!' quod the preest tho, 'thi pardon moste I rede;	
For I shal construe ech clause and kenne it thee on Englissh'.	<i>explain</i>
And Piers at his preiere the pardon unfoldeth —	<i>request</i>
And I bihynde hem bothe biheld al the bulle.	
In two lynes it lay, and noght a lettre moore,	

²⁶ Cf. Sir W. Smith and Sir J. Lockwood, *Chambers Murray Latin-English Dictionary* (Edinburgh, London: Chambers, John Murray, 1976), pp. 629, 630.

²⁷ E. Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry...*, p. 255 & 257.

And was iwriten right thus in wisse of trithe:
Et qui bona egerunt ibunt in vitam eternam;
 Qui vero mala, in ignem eternum.

'Peter!' quod the preest tho, 'I kan no pardon fynde
 But "Do wel and have wel and God shal have thi soule",
 And "Do yvel and have yvel, and hope thow noon oother
 That after thi deeth day the devel shal have thi soule!"'
 And Piers for pure tene pulled it atweyne
 And seide, '*Si ambulavero in medio umbre mortis*
Non timebo mala, quoniam tu mecum es.

'I shal cessen of my sowyng', quod Piers, and 'swynke nocht so harde,

Ne aboute my bely joye so bisy be na moore;
 Of preieres and of penaunce my plough shal ben hereafter,
 And wepen when I sholde slepe, though whete bred me faille.

*expect nothing else
 But that
 sheer anger, vexation*

*leave off; labour
 pleasure in food
 In; consist
 I lack*

(VII, 105—21)

The meaning of this episode is highly debatable, as is evident from the statement by Malcolm Godden:

Piers' action in tearing up the Pardon sent by Truth is startling; he is the servant and follower of Truth or God, and the Pardon has enshrined his own implicit ideals. Commentators have suggested that Langland means something less startling than appears: that Piers is to be understood as rejecting ordinary pardons by his action rather than Truth's, or that tearing is really an act of acceptance, or that the tearing refers not directly to Truth's Pardon but to the ending of man's damnation by original sin through the Redemption²⁸.

We seem to have here to do with one of those places where the internal logic of the poem breaks down, and the interpretations given above try, rather desperately, to salvage this logic, to preserve the coherence of the text. Piers, the pious labourer, can no longer reconcile the everyday toil of his humble vocation with the sublime reality his heart is yearning for, the mechanism of translating and re-translating the quotidian into the ideal, and vice versa, can no longer be relied upon. This mechanism is succinctly encapsulated in the contents of the pardon: 'And they that have done good shall go into life everlasting. And they that have done evil into everlasting fire'. The scene in question pictures the founding gesture of the modern sublime, conceived of as an escape from the alienating, material and bodily side of existence. In Burke's times this escape could take the form of 'rediscovering' labour, but in Langland's times, it could only be a movement away from it, though not necessarily against it.

At the same time, it is worth noting that Piers' abandonment of a labourer's way of life is presented in terms that remain strictly bound up with the

²⁸ M. Godden, *The Making of Piers Plowman* (London and New York: Longman, 1990), p. 55.

agricultural imagery: Piers is talking about replacing his material plough with a spiritual one: "Of preieres and of penaunce my plough shal ben herafter", and the very act of tearing the pardon could be seen as a metaphor of the fundamental agricultural gesture of cutting the soil with a plough or another sharp tool. We can see that the metaphor of cutting and piercing is quite consistently used to express Langland's sublime.

