

Anselmian Meditation: Imagination, Aporia, and Argument

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The claim of this paper is that there is a common form of reflection in Anselm's prayers and the Proslogion and Monologion. The practice of meditation, of rumination and introspection, is the crucial link between these works, mostly thought of as philosophy or speculative theology, and as opposed to Anselm's monastic practices of meditative prayer and thoughtful examination of self and scripture. The philosophical meditations are, like the prayers, the product of an imaginative project, in this case of reasoning as if he did not already believe and as if reason alone were his only resource. I show that Anselm's arguments are solutions to the aporetic paradoxes toward which he pushes reason. Like the sinner's realization of his own inability to extricate himself, grasping these paradoxes is for Anselm the only way of moving toward a sense of the metaphysically unique being of God.

The claim of this paper is that there is a common form of reflection in Anselm's prayers and the *Proslogion* and *Monologion*. Anselm applies the same meditative pattern whether he is composing a prayer to Mary Magdalene or focused on the nature of God. To that end, I would like to begin with Anselm's prayers and then turn to the *Monologion* and *Proslogion*. The common elements are those named in the title: imagination, aporia and argument.

I. The Prayers

a. Imagination and Emotion

Richard Southern first described Anselm's prayers as part of an "Anselmian revolution" in *St. Anselm and His Biographer* in 1963, and the claim of their distinctiveness has never been gainsaid, though there are, as Southern and others have found, historical precedents for elements of Anselm's prayers.¹ The prayers draw on traditions from the Carolingian period of private prayer and are, in important ways, an outgrowth of monastic and liturgical practices. Carolingian prayer collections in the growing practice of private devotion focused on elaborating the psalms and placing them in a Christian context, often with litanies of the saints. These litanies were expanded to include more details about the particular saints, their stories and special role, adding extended calls for aid and mercy beyond the simple, "have mercy on us."² Moreover, there was a growing trend toward the composition of prayers to Jesus and Mary.³

¹ Richard W. Southern, *St. Anselm and His Biographer: A Study of Monastic Life and Thought, 1059-c.1130* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 38-47.

² Benedicta Ward, "Introduction," Anselm of Aosta, *The Prayers and Meditations of St. Anselm*, trans. Benedicta Ward (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1973), 37-38. Some of these prayer books can be found in *Precum Libelli Quatuor Aevi Karolini*, edited by A. Wilmart (Rome: Ephemerides Liturgicae, 1940).

³ Ward, "Introduction," 38-40. Prayers addressed directly to Christ began to appear despite a ban on such prayers in the liturgy dating back to the Arian controversy in the fourth century and the Council of Carthage in 397, Ward notes.

Anselm's prayers, addressed to Jesus, Mary, and the saints, fit into these developing traditions; however, like his letters, they are clearly something new on the scene.⁴ They are much longer and much more elaborate versions of these earlier practices. What in other prayers amounted to a line or two added to the litany's plea to a saint to "pray for us" and "have mercy on us" becomes in Anselm 238 lines in the prayer to St. Paul and almost 200 in the longest prayer to Mary.⁵ Such a quantitative change becomes, especially as effected by Anselm, a qualitative one. The detailed exploration of the saint's experience and his own relationship to it is the fruit of extended meditation on the condition of both, and the result is an intense, emotional, and intimate form of prayer truly different in kind from its predecessors.

The aim of this extended and emotional exploration, as Anselm says in his prologue, is to stir up the mind to the love or fear of God or to self-examination, and the prayers are composed to model that desired result.⁶ In contrast to earlier Carolingian prayers, which tended to exhibit a certain emotional restraint, Anselm's prayers are full of anguished love, longing and despair.⁷ It is as if Anselm has taken the moment in the *Confessions* in which Augustine describes his tremendous struggle to convert, weeping and pulling his hair and clothes, and turned it into the dominant mood of his prayers.⁸ As it is in this moment in the *Confessions*, in Anselm's prayers the will is the problem, unable to rouse itself even to know its own sin. Benedicta Ward connects this kind of moment in the *Confessions* with the doctrine of compunction important not just to Augustine but also Gregory the Great. A wonderful passage from Gregory captures the mood of Anselm's prayers perfectly: "A man has compunction of one kind when he is shaken with fear at his own wickedness, and of another when he looks up to the joys of heaven and is strengthened with a kind of hope and security"; there is, thus, a "two-edged sword of compunction, piercing with terror and tenderness, fear and delight."⁹ However, though Anselm's aim is to evoke the kind of compunction described by Gregory, it is still Augustine to whom we can trace the way in which Anselm composes his prayers.¹⁰ Anselm takes up Augustine's technique of inner dialogue, exemplified in his early *Soliloquies*, a term Anselm clearly had in mind in the subtitle of the *Monologion* as "*id est soliloquium*."¹¹ Moreover, the kinds of exclamations and "successions of agitated questions" used in the *Confessions* are ubiquitous features of Anselm's prayers.¹² Thus, though the rhetoric of the prayers owes much to the psalms, Anselm emphasizes and exaggerates

⁴ See Richard W. Southern, *Saint Anselm: A Portrait in a Landscape* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 109-12.

