

**“So the satiated man hungers, the drunken thirsts”
The Medieval Rhetorical Topos of Spiritual Nutrition¹**

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This article explores the representation of hunger and thirst as faculties within medieval spiritual allegory that existed at two forms. In their bodily form, hunger and thirst represented a feeling of lack indicating the need for sustenance. In their figurative moralised form these needs came to represent a longing for that which was missing within the soul, an abstraction of human nutrition. In order to discuss this idea, this article presents two heavily interrelated forms of bodily need rendered as spiritual experience: a greedy longing for wealth with negative moral valance and a spiritual and transcendent hungering and thirsting after lasting spiritual foods. It concludes with the proposal that the abstract qualities of nutritive need (namely hunger and thirst) featured in a rhetorical formula when abstracted and mobilised for the purpose of moral allegory.

The malnutrition, sickness, and eventual death that result from a failure to cater for the basic needs of the human body is perhaps one of the most compelling images that spring to mind when we imagine an experience of corporeal vulnerability. It highlights the suffering associated with deprivation in a manner that is both immediate and visceral. In this article, I will explore the experience of hunger and thirst as physiological qualities rendered allegorically within medieval thought. The experience of thirst or hunger, when depicted figuratively as a spiritual need or desire, represented a profound longing to correct a lack or defect of the soul. When appearing as a temporal appetite, however, the same faculties were a medium for sin. The paths to culinary turpitude were many; every behaviour of consumption could be a sin. To eat or to drink was necessary, but to do so without rectitude was a spiritual ill, distorting and corrupting temporal life and leading it away from salvation.

As Caroline Walker Bynum has put it, food for medieval Christians ‘was not only a fundamental material concern [...] food practices—fasting and feasting—were at the very heart of the Christian tradition’.² A need for sustenance to keep the body alive was also figuratively a need for spiritual growth and the eternal nourishment of Christ. Conversely, continues Bynum, ‘voluntary starvation, deliberate and extreme renunciation of food and drink, seemed to medieval people the most basic asceticism, requiring the kind of courage and holy foolishness that marked the saints’.³ The

¹ This essay is inspired by research undertaken towards my 2013 doctoral thesis in History at the University of Western Australia, entitled ‘Water as Medieval Intellectual Entity: Case Studies in Twelfth-Century Western Monasticism’.

² C. W. Bynum, ‘Fast, Feast, and Flesh: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women’, in C. Counihan and P. Van Esterik (eds.), *Food and Culture: A Reader*, New York and Oxford, Routledge, 1997 [2008], p. 122.

³ Bynum, ‘Fast, Feast, and Flesh’, p. 122.

result was a contextual continuum of ambiguous emotions associated with nutrition. Food and drink were both essential and problematic, nourishment both a form of sin and a form of salvation. Just as a human being could gluttonously consume food and drink beyond the point of satiety, so too could the soul suffer from a spiritual gluttony, a gorging of the mind upon that which was worldly rather than divine. This article will address two linked forms of hunger and thirst: the appetite for worldly things that distracted, and the appetite for salvific nourishment that sustained. Together, these two strands form a distinct topos of spiritual nutrition in which bodily nutrition and its attendant appetites are rendered metaphorically as stimuli within medieval moral and spiritual life. Through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, striving for salvation began due to an awareness of want, a sense that something desired is missing.

A deliberate denial of the needs of the flesh and an experience of parsimony were symbolically linked through a fusion of bodily and spiritual experience: in short, the motif of bodily want embedded spiritual meaning into an experience of human suffering. Through symbols of nutritive spirituality, the bodily need for its fundamental requirements was transformed into a spiritual quest for that which sustained it, the instinctive reaching of humanity towards the ultimate source of life. Within these representations of bodily non-satiety lay two distinct forms of poverty, one a poverty of simplicity of the spirit that led one to spiritual purity, the other was an impoverishment of the spirit that left one morally bankrupt regardless of one's material or worldly wealth.

The difference between the two was the difference between sin and salvation. Within this article, I will outline an argument for the association of spiritual nutrition within medieval thought with both good and bad spiritual behaviour. Poised between two moral poles, the Christian had a choice to make regarding their life choices, the results of these choices appearing allegorically within the rhetoric of moral nutrition. The reality was a constant struggle between experiences of nutrition, a form of spiritual diatetics that never ended while temporal life continued. The encyclopaedist Bartholomeus Anglicus described taste as a function of the 'animal spirit', taken as a likeness from the nerves of the tongue and presented for the judgement of the soul.⁴ Thus, imbibing or eating was an inherently spiritual act: food could affect moral state. When rendered allegorically, this process was embedded deeper into the soteriological and moral life of medieval thinkers. Mary Carruthers argues that for medieval *rhetors*, the act of eating is an act of knowing, working upon the heart and the mind in equal measure. Thus, *sapientia* (wisdom) is linked to the *sapor* (flavour) of knowledge, its tastes and qualities upon the tongue of the mind.⁵

Hunger and thirst were motivated by impulses with a long pedigree within intellectual history. The dual forces at work are well known to many through the two types of love outlined by Church Father Augustine of Hippo in his *De Doctrina Christiana*. One was led astray by love as *frui*, desire for a thing 'to be enjoyed' for its own sake. This form of desire could lead only to bad ends, and distracted one from love as *uti*, of a thing 'to be used'. By using the world and loving it for its relationship

⁴ Book I of the Trevisa translation of *De Proprietatibus Rerum*, as cited in C. M. Woolgar, *The Senses in Late Medieval England*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2006, p. 105.

