

Introduction: trial by desire

Now the law entered that sin might abound. And where sin abounded,
 grace did more abound.

(Romans 5.20)

If man had remained in a state of innocence . . . Jesus Christ would
 not have been the head of the Church . . .

(Malebranche, *Treatise on Nature and Grace*, 2,ix)¹

If St Paul was the first, he was by no means the last to articulate the possibility that a redemptive Christianity requires human failure and offers human beings new blessings as a result of sin. The notion is most commonly referred to in the Middle Ages under the rubric of ‘felix culpa’, the sin whose ‘happy’ effect was Christ’s coming into the world.² However, this teleological description of Original Sin, cordoned off as it is from the daily problematics of human psychology, intention, action and ethics (not to mention the mind and power of God), has few of the disturbing implications of Paul’s words. What are the consequences for human life and desire if sin brings its own rewards? In this book I shall argue that this is a governing proposition of *Piers Plowman*. In chapter 1, I shall explore other medieval formulations of this idea; but here I

¹ Trans. Patrick Riley (Oxford, 1992), p.141. All translations of the bible are taken from *The Holy Bible. Douai Version*, modernised where necessary.

² See Easter Eve Canticle, *Missale ad usum sarum*, ed. F.H. Dickinson (Oxford, 1861), p.340; *Piers Plowman*, B,5,483a (all citations of the B Text are from the first edition of Kane and Donaldson, unless otherwise specified); see Rosemary Woolf, *The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1968), pp.290–1; also White, ‘Langland, Milton’.

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want to offer some readings of Langland's poem to illustrate what I have in mind.

'Piers þe Plowman!' quod I þo, and al for pure loye
 That I herde nempne his name anoon I swowned after,
 And lay longe in a louedreem; and at þe laste me þouzte
 That Piers þe Plowman al þe place me shewed
 And bad me toten on þe tree . . .
 I preide Piers to pulle adoun an Appul and he wolde,
 And suffre me to assaien what sauour it hadde.
 And Piers caste to þe crop and þanne comsed it to crye . . .
 I hadde ruþe whan Piers rogged, it gradde so rufulliche;
 For euere as þei dropped adoun þe deuel was redy
 And gadrede hem alle togideres, boþe grete and smale . . .³

In the vision of a Tree of Charity that grows in the human heart the seeker of *Piers Plowman* gets a sudden sight of the spiritual potential of the soul. When he asks to 'taste' the apples of the tree he expresses a desire to comprehend and absorb this vision in every way, spiritually, 'inwardly', even physically. The devotional literature of the Middle Ages uses the figure of 'taste' to describe understanding which it considers to be not only cognitive but also affective and experiential; as a result of a pun on the Latin nouns *sapor*, 'taste', and *sapientia*, 'wisdom', this is 'sapiential' understanding.⁴ It is all the more disorienting, therefore, that the seeker's desire to taste the apples of the Tree of Charity actually leads to the loss of the apples. Once removed from the tree, the apples are stolen by the devil. The seeker's desire to *assaien* them appears right and virtuous, and yet it initiates a simultaneously psychological and eschatological replay of the narrative of the Fall.⁵

What starts off as the seeker's project to *assaien*, to 'try', the apples turns through the loss of the apples into a radical 'assaying' of all the

³ *Piers Plowman*, B,16,18–22, 73–5, 78–80. On the Tree of Charity, see Donaldson, *C Text*, pp.183–96; Aers, *Christian Allegory*, pp.79–106; Dronke, 'Arbor caritatis'; Margaret E. Goldsmith, *The Figure of 'Piers Plowman'. The Image on the Coin* (Cambridge, 1981), chap.7; 'Piers' Apples'; Lavinia Griffiths, *Personification in 'Piers Plowman'* (Cambridge, 1985), pp.83–90; Cole, 'Trifunctionality'.

