WORDS OF FIRE AND FRUIT: THE PSYCHOLOGY OF PRAYER

WORDS IN THE CLOUD OF UNKOWNING

In chapters 35 to 38 of the Cloud of Unknowing (c.1390s), the anonymous author makes a series of remarks regarding the nature and form of effective prayer. He makes a sharp distinction between two classes of people: the ‘contemplatif prentys’, and those who ‘contynuely worchen in þe werk of þis book’. Each exemplifies a specific form of prayer. For those ‘biginners & profyters’ prayer is part of ‘Redyng, Þinkyng and Preiing’ – the Middle English translation of the first three stages of the lectio divina: lectio, meditatio, oratio. All three are ‘so couplid to-gedir’ that preier ‘may not goodly be getyn in bigynners & profyters wiþoutyn Þinkyng comyng bifore’. Prayer for the novice is rich in words, associations, and figures, and is inspired by preaching, reading, and aspects of the liturgy. It is dependent upon ‘menes of redyng or heryng comyng before’. The prayers of ‘hem þat be parfi te’ are utterly different. Their prayers ‘risen euermore sodenly vnto God, wiþ-outyn any meenes or any premeditacion in special comyng before, or going þer-wiþ’. Independent of liturgical formulae, or prior reading or thinking, such prayer possess the utmost potency and ‘peersiþ þe eres of Almyõty God þan doþ any longe sauter vnmyndfuly mumlyd in þe teeþ’. Linguistic brevity is stressed as key:

\& òiif þei ben in wordes, as þei ben bot seldom, þan ben þei bot in ful fewe wordes; 3c, & in euer þe fewer þe betir. 3c, & 3if it be bot a lityl worde of o silable, me ðink it betir þen of to, & more acording to þe werk of þe spiryte; siben it so is þat a goostly worcher in þis werk schulde euermore be in þe hiȝest & þe souereynest pointe of þe spirit.

The prayer of the perfect is rarely verbal, and when it is it consists of the smallest unit of language possible: the syllable. In this respect the Cloud author is drawing upon a tradition of monastic prayer that can be traced back to Ephraem the Syriac (d. 375), Evagrius (d. 399), and John Cassian (d. 435). For these early monks prayer was understood as part of a long process of increasing intimacy with God. In its ideal form it is continuous and pre-phatic. As Cassian asserts, quae non solum nullis imaginis occupatur intuuit, sed etiam nulla uocis, nulla uerborum prosecutione distinguuit, ignita uero mentis intentione per ineffabilem cordis excessum inexplubili spiritus alacritate profertur, quamque mens extra omnes sensus ac usibiles effecta materias gemitibus inenarrabilibus atque suspiriis profundit ad Deum.
(This prayer is not concerned with any consideration of an image, nor characterized by any sound nor set of words. It comes forth from a fiery mental intention through an ineffable rapture of the heart by means of an inexplicable burst of the spirit. Freed from all sensations and visible concerns, the mind pours itself out to God with unspeakable groans and sighs.)

These groans and cries are akin to those monosyllables, each one a succinct unit that stands on its own and is ‘uninflected, syntactically uninhibited’. Each syllable is a tool of focused expression, deeply connected to ‘þe werk of þe spiryte’, and able to channel it into its highest and most intense point. It is prayer born not out of conceptual or rational thinking, but of the raw affective powers of the soul:

A man or a womman, affraied wiþ any sodeyn chaunce of fiir, or of mans deþ, or what elles þat it be, sodenly in þe heiõt of his speryt he is dreuyn upon hast & upon nede for to crie or for to prey after help. Þe, how? Sekirly not in many woordes, ne 3i in o worde of two silabes. & whi is þat? For hym þinkeþ to longe tariing, for to declare þe nede & þe werk of his spirit. & þerfore he brestiþ up hidously wiþ a grete spirit, & cryeþ bot a litil worde of o silable, as is þis worde FIIR or þis worde OUTE.

Urgency and emotional intensity, not tranquillity and calm, distinguish this form of prayer. Affect is both its source and goal. Its emotionally expressive nature is key to its ability to garner God’s attention: only ‘þe hidous noise of þis crye be alweis herde & holpen of God’. The semantic range of ‘hidous’ is much broader than modern usage, meaning not simply ugly but also ‘intense’ and ‘terrifying’. Such prayer, therefore, is composed of and conveys strong emotion. In this respect, it is broadly consistent with Cassian’s advice that prayer ought to spring from compunction and penitential states, moving to express ‘ineffabile gaudium … gemitibus inenerrabilibus’. Yet, in other respects, the Cloud does not simply recapitulate early monastic works in its discussion of prayer. While the text is one of the most advanced pieces of Middle English spiritual writing, it does not exist in a vacuum. This essay will explore how the compositional advice it offers on prayer is itself drawn from other, more contemporary, ideas in medieval grammar and psychology.

The work of John of Garland (c.1190–1270) offers an interesting example. His *Parisiana poetria de arte prosayca, metrica, et rithmica* is a treatise on the best ways of composing prose, verse, and rhythmics in oral and written contexts. When dealing with how to convey strong emotions his advice is clear:

Interiectiones semper preponuntur, aliquando in oratione imperfecta, aliquando perfecta, et hoc quando exprimitur affectus doloris, uel gaudii, uel metus, uel admirationis. Sed magis exprimitur affectus per orationem imperfectam quam per orationem perfectam, quia imperfectio inexpressibilem exprimt affectum.