⁵ M. Carruthers, 'Sweetness', *Speculum*, vol. 81, no. 4, 2006, p. 1004.

to and reflection of God, wrote Augustine, one could advance along the path to salvation. One should love the things of this world not for their own sake, but as a vehicle of travel:

There are some things, then, which are to be enjoyed, others which are to be used, others still which enjoy and use. Those things which are objects of enjoyment make us happy. Those things which are objects of use assist, and (so to speak) support us in our efforts after happiness, so that we can attain the things that make us happy and rest in them. We ourselves, again, who enjoy and use these things, being placed among both kinds of objects, if we set ourselves to enjoy those which we ought to use, are hindered in our course, and sometimes even led away from it; so that, getting entangled in the love of lower gratifications, we lag behind in, or even altogether turn back from, the pursuit of the real and proper objects of enjoyment.⁶

Just as there were two kinds of love, so too were there two kinds of bodily want: one corrupting, the other redeeming. When taken together, the two extremes of spiritual nourishment shaped a complex landscape in which there is a spiritual goal and a path laden with hardship to follow, but also an endless network of distractions leading to the manifold possible paths to damnation. The balance was fine: excessive enjoyment of worldly things contaminated the spirit and subverted the salvific quest of medieval Catholicism—namely, to seek the Good and attain salvation through positive moral behaviour.

The argument will explore the dual faces of spiritual nutrition, the path of distraction and the path of stimulus. On the journey of moral life in which hunger and thirst served as topoi of motivation, the appetites could corrupt—as is the case in the first section on corrupt nutrition—or provide the stimulus for Christian salvation—as we see in the second example of soteriological thirst. The experience of moral life was a constant interplay of the two. I propose that we better understand the emotional valences at work within medieval spiritual subjectivities through an exploration of the two sides of spiritual nutrition as a moral topos.

Aura Sacra Fames: The Distractions of Corrupt Nutrition

As an amalgam of corporeal and spiritual, the human being as imagined within medieval thought could hunger or thirst for a great many things. One could thirst physically, or within the soul. One could hunger for food as a bodily entity, or for nourishment as a spiritual entity. A Christian, like a person standing in a great and barren wasteland, felt thirst for the water that sustained them. The scriptural tale of Exodus and the long journey through of the Israelites through the desert was punctuated with experiences of thirst.⁷ The early Christian epistle to Diognetus

⁶ J. J. O'Donnell (trans.), 'Augustine of Hippo, *On Christian Doctrine*, Book One', Chapter 3, *Georgetown University* (translator's faculty web space), <http://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/augustine/ddc1.html> (accessed 11 August 2014). See also R. P. H. Green (trans.), *Augustine: On Christian Teaching*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, Book One, sections 7–12, pp. 9–10.

⁷ See, in particular, the rock of Horeb episode in Exodus 17:6. All Scriptural references within this essay are from the Douay-Rheims translation of the Latin vulgate.

rendered the believer a traveller in a foreign land, never at home but on the path to an ultimate destination.⁸ Rather than defeating the Christian soul, thirst pushed it ever onwards on a quest to discover an oasis of salvation in the aridity of the temporal world. Bodily need was not simply the misery of the dehydrated or the suffering of the starving, but a sign that the current location was deficient. To wallow in the deficiencies of worldly life was corrupt nutrition, the topos of eating and drinking as an expression of turpitude.

The topos begins in Antiquity. Many *auctores* of the Classical tradition had long considered the nature of moralised thirst. In search of the virtuous and correct in life, the classical tradition generated a discourse exploring thirst as a spiritual allegory.⁹ Within Classical thought, it is possible to perceive an ongoing consideration of the question of poverty and wealth. The classical exploration of what was ‘proper’ or ‘right’ living for a human being, what made one ‘rich’ and what made one ‘poor’ was sophisticated and ongoing. The Romans—interested in the pursuit not only of wealth but of moral rectitude—devoted a not insignificant amount of attention to the perils associated with the pursuit of the former at the expense of the latter.

Appetite for worldly things was represented as a malady of the spirit. In this interpretation, the bloating waters of wealth continue to feed thirst, and cannot be assimilated. This is the trap of Greed: to forever thirst for more and more, and yet be unable to quench one’s thirst. As Horace claimed in his *Odes*, ‘anxiety, and the hunger for more, pursues growing wealth’.¹⁰ Originally coined by Virgil in the *Aeneid* (3.57), the *aura sacra fames*, the ‘accursed hunger for gold’, became an oft-repeated classical phrase. Seneca rephrased the notion with the sentence ‘what aren’t you able to bring men to do, miserable hunger for gold!’¹¹ This hunger and thirst for riches was exponential, and could never be quenched while its root cause remained unaddressed. The richer one became, the greater the thirst, and the poorer the spirit. Those who had luxuries in life were tortured not only by the wish for ever more elaborate symbols of wealth, but also by the fear of losing what they already possessed.¹² Thus, the ‘trap of wealth’ as represented by thirst was firmly established within classical thought, a moral peril for those who desired to have too much.

⁸ “[Christians] dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. They marry, as do all [others]; they beget children; but they do not destroy their offspring. They have a common table, but not a common bed. They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven”. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (trans.), ‘The Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus’, *Early Christian Writings*, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/diognetus-roberts.html> (accessed 23 July 2014).

⁹ I am indebted to Michael Gilleland, author of the blog *Laudator Temporis Acti*, for providing initial inspiration for this section. See “Avarice and Dropsy”, September 18, 2004, <http://laudatortemporisacti.blogspot.co.uk/2004/09/avarice-and-dropsy.html> (accessed 6 August 2014).

¹⁰ A. S. Kline, ‘Horace: The Odes’, *Poetry in Translation*, <http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/HoraceOdesBkIII.htm> (accessed 3 June 2014), 3:16–18.

¹¹ Virgil, *Aeneid*, 3.57, quoted by Seneca as “quod non mortalia pectora coges, auri sacra fames”.

¹² This trope was a comedic ingredient in Roman theatre, a notable example of which being the character of Euclio in the *Aulularia* of Titus Maccius Plautus. Euclio, a miserly old man obsessed with his poverty, discovers a pot of gold buried in his cellar and spends the remainder of the play obsessing instead over the possibility that it might be stolen.