⁴ On volitional, affective and 'sapiential' understanding in the poem, see below; on *sapor* and *sapientia*, see Leclercq, *Etudes*, pp.39–67; *Love of Learning*; Davlin, 'Middle English Equivalent', p.7; Simpson, 'From Reason to Affective', p.5; *Introduction*, p.190.

⁵ See Salter, *Piers Plowman*, p.76; Aers, *Christian Allegory*, p.103.

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protagonists.⁶ For the apples, Piers, the seeker and the reader, the narrative turns into a cycle of deprivation and trial. The apples are removed and stolen. Each apple expresses its distress at parting from the tree: the first ‘comsed . . . to crye’, the second ‘wepte after’, the third ‘made a foul noise . . . it gradde so rufulliche’ (B,16,75–8); the seeker has *rupe*. After the theft of the apples, Piers takes away one of the tree’s trinitarian ‘supports’ to throw it at the devil: ‘Piers for pure tene þat a pil he lau3te; / He hitte after hym, happe how it my3te’ (B,16,86–7). Already deprived of one of its supports, even this tree will in due course disappear, not to reappear in the poem.⁷ Even the reader perhaps shares in this sense of infuriation and loss, possibly experiencing some of Piers’ ‘pure tene’. This narrative of loss, in other words, turns the apples and the tree into sites and objects of lack, but by doing so it also turns them into sites and objects of intense desire. This is no longer merely a desire for understanding – it is a much more open desire altogether.

Tavormina has claimed that the iconography of plant life and growth in this scene suggests we are in an agricultural version of the domain of the ‘natural’, *kynde*, or creation. Not only here but also at the Ploughing of the Half-Acre and even in the Vision of Kynde (B,11,320–406) Langland’s portraits of the natural are always social and shaped by human and animal agricultural ‘work’. The association of rural labour both with the earthly work of Adam and with the seasonal labours that characterise the natural order is well documented in medieval texts and visual arts.⁸ In B,16, ‘nature’ is closely linked to, and protected by, its maker, God;

⁶ See *MED*, ‘assaien’ v.: 1b, ‘to test or try (food) . . . taste’; but also 2, ‘to test or try (a person . . .), subject to trials or ordeals’; numerous examples testify to the association of the term with trial by temptation; for comparable Lollard use, see *English Wycliffite Sermons*, ed. Hudson, 1,547; Walter Hilton also speaks of being ‘assaied and purified in þe fire of desire’ (*Scale*, 1,xxiv (fol.18r)).

⁷ On the allegorical mutations of the tree, see Aers, *Christian Allegory*, pp.79–107; Dronke, ‘Arbor Caritatis’.

⁸ The tree is ‘rooted in *kynde*’ (Tavormina, *Kindly Similitude*, p.114; also pp.113–40); Tavormina also speaks of the poem’s ‘great patterns of agricultural imagery’ (p.156). On nature, see chap.5; on nature as agricultural, see *Agriculture in the Middle Ages. Technology, Practice, and Representation*, ed. Del Sweeney (Philadelphia, 1995), chaps.12, 13, 14 and references; Freedman, *Images*, pp.213–35. Charting equivalent associations for ploughing, see Kirk, ‘Langland’s Plowman’; Christopher Dyer, ‘Piers Plowman and Plowmen: A Historical Perspective’, *YLS* 8 (1994), 155–76; Michael Camille, *Mirror in Parchment. The Luttrell Psalter and the Making of Medieval England* (London, 1998), chap.4; Freedman, *Images*, pp.223–9.

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yet it is fraught with risk, threatened by the ‘wikked wynd’ of the world and the flesh, the thieves of the devil and ‘unkynde Neighebores’. On the one hand, the Tree of Charity is a metaphysical tree growing within creation; in the garden of the human body it bears fruits of human life and virtue, while being cared for by the spiritual gardener, Piers Plowman, and supported by the props of the Trinity. On the other hand, its apples get lost – and ‘euere as þei dropped adoun þe deuel was redy . . .’ (B,16,25–79). Despite the deep ontological connection that Langland describes between human beings and their creator, in his version of nature the risk of falling prey to hostile forces and undergoing loss seems to be endemic.