⁵ The average length based on a glance-through is around 100 lines, with the seventeen-line prayer to God (no.1), the shortest by far.

⁶ Anselm, *Orationes*, Prol., *S. Anselmi Cantuariensis archiepiscopi Opera Omnia*, 5 vols. (Stuttgart: Friedrich Fromann Verlag, 1984, reprint, Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1940-1961, Seckau, 1938), vol. III, 3. (Hereafter referred to as "*Ora.*", with the number of the prayer and the volume, page and line numbers in Schmidt's edition).

⁷ Southern, *St. Anselm and His Biographer*, 34-47.

⁸ Augustine, *Confessiones* 8, 19-22. This and all works of Augustine are cited from *Corpus Augustinianum Gissense*, electronic edition, edited by Cornelius Mayer (Basel: Schwabe, 1995).

⁹ Ward, "Introduction," 55, quoting Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Job*, book 23; PL 76, 292. (Ward's translation.)

¹⁰ Thomas H. Bestul, "St. Augustine and the *Orationes sive Meditationes* of St. Anselm," *Anselm Studies* II (1988): 597-606.

¹¹ *Proslogion*, Prooem, S I, 94. Bestul, "*Orationes sive Meditationes*," 598.

¹² Bestul, "*Orationes sive Meditationes*," 599.

their anguish considerably, and the figures addressed and the stories they tell of the soul straining toward God are not from the Old Testament but the New. All Anselm's prayers are concerned explicitly with the Incarnation and its consequences, not more generically with God, as are, for example, the prayers in Boethius's *Consolation*. There is also in the prayers a tremendous elaboration and expansion both of emotional responses and of details of biblical stories designed to provoke those emotional responses. Anselm's prayers anticipate the twelfth century opening up of the emotional life in the flowering of romantic love; the "personal passion" and "emotional extravagance" expressed in them are picked up in later medieval spirituality.¹³

Besides naming his actual sins, Anselm describes his state in graphic and physical terms as decaying and wounded. In the prayer to St. Peter, using the metaphor of Peter as the good shepherd, he describes himself as the "sickly sheep" "groaning at the shepherd's feet" suffering from "full-grown ulcers, open wounds, progressive decay."¹⁴

In a prayer to Mary, Anselm throws himself between mother and son and leaps from one to the other, like a child moving from father to mother to find the one who be more lenient: "So the accused flees from the just God to the pious mother of the merciful God. The accused finds refuge from the mother he has offended in the pious son of the kind mother. He throws himself on both and between both. He casts himself among the pious mother and pious son."¹⁵

In the prayer to St. Paul Anselm arguably inaugurates the trope Carolyn Walker Bynum made famous: Jesus as mother. He begins by calling Paul "our great mother," because Christians are born and nursed in the faith by all the apostles but most by Paul, Anselm notes. Jesus is mother as well; he is like a mother hen, Anselm goes on, piling metaphor on metaphor, gathering her baby chicks under her wings. He asks Paul to lay his warm body atop Anselm's dead body and warm it back to life.¹⁶ The sinner's condition of exile is described in familial terms: he is an orphan; his soul is a widow having lost its one true love.¹⁷

The prayers not only ask for intimacy in the analogies to intimate human relationships, but they also seek an intimate connection with the events of Jesus' life. The prayer to Mary Magdalene imagines at great length her anguish as she searches at the empty tomb for the body of Christ. Anselm chides Jesus for leaving her in uncertainty, for inspiring a love she now feels is ignored; why does Jesus (and then later the angel at the tomb) ask the cause of her weeping when he well knows the answer?¹⁸ Anselm portrays her feelings as she seeks Jesus' body in the tomb without success, the body, which was to be her last comfort for the loss of his life, as the apex of her grief and the loss of all hope. The theme of the Magdalene in despair is not an ancient theme.

¹³ Brian Patrick McGuire, "Love, Friendship and Sex in the Eleventh Century: The Experience of Anselm," *Studia Theologica* 28 (1974): 150-52; Southern, *St. Anselm and His Biographer*, 47.

¹⁴ *Ora.* 9, S III, 31, 32-33.

¹⁵ *Ora.* 6, S III, 16, 45-47.

¹⁶ *Ora.* 10, S III, 39, 177-79; 182-84; 40, 197-98; 38, 137-41.

¹⁷ *Ora.* 2, S III, 9, 81-82.

¹⁸ *Ora.* 16, S III, 65-66, 37-50.