Within the *De Consolatione Philosophiae* of Boethius, we see the trope take a Christianised late antique form from the mouth of Philosophia, avatar of learning:

Though the rich man with greed heap up from ever-flowing streams the wealth that cannot satisfy, though he deck himself with pearls from the Red Sea's shore, and plough his fertile field with oxen by the score, yet gnawing care will never in his lifetime leave him, and at his death his wealth will not go with him, but leave him faithlessly.¹³

The classical topos of corrupt nutrition was given an additional layer of meaning in the case of thirst by associating greed, a disease of the spirit, with dropsy, or hydrospia, a disease of the body characterised by intense thirst. Now known as oedema, the dropsical condition was thought to result from a malady of the liver, resulting in a failure of the body to convert food and drink from an intermediate and unassimilated liquid into true blood, causing the body to swell with impure humours that could not be expelled from or absorbed by the body, or by the mind.¹⁴ The moral adages of the pre-Christian world had long equated a dropsical thirst with the unhealthy turgor of the spirit brought on by excessive greed.¹⁵ In a notable example, Ovid evoked the symbolism of dropsy in the *Fasti*. 'Riches', claimed Ovid, 'have grown and with them the frantic lust for wealth, and they who have the most possessions still crave for more. They strive to gain that they may waste, and then to repair their wasted fortunes, and thus they feed their vices by ringing the changes on them. So he whose belly swells with dropsy, the more he drinks, the thirstier he grows'.¹⁶ Greed was thus rendered allegorically as an excessive and abstract 'thirst' beyond the requirements of a balanced life. This dropsy of the mind caused one to swell with an intemperate turgor, the waters of wealth exacerbating the thirst to have, rather than quenching it.

The classical motif of Tantalus in torment lends power to this imagery. The dropsical thirst of the morally bankrupt rich man is compared to the half divine figure of legend who, for the crimes of infanticide, cannibalism and human sacrifice, was banished to Tartarus, the deepest portion of the Greek underworld. Forever tormented by visible water and fruit, Tantalus was cursed to temptation without satisfaction for eternity.¹⁷ When he attempted to reach for the fruit, it receded beyond his grasp; when he attempted to drink, the water receded beyond his reach. To be tantalised was to be ever tormented by the possibility of satiety, but to never obtain

¹³ W. V. Cooper (trans.), *The Consolation of Philosophy*, London, J. M. Dent and Co., 1902, Book 3, p. 64. See also S. Goins and B. H. Wyman (eds.), *The Consolation of Philosophy: Boethius*, San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 2012, metrum 3, pp. 71–72 for an isometric translation.

¹⁴ For a description of the medieval understanding of dropsy, see J. C. Nohrnberg, "'This Disfigured People': Representations of Pathological Bodily and Mental Affliction in Dante's *Inferno* XXIX–XXX', in J. C. Vaught (ed.), *Rhetorics of Bodily Disease and Health in Medieval and Early Modern England*, Farnham and Burlington, VC, Ashgate, 2010, pp. 52–53.

¹⁵ See a full list of imagery associated with greed in R. Newhauser, *The Early History of Greed: The Sin of Avarice in Early Medieval Thought and Literature*, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2000, appendix I, with the entry for dropsy appearing on p. 135.

¹⁶ J. G. Frazer (trans.), *Ovid's Fasti*, London, William Heinemann Ltd., 1931 [1959], 1.211–216, p. 17.

¹⁷ For further discussion of the myth of Tantalus in a medieval context, see Nohrnberg, "'This Disfigured People'", pp. 58–60.

it. Such a trope, in the hand of later Christian thinkers, became the perfect allegory for worldly life.

Within the fusion of a Christian morality and classical erudition characteristic of the Middle Ages introduced several new and intriguing elements into the topos of thirst. In the fifth century, John Cassian warned against *filargyria*, or love of silver. It should be 'cut out by the roots', as John put it, 'because it will do no good not to have money if there is a desire in us for possessing it'.¹⁸ The tropes of greed as a form of thirst were strongly embedded in the early Christian tradition, appearing in the writings of John Chryostom in the form of avarice as fever, and in Evagrius Ponticus as a maddening obsession distracting from any other thought.¹⁹ Moving beyond the status of a spiritual malady, greed became an extreme threat to Christian moral rectitude. The strong dichotomy of body and soul implicit within Christian thought enhanced and moralised the folly of greed, for what was moral and right for the soul was not always what was moral and right for the body. One could be rich in life, and yet be poor of spirit. One could be poor of body—an ascetic, for example—and yet rich of spirit.

The twelfth-century Cistercian Aelred of Rievaulx wrote that '[simplicity of spirit] is determined by attachment, not by external appearances'. Aelred made use of the example of King David who, despite being 'one abounding in riches and with the highest royal authority, says 'Truly needy and poor am I' [Ps 69:6]'.²⁰ This was an appropriate form of poverty, the poverty of a spirit devoid of the distractions hidden within worldly things, and thus receptive to spiritual enlightenment. Better to be poor and simple in spirit than rich in life and forever impoverished in death. The body had cravings, (hunger and thirst), and yet these cravings often detracted from one's moral wellbeing rather than augmenting it. One could not attain simplicity of spirit through wealth of the flesh. 'Wine and white bread and honey-wine [...] benefit the body not the soul', admonished Bernard of Clairvaux in one of his letters, for 'the soul is not fattened out of a frying pan!'²¹

The soul, proclaimed Bernard, was not satisfied by the kind of hunger or thirst that could be addressed with body alone. Worse still, attempts to quench thirsts and satisfy hungers of a bodily nature lead one into licentiousness and sin! 'Wisdom itself says, "They that eat me shall yet hunger; and they that drink me shall thirst again"', proclaims Bernard in another missive, 'But how can anyone hunger and thirst for Christ who is filled every day with the husks of swine? You cannot drink from both the cup of Christ and the cup of devils. The cup of devils is pride; the cup of devils is slander and envy; the cup of devils is debauchery and drunkenness; and when these fill the mind and body there is no room for Christ'.²² With characteristic bombast and rhetorical flourish, Bernard taps into a prevailing association of nutritive needs with moral health. As a bad spiritual diet pollutes the body and negates the benefit of purer foods, so too must the stomach of the soul be filled with pure nourishment alone if it is to prosper.

