

Teaching through Charite

The Role of Confession in Augustine and Langland

Randy Rude

The difficulties of reading a work like William Langland's *Vision of Piers the Plowman* go beyond historical distance, textual disagreement, sequence of manuscripts, and language. Despite the burgeoning field of scholars captivated by the speculation the text in those directions, one of the primary difficulties involves ethical interpretation. Written in an age of didacticism, when, as Chaucer explained of his *Canterbury Tales*, «For oure book seith, `Al that is written is written for oure doctrine,' and that is myn entente,» it is fit and meet that this element of the work not be ignored (CT X.1083). The poem brings up more questions than it answers, and demands persistent study for understanding. At the same time, though, its message («be Charitable» - in the fullest sense) is rather dear. Admittedly, this injunction is not revolutionary. Yet, what we see is that for some one to carry this charge through, to live in `caritas,' would be revolutionary. Such a radical shift, the poem suggests, is not to be accomplished on a broad or sweeping basis, is not to involve large groups of people. As John Lawlor pointed out in his study of the poem, Langland's «whole emphasis is upon the individual's application of the truth to himself. True reform thus begins at home; there is no need to externalize the search» (1962, p. 46). In this paper I would like to look at the apparent paradox of caritas, of Charite, which is based on the inward feeling of an individual directed outward toward all (and which is dead without works). Is it that one who has caritas acts upon it? Or is it that one who acts has caritas? I would like to look closer at what Charite means in the context of teaching, and will do so by focusing primarily upon Will the Dreamer's encounter with Dame Study in the middle of Langland's alliterative poem.¹

The Vision of Piers Plowman is a type of writing known as a «dream-vision,» somewhat like Dante's Comedy. Instead of a journey through Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory, though, Langland's vision focuses upon 14th century England and the «Fair feeld ful of folk» described in the poem's Prologue. From the conventional opening, setting us up for `wanders,' the Dreamer consistently comes across various characters (much like his contemporary Chaucer's pilgrims) as well as numerous symbolic-allegorical figures such as Dame Study, Reason, Ymaginatif, Patience, Anima, and so forth. The first such figure the Dreamer meets is Holi Church (who he tellingly doesn't recognize), and it is this meeting which propels him on his pursuit of Truth.

There are three primary manuscript versions in which *Piers Plowman* exists, known as the A, B, and C texts. The version I shall be discussing is the B-text, which is divided into a prologue and twenty Passuses («parts,» or chapters). We can more broadly divide the work into two major parts. The first part consists of Langland's vision of the world, from the vision of the world of Mede (which is to say, of reward or wealth) to a sermon by Reason, thence to repentance and confession, and finally to the appearance of Piers the Ploughman himself, who sets the world to work. The second part consists of the dreamer's pursuit of Do-Well, Do-Better, and Do-Best, a triad that stands for the active, contemplative, and prelatival lives respectively. This second part moves from talk with the figures Study, Learning, and Imagination to discourses with Haukyn the Active Man, and ultimately, to the founding and dissolution of the Holy Church. Thus the vision comes full circle; with the collapse of this society we are back where we started, in the «Fair feeld ful of folk» where Lady Mede holds sway. The Passus I shall focus upon is the tenth one, where the Dreamer encounters Dame Study and Learning. This part of the poem is at the center of the work, literally and metaphorically.

After his encounter with Piers, which runs from Passus V through Passus VII the Dreamer sets off on the search for Do-well. This leads him to Thought, who tells the Dreamer that Do-well exists in a trinity with Do-better and Do-best, and who provides correct but unsatisfactory definitions of each. Thought and the Dreamer then proceed to the home of Wit (Intelligence) and Study. Living up to his name, Wit discourses at length about Do-well, Do-better, and Do-best, all the while getting caught up in a digression about the flesh, marriage, and giving to the poor. At last Wit returns to the question at hand, telling the Dreamer, «Do-well...is to do as the Law requires. Do-better is to love both friend and foe. But to provide and care for, heal and help young and old alike, that, believe me, is Do-best of all. And Do-well is to fear God; Do-better is to suffer; and Do-best springs from both the others»² (Goodridge translation, 1959, p. 111). Dame Study reproves her husband for teaching the Dreamer, and rails against showy knowledge and vain speculation. The Dreamer asks her pardon, after which Study points him in the direction of Learning and Scripture, whose discourse largely expands upon what Study has said.