Traditionally she was either characterized by her hope and the constancy of her faith or chided (by Gregory the Great) for fleshly character of her love.¹⁹ But Anselm has turned her grief, her emotional response to Jesus into her virtue. He asks Christ to look at her: “see how she anxiously burns with desire for you, searching, questioning, but nowhere does that which she seeks appear. Whatever she sees displeases her since it is you alone she would behold and she sees you not.”²⁰ The hope is that Christ, once aware of her grief at his absence will answer her fervent desire with his presence. It is a very realistic picture of the anxious emotions of a woman for the man she loves. The portrait is intimate both in its close-up of Mary and her feelings and in the Christ it addresses and rebukes for playing with her very tender feelings. Anselm clearly identifies with Mary’s anxiety and her longing for Jesus, finding in her an expression of what he himself desires.

This is of a piece with the way in which Anselm attempts to imagine the concrete details of the lives and feelings of the other saints and Christ. He mourns the absence of one kind of intimacy, not having been physically present for the crucifixion of Christ or the martyrdom of St. Stephen, at the same time as he asks for a kind of spiritual but real intimacy in the future. “Why, O my soul,” he asks in the prayer to Christ, “were you not present to be pierced by a sword of keenest sorrow when you could not endure the wounding of the side of your Savior with a lance?” He believes by faith that the crucifixion took place as described but still “weep[s] over the hardship of exile” and “burns with desire for the glorious contemplation of your face.” He continues to imagine what it would have been like to experience the sorrows of Mary on that day, to have taken Jesus’ body down with Joseph of Arimathea, to have heard the angel’s announcement of the resurrection. He concludes, asking Jesus, “When will you restore me since I did not see the blessed incorruption of your flesh? Since I did not kiss the place of your wounds where the nails were fixed? Since I did not sprinkle tears of joy on the wounds that bear witness to your true body?”²¹

It is the imagination which provokes the emotions; Anselm imagines what the experience of the saints or Jesus might be, in turn spurring the reader to greater emotional responsiveness. In each of the prayers, the combination of imagination and emotion create a problem that the reader perhaps did not know existed or did not feel as urgent until the imagination adumbrated it. As we shall see, that problem is itself laid out in the most extreme terms—both as insoluble and as a matter of existential import.

b. Aporia

Anselm is not content simply to imagine the depths to which he has fallen; he also constructs his situation as a double bind, as an abyss from which he cannot even in principle extricate himself. Anselm cannot reveal his sins because they are “detestable” and would make

¹⁹ Saxer, “Anselme et la Madeleine,” 368.

²⁰ *Ora.* 16, S III, 66, 58-60.

²¹ *Ora.* 2, S III, 8, 42-43, 36-38, 56-62, 63-65.

him detested, but, on the other hand, sins cannot be forgiven unless they are confessed. “I am so defiled by horrible filth,” he writes to Mary, “that I am afraid you will turn your merciful face from (*avertatur*) me. So wasting away with despair I look to you for conversion (*conversionem*), for even my lips are mute to prayer.”²² In the prayer to St. John the Baptist, he further elaborates his hopeless situation. On the one hand, he must examine himself and know his own sinfulness since to remain self-deceived is the sure road to damnation. Yet this task cannot be accomplished for, he argues, any amount of self-examination would either be incomplete or unbearable: “If you could bear [looking at your sins], without a horror of grief, you would not be able to tolerate your toleration.”²³ So, examining himself wholly and truthfully is impossible since, from the horror of it, he would be unable to carry it out, and, even if he could, he would be horrified by his own ability to do it. But carrying it out incompletely or not at all is equally damning. “If I look at myself, it is an intolerable horror; if I do not look at myself, death is unavoidable.”²⁴

In all the prayers though in slightly different ways, the problem is imaginatively described in such a way that escape is impossible—the soul is in absolute need of salvation but unable to save itself.

c. Argument

The most persistent pattern of the prayers is that in the midst of this impossible situation, Anselm still finds room to make an “argument” that he can and must be saved. “Give me what you have made me want, grant that I may love you as you command as much as you deserve;” “perfect what you have started, give me what you have made me desire,” Anselm demands in the prayer to Christ.²⁵ Everything he has comes from God; what he has made of himself is, as he points out, precisely nothing.²⁶ Therefore, if he is going to get what he desires—his full love for and commitment to God, which God also commands him to give to God—God is going to have to give it to him in order that he give it back to God. Impossible, except that God’s infinite goodness and mercy makes it possible. In this way, Anselm manages to solve the problem of uniting himself as lowly sinner with lofty God without diminishing, but rather by increasing, the difference between sinner and savior. Because God is so much better and more powerful than his creation, his expansive nature can stretch far enough to save the lowliest and most undeserving sinner. Ultimately, the condition that makes the sinner’s union with God impossible, his lowliness and sinfulness, is exactly what makes the sinner’s salvation possible, for to think his salvation impossible is to place limits on the mercy and power of God. He can be saved, he contends, if divine mercy “not be deficient.”²⁷ Salvation, which the prayers begin by painting as impossible, ends by becoming both necessary and mysterious. The first prayer to Mary concludes, “If my misery is too great to be set free, will your mercy be less than is fitting?” In

²² *Ora.* 5, S III, 13, 14-16.