(Interjections always go first whether in an incomplete sentence or in a complete one. They are used to express a feeling of sorrow or joy or fear or wonder. But feeling is expressed better in an incomplete sentence than in a complete sentence, for incompleteness expresses inexpressible feeling.)
The prayer words that the Cloud extols are not simply monosyllables, they are also interjections – the parts of speech best suited to convey affective states and aid in the expression of the ineffable. The Cloud author is aware of this as he clearly possesses some degree of grammatical and linguistic education, and expects the same of his audience. Grammatical knowledge informs his work at a fundamental level, playing an integral role in the text’s chief agenda: the soul’s journey into union with God. For it is not simply the arts of poetry that engage with the nature and uses of the interjection. Both medieval theology and psychology pay particular attention to this part of speech, and how its usage indicates the dominance of the affective powers within the soul – or to use the Cloud’s preferred terms, the dominance of the ‘louyng miȝt’ over the ‘knowable miȝt’.

Strong language

While the ars grammatica was the initial subject of the trivium and quadrivium, and studied at pre-university levels by schoolchildren, it was far from rudimentary or simplistic. As Irwin and Thomson note, ars grammatica has both elementary and advanced aspects, encompassing a whole range of literary and interpretative activities and competencies. As such, the art of grammar has a particularly strong hold over the intellectual activities of the medieval period; theology being no exception. During this period theology comes to be defined as ‘poetry about God’, and so the importance and relevance of grammar as a compositional and critical art to such ‘divine poetry’ is critical.

As with any discipline, grammar has its set texts and authorities. Donatus’ (fl. 4th century AD) Ars minor and Ars maior, and Priscian’s (fl. 5th century AD) Institutiones grammaticae were the main primers for all medieval students. These foundational texts offer elementary instruction in the Latin language, and provide the first accounts of language’s relationship with emotion:

Interiectio est pars orationis interiecta aliis partibus orationis ad exprimendos animi affectus; aut metuentis, ut ei; aut optantis, ut o; aut dolentis, ut heu; aut lactantic, ut evax.

(The interjection is a part of speech thrown in between the other parts of speech to express the affects of the soul; either of someone who fears, like ei; or of someone who wishes, like o; or of someone in pain, like heu; or of someone merry, like evax.)

The interjection stands out for its unique ability to express affective states; in particular strong affective states. Fear, joy, and pain are some of the most potent passions of the soul. It does this in an auxiliary manner, not standing alone but working with the other parts of speech to provide strong affective signification and expression. Priscian’s text clarifies this point, which would become very significant for later linguistic speculation. There are only ‘partes igitur orationis sunt secundum dialecticos duae, nomen et verbum, quia hae solae etiam per se coniunctae plenam faciunt orationem, alias autem partes “syncategoremata”, hoc
est consignificantia, appellabant’ (‘two parts of speech, noun and verb, because these by themselves, when combined with each other, may form a complete sentence. The other parts they called syncategoremata, i.e. Co-signifiers’).21 The interjection is one of these syncategoremata, and as such is incapable of fully formed conceptual signification or expression. Interjections thus signify not the abstract concept of an affective state but rather the actual affective state of the soul itself. In terms of cognitive signification, the noun ‘pain’ conveys the concept of pain, while the interjection ‘agh!’ conveys the actual sensation of pain. This distinction between concept and affect contributes to one of the main perceptions of the interjection throughout the Middle Ages: that it lacks deliberation, order, reason. As Donatus makes clear, it is a part of speech that conveys not simply emotional force but also a degree of disorder and abruptness. It is an example of voces inconditae, and is ‘thrown into’ a sentence like a missile. For Quintilian (c. AD 35–100), the interjection is also a figure of rhetoric that functions by interruption:

Etiam interiectione, qua et oratores et historici frequenter utuntur ut medio sermone aliquem inserant sensum, impediri solet intellectus, nisi quod interponitur breve est.

(Understanding is also impeded by a parenthesis (a device which both orators and historians frequently use in order to insert a thought in the middle of a sentence), unless the insertion is short.)22

The etymology of the word supports this idea, as interjection comes from the third conjugation verb ‘interiectio’ meaning ‘to throw between’.23 Its abrupt nature compromises linguistic and syntactic order, erupting within a sentence in a manner that is in some sense uncontrollable. Its presence is thus an indication not simply of an effusion of affect, but also a corresponding deficit of rationality.

The cognitive significance of the interjection does not go overlooked later on by Augustine (d. AD 430). In his Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, he makes particular mention of the interjection and sees its emotive power as a source of concern. He examines Matthew v.22 where two specific words are equated with two specific punishments: ‘if he says, “Stupid!” (racha) to his brother, he will appear before the court. If he says “You fool!” (fatue) to his brother, he will answer for it in the fires of Hell.’24 Augustine is quite clear that these words express ‘the emotion of an angry mind’ and that the ‘Grammarians call those particles of speech which express an affection of an agitated mind interjections’.25 These interjections indicate a lack of emotional control on the part of the speaker, signifying a mind overcome by affect. Each corresponds to a specific degree of sin and corresponding punishment. The cry ‘racha’, uttered in exasperation and anger, indicates that the rational power of the soul has lost out to the affective. Different interjections thus indicate different degrees of sin, as ‘fatue’ is uttered not just with anger but also with a certain level of intention to harm (12.24). Uttering this interjection indicates that the speaker has been overcome by their passions to the extent that they seek some sort of vengeance. This part of speech can, therefore, be used to classify various degrees of sin, or
assent to sin, within the soul. As it lacks full cognitive deliberation, full rational control, it is potentially dangerous; at least in a moral sense.