Once the apples are lost, the narrative reformulates its desire for the lost fruit in the purpose ‘to go robbe þat Rageman and reue þe fruyt fro hym’ (B,16,89). This is the narrative of the Redemption, and it replays the preceding narrative by growing a new (and still in many senses ‘natural’) ‘fruit’, the incarnate Christ. Christ is carried by Mary ‘Til *plenitudo temporis* tyme comen were / That Piers fruyt floured and felle to be rype’ (B,16,93–4). Christ too participates in the embodied, ‘natural’ and agriculturally productive order of creation. Piers Plowman teaches him health-giving ‘lechecraft his lif for to saue’, which no doubt refers literally to the medical cure of real bodies (‘For I haue saued yowself and youre sones after, / Youre bodies, youre beestes, and blynde men holpen, / And fed yow wiþ two fisshes and wiþ fyue loues’; B,16,104, 123–5), as well as metaphorically to the ‘cure’ of spiritual ailments.⁹ Christ’s *lechecraft* reminds the reader of physical and spiritual ills to which the soul and body are prey within the natural order. Langland’s narrative of Christ then continues to involve notions of loss, as the fruit of Christ ripens and gives itself up to suffering, this time willingly, as an expression of desire for those already gone. Christ’s death is the supreme instance of beneficial loss and suffering enacted in Christian history, as God ‘suffreþ for som mannes goode, and so is oure bettre’ (B,11,382). Although the overall sequence concludes with a brief reference to Christ’s

⁹ For spiritual medicine and Christ as a spiritual ‘doctor’, see Mark 2.17; Luke 5.31; *Summa virtutum*, ed. Wenzel, p.8; McNeill, ‘Medicine for Sin’, pp.14–20; Raymond St-Jacques, ‘Langland’s *Christus medicus* Image and the Structure of *Piers Plowman*’, *YLS* 5 (1991), 111–27; also chap.1, nn.10 and 15. On this passage as part of Christ’s suffering experience of the natural order, see Aers, *Christian Allegory*, pp.107–9.

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success (B,16,165–6), it remains a short narrative, uncomfortably in the past tense. It is a while till we see Christ again. Immediately afterwards, moreover, the seeker wakes, still articulating a sense of loss, this time for Piers Plowman: ‘And I awaked þerwiþ and wiped myne eizen / And after Piers þe Plowman pried and stared. / Estward and westward I waited after faste . . .’ (B,16,168–70).

The narrative form of the poem means that the text also simulates these accumulating frustrations and losses for the reader: it is difficult for the reader not to participate in the text’s accelerating sense of deprivation and desire. In fact, you might say that, rhetorically speaking, the Tree of Charity episode recuperates the losses it narrates by producing the effect of desire in the reader. Multiple losses seem to produce the effect of a need greater than the sum of its parts.

To some degree, the desire produced seems more intense for being only partly specified. Nevertheless, the poem does not leave the nature of this desire completely open, for the poem’s overtly moral and spiritual agenda pushes the desire that it inculcates towards spiritual and sublimated ends. This means that the poem oscillates between specifying and not specifying objects of desire. On the one hand, the multiple losses of *Piers Plowman* B,16 are partly satisfied by the appearance of Christ, the ultimate fruit of the Tree of Charity, at the Harrowing of Hell. On the other hand, after this Christ disappears and the material church established in B,19 crumbles. The reader is again left looking for a narrative fulfilment that she does not receive. At the end of the poem Conscience departs, calling on Piers Plowman, once more driven by the most non-specific expression of desire: ‘he gradde after Grace til I gan awake.’ Under the term ‘grace’ Conscience directs desire out of and beyond the poem.