¹⁸ *Institutions* 7.21, as cited in Newhauser, *The Early History of Greed*, p. xi.

¹⁹ See p. 140 within appendix I of Newhauser, *The Early History of Greed*.

²⁰ J. R. Sommerfeldt, *Aelred of Rievaulx: Pursuing Perfect Happiness*: Mahwah, NJ, Paulist Press, 2005, pp. 122–123.

²¹ B. S. James (trans.), *The Letters of St. Bernard of Clairvaux*, London, Burns & Oates, 1953, Letter 1, p. 8.

²² James, *The Letters of St. Bernard of Clairvaux*, Letter 2, p. 16.

The food of this world, by this token, was offensive to the spirit and poisonous to the soul. Even more so polluted water with its hidden pestilence, for to poison one's soul was to jeopardise one's being. A destination and goal of salvation could not be approached and met by those contaminated by love of worldly things. Like a pilgrim athirst and wandering in the desert for some distant oasis, the Christian soul could be lead astray by the mirage of false thirst, falling into sin and bodily concupiscence. In *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, the thirteenth-century mystic Mechthild of Magdeburg dwelt on the ways in which 'A spiritual person resembles an Animal in Thirty Things as to His Nature'. 'This animal has at times a natural desire to drink from the sea because of a misguided sense of thirst', claimed Mechthild. 'It cannot regain its health unless it voids and gives back the bitter seawater', she continues, and 'thus it is with us sinners: when we drink of the foul puddle of the world and make use of the baseness of our flesh according to the counsels of the evil spirit, we poison ourselves with ourselves'.²³

The poison of corrupt nutrition was creeping and cumulative, slowly drawing the sinner away from the path to salvation. The complex of topoi generated from antiquity carried into the realm of poetic expression, the twelfth-century poet Alan of Lille repeatedly presenting the allegory of sinful thirst within his *De Planctu Naturae*. 'The rich man, shipwrecked in the deep of wealth', wrote Alan, 'thinks after money with the fires of dropsical thirst, and is set like a Tantalus in its midst'. In comparison is the poor man, who, 'though he is not able really to practice actual avarice, within preserves a spiritual parsimony'.²⁴ The moral association of spiritual simplicity with a kind of 'morally just poverty' and sinful bloating with an overly complex and worldly epicureanism of the soul is apparent. As in the example of King David put forth by Aelred of Rievaulx, Alan valorises a simple poverty free of wealthy corruption. Within the classical motif, we find a second element of the thirst topos, a representation of bodily torment as punishment for sin or transgression. 'While the passion for having makes the stomach of the mind dropsical' writes Alan, 'the mind thirsts as it drinks, and, like another Tantalus, burns in the very water, and the abundance of wealth gives intensity to the thirst. So the satiated man hungers, the drunken thirsts, the one with plenty longs, the individual covets everything, and by that very covetousness is made poor, and stays wealthy without'.²⁵

Within *De Planctu Naturae*, this punishment is presented as a fundamental edict by God's vicar, the lady Natura. The allegorical figure of Genius, speaking with the authority of nature itself, proclaims that those who are greedy and intemperate in life sin against the natural order, and will be punished:

[...] let him be isolated from the harmonious assembly of the things of Nature, whoever turns awry the lawful course of love, or is often shipwrecked in gluttony, or swallows greedily the delirium of drunkenness, or thirsts in the fire of avarice, or ascends the shadowy pinnacle of insolent pride, or suffers the

²³ F. Tobin (trans.), *Mechthild of Magdeburg: The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, Mahwah, NJ, Paulist Press, 1998, p. 161.

²⁴ D. M. Moffatt (trans.), *The Complaint of Nature by Alan de Lille*, New York, Henry Holt and Company, 1908, Prose VI, p. 66.

²⁵ Moffatt, *The Complaint of Nature*, Metre VII, p. 66.

deep-seated destruction of envy, or keeps company with the false love of flattery.²⁶

The spiritual lechery associated with the sins as a collection of unwholesome appetites is a sign of inner corruption made manifest through spiritual practice. The topos of spiritual nutrition is replete with the Classical tropes of moral greed, and provides a visual image of undesirable behaviour correlated to a more subtle and internal form of intemperate life. The list goes on, as the transgressors of God's law are catalogued in exhaustive detail, ending with a final edict:

[...] Let him who sleeps in the Lethean stream of drunkenness be tormented with the fires of perpetual thirst. Let him in whom burns the passion to possess incur the continual needs of poverty.²⁷

The notion of the 'continual needs' of poverty is an interesting one. In the form of a righteous poverty, these continual needs are a test, forging the pauper into a form fit for salvation. Poverty was only continual in death, transformed from an intermediate process into a misery without end. It is at this point that we begin to apprehend the symbiotic relationship of corrupt and soteriological nutrition: the two are ever coexistent, with the former leading to awareness of the latter when accompanied with proper education.

The trope of the thirsting sinner entered the medieval consciousness to warn of the ultimate price of sin. It became a face of the manifold punishments inflicted upon the sinner in hell, a constant reminder of one of the many paths by which one could be damned through temporal behaviour. The motif of Tantalus was augmented within a Christian context by the Biblical tale of the Dives and Lazarus from the book of Luke.²⁸ The message of this tale was clear. If one quenched thirst with the riches of the world, eternal torment with unremitting thirst would be one's reward. The bosom of Abraham was reserved for those wealthy after death, and not in life. The unsaved dead were doomed to be eternally thirsty, for they craved the very thing denied to them: spiritual life. This was the most fearful consequence of an impoverishment of spirit: the thirst for wealth felt in life was nothing compared to the endless thirst of Hell's inhabitants.