Before I fully discuss the Dreamer's encounter with Wit and Study, I would like to go back to an occurrence in the fifth Passus. In this Passus, personified Reason gives a sermon that has as its main theme divine retribution for sins. This sermon leads to the repentance and confession of the Seven Deadly Sins in a sort of catalogue that Spenser was certainly aware of. Now, what struck me about this sermon was not the theme itself, but rather, why Reason provided the sermon, and why it is Reason which leads to confession. I was dumbstruck until I remembered a somewhat similar scene in St. Augustine's *Soliloquia*³ in which Augustine has a 'dialogue' with personified Reason: «for many days I had been earnestly seeking myself, and my good, and what evil was to be shunned. Suddenly someone spoke to me... Behold, suppose that you have discovered something. To what will you entrust it, so that you might proceed to other things?» (Meagher p. 33; *Soliloquia*, 1.1.1). After perusing this passage, it did not then seem quite so odd that Reason pushed Will to confess. Langland was likely familiar with this passage, or at least this tradition of self-analysis (or rebuke) given the influence of St. 'Austyn', as Augustine was known in Medieval England⁴ Starting here with Reason and self-analysis, I'd like to discuss a little linguistic difference that is not (so far as I know) often discussed and which has some bearing on my present discussion of Study, Confession, and Charite.

It is obvious that 'knowledge' and 'acknowledge' are related words, albeit in this form the former is a noun, and the latter a verb. What does it mean, though, to have 'knowledge'? We often hear it said that people are «in the know,» and it is often admitted, «she really knows what she's talking about,» or even, «I know when Pearl Harbor was attacked.» In just these few examples of usage, we can see at work the two basic types of the verb «to know» that we find in Old and Middle English. In Old English, the two terms for such knowing are 'cunnan' (to give the sense of familiarity with) and 'witan' (which is more like knowledge of facts). In Middle English, we have 'kunne' (familiarity) and 'wite(n)' (knowledge). It would seem that the primary distinction being drawn by these two words for knowing is between experiential and authority-based knowledge.

So what, then, does it mean 'to acknowledge'? It involves more than simply speaking in the affirmative as when we admit, «Yes, this is the case.» For example, we might acknowledge a homeless beggar; Socrates acknowledged the limits of his knowledge; or, perhaps, we find that a drunk driver acknowledged his victim's family, and so on. In each of these cases, something more than strict 'factuality' or familiarity - something beyond 'kunne' or 'wite' - is being claimed. The word does not fit snugly within merely one or the other of our types of knowing. Indeed, in each of these cases there is a level of recognition that is beyond objective reality; i.e., there is more to it than meets the eye or ear. For each usage, someone admits something that was already known (in the 'wite' sense of the word) to be true, but left hidden or ignored. It seems fairly reasonable to me that you will not (though perhaps you can) acknowledge something without *knowing* in **both** of these two senses of the word. And since knowledge comes from two main sources, experience and learning, then Study ideally leads to acknowledgement, i.e., confession.

Most error (or sin) that occurs, occurs knowingly - it is not for lack of knowledge that one sins, but rather, lack of acknowledgement. This is why, in Langland's *Vision of Piers Plowman*, the friars and clergy are taken to task so harshly - such people know and sin and yet are supposed to lead, to teach, to instruct (kenne) the laity. Knowledge derived from Study is not enough. What we come to find as the Dreamer moves along is that study without confession, or knowledge without wisdom, would be dead.

As I hope I have made clear, moving toward acknowledgement (or, confession) is synonymous with Augustine's description of facing God. In *Piers*, what occurs when studying is that the Dreamer learns in order to acknowledge the Truth. I'd suggest that Dame Study could be understood as similar to how Augustine describes the voice of God in *De libero arbitrio*:

*Truly there is one who is everywhere present, and who, in many ways, through the creation which serves him as its lord, calls those who have turned away, teaches those who believe, encourages those who hope, exhorts those who love, assists those who strive, and listens to those who pray. You are not held to blame for ignorance which you have never willed; but you are held to blame for neglecting to seek out that of which you are ignorant. There is no blame in not binding up one's wounded **members; but there** is blame in despising one who is willing to heal them. (Meagher p.51; *De libero arbitrio*, 3.19.53)*

Dame Study, by rebuking the Dreamer for his apparent failings, puts him on the path to 'Charite' by reminding him of the demands of Love. In the world of the poem, 'Charite' can and does serve our (selfish) interests on earth in a limited way, but more importantly stands to serve our greater interest after death.