The version of sin offered here cuts across intentionalist and ethical notions, according to which suffering and punishment are the consequence of wrong-doing. In these passages of *Piers Plowman* suffering and punishment appear to be part of the experience of sin itself. Indeed, the Tree of Charity episode is also apparently counter-ethical in that here Original Sin appears to happen without anyone intending to do wrong; it occurs despite the fact that the seeker actually seems to have meant well. This anti-intentionalism still seems to me very striking in a poem elsewhere so emphatic in its ethical – and in this respect

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intentionalist – agenda (see chapter 2, pp.64–5, 76, 102–3). While this can simply be read as a version of the ‘felix culpa’, I suspect that this well-worn notion is scarcely adequate to the difficult implications of Langland’s having cast the issue as a narrative, whose connotations of sequence and causality seem to suggest that the Fall was bound to happen, even that it was somehow ‘willed’. Orthodoxly speaking, God does not desire this or any other human sin, but ‘suffers’ it to occur. Nevertheless, Langland’s narrative attributes to events a momentum so intense that something more seems to be behind them.

To sum up, then, in this episode Langland regards the Fall from a number of angles, each of which is written into the structure of the narrative itself. First, he sees this sin as somehow inevitable, determined by a force other than human intentionality; second, the broad tendency of Langland’s perspective remains highly psychological; third, he sees sin and its consequences in terms of multiple forms of loss and suffering; fourth, he suggests that this loss and its suffering engender desire – not just as they elicit the renewing gifts of redemption and grace, but also as they effect psychological renewals of desire in the soul itself.

If we need confirmation that Langland is interested in a highly psychologised version of the ‘felix culpa’, it can be found in B,18:

god, of his goodnesse, þe firste gome Adam,
Sette hym in solace and in souereyn murþe,
And siþþe he suffred hym synne sorwe to feele,
To wite what wele was, kyndeliche to knowe it.
And after god Auntrede hymself and took Adames kynde
To se what he haþ suffred in þre sondry places,
Boþe in heuene and in erþe, and now til helle he þenkeþ
To wite what alle wo is . . .¹⁰

Of these lines Davlin comments that ‘it is only under the aspect of sorrow that Peace (like Julian of Norwich) considers sin at all’ (*Game*, p.99); sin is closely associated with loss and suffering, whether divine or human, and brings its own benefits. In Langland’s punning text, God’s ‘suffering’, in the sense of ‘allowing’, cannot be separated from ‘suffering’ in the painful sense also entailed by sin. To know and *feele*¹¹ the *sorwe* that is associated

¹⁰ B,18,218–25; see White, *Nature*, pp.56–9.

¹¹ Middle English *felen* denotes sensory and tactile experience as well as a range of emotional and affective responses, both pleasurable and painful (see *MED*, ‘felen’ v., 1–6).

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with sin is to experience it *kyndeliche*, ‘naturally’, that is, in will and understanding, as well as in daily, embodied life.¹² It has been shown that when the phrase ‘kynde knowyng’ is used affirmatively elsewhere in the poem, it describes an understanding that is moral and loving, active and embodied – ‘experiential’ in all senses.¹³ An experience that is active and lived is central to Langland’s notion of *kynde*. However, by the medieval ‘natural’ logic of binaries, to know sin is also to know something of those things that are contrary to it, virtue and joy:¹⁴ God ‘suffered’ Adam to suffer sorrow that he should comprehend something of the good that God offered. Once again, the *sorwe* entailed by sin recuperates itself in a *kynde* and experiential fashion, acting as an incitement to spiritual understanding and desire – and perhaps this is as true for God as for human beings. Langland’s strong psychological orientation is notable throughout here, and the language of ‘seeing’ and ‘knowing’, as I shall argue below, is experiential, even ‘natural’, in its connotations. The Fall enabled human beings to *knowe* and to *fee*le the condition of human beings within the world, and, by doing so, to *knowe*, *fee*le and desire the *wel*e that God offers. Christ too suffered human sin from heaven, on earth and now in hell.