This motif notably appeared within in the *Divine Comedy* of Dante Alighieri in the form of Master Adam, a rich man now suffering from a fitting eternal punishment.²⁹ Encountered in *Inferno* canto thirty, Adam is described as being afflicted by 'the heavy dropsy, which so disproportions the limbs with unassimilated humors that there's no match between the face and belly'.³⁰ Suffering from the bloating of dropsy and the torment of Tantalus in equal measure, Adam thirsts

²⁶ Moffatt, *The Complaint of Nature*, Prose IX, p. 94.

²⁷ Moffatt, *The Complaint of Nature*, Prose IX, p. 95.

²⁸ Luke 16:19–31.

²⁹ For a more in-depth discussion of Dante's depiction of dropsy, see Nohrnberg, "'This Disfigured People'" in which the context of Adam's malady is discussed as an episode of moralised medicine within literature.

³⁰ A. Mandelbaum (trans.), *Divine Comedy, Inf.* 30:52–54, *Digital Dante*, <http://dante.ilt.columbia.edu/comedy/index.html> (accessed 3 September 2014), n. p.

eternally as the consequence of his sins, suffering as a result of his *contrapasso* punishment:

“O you exempt from every punishment in this grim world, and I do not know why,” he said to [Dante and Virgil], “look now and pay attention to this, the misery of Master Adam: alive, I had enough of all I wanted; alas, I now long for one drop of water”.³¹

The fear of an eternal punishment in Hell was the ultimate counterexample of moral rectitude. It was entirely appropriate that Master Adam, suffering from the effects of his profligacy, should forever serve as a dramatic warning to others. The ambiguity of spiritual nutrition demonstrates that moral life was never a simple eschewal of the corrupt and apprehension of the good. Awareness of or participation in moral folly is both a path to a bad outcome and a path to moral stimulus. Dante and Virgil’s encounter with dropsical thirst is so effective because the worldly Christian sees Adam’s sin incipient within his or her own behaviour, and is confronted with its consequences. When Dante moves through purgatory and into paradise, he sees his goal and, in apprehending it, is reminded of his previous encounters with the failure of those trapped in Hell.

Despite contempt for worldly power, it was the experience of corruption that tempered piety and provided the space for meditation upon purer desires. Augustine’s journey across the world without diversion by its pleasures makes no sense and has no cohesion unless risk exists. Moral life in a postlapsarian world can never be simple, linear, and unproblematic. In contrast to the hard-won and sinful thirst for power, there was the bounty of religious revelation. In contrast to the dangerous appetites discussed thus far, the flow of my argument now carries us to a hunger and thirst for the superlative principles of Christian life. Stimulated and catalysed by the thirst for worldly things, soteriological nutrition was a complex of allegorical hungers and thirst provoking soteriological progress.

Unexhausted Spring: The Stimulus towards Soteriological Nutrition

The tenth-century chronicler of the Stephen of Laon *vita* claimed that the holy Bishop ‘drank from the streams of the Liberal Arts all the more swiftly for being filled with the love of God’.³² In so doing, his saintly act of erudition-as-drinking initiated a cycle of thirst and satiety mediated by the disciplines of the Liberal Arts, and yet following a *cursus* directed towards a greater satiety, the quenching of thirst found within the salvific end offered by Christian salvation. Once filled with the message of Christ, the drinker would become a fountain ‘springing up into life everlasting’.³³ In the twelfth century, Gilbert of Stanford claimed that through Scripture, this refreshment ‘satisfies those who drink from it, and yet it remains

³¹ Dante, *Inferno* 30:58–63, n. p.

³² C. S. Jaeger, *The Envy of Angels: Cathedral Schools and Social Ideas in Medieval Europe, 950–1200*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994, p. 28.

³³ John 4:14.

unexhausted'.³⁴ Pouring forth from the throne of the lamb, these refreshing waters generate fruit 'for the healing of nations'.³⁵ The second section of this essay deals with the possibilities, and not the pitfalls, of nutrition.

This end was not given without struggle, requiring the devotee to follow a path of want and pain stimulated by hunger and thirst the length of a human lifetime. Only at the end, with rectitude of navigation, could the pains of this life give way to satiety. Augustine of Hippo set the tone for this debate in *De Doctrina Christiana*, elaborating upon the notions of *uti* and *frui* discussed above:

We find, however, that we must make use of some mode of conveyance, either by land or water, in order to reach that fatherland where our enjoyment is to commence. But the beauty of the country through which we pass, and the very pleasure of the motion, charm our hearts, and turning these things which we ought to use into objects of enjoyment, we become unwilling to hasten the end of our journey; and becoming engrossed in a factitious delight, our thoughts are diverted from that home whose delights would make us truly happy. Such is a picture of our condition in this life of mortality. We have wandered far from God; and if we wish to return to our Father's home, this world must be used, not enjoyed, that so the invisible things of God may be clearly seen [...]³⁶

The constant interference of human needs and the unending potential for sin were the path to salvation, and the cultivation of an appropriate *contemptus mundi*. Awareness of the wretchedness of human temporal life, its hunger pangs and thirsts, was the very mechanism by which a burning zeal for salvation was kindled. In his *Proslogium*, Anselm of Canterbury narrates this process by creating an affective counterbalance between the woe of the Fall and the delight of Paradise by playing upon a profound sense of mourning:

Man once did eat the bread of angels, for which he hungers now; he eateth now the bread of sorrows, of which he knew not then. Alas! for the mourning of all mankind, for the universal lamentation of the sons of Hades! He choked with satiety, we sigh with hunger. He abounded, we beg. He possessed in happiness, and miserably forsook his possession; we suffer want in unhappiness, and feel a miserable longing, and alas! we remain empty.³⁷

Hunger and thirst were spiritual symptoms of the Fall, but the pain of denial was also the vehicle of salvation. The cry for relief was answered by a solution for want, previously unavailable in the postlapsarian world. Like a pauper constantly tormented by hunger and thirst now able to find nourishment, the subsequent satisfaction of salvation is of greater meaning when accompanied by a memory of want. The absence

³⁴ As cited in H. De Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*, Vol. 1, London, Continuum, 2000, p. 75.