²³ *Ora.* 8, S III, 27, 48-49.

²⁴ *Ora.* 8, S III, 28, 57-58.

²⁵ *Ora.* 2, S III, 6-7, 16-17; 19-20.

²⁶ *Ora.* 8, S III, 26-27, 19-33.

²⁷ *Ora.* 6, S III, 17, 69-70.

one and the same moment she can save him and get rid of that which Anselm worries is so detestable it would make his salvation impossible: “Most merciful lady, heal my weakness, and you will take away the filth that offends you.”²⁸ In the second prayer to Mary, he states this logic in its starkest terms:

If it is—or rather because it is—that my sin is so great and my faith is so small, my love so tepid, my prayer so fatuous, and my satisfaction for sin so imperfect that I deserve neither the pardon for crimes nor the grace of salvation, this, this is the very ground for my supplication that in that which my merit does not suffice your mercy will not be lacking what is worthy of you.²⁹

As he addresses St. Stephen, he states the solution more directly: “Your merits are great, great Stephen, so that they can suffice for you and me, and if they are used for me, they are not diminished for you.”³⁰ To God through Peter, Anselm writes, “O God and you, his greatest apostle, is this misery of mine so enormous that it cannot be put up against the boundlessness of your mercy? If it can but it will not, what is the enormity of my guilt that exceeds the multitude of your mercies?”³¹

In ways we will see paralleled in Anselm’s speculative writings, in the prayers the moment of darkest despair is the moment of greatest light. Anselm writes, addressing the cross, “With what delight will I rejoice in you, through whom, for the servitude of hell I inherited, the kingdom of heaven is given. . . . Without you was a future which horrifies me, though it only last a moment, and through you I expect that I will rejoice in eternity.”³² This is the existential moment Anselm wants to produce over and over again in the prayers: self-examination which strips away every false sense of worth and shows the impossibility of self-actualization. Once there are no illusions left about any way of extricating oneself, at this moment the necessary possibility of salvation by grace becomes clear.

Every prayer, whether to Mary, Paul, Peter, John, or Benedict, has the same narrative and rhetorical structure. His relationship to the story is always the same. Anselm writes again and again in elaborate repetition what we could summarize in the language of a personal ad: lowly sinner seeks intimate union with lofty one through their mercy. Anselm’s prayers begin in and deepen the sense that salvation is impossible but conclude in the inevitable reunion of man and God.

Anselm’s spiritual task in the prayers is, first, to produce *discomfort* in order that one be moved beyond and outside any port which seems to offer shelter, at the same time as his goal is perfect union from this near total alienation. The intellectual goal in his speculative works is,

²⁸ *Ora.* 5, 14, S III, 43-44, 46-47.

²⁹ *Ora.* 6, S III, 17, 65-70.

³⁰ *Ora.* 13, S III, 52, 57-58.

³¹ *Ora.* 9, S III, 32, 72-74.

³² *Ora.* 4, S III, 12, 43-47.

mutatis mutandis the same: grasping a problem in its most difficult aspects, setting it out as insoluble, in order to make his way toward the perfect mirror of reality in language.

Intimacy and presence in the prayers are the equivalents of necessary reasons and indubitable proofs in the speculative works; both are the attempt to bring together extremes without remainder. In the latter, as we shall see, there is just as much a beginning in alienation—of word from thing, of knowledge from being—as there is of sinner from God in the prayers. And, moreover, we shall find that the arguments, like the prayers, even after their greatest success, finding necessity beyond contradiction and paradox, do not end in satisfied completion but in the continual and renewed desire for union not yet achieved.

II. The Speculative Meditations

a. Imagination

In both the *Prologion* and the *Monologion*, Anselm crafts a persona in whose voice he writes in both works, a voice not exactly the same as his own. In the *Monologion* preface, Anselm writes, “whatever things I say here are put forward in the person (*sub persona*) by thinking alone (*sola cogitatione*) disputing with himself and investigating that which he had previously not considered, just as I knew those whose requests I tried to comply with wanted.”³³ In a strikingly similar way, Anselm describes the *Proslogion* as written “in the persona (*sub persona*) of one endeavoring to raise his mind to the contemplation of God and seeking to understand what he believes.”³⁴ This description of the persona under which Anselm writes the *Monologion* comes after a defense of the way the work talks about the Trinity as three substances (protesting that this claim is neither novel nor untrue) and before his plea to have his preface included in all versions of the work.³⁵ He asks that the preface be included so that readers will understand the intent (*intentione*) and manner (*modo*) of the discussion and, thus, be less likely to judge it rashly.³⁶

The crafting of a persona who undertakes these questions under these constraints is analogous to the strategy we have seen in the meditative prayers. Just as Anselm put himself in the position of Mary Magdalene and saw Jesus as mother in the prayers, here he puts himself in the position of one who has not considered the divine nature or who is attempting to approach the divine nature from below, assuming only the attempt not any particular content or

³³ Anselm, *Monologion*, Prol., S I, 8, 18-20. (The *Monologion* and *Proslogion* are cited from Schmidt’s edition of Anselm’s *Opera Omnia*. For full bibliographical citation, see above n. 6.)