These ideas about suffering are connected in *Piers Plowman* with the experience of *pacience*, which we might describe as an intensely observing, ‘allowing’ and suffering encounter with the things of the world:

‘To se muche and suffre moore, certes, is dowel.’
 ‘Haddestow suffred . . . slepyng þo þow were,
 Thow sholdest haue knowen . . .’

(B,II,412–4)

¹² See Davlin, *Game*, pp.99–100; Harwood, *Problem*, pp.117–23; Galloway, ‘Intellectual Pregnancy’, pp.144–5.

¹³ On this phrase (and the seeker’s misguided use of it in a lesser and non-sapiential sense, to denote merely ‘precise’, ‘proper’ or ‘full’ knowledge), see O’Grady, ‘Penance’, p.350; Carruthers, *Search*, p.82; Davlin, ‘Major Theme’, pp.2–3; on Langland’s analogising and sometimes ironic use of terms or phrases in different senses, see below, pp.27–8. However, for positive readings of the seeker’s use of the phrase ‘kynde knowyng’, see White, *Nature*, pp.41–54; Harwood, *Problem*, p.9; *Piers Plowman*, B Text, ed. Schmidt, note to B,1,138; also *MED*, ‘kind(e) adj.’, 1.e.

¹⁴ On knowledge by contraries, see chap.1 and chap.5, pp.39–46 and 187–95 respectively.

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For pacience is payn for pouerte hymselue,
 And sobrete swete drynke and good leche in siknesse . . .
 A blessed lif wiþouten bisynesse for body and soule.
 (B,14,317–18, 320)

However, the advocacy of patience – and the linked concept of poverty – in *Piers Plowman* is not an advocacy of spiritual or contemplative inaction. On the contrary, the poem constantly brings together figures of passivity and activity, insisting on the ethical obligation both to experience and to act – to experience in the very modes of *action*.¹⁵ What the Tree of Charity episode reveals is that action also has a passive dimension and is not merely the sum of its own intentionality: action too is something you undergo. God has his own purposes, and human desires and deeds, even sinful ones, are contingencies that he uses as he chooses. The poem's insistence on a properly 'patient' attitude is demanding precisely because the poem simultaneously demands a real engagement with moral life and works.

The seeker's desire to 'taste' the apples of charity is thus not just a desire to know charity (however sapientially), but also to have it. And in the Tree of Charity incident, this desire is both frustrated and intensified; but because of this intensification, it is also realised for both seeker and reader more fully than either could have anticipated.

This is not the only narrative of this kind in the poem. There are many episodes in which the seeker's desire to experience and understand spiritual things leads to what I believe are comparable experiences of denial and exacerbated desire. The main difference is that in the other episodes the moral status of the seeker's initial desire is more dubious than at the Tree of Charity. In the Tree of Charity episode guilt may be written into the narrative of the Fall, but no one is explicitly blamed for the loss of the apples. In the episode I want to look at next, the seeker's desires seem considerably less morally clear, and he is personally blamed for the losses that result from the expression of his desire. As a result, however, this passage involves a more overt reorientation of one kind of desire to another.

¹⁵ My thinking here is indebted to Jill Mann, "Taking the Adventure": Malory and the *Suite du Merlin*, in Toshiyuki Takamiya and Derek Brewer (eds.), *Aspects of Malory* (Cambridge, 1981), pp.71–91.

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In the passus before that of the Tree of Charity, the seeker meets Anima, who remarks:

‘now I se þi wille.
 Thow woldest knowe and konne þe cause of alle hire names,
 And of myne if þow myȝtest, me þynkeþ by þi speche.’
 ‘Ye, sire!’ I seide, ‘by so no man were greued
 Alle þe sciences vnder sonne and alle þe sotile craftes
 I wolde I knewe and kouþe kyndely in myn herte.’
 ‘Thanne artow inparfit’, quod he, ‘and oon of prides knyȝtes.
 For swich a lust and likyng Lucifer fel from heuene:
Ponam pedem meum in aquilone & similis ero altissimo.
 It were ayeins kynde’, quod he, ‘and alle kynnes reson
 That any creature sholde konne al except crist oone.
 Ayein swiche Salomon spekeþ . . .’