³⁵ Revelation 22:1–2.

³⁶ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, Book 1, Chapter 4.

³⁷ S. Norton Deane (trans.), *Proslogium; Monologium; An Appendix in Behalf of the Fool* by Gaunilon; and *Cur Deus Homo* by St. Anselm, *Christian Classics Ethereal Library*, http://www.ccel.org/ccel/anselm/basic_works, (accessed 14 March 2014), Chapter 1, n. p.

brought about by the loss of grace is remediated by Christ's crucifixion as he said *sileo*, 'I Thirst', upon the cross.³⁸

In addition to serving as a memory of want, the pain of the spiritual body remains within a Christian framework as a constant stimulus towards soteriological nutrition. This is particularly evident in narratives of spiritual asceticism, since the constant physical absence of the body provides a corresponding catalyst for the questing of the soul. This is all the more evident in the case of affective devotion, in which the pain itself is the vehicle of salvation as well as its context. Caroline Walker Bynum refers to Catherine of Siena as an exemplar, an affective devotee *par excellence* whose attitude to hunger and thirst was one of mutual pain and expiation. Her description of her condition as she denied herself bodily sustenance is telling:

[...] the soul becomes like a drunken man; the more he drinks the more he wants to drink; the more it bears the cross the more it wants to bear it. And the pains are its refreshment and the tears which it has shed for the memory of the blood are its drink. And the sighs are its food.³⁹

For Catherine, the body in suffering brings relief from the greater suffering of worldly life. The soul becomes intoxicated with suffering, crying out for relief. This imagery inverts the thirst of the drunkard and renders it a morally valorous act; the soul has an all-consuming thirst for salvation brought about through the rigours of affective piety. Only bodily ordeals can resolve this spiritual lacuna, bringing greater proximity to salvation. Even in this deprived state of need, the conditions for true satiety emerge. For the twelfth-century Benedictine Peter of Celle—an advocate of bodily asceticism rather than affective devotion—the suffering of the body brings forth a flood of devout tears, a moisture generated through the deprivation of corporeal aridity:

When [monastics] look out their windows at any time, a mist, distilled by I know not what rains, appears. You would hear their hearts groaning like giants under the waters.⁴⁰ Neither are they dried up, although their body be a dry tree, and I wonder whence comes such a lamentation of the heart, since strength has almost given out in the body; whence comes such a flow of tears, since the river of natural moisture has dried up through the river of abstinence.⁴¹

The dry tree of the body, bound by chastity, no longer produces the fruits of the loins.⁴² Despite its lack of progenerative fecundity, it continues to produce the moisture of spiritual nourishment. Just as suffering is food for the soul for Catherine of Siena, so too are monastics fed by their lamentations. It brings forth a flood of devout tears

³⁸ John 19:28.

³⁹ Bynum, "Fast, Feast, and Flesh", pp. 129–130.

⁴⁰ "Behold the giants groan under the waters, and they that dwell with them. Hell is naked before him, and there is no covering for destruction". Job 26:5–6.

⁴¹ J. Haseldine (trans.), *The Letters of Peter of Celle*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001, Letter 28, to Hardouin of Larrivour, pp. 98–99.

⁴² Isaiah 56:3.

in the midst of the waters. This nourishment, although temporary, feeds the soul in this life and yet prepares it for the next.

When imbued with a positive valence, thirst represented a longing for the requirements of the spirit as well as those of the body. The life and death nature of thirst was of greater importance within the realm of the soul or spirit, for the life and death of the body applied only to the physical, whereas the life and death of the soul were eternal. Through symbols of nutritive spirituality, the bodily need for water was transformed into a spiritual quest for that which sustained it, the instinctive reaching of humanity towards the ultimate source of life. As is written in Psalm 42, 'as the hart panteth after the fountains of water; so my soul panteth after thee, O God'.⁴³ This anticipatory spiritual thirst did not always have negative connotations, for the motif of an impoverished spirit as a sinful thirst was coupled with an enriching thirst for spiritual growth. Thus like the thirst of dropsy, this thirst could not be quenched, intensifying the more one sought it. Unlike the superficial wealth of the temporal world, the ultimate source of this water existed with the Trinity beyond corporeal death. The thirst of life was quenched only for the saved.

Only once the confusing effect of temporal life is put aside can nutrition be guaranteed free of corruption. Until the moment of passing beyond mortal life, the imagery of corrupt desire and the imagery of pure nutrition must continually vie for ascendancy. Just as eating and drinking is an endless series of choices—what, when, how, with whom, how much—so too is moral life an endless choice of impure imbibing and ingesting. Contemplation of and participation in the object of spiritual love—the gift promised by the virtue of Christ the 'wonderful counsellor'—aroused a thirst for righteousness; it was a thirst for the fountain of eternal life that lay beyond the aridity of the material world. Only by 'entering into the joy' of divine propinquity could one discover the remedy for poverty, and for thirst. At the unmaking of the world, Christ proclaimed, 'To him that thirsteth, I will give of the fountain of the water of life, freely'.⁴⁴

This motif is worked over and presented in great detail by the monastic author Bernard of Cluny in the *De Contemptu Mundi*. When contemplating the fickle and impermanent nature of worldly life, Bernard eagerly anticipated the delectable draught of eternity, the waters of life promised by Christ in the gospels:

O holy draught, holy refreshment, the peace of souls; O pious, O noble, O peaceful is the sound of their hymn. God himself is sufficient food for all the saved; the perpetual sight of the almighty is their full refreshment. They have enough of Him, yet they have for Him a panting thirst, but without sorrows, without hardships, without complaint.⁴⁵

A longing to quench the thirst for salvation is an oft-repeated motif within the Bible. In the book of Isaiah, God promises to quench the thirst of humanity, 'For I will pour water on him who is thirsty, And floods on the dry ground; I will pour My Spirit on

⁴³ Psalm 42:1.