Later medieval grammarians and theologians explore this affective dimension, but do so by drawing more upon current understandings of the soul and its powers. Hugh of St Victor (d. 1141) offers this summary:

interiectio est pars orationis quae interiecta aliis partibus orationis animi tantum exprimit affectus voce incondita, quae ex natura magis quam institutione profecta videtur; unde communis fere omnibus gentibus inventitur.

(The interjection is a part of speech which, thrown between the other parts of speech, only expresses the affections of the soul with unelaborated sound, which seems to arise from nature rather than from culture; therefore it is found to be common among almost all people.)

While these comments encapsulate much prior discussion, and show a continuity of thought with those late classical texts mentioned above, there are some refinements. For Hugh the interjection is an unelaborated sound that at once lacks both cognitive and cultural deliberation. It is connected more with human nature and biology than with cultural endowment. Though interjections of various languages will differ in particular sound and form, they nevertheless share a common lack of order and rational deliberation. In this way, the interjection is posited as being closely linked to mankind’s animal nature. Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) reflects on this:

Et ideo uox datur aliis animalibus quorum natura usque ad hoc peruenit, quod sentiant suas delectationes et tristitias et hæc sibi inuicem signifi cant per aliquas naturales uoces, sicut leo per rugitum et canis per latratum; loco quorum nos habemus interiectiones.

(Thus voice is given to the other animals, whose nature attains the level where they sense their pleasures and pains, and they signify this to one another by means of certain natural sounds of the voice, as a lion by his roar and a dog by his bark; in the place of which we use interjections.)

While interjections are not animal sounds there is nevertheless a certain similarity. They share a lack of full deliberative reason, and are in this way irrational utterances born more out of pure affect than rational consideration. Their use is thus a clear sign that ‘the irrational soul of the speaker had prevailed over his rational’. This is the case because the interjection, in terms of its psycholinguistic structure, emerges more from the irrational soul and its powers than the rational soul. Roger Bacon (d. 1294), in his De signis, asserts that its emotive power is reflected in its structurally incomplete form. It is a special type of sign, one that signifies ‘per modum conceptus licet imperfecti, et per modum deliberationis imperfectae’ (‘in the manner of a concept, albeit, an imperfect one, and in the manner imperfect deliberation’). At first this may seem to contradict the idea that the interjection conveys affective states, as the term ‘conceptus’ is used. Yet Bacon provides further clarification and his thinking is much more grounded in the psychological operation of the mind.
As with the classical grammarians he notes that the interjection is an imperfect expression, and cannot signify in the same way verbs and nouns do. It requires those corresponding parts of speech to convey full signification. His *Communia naturalium* contains a step-by-step account of its cognitive formation:

Set secundum quod est interjeccio habet (gemitus) vocem absconditam et imperfectam et informem, quia imperfectus est conceptus, et imperfecta deliberacio, et affectus vincit conceptum, *unde dicuntur significare per modum affectus*, hoc est quia homo afficitur dolore, id est, dolet antequam concipiat dolorem, sive antequam moretur circa concepcionem, quia conceptus ejus transit cito in affectum, licet non subito sicut in vocibus quae omnitno significant naturaliter.

(But inasmuch as it is an interjection it has a vocal sound that is hidden and imperfect and unformed, because the concept is imperfect and the deliberation imperfect and the emotion overcomes the concept. Hence they are said to *signify in the manner of an emotion*, [and] this is because the man is afflicted with pain, i.e., he is in pain before he conceives the pain or before he delays with respect to the conception because its concept quickly transitions into an emotion, granted not suddenly as is the case of vocal sounds that signify completely naturally (emphasis mine).)\(^31\)

When grief is felt, the mind begins to conceive of that experience and tries to conceptually apprehend it. The potency of the emotion, however, is such that it overcomes this conceptual work. Instead, the mode of signifying proceeds affectively, and is dominated by the particular emotion. Grief is so powerful that it defies full conceptualization, and breaks down language and thought to an outpouring of a single utterance – a cry. Thus, while Bacon notes that the interjection does signify *per modum conceptus*, he asserts that it only does so in a very limited and incomplete way. More correctly it signifies *per modum affectus*. It is the part of speech that stands at the threshold between raw sensory movements of the soul, and conceptual apprehension in the rational soul. For Aquinas and Albertus Magnus, this irrational nature is cause for concern. It shows only that reason has lost out to an emotion and that the speaker is in thrall to his or her passions: the very hierarchy of the soul and its powers has been compromised; sin is the inevitable consequence. Both reassert the work of Augustine in his *Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount*, grading the degrees of sin that ‘racha’ and ‘fatue’ express. The second grade of sin belongs to ‘racha’ as it is an uncontrolled expression of anger; while ‘fatue’ is both affective and to some degree rational, in that it indicates the desire to censor and harm. As a result it is a sin of the third grade.\(^32\) For these schoolmen interjections are dangerous utterances that prove that the mind has been overwhelmed by emotion, and that the sovereign governance of reason has been compromised.

For other medieval writers, however, the interjection is far from negative and indeed may be of important liturgical and devotional use. Medieval theologians influenced by Bonaventure and Grosseteste’s thoughts on the importance of affectivity are more likely to view the interjection as a potential tool for religious life. Even in Augustine we find evidence that the interjection can be positive. In his *On Christian Doctrine*, he notes that *amen*, *alleluia*, and *hosanna* are interjections
that specifically express joy. Other terms commonly found in the liturgy of the medieval period, such as Deo gratias, Ite missa est, benedicamus Domino, were also held to be interjections. Thus, within this part of speech there is great potential not simply for harm but also for benefit. Roger Bacon is keenly aware of this, and throughout his Opus maius he makes it clear that interjections can have a beneficial use in religious observance:

Et cum in omni Missa dicimus Osanna, haec dictio est composita ex corrupto et integro. Nam ut Hieronymus dicit ad Damasum Papam, Os est idem quod Salvifica, et anna est indicatio deprecantis, secundum quod per aleph scribitur syllaba prima; unde significat idem quod, salva deprecor.