It should not come as a surprise that Langland's and, generally, the medieval sublime grows out of the spirit of prayer. The Benedictine rule *ora et labora* (work and pray) summarizes neatly a certain conceptual universe in which the way of 'labour', i.e. of a strenuous, regular effort is counterbalanced by the relatively easy and direct way of 'oratio'. From an idealistic point of view, the two ways complete and condition each other in the same way as night and day, or a workday and Sunday. Characteristically, for Hilton reaching the highest degree of prayer is associated with the ultimate reward for labour. "This peace our Lord gives to some of his servants as a reward for their labour", while in Langland's view: "ne none sonner saved, ne sadder of bileve than plowmen and pastours and povere commune laborers" "none are sooner saved or are firmer in their faith, than simple ploughmen and shepherds and poor common labourers". It seems that in the minds of such people like Langland and Hilton the potentially sensational efficiency of prayer is dialectically linked with hard physical toil, but the exact nature of his relationship is not so easy to decipher. On the one hand, we may have to do here with what might be called 'inversely mimetic thinking'. 'A poor common labourer' is somebody whose intensity and arduousness of effort is inversely proportional to his social position, it is then a paradoxical or even an absurd creature similar to the mythical Sisyphus. It is then only natural that such a creature should be endowed, by way of compensation, with the gift of 'piercing Heaven with his paternoster', which is an act that constitutes a direct inversion of his ordinary situation and consists in getting a maximal effect, and a maximal elevation, for a minimal effort. Langland's sublime could consequently be described as the opposite to the Sisyphian absurdity.

It is small wonder that it is the Lord's Prayer that proves to be the most efficient of all, it was considered both a prayer to God, and, in a sense. God's own prayer, being the only prayer sanctioned by Jesus Christ himself, and as such it could be thought to control both bridgeheads of the imaginary bridge spanning the space between heaven and earth. The Lord's Prayer contains thus, because of its content and because of its historical context, both the perspective of the son and that of the father, establishing a balance and a sort of 'symbiosis' between the two. It is for this reason that St. Thomas Aquinas calls Paternoster the safest of prayers²⁹. This very epithet makes us think of prayer as, potentially,

²⁹ St. Thomas Aquinas lays great emphasis on the authentic character of Lord's Prayer, and the benefits that result therefrom. Cf. Th. Aquinas, *Wykład pacierza [Exposition of the Lord's Prayer]*, trans. M. Starowieyski (Poznań: „W drodze” Press, 1987), p. 63.

a zone of unsafety and insecurity. Striking in the medieval reflection on prayer is the practice of multiplying the conditions that have to be met if the prayer is to prove efficient and not disappointing. For example, according to Aquinas, a prayer should be "certain, proper, orderly, pious, and humble", and it very hard to discern which things are worthy of being asked for and which are not³⁰. It is remarkable that for Aquinas the Lord's Prayer is first of all a list of the things that a Christian can desire and ask for without being impious and committing the sin of greediness³¹. If then man's greediness was considered, as it can easily be seen in Chaucer's *Pardoner's Tale*, a 'root of all evil', the Lord's Prayer is endowed by Aquinas with the power to 'civilize' and to Christianize this potentially the most destructive and anarchic of sentiments, and to transform it into a positive force, serving the cause of the Father's Kingdom.

The motif of a special significance of Paternoster appears once again in Passus XIV, where it functions as a miraculous piece of food that is capable of satisfying every desire of the faithful:

But I lokede what liflodde it was that Pacience so preisede;
And thanne was it a pece of the Paternoster — *Fiat voluntas tua.*

piece; Thy will be done

'Have, Haukyn', quod Pacience, 'and et this whan the hungreth,
Or whan thow clomsest for cold or clyngest for drye;
And shul nevere gyves thee greve ne gret lordes wrathe,
Prison ne peyne — for pacientes vincunt.

*are benumbed; parch; drought
feters; afflict*

By so that thow be sobre of sighte and of tonge,
In [ond]ynge and in handlynge and in alle thi fyve wittes,
Darstow nevere care for corn ne lynnyn cloth ne wollen,
Ne for drynke, ne deeth drede, but deye as God liketh,
Or thorough hunger or thorough hete — at his wille be it.

*Provided
smelling; touching
You need; worry about*

For if thow lyvest after his loore, the shorter lif the better:
Si quis amat Christum mundum non diligit istum.