‘What could be of more use than eternal salvation?’ seems an obvious rhetorical question at the back of *Piers Plowman*. Very little, all would say, though the fact is rarely acknowledged in the unfolding action of the book. During Study’s discourse with the Dreamer in Passus X, she explains, «Theology has always caused me a lot of trouble. The more I ponder and delve into it, the darker and mistier it seems to me to be. It is certainly no science for subtle invention, and without love it would be no good at all»⁵ (p. 117). Knowledge must be paired with love in order to be useful. But what does it mean to seek or possess knowledge with love? And what might this injunction mean for teachers, those of us who seem to exist in some nether-realm between the active and contemplative lives?

The pursuit of knowledge, of knowing, is in large part a self-interested, internalized process. We seek to know those things that both interest us and are applicable to our particular problems. Through learning, we seek to understand ourselves and the world simultaneously. The . pursuit of knowledge, of ‘wite’ and ‘kunne’, falls somewhere between the contemplative and active life. So where does this leave us? In his book *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine*, Etienne Gilson explains that

The active life means movement, work, exertion, conflict. It is carried on amid the things of this world and strives to achieve a purpose which can be fully realized only in the world to come. The contemplative life is the recompense for the exertion of the active life, the guerdon won in its conflict. (1960, p. 118)

While pursuing knowledge, then, we are somewhere between work for momentary gain (i.e., the world of Mede) and work toward what is eternal and foundational (Truth).

This does not mean that the active life is necessarily worse, for we might «Do well» like Piers Plowman, who is a servant to truth. Do poorly, though, and we are like Haukyn the ‘active man’ who Will meets in Passus XIII, providing one of the saddest but strongest depictions of a type, or allegoric figure in the poem. Haukyn is dressed like a minstrel, but is really a baker (a maker of wafers), for he admits himself that he «cannot sing ballads, or make vulgar noises or play the fiddle at feasts»⁶ (p. 158). Haukyn is certainly not idle, but he has let his coat (which is to say, his soul) get torn, tattered, and sullied with sin. It is not for ignorance that Haukyn cheats his fellows, for he does so knowingly, describing his various schemes to Will in apparent glee. However, he has, like our poet at the beginning, failed to acknowledge the death that will take away his possessions, nor the justice which he shall face after death. Haukyn must be reminded by allegorical Patience about Do-well. We might get caught up in the pursuit of gain for gain’s sake like Haukyn, which is emblematic of living outside of ‘Charite’.

After meeting Haukyn, the reader may be tempted to say, «Okay, if the active life is so full of temptation and snares, I will try to lead the contemplative life, shut myself away from the world.» However, we find the same sorts of temptations in the life of learning, as well. Langland makes it clear that studying in the pursuit of truth is not sufficient in vacuo. The Dreamer seeks an explanation of the difference between Do-well, Do-better, and Do-best from Wit and his wife, Dame Study in Passus X. However, when it is Dame Study’s turn to speak, she chastises both her husband and the dreamer, telling Wit, «You deserve to go deaf for clouding men’s minds with these fine distinctions between Do-well and Do-better! What use is it this fellow here asking about them, unless he lives the life that belongs

to Do-well? I dare lay my life on it he'll never do better, though Do-best should drag him on by the scruff of his neck every day of his life! «⁷ (p. 116). Being engaged in learning, in study carries with it risks much like those that face the person in the world of Mede, as Study further warns the Dreamer that, «the gorges of these great theologians are often crammed with God's Name, but His mercy and His works are found among humble folk»⁸ (p. 114).

What we find in Dame Study's injunction is that knowledge without footing in the world leads thinkers down the wrong path, and the same sort of pride, envy, anger, and avarice that we find spotting Haukyn the Active Man's coat are encountered again in the life of learning. The reason Langland takes such people (typically friars and clergymen) to task so harshly is because they speak of virtues that they would be unwilling to enact - for instance, exhorting people to be kind to strangers while neglecting the charge themselves. This is a particular problem for Langland because such bad clergymen or friars (those people who are supposed to lead by word and example) mislead not only themselves but their parishioners.