(In every Mass we say Osanna, a word composed of two elements one correct and one incorrect. For, as Jerome says to Pope Damasus, osi is the same as salvifica, and anna is the interjection of one praying, the first syllable in this case being written with an aleph. When the meaning is the same as salva deprecor [save, I pray].)

At the very threshold of the eucharist there lies the emotive force of the interjection. It is, in this instance, a word comprised of two others from another language, but nevertheless the grammatical rules apply. Bacon is after all involved in the idea of a universal grammar that applies equally to all languages. In this case the hymn is an integral part of the Eucharistic Prayer, and contains an interjection that is specifically connected to prayer itself – ‘anna’. This word, in accordance with Bacon’s grammatical theory, signifies per modum affectus and has the function of providing emotive force for the speaker and hearer. As a result, its usage is designed to ensure that both celebrant and congregation are emotionally synchronized at this key moment. It thus possesses great utility for encouraging a specific affective disposition to occur within the persons uttering and hearing it, ensuring correct intention:

Nam intentio necessaria est sacramento, ut theologi sciunt. Et intentionem praecedet intellectus et notitia rei faciendae. Et ideo per omnem modum expedire Ecclesiae ut sacerdotes et praelati omnia vocabula sacrificiorum et sacramentorum et consecrationum scirent recte proferre et intelligere.

(For intention is necessary to a sacrament, as theologians know. Understanding and knowledge of the thing to be done precede intention. And therefore in every way it would be expedient for the Church that her priests and prelates should know how correctly to pronounce and understand all the words of the Masses and the sacraments and consecrations.)

While Bacon speaks here of the poor linguistic education of some of the clergy and not of the interjection itself, he is nevertheless concerned with the power of words and their beneficial use in religious observance. As with all other parts of speech, the interjection is an extremely powerful instrument that must be used correctly. In this Bacon is unambiguous. As he writes in his Opus tertium, it is through words that mankind gains ‘et ideo cum verba proferuntur profunda cogitatione et magno desiderio, et recta intendione, et cum forti confidentia’ (‘profound cognition, great desire, just intent, and the strength of confidence’). Thus, his uniquely sophisticated account of the cognitive and psychological work
of the interjection, and his observation of its function in the liturgy, gesture towards its potential use in broader religious contexts. Given its strong affective force, the interjection is a natural means of aiding devotion and religious fervour. In the practice of advanced contemplation, as the Cloud of Unknowing makes clear, the subordination of reason to affect is a desirable occurrence. Moreover, the text is also acutely aware of the potential of language in the work of contemplation, and draws from these current debates and thoughts on the significatory power of language.

Language of fire

In Bonaventure’s (d. 1274) prologue to his Itinerarium mentis ad Deum, he makes it very clear how important powerful passion is to the work of contemplation:

Non enim dispositus est aliquo modo ad contemplationes divinas, quae ad mentales ducunt excessus, nisi cum Daniele sit vir desideriorum. Desideria autem in nobis inflammantur dupliciter, scilicet per clamorem orationis, quae rugire facit a gemitu cordis, et per fulgorem speculationis, qua mens ad radios lucis directissime et intensissime se convertit. Igitur ad gemitum orationis per Christum crucifixum, per cuius sanguinem purgamur a sordibus vitiorum, primum quidem lectorem invito.

(For no one is in any way disposed for divine contemplation that leads to mystical ecstasy unless like Daniel he is a man of desires. Such desires are enkindled in us in two ways: by an outcry of prayer that makes its call aloud in the groaning of our heart and by the flash of insight by which the mind turns most directly and intently toward the rays of light.

First, therefore, I invite the reader

to the groans of prayer
through Christ crucified,
through whose blood
we are cleansed from the filth of vice.39)

The requirements of contemplation are clear. Language and music, Psalms and cries, affect and articulation must coalesce into prayer – all focused and all focusing upon the soul’s striving for the Divine. It is far from gentle. Those cries and groans of prayer are utterances of intensity and extreme feeling. Affect is central to the union of God and the soul. There is no role here for rational consideration and detached observation, only blind and burning desire. It is a position that underpins much of the Cloud.40 From as early on as chapter 4, the importance of the psychology of love is made clear; particularly when the text provides a schematic analysis of the human soul:

o principal worching miȝt, þe whiche is clepid a knowable miȝt, & a-nȝþer principal worching miȝt, þe whiche is clepid a louyng miȝt: of þe whiche two miȝtæs, to þe first, þe whiche is a knowyng miȝt, God, þat is þe maker of hem, is euermore incomprehensible; & to þe second, þe whiche is þe louyng myȝt, in ilch one diuersly he is al comprehensible at þe fulle, in so mochel þat o louyng soule only in it-self, by vertewe of loue, schuld comprehend in it hym þat is sufficient
The soul consists of the two principal powers of knowing and loving; or rational and affective. Both are contrasted here and throughout the text in regard to their function of furthering the unity of God and the soul. The knowing might is, crucially, cast as useless in terms of its primary function: it can comprehend all things except God. The chief object of the contemplative’s desire is forever beyond the power of the knowing might. In contrast, the loving might has the unique ability to comprehend God. It has inbuilt within itself the potential for privileged and unitive access to the divine. This contrast is reiterated when the text discusses the anthropology of the soul. Dividing the soul into ‘reson & wille’, it notes that the rational power is forever compromised in this life due to the consequences of original sin. ‘Bot now it is so blendid wiþ þe original synne þat it may not kon worche þis werk bot þif it be illuminid by grace.’ Before the Fall the rational power could have performed this unitive work itself and naturally; now only illumination by grace could undo this. In much the same way the loving might could engage with God directly, as ‘þorow þe whiche we loue God, we desire God, & resten us wiþ ful likyng & consent eendli in God’. This power of the soul is the seat not simply of a burning desire for God, but also allows unitive engagement with him, offering the means and the place for him to cohabit within the soul. It too is damaged by original sin and may not carry out this important function ‘bot þif it be anointed wiþ grace’. In this respect the text is unambiguous: the knowing might can do nothing in the face of the divine.

The impotence of this power of the soul would seem to indicate that all language is similarly useless when it comes to contemplation – the ‘werk’ the text primarily addresses. However, this is is an imprecision. It would be more accurate to say that all rational language is useless. As mentioned earlier, there are specific parts of speech that operate not rationally or on a conceptual level, but rather irrationally on the purely affective level – the interjections. The Cloud gestures towards this point and the utility of interjections by its own subtle choice of language. The words chosen in the above passage, ‘comprehensible’ and ‘comprehende’, have a much wider semantic range during the period and mean not simply to understand, but also to grasp, fathom, apprehend, categorize, and – crucially – ‘to put into words’. To state that only the loving might can ‘comprehende’ God means far more than simple mental understanding. There is posited here a connection between God, the loving might of the soul, and words – specifically words that arise out of this affective power, that signify per modum affectus. Those groans and cries of prayer, monosyllabic, forceful, and affective, have a connection to God far greater than anything born out of rational syntactical constructions. They can aid in moving the soul towards God. Such a connection and utility is made more explicit soon after chapter 4, when the text notes that only a ‘naked entent directe vnto God, wiþ-outen any oþer cause þen him-self’ can effect the work of contemplation.
Intention is not unrelated to words but rather an integral part of them, and can be encapsulated within specific kinds of brief utterances. The monosyllabic is the defining structural feature here – a single sound, something free from syntactic relations, and unencumbered by synonymic, semantic, and connotative referents. The words extolled – GOD and LOVE – are not really synonyms in the sense of meaning; what they hold in common is their monosyllabic structure and affective nature. These two words are properly not nouns either, in the sense of referring to concrete instantiations of things. Even their own abstract meaning is eschewed here, as they are rendered as words that primarily ‘acordeþ wiþ þe werk of þe spirite’. They are words connected to the loving might of the soul, to the effusion of affect. What they mean is irrelevant; the only thing that is important about them is what they express: affective force and potency – pure intention. In this regard any such monosyllabic word can function in the same way; a fact emphasized by the text. The reader is advised to ‘cheese þee wheþer þou wilt, or anoþer as þe list: whiche þat þee likeþ best of ðo silable’ – syllabic length, not meaning or semantic range, is the only thing that is important. Such words ‘lappid & foulden’ intention – clothe and cover the raw ‘naked entent directe vnto God’ with the slightest and most humble form of linguistic dress. Yet, while slight, they are also supremely potent:

Dis worde schal be þi scheeld & þi spere, wheþer þou ridxest on pees or on werre. Wip þis worde þou schalt bete on þis cloude & þis derknes abouen þe. Wip þis word þou schalt smite doun al maner þouþt vnder þe cloude of foþeting; in so mochel þat þif any þouþt pres þoþ apon þe to ask þe þat þou woldest hauæ, answere him wip no mo worde bot wip þis o worde. & þif he profre þee of his grete clergie to expoune þee þat worde & to telle þee þe condicions of þat worde, sey him þat þou wilt hauæ it al hole, & not broken ne vndon. & þif þow wilt holde þee fast on þis purpos, sekir be þou he wil no while abide. 

Clearly these two words are not meant to be understood in terms of their normal referents: they may well exist as nouns, but the text stresses their unique status as interjections in the work of contemplation by stripping them of their normal semantic range of meaning. Aggressive force and potency, not tenderness or sentiment, are what they are associated with functionally. These prayer words are armaments to be used with all the force of weapons of war. The verbs directly associated with them in the passage convey this sense of them as tools to be used for attack: they function to ‘bete on þis cloude’ and ‘smite doun al maner þouþt’. Their target is nothing less than cognition itself, specifically the hermeneutic activity of semantics and meaning. As the text makes clear, imagination has run amok and must be constantly ‘refreynd’ in contemplative work. This power will ‘neuer sees, sleping or wakyng, for to portray dyuerse vnordeyn ymages
of bodely creatures; or elles sum fantasye, þe whiche is nouȝt elles bot a bodely conseyte of a goostly þing'. These prayer words function to focus and control, to corral and subdue this rebellious power of the soul. Such force is needed. So marred is cognition by the Fall that the mind will even try and interpret these very prayer words – to ‘expoune þee þat worde & to telle þee þe condicions of þat worde’: unrestrained semantic analysis, unlimited hermeneutic activity, is the enemy here.