(B,15,44–54)

Readers have observed that at this, and other, similar moments, the seeker’s desire for virtuous and salvific understanding has degenerated into a self-centred or covetous pursuit of knowledge apparently for its own sake.¹⁶ The acquisitiveness of this pursuit is usually signalled in a reifying tendency in the language, as here in the multiplying terminology of *causes*, *sciences*, *craftes* and *names*. In this passage, the seeker seems not to use the term *kyndely* to refer to embodied, affective and ‘experiential’ understanding; instead, he uses it in a debased form to refer to knowledge that is possibly ‘authentic’, but also ‘proper’, ‘full’ or ‘precise’; this is an exclusively intellectual understanding and perhaps even a site of intellectual covetousness or materialism (see above, note 13). Anima accuses the seeker of pride and greed, and refuses his request. He also indicates that it is ‘ayeins kynde . . . and alle kynnes reson / That any creature sholde konne al except crist oone’: even *kynde* contradicts as unnatural the desire to possess (all) the goods of creation. As we shall see in chapter 5, a state of lack is part of the natural condition of creatures.

However, Anima’s denial still functions, like the stealing of the apples, as a mechanism to effect suffering and loss, and this in turn elicits and

¹⁶ See O’Grady, ‘Penance’, p.365; Wittig, ‘Inward Journey’, pp.229–30; Davlin, ‘Major Theme’, pp.2–3; Murtaugh, *Image*, p.64; Simpson, *Introduction*, p.167.

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exacerbates new forms of desire. I use the term ‘desire’ here in a non-specific way, as I did above, for two reasons: first, because Langland himself repeatedly chooses not to be entirely specific about the nature of the desire that is being inculcated; second, because what interests Langland is how one desire turns into another, how you might use one desire to inculcate another one. The immediate result of Anima’s refusal of the seeker’s suspect wish to know ‘alle þe sciences vnder sonne’ – a wish with which the reader has perhaps empathised – is to produce an effect of surplus desire. Thwarted of one object, both seeker and reader are left in a state of unexpected loss and eager expectation, although now the object of desire is no longer clear. This state of intense, and perhaps objectless, desire lasts for over a hundred lines, while Anima lays down the law.

However, the seeker’s desire is not entirely undirected. Like many authoritative statements in the text as a whole, Anima’s rebuke has a strong ethical drive and a binary structure. It moves between the categories of the worldly and the spiritual, between personal self-aggrandisement and humble pursuit of God, between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ desire. When Anima forbids one of these poles, the effect is inevitably to direct the seeker towards the other. Few other options are offered within this over-determining logic: ‘Thanne artow inparfit . . . and oon of prides knyȝtes. / For swich a lust and likyng Lucifer fel from heuene.’ It takes a while for this redirection to become apparent, but this seems to happen towards the end of Anima’s long speech. When Anima speaks the word *charite*, the seeker suddenly interjects, ‘What is charite?’ (B,15,149): even here, Langland is not fully explicit about the reorientation of the seeker’s desire. Nevertheless, the effect of his interjected question suggests exhilaratingly, if enigmatically, that charity is suddenly what he wants. The passage is both revelatory and relieving. It would seem that, by a process of error and denial not within his control, the seeker has found more than he had sought.

There are many analogies between this incident and that of the Tree of Charity. In both cases the pursuit of understanding leads to sin and its suffering. In both cases, the protagonists suffer personal mortification and deprivation, experiences that are specific to the situation but also implied to be inevitable within the natural order. These experiences