Dame Study's rebuke of the gluttonously «bad» knowledge of the friars and clergy and their subsequent lack of teaching by both word and works applies well to our role as teachers. What do we as teachers ideally do? I would suggest we attempt to encourage the pursuit of knowledge in both of the senses mentioned earlier: to know through learning and to learn how to «read» experience. All learning is initially self-centered; we seek after what we want to know, whatever strikes our interest at a given time. This attitude is beneficial so long as it does not become, as Study warned us, a pursuit of knowing for the sake of knowing (which is to say, endless speculation), or lead us to covet knowledge as wealth, becoming intellectually arrogant. Augustine, in one of his sermons, tells his parishioners, «Submit yourselves ... to a thorough interrogation, turn out your innermost closets and cupboards. Take careful stock of how much you have of charity, and increase the stock you find ... if you want to acquire charity, look into yourself, and find yourself» (Sermons 34.7). As we saw before, confession can be considered synonymous with acknowledgement, and as a recognition of what we already know.

This recognizing, this re-thinking of what is known but ignored or hidden, is similar to 'caritas'. The act of confession or acknowledgement is both an internal evaluation of the person in relation to God, and an external evaluation of the person's relation to his/her fellows. These two relationships go hand-in-hand; «Charite» is an inward feeling that can only be validated when enacted through service to our fellow man. The pursuit of Charite, then, is much like the pursuit of knowledge; as was said earlier, we seek to know of ourselves and of our world. The person acting through «Charite» is acknowledging himself by acknowledging (confessing) his duty to his fellows. What we see in the final Passus of The Vision of Piers Plowman is the dissolution of Unity Holy Church because of one Friar, who «went about collecting money, and flattering those who came to him for confession. And Contrition had soon forgotten to weep for his sins ... So, in return for the comfort of an easy confessor, he gave up repentance»⁹ (p.256). What is lost through the easy confession the Friar provides is unity, which can only stand when there is sincere acknowledgement, which is to say, Charite.

Since Charite comes about through confession (acknowledgement), what it might mean to teach with the spirit of 'Charite' is to encourage our students to seek after knowledge with a mind to acknowledgement. In other words, to realize the great duty that is put upon those who would know to be wise. For us teachers,

instruction should be based upon more than instilling knowledge as facts, or structuring courses strictly as springboards to employment or because of audience-demand; our classes should take into account the effects and uses of knowledge, which is fundamentally the recognition of our individual service to our fellow human beings simply because they are fellow human beings. Teaching in this manner would be teaching by both word and example.

NOTES

1. For the sake of clarity, all internal quotations from *Piers* are from Goodridge's prose translation (1959). I have relegated the original Middle English to footnotes.

2. «Dowel, my fiend, is to doon as law techeth. / To love thi fend and thi foo - leve me, that is Dobet. / To yyven and to yemen bothe yonge and olde, / To Helen and to helpen, is Dobest of alle. / And thus Dowel is to drede God, and Dobet to suffer, / And so cometh Dobest of bothe.» (IX.200-05)

3. In citing Augustine, I have given both my source for the work and where it appears in Augustine.

4. We see the same sort of self-rebuke in Cicero's *Dream of Scipio*, Horace's *Satires*, Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, not to mention throughout Dante and Chaucer.

5. «Ac Theologie hath tened me ten score tymes: / The moore I muse therinne, the mystier it semeth, / And the depper I devyne, the derker me it thynketh. / It is no science, forsothe, for to sotle inne. A ful lethi thyng it were if that love [therinne] nere.» (X.182-86)

6. «Ac for I kan neither taboure ne trompe ne telle no gestes, / Farten ne fithelen at festes.» (XIII.231-32) 7. «And tho that useth these havylons to [a]blende mennes wittes / What is Dowel fro Dobet, now deaf mote he worthe- / Siththe he wilneth to wite whiche thei ben alle - / But if he lyve in the lif that longeth to Dowel; / For I dar ben his bolde borgh that Dobet wole he nevere, / Theigh Dobest drawe on hym day after oother.» (X.131-36)

8. «Clerkes and othere kynnes men carpen of God faste, / And have hym mucche in hire mouth, ac meene men in herte.» (X.69-70)

9. «Thus he gooth and gadereth, and gloseth there he shryveth - / Til Contrition hadde clene foryeten to crye and to wepe, / ... For confort of his confessour, contrition he lafte, / That is the soverayneste salve for alle kynne synnes.» (XX.369-73)

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Address correspondence to:

Randy Hude
1708 Highland Ave
Knoxville, TN 37916

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