³⁴ *Proslogion*, Prooem., S I, 93, 21-94, 2.

³⁵ Anselm is defending the claim he makes in the text, *Monologion* 79, S I, 86, 14. See my discussion of this passage below. Augustine makes the same claim in *De trinitate* VII, 4, 7; cf. VIII, Prooem. The claim is also made by Boethius in *Contra Eutychen et Nestorium*, in *The Theological Tractates and The Consolation of Philosophy*, translated by H. F. Stewart, E. K. Rand, and S. J. Tester, Loeb Classical Library 74 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973), 90.

³⁶ *Monologion*, Prol., S I, 8, 10-18; 21-26.

background. Both personas are of somewhat naïve beginners as Anselm tries, by taking an unexpected perspective, to invigorate and enliven the meditation, making fresh insight possible.

There is a formal continuity between the *Monologion*, *Proslogion*, and Anselm's earlier work; he thinks of them all as *meditationes*. The prayers, sometimes with the short pieces we now call meditations and sometimes on their own, circulated under various titles, described both by Anselm and in manuscripts as prayers, meditations, and both, that is, *orationes sive meditationes*.³⁷ In his preface to the *Monologion* Anselm refers to the work as having the form of meditation and repeats this in the *Proslogion* preface.³⁸ The practice of meditation, of rumination and introspection, is the crucial link between these works, mostly thought of as philosophy or speculative theology, and Anselm's monastic practices of meditative prayer and of the Benedictine rule's emphasis on thoughtful examination of self and scripture.

What commentators have focused on is the claim to proceed *sola ratione*, but it is equally important to see that Anselm's exercise of reason is at the same time an exercise that is, though in the modern not medieval sense, *imaginative*. Anselm imagines himself in the position of someone else, feeling and reasoning as he thinks they would. This imaginative act creates the odyssey of reason from which these two works begin. This exercise has something in common with the simplest and more characteristic product of the imagination: metaphor. And as in metaphor, what Anselm aims to produce is a fresh insight with an unexpected combination. The vehicle is the means—reason and clear and simple argument—and the tenor, the end—knowledge of God. Anselm does not join grammatical, dialectical training and *lectio divina*, as becomes common in the next century, by using dialectical and grammatical arguments to interpret scriptural passages or to mediate conflicts between authorities. Instead, he uses the tools of dialectic to reach toward the basic truths about the divine substance taking on the voice of an imagined persona.³⁹

When we think of these exercises, in the context of meditative practice and monastic conversation, as acts of imaginative reflection, we can see that they are less like attempts to confront skeptical doubt than attempts to meditate the truths of faith in a new way. As meditations they aim to display the ground and significance of what he believes about the divine nature in ways that might have been obscured by the routine repetition of prayers.⁴⁰ To the degree that they are acts of rationalism, they are so in the service of rumination. Taking the perspective of later intellectual history, we could say that, insofar as such things can be traced

³⁷ On the titles see F. S. Schmitt, "Prolegomena seu Ratio editionis," in vol. 1 of *S. Anselmi Cantuariensis archiepiscopi Opera Omnia*, 5 vols. (Stuttgart: Friedrich Fromann Verlag, 1984, reprint, Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1940-1961, Seckau, 1938), 140-48. Anselm's dedication refers to the collection as "*orationes sive meditationes*" (S III, 3, 2).

³⁸ *Monologion*, Prol., S I, 7, 3-5; *Proslogion*, Prooem., S I, 93, 2.

³⁹ *Proslogion*, Prooem., S I, 93, 1-3.