To function correctly, the prayer words must be taken in their sense as interjections, as expressions of raw affect. For each prayer word the contemplative must ‘haue it al hole, & not broken ne vndon’. While at the beginning of this passage prayer words are endowed with a martial force, it is hermeneutic activity that now is rendered as disruptive and destructive; as a form of mental aggression. For these words to work, they must be kept as they are meant – as thin coverings for that raw and potent desire for God. They work on the linguistic level exactly as interjections do – as cries that express pure affect, not rational consideration or conceptualization. It is this which makes them effective in furthering the soul’s progress into God. As the text makes clear, these words are vessels of affect:

& whi peersiþ it heuen, þis litly schort preier of o litil silable? Sikirly for it is preyed wiþ a fulle spirite, in þe heiȝt & in þe depnes, in þe lengþe & in þe breed of his spirit þat preieþ it … þe hidous noise of þis crye be alweis herde & holpen of God.51

These words are full of, and emerge from, the spirit, from the passions of the soul. Their nature is wholly irrational, and not infl icted by reason or rational consideration. The anguished cry to God thus contains an irresistible emotive force, one that can garner God’s attention better than anything else. Such words are cries of passion:

Se by ensaumple. He þat is þi deedly enmye, & þou here him so afraied þat he crye in þe heiȝt of his spirit þis litly worde FIIR, or þis worde OUTE: ʒiৎ, wiþ-outyn any beholdyng to hym for he is þin enmye, bot for pure pite in þin herte stirid & reisid wiþ þe doleffulness of þis crye, þou risist up – ʒe! poʃ it be about midwintirs niȝt – & helpist hym to slecke his fiir, or for to stylle hym & rest hym in his disese. A, Lorde! siþen a man may be maad so merciful in grace, to haue so moche mercy & so moche pite of his enmye, not aȝenstonding his enimite, what pite & what mercy schal God haue þan of a goostly crye in soule, maad & wrouȝt in þe heiȝt & þe depnes, þe lengþe & þe breed of his spirit, þe whiche haþ al by kynde, þat man haþ by grace, & moche more? Sekirly wiþ-outyn comparison moche more mercy wil he haue; siþen so is þat þat þing þat is so had by kynde is nerer to iche a þing þat þa þat þat þe whiche is had by grace.52

These words signify per modern affectus – are cries that lack real referents, are pure vessels of affect. While FIIR could be seen as a nominative, it is not interpreted as such in this example. Not only does the cry of FIIR emerge from fear – the ‘þe heiȝt of his spirit’ – but also is only understood emotionally as well. The man who hears the cry of FIIR, does not respond to this word conceptually
but instead has ‘pure pite in þin herte stirid & reisid wiþ þe dolefulness of þis crie’. The presence or nature of the fire is, curiously, never mentioned here; the only details that are given are those which reflect upon and clarify the emotional register of the cry itself – the adjectives ‘afraied’, ‘dolefulness’, ‘pite’. The word is both expressive and evocative, making the hearer feel specific emotional states and compelling him into action. The expressive force of this cry is emphasized by the text, as it is sufficient to make a bitter enemy, even in unpleasant circumstances, get up and help.53

The words are seen as capable of creating relationships. Just as the man is compelled by sheer pity into helping another by the cry, so too will it establish an emotional connection between God and the soul. They are powerful utterances, but they are also natural ones – ‘þe whiche haþ al by kynde’. The text posits a connection between human psychology and biology, one also present in grammatical and theological discussions of the interjection and its expressive force and signifying nature. They are, like animal sounds, potent eruptions of pure affect common to all. The idea that they emerged from the human affective powers is further reinforced when the text discusses what prayer in this manner actually is. It states that ‘preyer in it-self properly is not elles bot a deuoute entent directe vnto God, for getyng of goodes & remowyng of yuelles’.54 It is seen as pure intention, pure affect, and mirrors the basic structural division of the soul’s affective power. As theologians such as John of La Rochelle note, the affective part of the soul is divided into the irascible and concupiscible powers. These powers compel us to either move away from something though fear and revulsion, or towards something through desire and attraction. The discussion of how these prayer words function makes this apparent:55

& þan, siþen it so is þat alle yuelles ben comprehendid in synne, ouþer by cause or by being, lat us þerefore, wene þat wyl ententifl þe preie for remowyng of yuelles, ouþer sey or þin or mene nouȝt elles, no mo words, bot þis lityl worde SYNNE. & þif we wil ententifl þe preie for getyng of goodes, lat us cri þe, ouþer wiþ worde or wiþ þouȝt or wiþ desire, nouȝt elles, ne no mo wordes, bot þis worde GOD. For whi in God ben alle goodes, boþe by cause & by beyng.56

Each prayer word expresses and exemplifies a specific affective disposition, and is the most basic linguistic covering of the pure affect of either desire or revulsion. SYNNE is a cry of horror and repugnance, an articulation and expression per modum affectus of the primary nature of the irascible power of the soul. In the same way GOD is the cry of desire, the barest articulation of the primary nature of the concupiscible power. The text is insistent that their referential range is ultimately erased. It cautions ‘stody þou not for no words, for so schuldest þou neuer come to þi purpos ne to þis werk’.57 These words are to be taken only as interjections; what they may conceptually refer to is rendered as irrelevant. The reader must ‘haue no merueile whi I sette þees words forby alle oþer’, because they ‘so fully comprehending in hem alles goodes & alles yuelles’.58 Referential erasure occurs not by contraction but rather massive expansion of each word’s semantic range: SYNNE refers to all evils; GOD all
goods. Each word becomes so semantically wide that it becomes conceptually meaningless. Such expansion effectively results in conceptual ‘white noise’. By encompassing all goods and all evils, each word becomes so saturated with referents that they lose any fixed point of reference and so, paradoxically, break free from syntactic and semantic confines. Connotatively and denotationally, these words refer to nothing beyond the emotional dimension. It is a point repeatedly emphasized by the text. Discussing SYNNE, it advises that the reader must see the word as conceptually empty:

[F]ille þi spirit wiþ þe goostly bemenyng of þis worde SYNNE, & wiþ-outyn any specyal beholdyng vnto any kynde of synne, wheþer it be venial or deedly: pryde, wræþpe, or enuye, couetyse, sleþþ, glotenie or lecherye. What þar reche in contemplatius what synne þat it be, or how mochel a synne þat it be? For alle synne hem pynkyþ – I mene for þe tyme of þis werk – iliche greet in hem-self, when þe leest synne departeþ hem fro God, & letteþ hem of here goostly pees.59

This form of prayer has little to do with the examination of conscience, or with enquiry into the nature of sin. All rational thought and conceptual signification of the word, and its applicability to the speaker, must be avoided here. It refers to all sin, encompassing all its instances and manifestations. Its range is limitless and goes beyond the categorizing and compartmentalizing taxonomies of sin. Standard catechetical frameworks such as the seven deadly sins are eschewed here, their conceptualizing nature unsuited to this work. All that is stressed about sin as a concept is its ability to impede the contemplative in this striving for God. Nothing is mentioned about what sins hinder the soul and in what ways, only the bare fact that any and all sin does so. Instead, the reader must proceed not conceptually but affectively:

[F]ele synne a lumpe, þou wost neuer what, bot none oþer þing þan þi-self. & crye þan goostly euer upon one: ‘Synne, synne, synne; oute, oute, oute!’… For it is best whan it is in pure spirit … when for habundanunce of spiryt it brestþ up into worde, so þat þe body & þe soule ben boþe fillid wiþ sorow & kumbryng or synee.60

The word is not to be rationally considered, but felt directly. Meaning itself is eschewed here for affective reach: the only thing said here of the word SYNNE is that it is an expression of pure spirit, pure affect. It signifies only sorrow. The repeated usage of the word is mantra-like and interjectional, each cry being a successive increase in affective force and potency, with a corresponding decrease of the word’s connotative and denotative range. We have here not a laying of meaning but of affect, the thick build up of emotional charge. This is reinforced by the use of OUTE, another interjection and prayer word that signifies the same sorrow for sin. Both words function interchangeably. The text emphasizes the point that these prayer words ought only to be an ‘habundanunce of spiryt’ that ‘brestþ up into worde’. Language and emotion come together in a single utterance, a single cry. The same advice is given of the word GOD. The reader must not perform any interpretative activity on it, should not mentally explore ‘wheþer þei be good, betir, or alþer best … meeknes of charite, pacynce or...
abstynence, hope, feiþ, or sobirnes, chastite, or wilful pouerte’. Each word is to be taken as it is intended, as an expression of the soul’s desire for God and sorrow for sin. They are, like interjections, the most basic form of affective expression:

& forþi þat euer þe whiles þou leuyst in þis wrechid liif, þee behoueþ alweys fele in som partye þis foule stynkyng lump of synne, as it were onyd & congelid with þe substaunce of þi beyng, þerefore schalt þou chaungabely mene þees two wordes – SYNNE & GOD; wip þis general knowyng: þat & þou haddest God, þen schuldest þou lacke synne, & miȝtest þou lacke synne, þen schuldest þou haue God.

All linguistic artifice and semantic reference is stripped away by these words. Each is an expression of the irascible or concupiscible dispositions within the soul, and as such each fuses language with ontology. Together they signify and express the very ground of the soul’s being, both in terms of its fundamental damage by sin and its ultimate divine origin and destiny. Such words, full of affective yearning and force, are true manifestations of prayer. To use them is to ‘preie in þe heiȝt & þe depnes, þe lenghe & þe brede of oure spirit. & þat not in many wordes, bot in a lityl worde of o silable’. They focus and express affect, and are the very groans of prayer which Bonaventure asserts are so crucial to the soul’s journey into God. The practice of prayer is thus not removed from language, but rather the best part of it.

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NOTES

1 The Cloud of Unknowing, ed. Phyllis Hodgson, EETS, os 218 (London, 1944), p. 71, line 11, and pp. 72f., lines 24f. Hereafter Cloud. Many thanks are owed to Professor Vincent Gillespie, Professor Denis Renevey, Professor John C Hirsh, and Sr Maggie Ross, who all commented on an earlier version of this article. Also, thanks are due to the anonymous readers of this article for their suggestions for improvement. I would also like to thank The Leverhulme Trust for funding my research.

2 Cloud, p. 71, line 18, and p. 71, line 14.

3 Ibid., p. 71, line 17, and p. 71, lines 19f.

4 Ibid., p. 73, line 3.

5 Ibid., p. 71, lines 18f.

6 Ibid., p. 74, lines 5–7.

7 Ibid., p. 75, lines 3f.

8 Ibid., p. 74, lines 8–13.


11 Vincent Gillespie, ‘Postcards from the edge: interpreting the ineffable in the Middle English mystics’, in Interpretation Medieval and Modern: The J. A. W. Bennett Memorial Lectures,
the art of grammar to medieval literary instruction with specific reference to medieval century England’, England in his ‘Literary implications of instruction in the verbal arts in fourteenth-century a special form of language. and we see a sense here that the prayer words are, if not a special category, then at least descriptions of the mystical state of jubilation. This is a very interesting observation, that in certain texts the words aspire to their own erasure and are more frequent in resist interpretation’ (p. vol. XXX, ed. Almut Mutzenbecher (Turnhout, 2001), pp. 157–65 (p. 155)). Gillespie notes this specifically of the Cloud and its prayer words, making the case that the word aims ‘to escape from referentiality and from the chains of signification of earthly discourse. It resists interpretation’ (p. 155). He widens this to include other religious writing, asserting that in certain texts the words aspire to their own erasure and are more frequent in descriptions of the mystical state of jubilation. This is a very interesting observation, and we see a sense here that the prayer words are, if not a special category, then at least a special form of language.