⁴⁴ Revelation 21:6.

⁴⁵ R. E. Pepin (trans.), *Scorn for the World: Bernard of Cluny's De Contemptu Mundi*, East Lansing, MI, Michigan State University Press, 1991, Book 1, pp. 28–29, Lines 285–289.

your descendants, And My blessing on your offspring'.⁴⁶ By creating a paean for the saving gifts of Christ, Bernard provides an intellectual, spiritual, and devotional focal point within the confusion of the world.⁴⁷ He writes 'ask and you will obtain the best potion', for it is within these waters that the true remedy for poverty can be found.⁴⁸ The result is affective, not as a means of spiritual expression but as a symptom of a spiritual transformation. By weeping, the pious offer themselves up as a candidate for salvation, their tears a badge of honour signifying awareness of sin and true repentance:

This man has the deepest thirst for this potion, and holy tears. He is inspired, pants, becomes a sacrifice by his weeping, weeps for his faults and in weeping covers them.⁴⁹

The focus in these monastic texts, as in much monastic literature, is on preparation. In order to begin the journey, the correct stimulus is necessary. In the twelfth-century *Fons Philosophiae*, a Victorine didactic moral text attributed to Godfrey of Saint-Victor, we apprehend the topos of moral thirst transposed into a narrative of intellectual and spiritual discovery. Prompted by the Holy Spirit, the thirst for higher things sets the scene for the journey of moral life, rendered allegorically. In the poem, the author transforms his quest for wealth of the spirit into a journey towards a source of water. Engaged in a spiritual pilgrimage, Godfrey passes through a figurative landscape of learning, his progress motivated by the now-familiar forces of spiritual thirst:

I run more hurriedly, anxious to see, there have been signs holding out hope of quenching my thirst. For soon almost a thousand rivers astound my ears with their sweet murmuring.⁵⁰

Urged onwards by the divine impetus of Grace, the spiritual pilgrim on the road to true wealth ignores the distractions of power and worldly enrichment. Thirst, then, could appear within medieval devotional and spiritual literature as a figurative bodily representation of *contemptus mundi*. Since the soul is not fattened from a frying pan, the body spurns more mundane repast to hunger and thirst for the superlatives of salvation.

To leave the debate at this point would be facile, for there was a continuous risk of corruption inherent in nutrition that remained in spite of a positive exemplar to guide spiritual aspiration. The risk always remained that one would drink from the incorrect water source, and to become poisoned. Later in the *Fons Philosophiae*, Godfrey's allegorical journey leads him to the river of mechanics, a polluted and worldly art not directed to heavenly ends:

⁴⁶ Isaiah 44:3.

⁴⁷ For a more detailed study of this topic, see J. Smith, 'Fluid', in J. J. Cohen (ed.), *Inhuman Ecologies*, Washington, D.C., Oliphaunt Books / punctum books, 2014, pp. 115–131.

⁴⁸ Haseldine, *The Letters of Peter of Celle*, Lines 376–377, pp. 34–35.

⁴⁹ Haseldine, *The Letters of Peter of Celle*, Lines 379–380, pp. 34–35.

⁵⁰ H. Feiss (trans.), 'Godfrey of Saint-Victor: *The Fountain of Philosophy*—Introduction and Translation by Hugh Feiss, OSB', in F. T. Harkins and F. van Liere (eds.), *Interpretation of Scripture: Theory*, Victorine Texts in Translation 3, Turnhout, Brepols, 2012, Lines 17–20, p. 390.

When I have come closer, first I find in the fields, at the very base of the mountain, a spring drawn up from the mud that people call “mechanical,” soiled with the dung of wrestling frogs.⁵¹

Even at the moment of attainment, the pursuit of pure refreshment could be degraded by corrupt appetites.⁵² Even when the quest is pure, there are always forms of spiritual folly disguised by the very medium of positive nutrition. The deceptive nature of nutrition is strongly reinforced within an episode of personification allegory found in the early medieval *Super Thebaiden* of Fulgentius, a commentary on Statius’ *Thebaid*. In Fulgentius’ Christian allegory of the epic poem, the Seven Kings of Greece (the seven liberal arts) go to battle due to excessive thirst for worldly knowledge. During their journey, they drink from a spring discovered by Hypsipyle (idolatry) and are poisoned. In a battle with Eteocles (greed) the seven fail and six perish—the sole survivor is King Adrastus (philosophy), who can never truly die, but only be brought low by the failure of the other six.⁵³ Thus, even a quest to do battle with vice equipped with arms and armor fit for the task can fail if excessive love for worldly things pollutes the spirit. Within this motif, we apprehend the fundamental inseparability of the tropes that compose the topos of moral nutrition—dichotomy can never maintain cohesion in the endless vicissitudes of worldly life.

Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht has pointed out the problematics of grouping discourse surrounding the medieval senses between two opposites, a view of the sensually intense Middle Ages (*das sinnenfrohe Mittelalter*), and a sensually deprived Middle Ages (*das asketische Mittelalter*). Both rely on totalisations, and the topos of spiritual nutrition shows a synergy between the two indicative of a wider complexity.⁵⁴ The problem is sensually intense in a morally harmful manner, the solution is ascetic and sense-denying; it leads to an embrace of other spiritual senses, thus inducing new forms of sensory intensity. As we can see from literature that deploys the manifold tropes of spiritual nutrition, the competition of desires never ends. The intensity of the senses can never be divorced from their denial, for the two were continually necessary. A lifetime of struggle was the only way to pass across the temporal world, to use it as a vehicle of travel fuelled by spiritual hunger.