⁴⁰ Cf. the comments of André Hayen, "The Role of the Fool in St. Anselm and the Necessary Apostolic Character of True Christian Reflection," trans. Arthur C. McGill, in *The Many-Faced Argument: Recent Studies on the Ontological Argument for the Existence of God*, eds. John Hick and Arthur C. McGill, (New York: McMillan, 1967), 176.

back to Anselm, the origins of rationalism and skepticism in his work arise from *within* not outside of monastic spirituality, derived from rather than opposed to its practices of reflection, introspection, and meditation. This does not mean that there is no tension between the means, which is the search for rational reasons and perfected language, and the end, which is the ineffable God, but the tension is not an opposition of faith and reason.⁴¹ Just as we must not project back onto Anselm an opposition between faith and reason, we cannot reduce or circumscribe Anselm's rational project within faith or spirituality.⁴² Those who see Anselm this way save his work from one kind of distortion, equating it with philosophy *as opposed to* theology, only to fall prey to another kind of distortion, making it theology *as opposed to* philosophy. Neither of these categories as mutually exclusive exists for Anselm. We thus have to try to understand his project as neither philosophy nor theology in these narrow and exclusive senses but as both in some broader sense of each.

b. Aporia

The projects in these works in their very extremity, both in the reliance on rational argument and in the seeking of the most important truths about God with the greatest possible certainty, are not only not opposed to the spirituality of the prayers but are actually another expression of it. We shall see this in the way these works repeat over and over the moment in the narrative found in the letters and prayers. Here again insoluble problems, painted with the colors of reason as logical contradictions, are resolved, also with reason, as Anselm creates the greatest distance between word and thing, human ideas and divine reality, and then manages, as Gillian Evans put it, to "spin threads across [the] chasms" he has created.⁴³

Anselm connects his rational and spiritual projects by means of the opening prayer of the *Proslogion*. The prayer both lays out the problematic for the *Monologion* and *Proslogion* and turns to reason as that which might satisfy monastic longing for God. This prayer creates the same kind of double bind we found in Anselm's prayer collection, describing extreme need and desire for God but with impossible barriers to union with him. Anselm prays to God that he might find him but wonders, "Lord, if you are not here, where will I search for you, being

⁴¹ Bencivenga does seem to construe the tasks of faith and reason here as opposed, characterizing Anselm's attempt to convince the rational objector as playing the spy (or even double spy) in the enemy's camp, Ermanno Bencivenga, *Logic and Other Nonsense: The Case of Anselm and His God* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 78-91. As Bencivenga writes, "The practice of questioning the system *in order to establish it* is, after all, a practice of *questioning the system*, and if that is what you do, you will end up *in fact* working for a different master than you thought. . . . You will be attempting a final vindication of ordinary beliefs and will generate one aporia after another and wake up sleepy souls and initiate centuries of challenging, provocative inquiry." Bencivenga, *Logic and Other Nonsense*, 89 (his emphasis).

⁴² For theologians like Anselm Stolz, Anselm's starting point, like his end point, is in theology. He concludes that "faith seeking understanding" means the attempt to "attain a vision of God through an understanding of what the faith says about God," a task accomplished by mystical theology. See Stolz, "Anselm's Theology," 185-86.

⁴³ Gillian Evans, "The 'Secure Technician': Varieties of Paradox in the Writings of St. Anselm." *Vivarium* 13, no. 1 (1975): 20. Evans notes Anselm's penchant for paradox, but she argues that he creates them in his prayers and meditations and resolves them in his logical writings. My claim is that Anselm both creates and resolves paradox not just in the devotional writings but also in his speculative writings.

absent? But if you are everywhere, why do I not see you present?”⁴⁴ Where, Anselm continues, is the “inaccessible light” in which God dwells, and how might one come to it? The condition of exile as Anselm describes it implies infinite distance and ignorance; the exiled, Anselm tells God, “desire to come to you, and your habitation is inaccessible . . . long to discover you, and do not know your place.”⁴⁵

The paradoxes in his relationship to the divine in this prayer echoes, of course, the opening prayer of Augustine’s *Confessions*. Augustine wonders as he prays how he can make room for God or reach toward God when it must be the case that he already exists in God; he reflects on the paradoxes of space in a God who fills all things by containing them, without having parts and without being dissipated; the God to whom he prays is merciful yet just, hidden yet present, ever active but at rest.⁴⁶ These are not excesses of rhetoric in Anselm just as they are not in Augustine. The whole of both the *Proslogion* and *Monologion* are, in effect, explorations of these paradoxes. However, it is noteworthy that Anselm limits himself in his opening prayer to those paradoxes that have to do with the relationship between his desire for knowledge and union with God who is both supremely present to and absent from him, and that he places the others, internal to the divine nature, later in the works as spun out of their basic notions of the divine, the notion of the highest good in the *Monologion* and of “that than which none greater can be conceived” in the *Proslogion*.

The paradoxes of presence and absence describe the central philosophical and theological problem of the *Proslogion*; they are Anselm’s version of the *Meno* paradox. On the one hand, if one does not know God or that he exists, then there seems to be no path toward the discovery of these things, for Anselm concedes that God is infinitely beyond human comprehension and experience. How, then, can anyone know anything about God, who is by definition incomprehensible? If, on the other hand, one does know God, no proof should be necessary since his existence should be self-evident; God should be so thoroughly present that his absence cannot even be thought. Just as in the *Meno* paradox, there is apparently no middle ground here, no room between extremes for an argument to take place—God is either thoroughly absent or utterly present. Moreover, the supposition of God’s complete presence becomes an argument for his absence—if God were present, we could not *not* see him. Since we cannot, he must be absent. The problem, we see clearly, is not extrinsic to faith but arises out of it.