Either ... or

(XIV, 48—59)

The Paternoster then, an invocation of the Father, functions then almost as a true farmakon³², a medicine and a poison, a means of intensifying and sustaining life, as well as a means of making death easier, a drug a frequent administering of which makes you not only forget about your material needs but also look forward to death in a spirit of equanimity, or even of joyful expectation, awaiting the glory of after-life, though stopping short of harbouring suicidal desires. We can notice quite clearly the necessary link that appears here between the truly sublime disregard for the material and the bodily elements of life, on the one hand, and poverty, spiritual or material, on the other. Such poverty is at the same time a necessary condition for an

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

³² Cf. A. *Lexicon* abridged from Liddell and Scott's *Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1980), pp. 751, 752.

efficient prayer and a fulfilment of such a prayer, as a cathartic state of sublimated and cleansed desires directed solely towards the unearthly goals. Langland very appropriately chooses as the spiritual and miraculous food the fragment of the Lord's Prayer which contains the words, *Fiat voluntas tua* "Thy will be done". The renunciation of one's own will in favour of another's is a central element in the Western thinking on the subject of the sublime, as is witnessed in the well-known statement by William Blake: "The most sublime act is to set another before you"³³. God, as a father-figure, is naturally also a figure of the Other, of the radically different, which, for this very reason, is a standing challenge to those who desire to bridge this gap, and who can imagine a satisfaction of this exorbitant desire as achievable only through a denial of all other desires.

It might be useful to remind here St. Augustine's stern warning that "you shall pray for nothing else than God Himself"³⁴. St. Augustine turns here against any particularistic or fragmentary use of prayer, other than a full invocation of the Father and His kingdom, with the accompanying mixture of dread and fascination, fear of punishment and expectation of mercy. It is doubtful that Langland would have gone that far, he seems to accept the legitimacy of praying for a specific purpose, like in this case, for the end of a disastrous plague. But he shows the same Augustinian fear of people who have other aims in view than the totality of religious experience. The friars, who are the most common butt of Langland's criticism, are accused here of toadying to rich patrons, of competing unfairly with the lay clergy, of which Langland is a representative, and of neglecting their teaching duties. The latter should include, according to the poet, telling people that they should be prepared to part with their possessions for a charitable purpose, and to regard themselves as primarily responsible for failures of all sorts.

The subject of 'false sublime' involves the problem of mendicant friars exactly because the theoretically embody the desire for the absolute founded upon piety and poverty. In Langland's eyes they are but cheats and impostors. Let us have a closer look at the rationale on which this negative attitude seems to be based:

Whoso hath muche, spende manliche — so meneth Tobbye —	<i>generously</i>
And whoso litel weldeth, [loke] hym thereafter,	<i>let him behave accordingly</i>
For we have no lette of oure lif, how long it shal dure.	<i>written assurance; last</i>
Swiche lessons lordes sholde lovye to here,	
And how he myght moost meynee manliche fynde —	<i>retainers; provide for</i>
Noght to fare as a fithelere or a frere to seke festes,	<i>dinner-parties</i>
Homliche at othere mennes houses, and hatien hir owene.	<i>At home; hate, shun</i>

(X, 89—95)

³³ W. Blake, "Proverbs of Hell", in "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell", in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, gen. ed. M.H. Abrams, vol. 2 (New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1986), p. 63.

³⁴ "The Entry Prayer", in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol. 18 (Chicago, London, Toronto, Geneva, Sydney, Tokyo, Manila: W. Benneton Publisher, 1972), p. 433.

The friars, according to Langland, have confused poverty with rootlessness, their existence is fundamentally frivolous, like that of fiddlers and other itinerant entertainers. The friar is here ontologically connected with the grasping rich man, they both exist outside the principle of 'giving according to what you have received', and they both are entirely bent on 'receiving' rather than 'giving', the main difference being that the rich men abandon the logic of giving and receiving by cutting themselves off the society of ordinary people, whereas 'friars and fiddlers' are ubiquitous, pretending to be everybody's friends, while in fact bringing nobody any good.