19 For the wider historical context of this, and the status of the poet as the poeta theologus, see Vincent Gillespie, ‘From the twelfth century to c.1450’, in The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism, II, 145–236 (pp. 233f.). Also useful is Lois Ebin, Illuminator, Makar, Vates: Visions of Poetry in the Fifteenth Century (Lincoln, Nebr., 1988).


23 OED, s.v. ‘interjection’, v.

24 Matthew v.22.


28 Medieval grammarians gave considerable attention to this distinction, as interjections are like animal noises but ultimately are not animal sounds in terms of their cognitive nature. The key difference is that animal sounds – which human beings can emit in extreme circumstances due to their shared instinctual nature with animals – do not proceed with full cognitive deliberation and so do not signify ‘at pleasure’ but rather
immediately. Roger Bacon clarifies that animal noises are vocal sounds that arise ‘without the deliberation of reason and without a choice of the will, neither at our pleasure nor for a purpose, but rather suddenly, with no noticeable time lag, by a kind of natural instinct and impulse … such are the sounds of brutes’ (On Signs: Opus maius, Part 3, Chapter 2). Medieval Sources in Translation 54, ed. and trans. Thomas S. Maloney (Toronto, 2013), 1.8, p. 40). For an overview of medieval discussions of the interjection see Irène Rosier Catach’s ‘Discussions médiévales sur l’expression des actus signifìcatis’, in Le Sujet des émotions au Moyen Âge, ed. Piroska Nagy and Damien Boquet (Beauchesne, 2009), pp. 201–23.


Roger Bacon, ‘An unedited part of Roger Bacon’s Opus maius: De signis’, Traditio, 34 (1978), pp. 75–136 (para. 10). A full and superb translation has recently been published, see Bacon, On Signs, 1.10, p. 41.


St Augustine, De doctrina christiana, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina, vol. XXXII (Turnhout, 1962), 2.9–12, p. 42.

For further comments see Kelly, Mirror of Grammar, p. 137.


Vincent Gillespie also explores the *Cloud*s engagement with the powers of the soul, but with specific reference to medieval hermeneutics and the importance of language and effacement; see his ‘Postcards from the edge’, pp. 137–65. Also important is the work of René Tixier, “‘Dis louely blinde werk’: contemplation in *The Cloud of Unknowing* and related treatises”, in *Mysticism and Spirituality in Medieval England*, ed. William F. Pollard and Robert Boehing (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 107–58.

The Carthusian monk Richard Methley remarks on this passage his *Schola amoris languidi* (c.1481), and sees the use of these words as eruptions of pure affection. See Katherine Zieman, ‘Monasticism and the public contemplative in late medieval England: Richard Methley and his spiritual formation’, *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 42/3 (2012), 699–724 (p. 716).

John of La Rochelle, *Summa de anima*, ed. J. G. Bougerol (Paris, 1993), II, 107, lines 50–91 and his *Tractatus de divisione multiplici potentiarum animae*, ed. P Michaud-Quantin (Paris, 1964), pp. 143, 205. Such a distinction can be traced back to Plato, but the wider schematization of specific passions into either the irascible or concupiscible occurs with
John of La Rochelle and can be seen at work in Aquinas. See Claire Elizabeth McIlroy, *English Prose Treatises of Richard Rolle* (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 85 ff. n. 86.

56 *Cloud*, p. 77, lines 6–13.

57 Ibid., p. 77, lines 18–20. Tixier also notes the potency of these prayer words, likening them to ‘sparks leaping from a fire’; though he connects them with the expression of the soul’s aspirations towards God (p. 121).

58 Ibid., p. 77, lines 14–16.

59 Ibid., p. 78, lines 9–16. A very similar passage occurs in the companion text to the *Cloud*, the *Book of Privy Counselling*: ‘For þer is no name, ne felyng ne beholdyng more, ne so moche, acordyng vnto euer-lastynges, þe whiche is God, as is þat þe whiche may be had, seen & felt in þe blinde & þe louely beholding of þis worde IS. For ʒif þou sey “Good” or “Faire Lorde”, or “Swete”, “Merciful”, or “Riʒtwise”, “Wise” or “Alwitty”, “Miʒti” or “Almiʒti”, “Witte” or “Wisdome”, “Miʒte” or “Strengthe”, “Loue” or “Charite”, or what oþer soche þing þat þou sey of God: al it is hid & enstorid in þis litil worde IS. For þat same is to him only to be, þat is alle þees for to be. & ʒif þou þut to an hundrid þousand soche sweet wordes as ben þees – good, faire, & alle þees oþer – ʒit ʒedest you not fro þis worde IS’. *The Book of Privy Counselling*, ed. Phyllis Hodgson, EETS, OS 218 (London, 1944), p. 143, lines 19–29.

60 *Cloud*, p. 78, lines 17–24.

61 Ibid., p. 79, lines 2–6.

62 Ibid., p. 79, lines 13–19.

63 Ibid., p. 76, lines 19–22.
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