Here we have the equivalent of the crisis set up in the prayers created by the imaginative placement of the self in the presence of God, Mary, and the saints. As he imagines himself without the faith or the grace that would save him in the prayers, here he imagines himself without the knowledge of God, even through a glass darkly, that would help him understand the divine nature.

⁴⁴ *Proslogion*, 1, S I, 98, 2-3.

⁴⁵ *Proslogion*, 1, S I, 98, 3-7, 9-12.

⁴⁶ Augustine, *Confessiones* I, 2-4.

The opening lines of the *Monologion*, propose, as noted above, to reveal to one ignorant of it the nature of God, in this way setting up the beginning and end points of the meditation. There is someone who does not know or chooses not to believe at one end and the “many things we necessarily believe about God and creatures,” on the other. Anselm’s task is to start from ignorance in the “irrational” stance of his persona and to move “by reason” towards understanding which grasps its conclusions as necessary. Moving from ignorance to certainty is to go from nothing to everything, structurally parallel to the path in the prayers from sin to beatitude. The *Monologion* is particularly striking in this regard, moving back and forth repeatedly between bafflement and certainty at every step for each of the attributes of God, a pattern common to the other works but most pronounced as it originates here.

The most striking example occurs immediately after Anselm concludes that the supreme being must exist and to a discussion of the nature of this existence. It is, he argues, an existence so different from that of other things that the attempt to explicate it gives rise to the numerous paradoxes Anselm must go on to resolve. The necessary and completely independent existence of the highest good seems, on closer examination, to be nonexistence: “For that which does not come to be from someone making or from matter or by means of some external assistance is either nothing or, if it is something, it exists through and by nothing.”⁴⁷ Predicating anything of nothing seems to make it something, and predicating anything of being (the highest being) seems to imply that it is *not* in some sense, that it has attributes and, therefore, composition. Anselm finds that following out the logic of the perfect, absolutely good, absolutely existing being seems paradoxically to lead to the conclusion that it cannot be called perfect, good, or even existent.

This is the pattern which marks the discussion of each new attribute of God in both the *Monologion* and the *Proslogion*. In the *Monologion*, Anselm gives the following series of chapter headings: that the highest being exists in every place and time; that it exists in no place or time; that it exists in every *and* no place and time.⁴⁸ The structure is striking. Anselm argues against both sets of claims, and then argues that both are true. The distance, for example, between God’s being and the being of other things, is so great, Anselm contends, that other things are “almost non-being, and hardly are at all.”⁴⁹ This is simply the inverse of the paradox about the highest being that arose from proving its necessary being, i.e., that its being is so different from other things that *it* can hardly be said to be at all. Ultimately, the two claims come to the same thing: that which must exist as the condition of the possibility of finite being contradicts everything we know about (finite) being, such that if one can be said to be, the other cannot.

In a similar way, in the *Proslogion* after finding his way to the existence of that than which none greater can be conceived, Anselm considers a series of attributes and attempts to understand their application to God, deriving the rest of the divine attributes from the original

⁴⁷ *Monologion*, 6, S I, 19, 10-12.

⁴⁸ These are the titles given in the list at the beginning of the *Monologion* for chapters 20-22.

⁴⁹ *Monologion*, 28, S I, 46. Cf. Augustine, *Confessiones* VII, 11; *In Iohannis evangelium tractatus* 38, 10.

formula. In each case, Anselm begins with the notion that God must have that quality because it is better to have it than not, but he always ends up showing that there is some contradiction in attributing it to God. So, sensibility seems to require a body; omnipotence seems to include the capacity to do evil; being compassionate seems to imply being subject to passion; and being just seems to exclude mercy.

Anselm is chasing these paradoxes; they do not come find him. He has pushed reason toward aporiae as the only way of moving toward a sense of that metaphysically unique being. As a pedagogical matter, Anselm wants to bring his readers to realize that they are in what Augustine called “a region of unlikeness”⁵⁰; his language of God becomes more and more unlike ordinary language as a way of bringing the reader to some sense of the gulf separating the material world from the divine being. This is operative not just as Anselm poses the paradoxical dilemmas that mark each new attribute but in the solutions which themselves are difficult and problematic.