Any reader of *Piers, the Plowman*, will notice the insistence with which Langland returns to the problem of mendicant friars, expressing at each time his profound hostility towards them. The following fragment allows us to have a glimpse at probably the deepest root of that hostility, it comes from the part of the poem called "The Confession of the Seven Deadly Sins", and is spoken by a character representing Anger, or Wrath:

<p>'I am Wrathe', quod he, 'I was som tyme a frere, And the coventes gardyner for to graffen impes. On lymitous and listres lesynges I ymped, Til thei bere levels of lowe speche, lordes to plese, And sithen thei blosmede abroad in boure to here shriftes. And now is fallen therof a fruyt — that folk han wel levere Shewen hire shriftes to hem than shryve hem to hir persons. And now persons han parceyved that freres part with hem, These possessioner preche and deprave freres; freres fyndeth hem in defaute, as folk bereth witnesse, That whan thei preche the peple in many places aboute, I, Wrathe, walke with hem and wisse hem of my bokes. Thus thei speken of spiritualte, that either despiseth oother, Til thei be bothe beggers and by my spiritualte libben, Or ellis al riche and ryden aboute; I, Wrathe, reste nevere That I ne moste folwe this wikked folk, for swich is my grace</p>	<p><i>friar</i> <i>friary's; graft shoots</i> <i>lectors; grafted</i> <i>produced; servile</i> <i>blossomed; bedroom(s)</i> <i>i.e. result; much prefer</i> <i>parish priests</i> <i>are sharing</i> <i>beneficed priests; revile And</i> <i>find fault (with)</i> <i>teach (from)</i> <i>spirituality (C); each</i> <i>live</i> <i>fortune</i></p>
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(V, 135—50)

Another fragment comes from Langland's denunciation of the personified Fortune:

<p>Coveitise of Eighes confortd me ofte And seide, 'Have no conscience how thow come to goode. Go confesse thee to som frere and shewe hym this synnes. For whiles Fortune is thi frend freres wol thee lovey, And festne thee in hir fraternitee and for thee biseke To hir Priour Provincial a pardon for to have, And preien for thee pol by pol if thow be pecuniosus'. <i>Pena pecuniaria non sufficit pro spiritualibus delictis</i></p>	<p><i>into (my) thoughts</i> <i>scruples; achieve wealth</i> <i>secure</i> <i>head (C); rich; moneyed</i></p>
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(XI, 52—58)

The charges levelled against the friars seems to hinge on the supposition that the friars' way of being blurs certain fundamental borders and distinctions. In the first of the above fragments the allegorical figure of Anger owns up to having been a friar, he is above all a gossip and a talebearer, but his job is basically that of a gardener, 'grafting shoots'. A grafted tree used to be considered by many as a violation of the laws of nature, and there was a taboo against eating the fruit of such a tree³⁵. It surely was a part of a more general taboo against hybrids of all sorts, or creatures of mixed origin. Anger is a negatively mediating figure whose very status is that of a hybrid. Being a religious person, he flatters the gentry and gentle ladies, naturally by appealing to their vanity and self-love — thus he acts as an intermediary between the zones of the sacred and the profane, but his mediation is clearly weighted in favour of the profane. He also orchestrates a confrontation between friars and lay priests, i.e. their negative coming together, in a similar way as he stirs mutual hate and resentment as a cook in a convent of nuns. Needless to add, the job of a cook has a strongly mediating character and was associated mainly with mixing ingredients. A cook was preparing the vitally important meals, but was also the most obvious person to be accused of poisoning his masters, in this sense, he was a powerful mediator between life and death. His negatively mediating nature is obvious in his calumniating activities which disclose secrets not for the purpose of elucidation, but rather that of darkening and 'casting a shadow'. Finally, there is an element of suspect mediation in the very status of a medicant friar whose 'mode of existence' involves wandering around, without any due respect for the borders, such as the ones between parishes.

One of the most serious of Langland's objections to the friars' behaviour involves their practice of hearing the confessions of people who otherwise would have turned for confession to their parish priests. We may suppose, on the basis of the discussed fragment, that confessors derived some material profit from their job. It has to be realized of course that the medieval religious confession and penance differed quite radically from their modern continuations, penance was often long and hard, and could be connected with great physical exertion, like going on a long and dangerous pilgrimage, moreover, it was usual for the priest to withhold his absolution until the penance was successfully performed. The clergy could count on quite substantial revenues owing to the so-called, 'system of commutation', which allowed the penitent to 'commute' a particularly long and arduous part of penance into the payment of a sum of money. This practice probably led to the rise of the institution of indulgences³⁶. It was then in the material interest of the Church

³⁵ Cf. *Leksykon symboli*, ed. M. Osterreicher-Moliwo, trans. J. Prokopiuk (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo ROK Corporation SA, 1992), p. 155.