Conclusion: Corruption and Salvation as Compound Topos

In order to travel through the world without diversion, one form of suffering could be endured to avoid a later eternal torment. Those who could remain simple

⁵¹ Feiss, *The Fountain of Philosophy*, Lines 21–24, p. 39.

⁵² It is interesting to note that Godfrey of Saint-Victor is rare among Liberal Arts masters in his disdain for the mechanical arts. The *Didascalicon* of Hugh of Saint-Victor—Godfrey’s illustrious forebear in the Victorine order, whose treatise is the template of the *Fons Philosophiae*—is complimentary. This raises the point that moral exemplar and counter-exemplar are ever-shifting, determined by the interpretation and opinion of the exegete.

⁵³ Fulgentius, *Super Thebaiden*, as cited in J. Chance, *Medieval Mythography: From Roman North Africa to the School of Chartres, A.D. 433–1177*, vol. 1, Gainesville, FL, University Press of Florida, 1994, p. 127.

⁵⁴ H. U. Gumbrecht, ‘Erudite Fascinations and Cultural Energies: How Much Can We Know about the Medieval Senses?’, in S. G. Nichols, A. Kablitz and A. Calhoun (eds.), *Rethinking the Medieval Senses*, Baltimore, MD, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008, 1–10, p. 2.

and unencumbered would hear the call of greater things, avoid gluttonous appetites, and become attuned to spiritual pangs. Those who could negotiate their appetites would avoid temptation and damnation. The tropes that compose the focal topos of this essay demonstrate the difficulty of doing so. This is what Christ meant by the proclamation 'Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven'.⁵⁵ Thus was King David, powerful and majestic and yet simple in spirit. The thirst of the damned was unquenchable and continually exacerbated by drinking from the false cup of devils, yet the thirst of the poor in spirit was quenched by the cup of Christ for eternity. In death, the damned would languish in torment, forever desiring yet forever denied, and the blessed would exist within the final Jerusalem, drinking deep from the waters of eternal life flowing through its streets. The topos of nutrition narrates the difficulty of avoiding the former and embracing the latter, and the complications of moral balance. The result was a compound entity, endlessly varied.

In *The Sacred and the Profane*, anthropologist Mircea Eliade claimed that 'religious man can live only in a sacred world, because it is only in such a world that he participates in being, that he has a *real existence*. This religious need expresses an unquenchable ontological thirst. Religious man thirsts for *being*'.⁵⁶ The notion of a spiritual and ontological 'thirst' rings true when placed within the scope of this essay. The body longs for satiety as the mind craves fulfilment; these are common themes of the human condition. For the medieval topos of spiritual nutrition, there was only one real existence that could provide satiety: the reality of God.⁵⁷ Through salvation, medieval spirituality attempted to participate in being, bringing the saved into propinquity with the source of all being—hunger and thirst represented the desire for an eventual apprehension of a Real. The false satiety of the natural world did not promote simplicity of spirit, the poverty that would lead to later wealth. On the contrary, it filled the soul with poison, bloating it with un-assimilated fluids that were as false as they were unsatisfactory. The *real existence* described by Mircea Eliade lay beyond this, in the wealth of the elect; like Lazarus the beggar, a man wretched and simple in life could be content within the bosom of Abraham in death. As Christ proclaimed in his sermon on the mount, 'blessed are they that hunger and thirst after justice: for they shall have their fill'.⁵⁸

The interplay between positive and negative within the topos of spiritual nutrition involves an endless mixture and recombination of moral tropes. In this article, I have demonstrated that corrupt nutrition serves as both a warning of potential error and points to soteriological nutrition, a faculty riven with an equal amount of spiritual anguish and yet leading to later satiety. When rendered allegorically, such a life was want and satiety densely intertwined. Hunger and thirst were products of postlapsarian life, and yet they were also the conduits by which spiritual enrichment could be sought. Without hunger or thirst, there would be no impetus for spiritual progress, and yet hungering and thirsting were paths to corrupt appetites. Like a series of paths to be chosen, every act of allegorical nutrition was an

⁵⁵ Matthew 5:3.

⁵⁶ M. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, San Diego, Harvest Books, 1959, p. 64.

⁵⁷ Eliade describes the goal of his *homo religiosus* as a search for the Real, a fundamental truth. This was a need beyond relative truth claims that distinguished the religious from the non-religious. See *The Sacred and the Profane*, p. 80.

⁵⁸ Matthew 5:6.

ambiguous experience, and yet contained a series of moral valences to be sought or avoided. By mapping this journey onto human anatomy, the topos of spiritual nutrition could serve as a reminder that spiritual need was every bit as fundamental to life as physiological need. Morality, just like nutrition, is an endless series of negotiations, triumphs and temptations. As a result, the mapping of a complex topos of spiritual nutrition onto the imagery of human bodily life was perfect in its flexibility and adaptability, explaining its enduring popularity for generations of moralists.

Author Biography

Dr James L. Smith completed a PhD in History at the University of Western Australia in 2013 entitled 'Water as Medieval Intellectual Entity: Case Studies in Twelfth-Century Western Monasticism', supervised by Professors Philippa Maddern and Andrew Lynch. His broader research interests include medieval intellectual history, water history, and the environmental humanities. His current research focuses on the intersection of medieval intellectual history and twenty-first century environmental management.

In Memoriam of Philippa Maddern

This paper—heavily modified over the years—is based on the talk I gave at the 2010 Perth Medieval and Renaissance Group conference when new to PhD life. Philippa, as was her way, sensed my anxiety and helped me to compose the paper, offering copious advice to ensure that it went to time. I have given many papers since, but this one will always remind me of her. It is one small example of the countless ways that Philippa Maddern has touched my academic life, and her memory lives on in all of her postgraduate students. Vale.