c. Argument

But, as we know, Anselm’s prayers do not end in the infinite distance that separates sinner from saint and creature from God but find a way to cross the infinite distance not by lessening it but, in a sense, by taking it to its logical, which is to say paradoxical, conclusion. Though the sinner is infinitely unworthy, God’s infinite mercy and goodness is great enough to cross that gap to save the sinner. Something similar happens in the speculative meditations as a kind of argument to resolve the paradox that leans into rather than attempts to lessen the paradox is found. Again, the most succinct example of this strategy is found in the early *Monologion*; it is the most succinct because the paradox and resolution are almost identical. Since this being exists so perfectly and completely, Anselm argues, it can derive its existence neither from something nor from nothing.⁵¹ “How, then,” he asks, “is it to be understood that this thing is through itself and from itself if it neither made itself nor came to be of its own material nor assisted itself in any way to be what it was not? It seems it cannot be understood at all *unless, perhaps*, it is understood in the way in which it is said that the light lights or is lucent through itself and from itself.”⁵² Within this one-sentence response, turning on “unless, perhaps,” Anselm goes from the view that the existence of the supreme being seems impossible, contradictory, and unintelligible to the view that its existence is transparent and self-evident. Anselm concludes, “therefore let us assert, if we can, that nothing was not before nor will be after the highest being, rather than, while giving place to nothing before or after being, through nothing to reduce to nothing this being which through itself brought into being that which was nothing.”⁵³ Even as Anselm gives the solution, he reminds us of how close it lies in proximity to the paradox. He may snatch victory from the jaws of defeat but he won’t allow the reader to forget just how close that victory lies to defeat.

⁵⁰ Augustine, *Confessiones* VII, 10.

⁵¹ *Monologion*, 6, S I, 19-20.

⁵² *Monologion*, 6, S I, 20, 10-15 (my emphasis).

⁵³ *Monologion*, 19, S I, 34, 15-18.

We can, again, find the same pattern in the *Proslogion*. How can God be omnipotent given that he cannot lie or be corrupted, he asks? God cannot be corrupted, cannot lie, and cannot make what is true false, because, Anselm explains, to do those things is impotence rather than power. These things are called capabilities by “another manner of speaking [*alio genere loquendi*].”⁵⁴ In these cases Anselm exposes the deceptiveness of the surface of language which hides a deeper and sometimes opposite meaning. But he does not stop there. Anselm, true to his tendency to turn the paradoxical into the necessary and vice versa, gives a paradoxical twist to his solution: “since the more one has this power [to do evil, lie, etc.], the more powerful are adversity and perversity in him and the more powerless is he against them.”⁵⁵ Anselm resolves the original paradox of God lacking the power to do some things though he is omnipotent by distinguishing two senses of power, but then uses the term in two different senses within the same sentence, calling attention to, rather than moving utterly beyond, the original paradox of omnipotence.

The formula of the *Proslogion*, that than which none greater can be conceived, is, if anything, even more perfectly perched on the knife edge separating paradox from indubitable truth. It both captures and resolves the paradox of presence and absence explored in the opening prayer. For the formula mirrors the sense in which God is both supremely present, given in the very structure of thought, and, at the same time, always beyond the limits of thought. This is exactly the path on which the notion of “that than which none greater can be conceived” sets the mind. Thinking “that than which none greater can be conceived” does all these things at once. It represents succinctly the paradox of prayer, which simultaneously expresses the infinite distance between the human mind and God and traverses it.

III. Imagination and Understanding

My teacher, Louis Mackey, argued that proofs for God’s existence repeat the pattern of the parable of the prodigal son. The son, having come to live in a world where it at least seems possible that there is no father nor indeed any need for one, heads home when he comes to possess “the imagination to see alienation as such—a contingent departure from originary reality—and the resolution to transgress it toward the Father.”⁵⁶ Anselm’s strategy in the prayers and the speculative meditations is to use the imagination to bring the reader to a place where she can see her alienation as such, where she can see that there is a problem, a serious life and death, salvation and damnation problem, a problem of hope or despair—that there is a journey to be undertaken. Of course, the steps in the journey, using the vehicle of reason to make progress, are important, but the equal or more important role is played by the imagination to bring us to see that there *is* a problem, a distance that must be traversed. Thus, Anselm creates through the imagination the utter alienation between his words and God, placing the reader in that “far

⁵⁴ *Proslogion*, 7, S I, 105, 12-16.

⁵⁵ *Proslogion*, 7, S I, 105, 26-7.

⁵⁶ Louis H. Mackey, *Peregrinations of the Word: Essays in Medieval Philosophy*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 126.

country” in which she, like the prodigal son, can realize her lack of self-sufficiency, but in that very realization can grasp that the possibility of her alienation implies its overcoming. In other words, Anselm realized what I think those who argue both for and against theism all too often forget, perhaps prompted by the rationalism that Anselm himself helped to create: the commitment to one or the other is as much a product of what we can imagine as what reason tells us or the will resolves. Anselm’s meditations, whether on the stories of scripture and the saints or the contents of human reason, are, both of them, projects of both reason and imagination, both essential to the end of that project: understanding.