³⁶ Cf. the entry 'penance', in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. F.L. Cross (Oxford, London: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 1059, 1060.

to impose hard penance and to guard jealously its monopoly of hearing confessions. The friars constitute an obvious danger to this quite elaborate system. They were usually people from outside whose knowledge of the parishioners' life was infinitely smaller, they, as 'birds of passage', could not and would not impose any hard and long penance, let alone wait for such penance to be accomplished. They could, however, count on the penitents' gratitude if they made the conditions of absolution less harsh. From Langland's point of view, we seem to have to do here with a religious version of Gresham's law, where bad confessions replace good ones, just as 'bad money drives out good'. Of course the seed of corruption is contained already in the system of commutation, the origin of which lies is purely simoniac, with absolution treated as a saleable commodity. The activity of the friars is naturally comparable to the economic practice of dumping, the effect of which is always detrimental to monopolies of any sort.

Highly telling is the connection that Langland makes, in the second of the discussed fragments, between the friars and the allegorical figure of Fortune. The friars in themselves are meant to be regarded here as 'friends of Fortune', embodiments of mutability and 'commutability', whose other representation is money, or material remuneration — a notion that occupies, also as the famous Lady Meed, a central place in Langland's sociological reflection. The friars' vital connection with the money market begins already at the very moment when they decide to part company with the traditional, hierarchical society, and embark on their fundamentally universalist, 'rootless' venture, which involves wandering about and accepting novices irrespective of their social status and place of origin. This founding gesture is inseparable from the friars' vow of poverty, in accordance with the old proverb: 'a rolling stone gathers no moss'. And yet, paradoxically, we arrive here at the moment when the element of indeterminacy turns out to be a link between the Franciscan poverty and the money oriented society of the budding capitalism. The friars' betrayal of poverty would then be related to the very act of embracing it.

Langland is well aware of the complexity of the problem of friars:

'I have yseyen charite also syngen and reden,
Riden, and rennen in ragged wedes;
Ac biddynge as beggeris biheld I hym nevere.
Ac in riche robes rathest he once
Ac it is fern ago, in Seint Fraunceis tyme;
In that secte siththe to selde hath he ben knowen.

(*sc. as a priest*)

*a long while
order; since then; seldom*

(XV, 225—32)

Here Langland seems to come to grips with the friars' peculiar mode of existence. Charity may take various shapes, it is not permanently attached to poverty, at least not to material poverty. Langland even goes to the length

of saying that Charity prefers to 'walk in rich robes', though this certainly should not be understood as meaning that it can be met more often among the rich than among the poor³⁷. The embodiment of Charity is here in fact a figure of a regular monk 'with tonsured head, a skull-cap and a fringe of crimped hair'. At any rate, the scandal of the friars seems to be that they are neither rich nor poor in the proper sense of the word, they are 'wheedling like a beggar', which, as Langland seems to suggest, does not go together with their clerical status, and their position of confessors to whom people turn asking for the absolution of sins. It is interesting that the word used in the original for begging is 'bid', which in other contexts is used for praying, which could suggest that friars practise a debased form of prayer, directing their desires downwards rather than upwards. At the same time, Langland does not forget about the idealistic traditions of the movement of mendicant friars, the traditions represented by their founder, St. Francis, although he clearly considers them a thing of the past.

The above examples seem to be enough for showing the consistency of Langland's "metaphysical suspiciousness". He proves himself to be a thinker who inveterately draws parallels between the true and the false sublime, the supreme good, and its disquieting dark shadow or caricature, trying to devise, in a series of not quite successful attempts, a reliable method for distinguishing between the two. His "method" seems largely to consist in trying to unmask all sorts of "mixed beings", while being clearly attached to them — a task that certainly appealed to him much more strongly than the search for the "pure absolute" on which the mystics embarked. What connects, on the other hand, Langland with the mystics is his thinking in terms of an act of faith as means to reach the "instant salvation", when all entanglements with the material world seem too frustrating to cope with.

³⁷ Cf. the note made by ed. and trans. J.F. Goodridge *Piers the Ploughman* (London: Penguin Books, 1966), p. 300, n. 34,